UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Jehovah's Witnesses in Post-Soviet Armenia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Peter S. Cowe, Chair

In my doctoral research, I focus on the formation and development of the community of Jehovah's Witnesses in post-Soviet Armenia. The main research question has two parts. 1) What accounts for changing state policies towards JWs in post-Soviet Armenian and for particular public intolerance towards JWs compared to other religious minorities? 2) What personal, social, institutional, cultural, and contingency factors affected one's decision to become a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses' community or to leave it? I answer these questions based on the materials collected during my intermittent field work in Armenia from 2016 until 2022 in the Russian, Armenian, and English congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Yerevan as well as other towns in Armenia. The data include hundreds of interviews with Jehovah's Witnesses, state officials, journalists, anti-Jehovah's Witnesses activists, non- Jehovah's Witness Armenians, and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church. I also draw on statistical information, media, and reports generated

by international NGOs and governmental organizations about post-Soviet Armenia.

As one of the most controversial and contentious religious groups of the last hundred years, Jehovah's Witnesses have been persecuted in democratic Christian-majority countries and in totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Academic literature identifies the Armenian Church as the main driver of religious antagonism in post-Soviet Armenia (Kharatyan 2007; Lusyan 2011; Namoradze 2008), while the Armenian state is portrayed as a protector of the Armenian Church that does not have its own agenda in the religious field. Yet, a closer examination reveals that Armenian political elites chose to support the Armenian Church only when it corresponded to their political and ideological interests. My analysis strongly suggests that while the dominant national Church plays a significant role in shaping religious freedom in Armenia, it is a *directed* rather than a *directing* power.

Throughout the post-Soviet period, the policies of the Armenian state towards Jehovah's Witnesses have been inconsistent. In the media and everyday discourse, Jehovah's Witnesses were described as the traitors of the Motherland seeking to destroy the Armenian nation. Because of their conspicuous public proselytism, Jehovah's Witnesses were singled out as the most "harmful" non-traditional religious group in Armenia. The animosity towards Jehovah's Witnesses quickly turned into a self-perpetuating cycle that required little external support. Individual state officials used the power of their office to push back against what they perceived as a threat to the country and nation. The overall liberalization of religious policies in Armenia has been contingent upon Armenia's relationship with the European Union.

There are multiple incentives for people in Armenia to join the Jehovah's Witnesses' community, such as a relatively egalitarian distribution of religious power at the level of the congregation, an alternative ideological message, a close-knit community, a clear guide for those who

seek moral improvement, and moral empowerment for women to counter patriarchy and low social status. The most significant factor has been that of deprivation. Widely understood as one's insufficient embeddedness or involvement in society, deprivation causes low social status and limits economic opportunities, as well as entails a lack of respect and social interaction. The fluctuation in the intensity of deprivation serves as a good explanation for the dynamic of the growth in the Jehovah's Witnesses' community in post-Soviet Armenia.

The dissertation of Anatolii Tokmantcev is approved.

Carol Ann Bakhos

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William Rogers Brubaker

Peter S. Cowe, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

For my parents,

Nadezhda and Anatolii

Посвящается мои родителям,

Надежде и Анатолию

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List of Acronyms

AAC	Armenian Apostolic Church KH Kingdom Hall
CIAOSN	Centre d'Information et d'Avis sur les Organisations Sectaires Nuisibles (The Information and Advisory Center for Surveillance over Harmful Sectarian Organizations)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union PACE Parliament Assembly of the Council of Europe
JW	Jehovah's Witnesses
OPI	Office of Public Information
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UN	United Nations
WTBTS	Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania
WWII	World War II

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When I was growing up in a small town in Siberia in the 1990s, I could not possibly have imagined that one day I was going to do research about Armenia, Armenians, Armenian culture, and religion at the University of California Los Angeles. There have been many intentional and accidental turns on my life path that led me towards this future. With all the ups and downs, I had a tremendous support that I could unconditionally rely upon – my parents and Terra. Mom and Dad, none of this would be possible without your boundless care. Your wonderful openness to the new and unknown has inspired me to go forward and overcome any obstacles on my path towards my dreams. I know you sacrificed a lot to open every conceivable and inconceivable opportunity for me and Zhenya. Without your love, I would not be able to make it.

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Vita

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

When I was preparing for my first visit to the community of Jehovah's Witnesses (henceforth JWs) in Armenia in the summer 2016, I had a very clear image of this religious group in my head. As my personal experience with JWs had been very limited, this image was based almost exclusively on academic literature about JWs and some stereotypes I unwillingly internalized when growing up in post-Soviet Russia. I was prepared to find a closed community that treats outsiders like me with suspicion because they belong to the "world" – the source of corruption that JWs try to stay away from. I was surprised that the information about the time and exact location of JW meetings was easily accessible on www.jw.org, the official website of Jehovah's Witnesses. Equipped with a notebook and a pen, I went for my first field visit to the Russian-speaking congregation of JWs.

Contrary to my expectations I found few Russians there, as most members of the congregation were Russian-speaking Armenians. I was immediately noticed and warmly welcomed by nearly everyone. Having observed several meetings, public talks, Watchtower studies, and the style of interaction between the leaders (whom I mistakenly called "pastors" in my first field notes) and rank-and-file members, I realized that the number of questions I had about this group alone was enough for a few dissertations. I already knew that there was no research done on JWs in Armenia, although they clearly stood out as the most disliked religious group in the country. Since they demonstrated openness to my being a researcher, I decided to focus on JWs for my dissertational project. Later, my research foci shifted, and research questions transformed under the influence of external circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.[1]

[1] Originally, I wanted to focus on whether and how the multitude of everyday religious practices help JWs embody discursive schemas and religious dispositions, which enhances their commitment. However, when the COVID-19

At the beginning of this Chapter, I provide a short introduction to the JWs' community in Armenia and describe my research questions and original hypotheses. Then, I provide a general overview of the teaching of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (henceforth, the WTBTS), the official name of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. Next, I introduce my research sites and give an overview of my fieldwork in general. Also, I discuss my contribution to relevant scholarship. I conclude the Chapter with a preview of the organization of the dissertation.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Perestroika and the first years following the collapse of the Soviet system ushered in an era of the liberalization of all spheres of Armenian society, including religion. With very few exceptions, all forms of religious worship were tolerated by the Armenian state as it was mostly preoccupied with the conflict with Azerbaijan in Nagorno Karabagh. Physical violence against members of the Hare Krishna Society in 1992-1995 could be largely attributed to the Soviet legacy of persecution of this religious group and to their truly distinct public style of worship. However, starting in 1995, the Armenian government, police, the Armenian Apostolic Church (hereafter, the AAC or the Armenian Church), and non-governmental nationalist groups started to apply pressure on all non-traditional religious organizations. Although members of the JW community had been proselytizing in Armenia since the middle of the 1970s, the group was still very small in numbers and practically unknown to the wider population. Nevertheless, the public conspicuousness of JWs coupled with the rapid proliferation of negative stereotypes through word of mouth and the media eventually turned them into a religious and national enemy allegedly seeking the destruction of Armenia and Armenianness. Starting in 1993, JW conscientious objectors were imprisoned for evading military

pandemic started, JWs discontinued their regular meetings and public ministry, which made participant observation impossible. As a result, I shifted my gaze from the mechanics of conversion towards the factors facilitating or impeding (dis-)affiliation.

service. The police disregarded cases of violence towards the JWs, which were sometimes supported or even organized by the priests of the AAC (Corley 1998). In 1992, Nagorny Karabagh (Artsakh) introduced martial law and officially banned all religious organizations other than the AAC.[2] Police raided the meetings of JWs in Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh), and several JWs were charged with administrative offenses because the organization was not registered and, therefore, was illegal (Case of Christian Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Nagorno Karabagh v. Armenia, Application # 41817/10).

Despite the notoriety gradually accrued by the JW organization, their proselytism and recruitment of new members continued. Between 1992 and 2011, the growth of the organization was very impressive as the JWs gained almost 1,000 new members per year. While in 1993, this religious group comprised a few hundred members, by 1997, there were approximately 3,000 full-fledged members, not including those who had not yet been baptized or had just started their Bible study course. At the end of the 2000s, the number of JWs in Armenia reached 11,000.[3] However, in 2010, the growth plateaued and did not change significantly until the COVID pandemic when in one year (2021) the number of JWs in Armenia increased by 700. Following the end of the COVID restrictions in Armenia in 2022, the membership started to slightly decrease (see, Figure 1).

This dissertation seeks to account for the development of the JW community in post-Soviet Armenia and for the volatile trajectory of its relationships with the state and larger society. The main research question has two parts. 1) What accounts for changing state policies towards JWs in post-Soviet Armenian and for particular public intolerance towards JWs compared to other religious minorities? 2) what personal, social, institutional, cultural, and contingency factors affected one's

[2] The martial law was lifted only in 1997.

[3] The high rate of emigration of JWs during this period makes the growth of the community all the more impressive.

decision to become a member of the JWs' community or to leave it?

Figure 1. The growth of Jehovah's Witnesses in post-Soviet Armenia

Exploring these questions is important for our understanding of the vibrant religious diversity in independent Armenia. Besides, it allows us to account for the reasons why religious freedom has followed different trajectories in the post-Soviet space; while it has generally been improving in Armenia, it has been deteriorating in other countries, such as Russia and Belarus. Importantly, exploring these questions has implications for the issue of marginalization and persecution of religious minorities across political, cultural, and religious contexts. JWs, one of the most controversial and contentious religious groups of the last hundred years, have been mistreated in democratic Christian-majority countries and in totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. I am interested in uncovering the institutional and contextual reasons for why JWs turned into one of the most resented religious groups in post-Soviet Armenia. Academic and non-academic explanations often tie this animosity to JWs' refusal to receive blood

transfusion (Chryssides 2019:231; Holden 2002:28; Knox 2018a; Luca 2004; Woolley 2005) or their evasion of compulsory military service (Bergman 1996b:87; Ferrari 2020; Jubber 1977; Knox 2018a; Lawson 1995:24; Luca 2004:66; McAninch 1986:1007; Perica 2002:15; Sprague 1946; Tietz 1954), among others things. Yet a closer examination reveals the deep insufficiency of these interpretations, while the analysis of JWs' public conspicuousness and their ideological message allow for a better understanding of intolerance towards them. I am also interested in understanding why people join the JWs' community and how they maintain their dedication despite animosity on behalf of their family members, friends, colleagues, and the wider society.

Informed by academic literature (Baran 2006, 2007; Gill 2005; Richardson 2020; Stark and Bainbridge 1987), my original hypothesis was that animosity towards JWs in Armenia was a result of pressure from the AAC. This dominant religious organization, venerated by most Armenians as their Mother Church, automatically enlists all Armenians into its ranks regardless of their attitude towards faith and religious practices. I conjectured that religious competition over potential members informed the particularly harsh stance of the AAC towards JWs. Yet, a closer examination revealed that more numerous religious groups in Armenia, such as Pentecostals, who indeed compete with the AAC for members attract significantly less attention and antagonism than the much-resented JWs who have significantly fewer followers. This suggested that the issue of flock competition is not a significant factor in Armenia where one's participation in a church life is not regarded as mandatory. Also, I noticed that the negative media portrayals of JWs rarely focused on JWs' evasion of compulsory military service. In other words, rather than being described as threat to the combative power of the Armenian army, JWs were consistently portrayed as a menace to Armenians and Armenianness. Instead, the media concentrated on the threat posed by JW to the family and the Armenian nation. JWs' public and conspicuous proselytism was regarded as culturally alien

phenomenon sowing dissent and undermining the *status quo*.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania

Jehovah's Witnesses are a millenarian Arminian Unitarian Christian group that rejects the doctrine of Trinity and strongly emphasizes proselytism. The history of JWs stretches back to the 1870s when Charles Taze Russell and his followers formed a distinct group that later questioned many fundamental aspects of mainstream Christianity. In 1884, Russell registered the Watch Tower Bible Tract Society of Pennsylvania, a legal body under whose umbrella today's JWs conduct their activities throughout the world.[4] Originally, Russell's followers called themselves "Bible Students," but in 1931, drawing on Isaiah 43:10 they assumed their current name, "Jehovah's Witnesses."

As time went by and one WTBTS leader replaced another, the theology of the group underwent significant transformation. Although, originally, Russell's movement was but an offshoot of more traditional Protestant Christianity and was similar to Adventism, eventually the teaching and practices of WTBTS drifted significantly further away. In this section, I am not attempting to describe a full history of the WTBTS.[5] Instead, I will focus on those aspects of doctrine and practice that have morphed into an idiosyncratic religious teaching that JWs call simply "the Truth."[6]

A central aspect that distinguishes the WTBTS's theology is the rejection of the doctrine of Trinity. JWs believe that there is one God Almighty whose name is Jehovah (Arm. Եհովա, Rus. Иегова) and who insists that he be addressed by his name. Therefore, JWs emphasize the name of God and claim that other forms of referring to God, such as simply God, the Lord, or the Lord of

[4] I do not address the alternative traditions that appeared as a result of several schisms within the WTBTS in the 20th century. These traditions are addressed in Beckford 1977; Chryssides 2009; Pinto 2005.

[5] For a detailed history of the Watch Tower Organization see Beckford 1975b; Penton 1985.

[6] Although I am using the word "Truth" throughout the dissertation, it does not reflect my personal attitude towards the belief system of JWs. Rather, I aim to make this emic vision of the JWs' doctrine as salient as it is for the everyday life of JWs in Armenia.

Hosts, are insufficient. In addition, the WTBTS denies divinity to Jesus, as there is only one God, regarding him as God's first and perfect creation through whom "all other things were created in the heavens and on the earth, the things visible and the things invisible" (Colossians 1:16). Most other Christian traditions follow trinitarian theology and believe that granting Jesus the status of God is a *sine qua non* aspect of Christianity. Therefore, JWs' denial of Jesus' divinity often leads to the claims that they are not Christians. However, leaving theology aside, JWs' emicly understand themselves as Christians, because they believe that Jesus is the King of God's heavenly kingdom, and they are the followers of his teaching.

Another distinctive teaching of WTBTS rejects the immortality of the soul, claiming that it is uncorroborated by Scripture. JWs understand the soul as a metaphor for "life," i.e. something that is indivisible from humans and therefore cannot outlive them. This view on the nature of the soul entails a range of other doctrinal views that make JWs stand out among many other Christian groups. First, after death, one does not continue as an immaterial spirit, but stays dead, or asleep, until resurrection. In other words, death is followed by non-existence. This understanding of soul and death renders the traditional Christian views of Hell and Heaven obsolete as well, as humans either live on earth or irrevocably die. JWs' belief that the human soul is in blood partly informs their prohibition to consume blood in any form, including blood transfusion. The practice of abstaining from receiving blood in medical procedures became one of the trademarks of JWs.

As JWs believe that the Bible's author is Jehovah himself, the principle of *Sola Scriptura* plays a central role in the formation of their theology and religious practices. For example, today JWs reject the existing Christian traditions of celebrating Christmas because it is viewed as extra-scriptural and outwardly pagan. However, until the early 1920s, the Bible Students celebrated Christmas and birthdays. In general, birthdays are viewed as a non-Christian practice, and they are regarded as

pagan because the Bible does not have examples of God's servants celebrating their birthdays. At the same time, commemorating the death of Jesus is sanctioned by the Gospels, which makes the Memorial of Jesus' Death the most important day in the JWs' worship calendar (for more detail, see Chapter II).

The principles of their theological authority have changed throughout the history of WTBTS. In general, Jesus is regarded as the actual leader of the WTBTS who rules over his earthly flock through the "faithful and discreet slave" (Matthew 24:45). The concept of the "faithful and discreet slave" has been central to the theology and authority structure within the WTBTS. The role of the Slave is to dispense spiritual food for Jehovah's flock until Armageddon (Watchtower, June 2013), which includes interpreting the Bible and making organizational decisions. However, the identity of the Slave has been changing as well. Originally, Russell was identified as the Slave who was to guide the true Christians until the return of Jesus. This tradition continued and in later periods, it was the president of WTBTS who defined the theological message and organizational rules to a great degree. However, starting from 1971, the Governing Body, a group of anointed male members, has been acting as a collective Slave that provides JWs with guidance. Their role in giving the correct interpretation of the Bible is so high that reading the Bible without their tutelage is regarded as, at best, futile. Some scholars even suggested that it is the Governing Body "and not the Bible, which is the primary spiritual authority among Jehovah's Witnesses" (Penton 1985:164).

Regarding the distribution of authority within the organization, the WTBTS has always tried to prevent dissent amongst its followers. Originally, the elders who are in charge of the congregation were elected by the members of the congregations. Yet, in 1932, as a part of Joseph Rutherford's effort to centralize his authority within WTBTS, the institute of elective elders was abolished. Thenceforth, the elders were appointed by the WTBTS headquarters in Brooklyn, NY and later,

Warwick, NY. Seeking to maintain centralization of authority and purity of the teaching, the WTBTS recommends its members to minimize their ties to the sinful "world." It also employs other mechanisms, such as excommunication (called "disfellowshipping") or ostracization of the expelled members, to lower the chance of contamination of the communal life with dissenting views, beliefs, and practices.

By the 1940s, a desire to build their community and lead their lives in strict correspondence to Scripture and their rejection of other Christian denominations as fallacious led JWs to the conclusion that the existing translations of the Bible were not completely accurate.[7] Between 1950 and 1960, the WTBTS commissioned a translation of the Bible that is today known as the "New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures." Scholars and other religious groups were highly critical of the WTBTS endeavor for several reasons. First, the identity of the translators was not disclosed.[8] Second, some traditional Christian concepts like that of the cross were challenged by the new translation. The interpreters maintained that the Greek word "*stauros*" means a stake, while the claims that Jesus was crucified on a cross were ahistorical and unsubstantiated by the Scripture. However, before the 1920s, the Bible Students accepted the cross as a Christian symbol, and it appeared on their magazines and even buildings. Third, the name of God was used in the New Testament in places where it had not appeared in any ancient manuscripts. The harshest criticism, however, targeted only a few passages, particularly the translation of John 1:1, which is crucial for the trinitarian understanding of Jesus as a divine being. In this instance the word that is usually translated as "God" was rendered as "a god" based on the absence of the definite article in the

[7] James Beckford (1975b) argues that the new translation was necessitated by the WTBTS desire to rewrite the sacred texts in the same language and style as the rest of their writings, which would "persuade the reader of the intimate connection between the Bible and the sect's own literature" (49).

[8] Their names became known in the 1980s when Raymond Franz, a member of the Governing Body, left the WTBTS.

Greek version (for more details, see Penton 1985).

Among other things, JWs are known for their multiple attempts to calculate the date of Armageddon that was predicted to take place several times in 1881, 1914, and 1925, to name a few (Bergman 1999:12; Penton 1985:166–68). However, with time, as these anticipations failed to materialize, predicting the exact time of Jesus' return became less significant for the WTBTS theology. And when Armageddon failed to materialize in 1975, JWs abandoned the attempts to predict it altogether. Yet, despite the failed prophecy, the year of 1914 became a pivotal point for the WTBTS theology because it is believed to be the moment when Jesus was installed as King in God's heavenly kingdom. Eventually, his government will be comprised of 144,000 anointed members of WTBTS who will rule over Jehovah's flock from Heaven. The remaining followers of Jehovah will live in a perfect new world on earth, in the restored Paradise.

The ultimate goal of the WTBTS as earthly organization is spreading the Good News, or in words of James Beckford (1976) "the constant production and reproduction of people who are dedicated to the task of disseminating the group's evangelical message through direct contact with the public" (173). The overall structure of the WTBTS,[9] the nature and foci of the meetings, and the allocation of financial resources facilitate reaching this goal. Not only is publishing[10] a primary objective of all active JWs, but it may also affect their official and unofficial standing in the community. If publishers do not participate in public ministry, they are regarded as "inactive" members and are not included into the statistics reflecting the number of followers. Also, in Chapter

[9] The WTBTS does not have its own kindergartens, schools, or youth clubs that many other religious organizations often have because these institutional sub-structures do not contribute to the achievement of the ultimate goal.

[10] A Jehovah's Witness who engages in public ministry is called a "publisher." This term is used very unevenly amongst by JWs in Armenia. For example, Armenian-speaking JWs rarely if ever use the Armenian equivalent, "քարոզիչ." In the English congregation, this word is used slightly more often, while in the Russian congregation, the word "возвещатель" is commonly employed to refer to oneself or co-religionists.

V, I show that reporting a high number of hours spent preaching may positively correlate with publishers' self-esteem as well as increase respect from their co-religionists.

This section describes the religious teachings and practices of JWs in the way they are usually presented in academic literature – a homogenous, strict religious group whose members stand out from the wider society and often in conflict with it (Beckford 1975a; Holden 2002; Penton 1985a; Stark and Iannaccone 1997; but, see Beckford 1977). This view ascribes a monolithic unity to the group and presupposes that JWs' beliefs and practices are highly uniform, that theological details are equally mastered by all members, and that any deviations are incompatible with continuous affiliation with the community. As I show in chapter II, the lived reality, beliefs, and practices of JWs in Armenia are much more diverse than the summary of their theological system can suggest.

Research Sites, Methodology, and Data

Cumulatively, I spent about two years doing my field work in the community of JWs in Armenia. I conducted the bulk of my research in the capital city of Yerevan, although I attended meetings in other towns and villages throughout Armenia. Also, I interviewed JWs from Artsakh, commonly known as Nagorno Karabakh, a disputed territory internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan, but de-facto politically independent. Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh) maintains close cooperation with the Republic of Armenia and largely relies on it in all spheres. Also, I held interviews with JWs who visited or moved to Armenia from Europe, Africa, and the U.S.

The focus and structure of my ethnographic work changed over time. As I mentioned above, I started my participant observation in the Russian congregation that was called *Russkoe Tsentralnoye* (literally, Russian Central). Its Kingdom Hall (hereafter, KH) was located slightly outside of the city center but within walking distance from the so-called "Small Center" (Arm. Փոքր Կենտրոն). As is common for JWs throughout the world, the same KH hosted several

congregations. Besides the Russian congregation, at different periods, this KH accommodated two Armenian, one English, one Persian, and one sign language congregations. From the very beginning, I attended the Russian and English congregations, as well as two Armenian congregations called *Kilikia* and *Eritasardakan*.[11] At first, my Armenian was proficient enough to understand, while my ability to actively engage with the members of the Armenian congregation remained limited until 2018. The JWs did not usually offer to switch to speaking Russian, although almost everyone's proficiency in this language was higher than mine in Armenian. Instead, they demonstrated significant patience and readiness to converse with me in my broken Armenian. In later years, I improved my proficiency in Armenian and was able to easily converse with JWs about theology and their everyday lives.

During a pilot study in 2016 and a two-month-long visit in 2017, I focused mostly on the communal life within the congregations, examining the dynamic in the relationship between the rank-and-file members and elders, men and women, as well as younger and older believers in different congregations. As I acquired more and more personal connections within the community, I started to spend more time with JWs outside of the regular meetings. I met many JWs affiliated with other congregations. By the end of my 14-month-long field trip in 2021-22, most of my informants were from outside of the original congregations. At this stage, my focus shifted from communal life to extra-congregational activities, JWs' personal lives, and interactions between JWs and non-JWs.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was the main tool for collecting information about the JW community in Armenia and its relationships with society at large. I participated in regular meetings,

[11] As Eritasardakan literally means "youth" or "youthful" in Armenian, I originally thought that it enlisted mostly young people. However, during the first visit, I understood that it was just another congregation with the standard age distribution.

conventions, Bible studies, family worship sessions, and many informal gatherings. I focuesed on the pattern of worship – how believers participate in the meetings, how they react to the elders and other co-religionists' actions and words, and how they use the WTBTS literature, among other things. Also, I paid attention to how and with whom people come to the meetings, what they wear, what they talk about, and what sparks their interest and excitement. Usually, I took notes in my notebook during the meetings and later I used my computer to produce expanded, more detailed entries. During the pandemic, when in-person gatherings were discontinued, I participated in Zoom meetings and in the Memorial of Jesus' Death, while living in California and later in Armenia. Although Zoom meetings gave me access to congregations that were physically far from me and each other, this type of engagement was very limiting because most publishers did not turn on their cameras during the session and did not actively participate in the discussion. However, I was able to observe how the congregations adjusted to the new circumstances, and how continuous participation in communal life affected the lives of ordinary JWs and influenced their commitment to the Truth.

Over the years, I had several Bible studies with experienced JWs, during which I sought to understand how the Truth is presented to novices, how different publishers handle various types of questions, and how the existing WTBTS literature is used during the Bible studies. I attended Bible study sessions with other students in different parts of Yerevan and Armenia. I paid particular attention to how a student's socio-economic class, age, gender, education and other characteristics correlate with their openness to the Truth, learning style, and eventually commitment.

I observed JWs in the context of their homes and families. In Armenia, hospitality is closely associated with serving food or at least coffee, so I was often invited to many dinners and parties. My main goal was to understand the role that the Truth played in the family lives of JWs – how

spouses treated each other, how often the Truth was brought up explicitly, and how JWs interacted with those outside the community. I participated in multiple "family worship" sessions – time set aside for family members or friends to get together and focus on activities centered around the Truth (for more details, see Chapter II). The family worship may include discussing certain passages from WTBTS literature, preparing for the next meeting in a KH, or reading the Bible, among many other things.

Once, I rented a room in an apartment of a JW for two months, which gave me an opportunity to see how JWs are written into the dense Armenian social milieu; how they interact with their neighbors, non-JW visitors, and family members. Also, I was invited to many extra-ecclesial gatherings of JWs. I went on evening walks, ski trips, hikes, bike rides, and café and shopping outings with various groups of JWs. I observed whether/how the interactions between people of different genders diverged from that of mainstream Armenian society. I had a chance to join larger gatherings during which members of many different congregations went outside of Yerevan together to spend a day in a forest or near lake Sevan. Very informal, these get-togethers provided a lot of information about how JWs interact across congregational lines. Importantly, non-JW members of families also participated in these trips, which gave me an additional opportunity to explore the dynamics in the mixed – JWs and non-JWs – families.

I have not had an opportunity to observe door-to-door preaching because I did not have permission from the elders during my first couple of trips. Later, this type of public ministry was discontinued because of the COVID pandemic. Nevertheless, I was invited many times to preaching trips to the Roma community outside of Yerevan; I observed spontaneous preaching that my JWs informants engaged in with a taxi driver, occasional passer-by, or ice-cream seller. I spent many hours observing JWs' doing other types of public ministry – serving with the literature carts or

distributing WTBTS brochures and magazines in the street. Usually, I followed them as an uninvolved spectator, but sometimes I acted as a person interested in the literature or introduced myself as a researcher and engaged in conversation. When observing public ministry, I was mostly interested in non-JWs' reaction to proselytism and JWs' response to animosity.

Interviews

Interviews were another major element of my field work. I conducted hundreds of informal, semi-structured interviews with regular JWs, elders, circuit overseers, members of the local branch office, ex-JWs, members of JWs families unaffiliated with the Truth, journalists, staff members of NGOs, and regular non-JW Armenians. Most of these interviews were spontaneous interactions often initiated by my informants that were very lightly guided on my part. Often, I allowed my informants to choose how much they wanted to share and the direction of the conversation. These exchanges ranged from short dialogues to many-hour-long discussions around the dinner table. Sometimes I would take notes during the interaction, but sometimes I intentionally abstained from taking notes in order to make the interaction look and feel less like an interview. Over the course of my field work, I conducted more than 300 interviews.

I held 53 more formal and structured interviews with current and former JWs, state officials, scholars, JWs' family members, and anti-JWs activists. They usually lasted from 30 minutes to several hours. With a few exceptions, these informants felt comfortable being recorded, which allowed me to obtain verbatim transcripts of our conversations. In other cases, I had to rely on notetaking. During the last stretch of my field work in 2021-22, facilitators from the local branch office helped me conduct several dozens of Zoom interviews with JWs from Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. All but one those interviews were recorded under the condition that I delete the voice recordings once they were transcribed.

In the interviews with JWs, I focused on the path that led them to the community, details of their personal and family backgrounds, patterns of interaction with non-JWs family members, and their experience of animosity and mistreatment. When interviewing ex-JWs, I inquired about the conflict with the Truth, community, elders, and JW family members, as well as about their exit tactics, post-exit lives, and interaction with the former co-religionists. Talking to anti-JWs activists, I tried to uncover the reasons for their intolerance toward JWs and understand how well they knew WTBTS theology and practices. In my interviews with incumbent and former state officials, I inquired about the overall atmosphere of religious (in-)tolerance in the country, as well as about relationships between the state, the AAC, and non-traditional religious groups like JWs.

Challenges of Conducting Research in the Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Armenia

Doing research in a religious community that has been a target of social animosity in Armenia and neighboring countries posed several challenges. As I mentioned above, my Russian background was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, my proficiency in Russian allowed me to comfortably conduct my research and collect data at the initial stage of my field work when my Armenian was not proficient. In addition, I was able to interact with many JWs who spoke only Russian. Besides, my experience of living in post-Soviet social settings allowed me to read certain cultural cues that otherwise would have remained unnoticed. Simultaneously, my Russianness created a major obstacle for my ethnographic work and my relationship with the locals. At the beginning of my field work, all the members of the Russian and Armenian congregations including the elders demonstrated their extreme openness to my research. However, when the elders realized that I was interested in a deeper understanding of JW communal life, I noticed a tangible change in their attitude. When I asked if I could join publishers in public ministry to observe their interaction

with people, they told me that it was against the rules for a non-JW to accompany publishers. As JWs' in-person meetings are open to the public, I could still freely attend the gatherings and talk to people.

In 2021, when I asked if I could participate in the Zoom meetings, I was granted access by all of the congregations except for the Russian *Russkoe Tsentralnoye* congregation. One of the elders sent me a message saying, "Anatolii, the elders considered your request and decided to turn it down because many of our brothers and sisters join us over Zoom from Russia. Given the persecution of the Witnesses in Russia, they will feel unsafe because you are not a Witness. Perhaps, you can join another congregation. We hope for your understanding." A suspicion that I might be an agent of the Russian special services collecting information about JWs was shared not only by the elders, but by many of the JWs with whom I had close and friendly relationships.[12]

During the period between 2016 and 2018, very few JWs agreed to be interviewed. The elders hesitated to give me official permission to talk to rank-and-file members, yet they did not directly prohibit it. However, since I did not have official approval, most JWs would become visibly nervous when I asked them for an interview. In addition to the suspicion about my true intentions, the majority of JWs could not comprehend my status as a researcher and/or a graduate student. Until the very end of my ethnographic work, many thought I was a journalist collecting data that would eventually become available to a larger audience in a newspaper or even on TV. For this reason, I stopped using the word "interview" when approaching them because this term had very specific journalistic connotations. Instead, I would invite them to discuss their lives as JWs, which

[12] Almost every person in Armenia considered my fluency in Armenian suspicious. Both JW and non-JW informants openly asked me if I was working for KGB, CIA, or Turkish agencies. For example, one of the anti-JW expressed confidence that I was working with JWs in order to use these "traitors of the nation" in the interest of foreign governments (Michael).

did not evoke the same negative connotations.

The overall level of suspicion decreased after my visit to the headquarters of WTBTS in Warwick, NY in March 2020. Having received an invitation from the WTBTS Office of Public Information (the OPI), I spent two days observing the work of various departments, including design, printing, and audio and video recording, among many others. I was allowed in certain areas that normally remain closed for regular JWs' visitors, such as a workshop for the restoration of old Christian manuscripts. Most importantly, the workers of the OPI promised to facilitate my research in Armenia and help me overcome the suspicion from the JWs in Armenia. Their assistance opened multiple doors for me in the JWs' community of Armenia. The local Bethel, a branch office of WTBTS, allowed me to interview JWs and assisted me in conducting my research in general.[13]

In addition, conducting participant observation in a proselytism-oriented religious community was difficult, because everyone saw me as a potential recruit and was trying to preach to me. Not affiliated with any religious organization, I was regarded as a perfect target, which spurred their zeal. Sometimes, when they saw the futility of their attempts to turn me into a genuine Bible student, they lost interest in communicating with me.

Another challenge was to preserve the anonymity of my JW informants for both outsiders and other members of the community. This is crucially important in Armenia because here belonging to the JWs' group can cost one a job, ruin a family, or incite the anger of neighbors. In addition, many of my informants provided somewhat negative information about their co-religionists and elders or engaged in activities that violated the rules of WTBTS. In order to avoid disclosing their identity, which might result in various sanctions on the part of the elders, I withheld

[13] Nevertheless, the suspicion about my status and intentions never disappeared. For example, the elders of the Russian congregation did not allow me to join the meetings via Zoom after I had received the endorsement from Warwick and local Bethel.

or even changed some details of their biographies (age and occupations, among other things) to protect their identities. Throughout the dissertation, I use aliases rather than the real names of my informants, but in some cases I avoid providing identifying information altogether. In certain cases, my informants, including anti-JWs activists and ex-JWs, insisted that I use their real names. In Appendix III, I provide some information about my informants, including their aliases, ages, genders, languages, and sometimes congregations.

Literature Review and Contribution to Scholarship[14]

Scholarship on Jehovah's Witnesses

JWs are one of the most contentious religious movements of the 20th century, yet the amount of scholarly attention they have attracted is very insignificant given their recognizability, number of followers (over 8 million members worldwide), recurrent conflicts with governments throughout the world, and even open persecutions. There have been several attempts to comprehensively study JWs. James Beckford's *The Trumpet of Prophecy* (1975b) was the first such study that drew on a whole range of sociological methods, such as interviewing, participant observation, and questionnaires. Later, Melvin Curry (1992) produced *Jehovah's Witnesses: The Millenarian World of the Watch Tower*, in which he emphasized the influence of Adventism on the WTBTS teaching, beliefs, and practices. Andrew Holden's (2002) *Jehovah's Witnesses: Portrait of a Contemporary Religious Movement* is very limited as it focuses on a single congregation in the UK. In addition, the tone of his book is somewhat disparaging and biased, which further lowers the value of the account. The aforementioned studies explicitly follow the modernization theory that unambiguously regards the modern, rational worldview as superior to religion yet lacking meaning

[14] Throughout the dissertation, I review relevant literature at the beginning of each chapter, except for Chapter II where I analyze academic views on a particular aspect of JWs' communal life throughout the chapter. In this subsection, I provide a very brief synopsis of the key contributions of this dissertation to academic literature.

and a clear system of values. Overall, this approach regards secularization as normal, and, therefore, one's retreat from the more *progressive* world into a world of religion is treated as implicitly illogical or as a temporary fluke.

Several comprehensive studies about the WTBTS were executed by ex-members of the organization. The most famous of them is probably *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses* by James Penton (1985), a former elder in a congregation of JWs, who provides an overview of WTBTS history, teaching, and contemporary practices. Although this account of the WTBTS cannot be considered impartial, it generally followed scholarly conventions. From this point of view, the story of Raymond Franz, a former member of the Governing Body (1983, 1991) and other accounts of ex-JWs resemble critical and extremely valuable memoires rather than scholarly investigations.

This research contributes to the academic literature on JWs in several ways. First, it does not employ the modernization theory and therefore regards religious beliefs and practices not as deviation, but as a routine part of contemporary social life. Second, all of the comprehensive studies of JW communities draw on western material (Beckford 1975b; Curry 1992; Holden 2002; Penton 1985), while JWs outside of the western countries, e.g. in Japan (Wilson 1977), Kenia (Wilson 1973), Central Africa (Cross 1977; Hodges 1976), Mexico (Gutierrez 2004), and Russia (Knox 2019), have been analyzed only in a few short articles. Therefore, this research fills in this gap by describing the establishment and development of a JW community outside of the western world. As I show in Chapter IV, the unique socio-cultural and socio-political context and the distinct understanding and practice of Christianity in Armenia greatly influenced the rates of growth in the JW community there and impacted the level of intolerance towards JWs from the Armenian majority.

When describing JWs, most scholars pay particular attention to the normative prescriptions and theological postulates of the WTBTS, which downplays the vibrant diversity of views, beliefs,

and practices at the level of rank-and-file members (Beckford 1975; Blankholm 2009; Holden 2002; Knox 2018, 2019; but, see Beckford 1977). This approach seriously flattens our understanding of the actual lived experience of JWs and depicts an unrealistically homogenous group whose members share the same views and mostly follow the same rules. As I show in Chapters II and V, the members of the JW community in Armenia harbor different attitudes towards the teachings and rules of the WTBTS. Importantly, they demonstrate very different degrees of mastery of the basic theological principles of the WTBTS teaching or sometimes prefer to neglect them as unimportant or inconvenient. The emphasis on the lived experience of JWs allows for a nuanced understanding of the power dynamic between the members of one congregation, as well as between members of the WTBTS community and non-JWs.

When evaluating the causes for intolerance towards JWs, scholars of WTBTS have paid little attention to contextual factors and have focused mostly on the idiosyncrasies of the JWs' teachings and practices, such as their refusal to receive blood transfusion (Holden 2002; Knox 2018a; Woolley 2005), lack of patriotism or civil engagement (Bergman 1997; Melton 2021; Zygmunt 1970; but see, Sarkissian 2009), or their proselytism (McAninch 1986; Stark and Iannaccone 1997). I argue that these specific traits create certain affordances for intolerance towards JWs, but that they only matter in a specific socio-cultural and socio-political context. For example, I show that in western democracies, JWs have been under scrutiny because of their practices of ostracizing excommunicated members, bans on blood transfusion, or alleged "brainwashing" techniques. These practices engender suspicion because they are viewed as an infringement on the individual human rights that are highly valued in those countries. In Eastern Europe and post-Soviet space, including Armenia, these issues are of little concern because collective identity and cultural preservation are much more salient in those societies than the preoccupation with individual rights. This focus on

collective identity informs antagonism towards JWs on the part of the majority of Armenian population.

Religious Diversity in Armenia

At the backdrop of a general shortage of comprehensive studies of the WTBTS, JWs in Armenia have never been an object of research, although they are sometimes tangentially mentioned when scholars discuss religious diversity in Armenia (Antonyan 2011; Corley 1998; Ohanjanyan 2014; Tchilingirian 2007a). As the dominant religious organization in Armenia, the AAC has been at the center of scholarly attention (Antonyan 2014; Siekierski 2014; Tchilingirian 2007b, 2007a, 2014), while other religious groups have remained at the periphery of scholarly interest. Therefore, the present research fills this gap by providing the first academic description of the history, structure, and practices of the JW community in Armenia.

The religious policies of the post-Soviet Armenian state have been studied very unevenly. There is no comprehensive analysis of the post-Soviet political history of Armenia, and the ideological and political importance of religious organizations have been minimally researched. Hranush Kharatyan reviews some religious policies during Robert Kocharyan's presidency (Kharatyan 2007, 2008) but does not address the political rationale that informed them. Other scholars (Lusyan 2011; Mikaelyan 2014; Sarkissian 2008) tend to lump all Protestant religious groups together and treat them as functionally similar because of their ideological opposition to the Armenian Church. This view oversimplifies the Armenian religious field and does not allow for a nuanced understanding why certain religious groups, such as JWs, receive more animosity than others. In my analysis, I emphasize the diversity of the Armenian religious field and focus on theological, behavioral, and organizational idiosyncrasies of religious groups that affect their public profile.

Religious Freedom and European Influence

Analyzing transition to democracy in post-Socialist Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries, scholars have emphasized the importance of the conditionality of association with the EU for the success of democratic reforms (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017; Kelley 2004; Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit 2012; Vettori 2013). This approach evaluates the correlation between governments' interest in close cooperation with or membership in the EU and their willingness to improve certain policies. However, when analyzing the reforms regarding religious, sexual, linguistic, and national minorities, scholars usually make no analytical distinction between them, although these markers of difference engender different types of resistance or acceptance on the part of local actors. In the conclusion of this dissertation, I argue that religious sphere and its liberalization could be a bargaining chip that the Armenian government could offer in exchange for maintaining closer relationships with the EU. Simultaneously, I suggest a hypothesis that reforms in the sphere of LGBTQ rights and domestic violence are much more challenging as wider Armenian society is particularly conservative in these areas and regards them as existential threats to the fundamental family-oriented structure of Armenian society. This hypothesis, however, requires a further comparative analysis of these politics of difference, which is outside of the scope of this dissertation.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter II describes the social world of JWs in Armenia – their everyday practices, conflicts, leisure activities, proselytism, and worship meetings. It underscores their intricate system of intracommunal connections as well as their personal, familial, professional, and cultural ties with society at large. Here, I show that although JWs are perceived by most Armenians as social outcasts living on the fringes of the society, they are usually well-incorporated into the fabric of the Armenian social world. The chapter pays attention not only to

standard JWs practices but also to multiple deviations from WTBTS teaching and rules, as well as from popular and academic views on JWs.

Chapter III analyzes the relationships between JWs and the state in various socio-political and ideological contexts. It addresses the mistreatment of JWs in western democracies, post-socialist Orthodox-majority countries, and totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany. The first two groups are important because they share multiple historical, cultural, and socio-political characteristics with post-Soviet Armenia. Although Armenia is not a totalitarian regime, the influence of the dominant national ideology that regards Armenianness as the ultimate value and source of legitimacy has been significant throughout the post-Soviet period. From this regard, the analysis exclusively pursues the goal of examining the effect of the ideological confrontation between the state and JWs and does not suggest any similarity between Armenia and Hitler's regime whatsoever. The chapter concludes that the level of democratic development in a country cannot serve as a good predictor of governmental policies regarding religious minorities and JWs more specifically. It also argues that although compulsory military service creates certain affordances for the persecution of JWs, it alone cannot account for the intolerance towards them. The existence of a national Church that claims to embrace and represent the entire population of a given country generally increases intolerance towards JWs, yet the leading role in the formation of religious policies and attitudes usually belongs to the state and political elites. Overall, the chapter serves as a background for Chapter IV, in which I turn to the relationships between the Armenian state and society, on the one hand, and JWs, on the other.

Chapter IV provides a general overview of the Armenian religious field, its major actors, their relationships with the Armenian state and each other. Then, the chapter outlines the development of the JW community in Armenia starting from 1975. Drawing on legal documents, court decisions,

interviews with state officials and anti-JWs activists, international reports, and other sources, the chapter explores the following aspects of the relationships between the Armenian state and JWs. First, it examines the influence of the AAC on the treatment of JWs in Armenia. Second, it highlights the effect of the overall ideological framework formulated by the political elites on intolerance towards JWs at the level of state policies and the attitude of the Armenian population. It emphasizes how the dependence of Armenia on western economic and political aid impacted the formulation and implementation of policies regarding religious freedom. In general, I show that relationships between JWs and the Armenian state and society were developing along a somewhat similar trajectory to many other post-socialist Orthodox countries. Yet, the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh, the specific character of Armenian Christianity, and Armenia's international interests seriously affected these relationships. Third, it evaluates how the idiosyncratic understanding and practice of Christianity in Armenia affected the character of animosity toward JWs.

Chapter V focuses on the "conversion careers" (Gooren 2007) of JWs in Armenia and explores the reasons driving people to join the JWs community or incentivizing them to leave the Truth. Drawing on academic literature about religious conversion and extensive field work material, the chapter considers what internal institutional idiosyncrasies of the JWs community in Armenia attract potential recruits and sustain their commitment later on. It also examines how contextual factors, such as the socio-economic crisis, ideological framework, and the overall gender dynamic in Armenian society boost the interest of prospective converts towards JW teaching and practices. In addition, it examines the effect of the COVID pandemic and the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the attitudes towards the JWs community.

The Conclusion accounts for the volatile trajectory of the growth of the JW community in

post-Soviet Armenia. It also draws an overall socio-economic and socio-cultural portrait of the JWs community. It also offers some warnings about a potential worsening of the JWs' practical position and status in Armenia in the coming years.

CHAPTER II. JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN ARMENIA

For its visitors, the capital of Armenia, Yerevan, immediately creates a sense of mélange of elements that seem hardly compatible. Wide western-style avenues intersect with Middle East-style narrow, windy streets without sidewalks. Myriad of rundown Soviet-style apartment complexes cover the hills surrounding the downtown with its modern buildings, interior garden-rooms, pedestrian streets, and open-air restaurants. In their post-Soviet rhythms, the city and its 1.1 million inhabitants are uniquely traditional, yet open to the outside world with its Teslas, shopping malls, and skateparks. The worlds of the traditional and the global collide here and create both harmony and conflict. The Armenian churches, both old and new, spread throughout the city guard everything Armenianness stands for – they demonstrate that Armenians, comprising about 95% of the population of the city and country, are not ready to dissolve into the contemporary global world. Yet this façade of monolith Armenian traditional culture hides a vibrance of cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity in today's Armenia.

In this chapter, I do not attempt to describe every detail of the structure and activities of JWs. This Chapter introduces JWs living in Armenia and their environment, into which they are often embedded very organically yet from which they frequently stand out. Having created yet another element in the Armenian socio-cultural kaleidoscope, JWs often encounter hostility and even physical violence in addition to resentment which they commonly experience all over the world. The chapter has several subsections. First, I draw a picture of JWs' daily lives with meetings, public ministry, and Bible studies. Furthermore, I zero in on the constellation of connection and networks that tie JWs to each other and to the social world around them. I also describe various conflicts that arise between JWs and the rest of society.

I aim to show that the way in which JWs are woven into the fabric of the larger society is not

linear or straightforward. Many scholars regard and present JWs uni-dimensionally as strictly separate from the world (Cooper 1974:706; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Holden 2002; Stark and Iannaccone 1997:136; Sturgis 2008:298), strictly neutral when it comes to nationalism and politics, strictly indifferent towards holidays or birthdays, and excellently well-versed in the Bible and theology.[15] To a great extent, these views draw on WTBTS literature that invites JWs to be wary of the danger posed by the outside world – colleagues, school friends, even relatives – who do not worship Jehovah. Simultaneously, literature produces an image of JWs as an authoritarian organization that strictly controls its members from the top down and whose members love each other and are fully dedicated to Jehovah's rules and principles (Beckford 1975b; Curry 1992:157–58; Eddy 1958:117; Holden 2002; Knox 2018a; Penton 1985). I seek to break away from this approach that grants too much weight to these normative expectations and official rules and prescriptions. Naturally, I do not suggest that JWs are frauds and that they lie to others, each other, and themselves personally. I simply intend to demonstrate that JWs are a vibrant and complex community that accommodates people with different national, linguistic, educational, and class backgrounds and offers something to people with various interests, abilities, and aspirations. This community cordially receives those in need and those who are eager to give and share. Yet it painstakingly protects its way of being and often does not hesitate to disfellowship and shun trespassers and apostates – while its front door is open for everyone, its back door is open, too. There is a lot of room for negotiation – how strictly should one stick to the "no-holidays" rule, how politically neutral can one be during a revolution, how to react if a spiritual brother/sister behaves

[15] For the overview of the inherent bias in the study of religious organizations see, Greil and Rudy 1984. They note that the study of conversion in religious group draws on the "assumption that all members of a given group have all undergone the same essential transformation process and can therefore be regarded as a single unit for the purposes of analysis" (1984:311).

inappropriately? The members of the JW community often have very different views on these questions.

Congregation

It so happens that at the level of congregation the WTBTS is organized linguistically. Declaratively following the principle of *Sola Scriptura* and placing Bible study at the core of worshiping God, JWs try to provide everyone with an opportunity to study religious literature in the language that the Bible student wields best. In the 1990s, in Armenia, there were only two main congregations – Russian and Armenian. Since Russian had been a lingua franca of the region and is the language of education for many Soviet Armenians, many chose the Russian congregations because their reading or speaking skills in Armenian were subpar.[16]

The English congregation is an exception from the language preference "rule." There are many native English speakers who moved to Armenia for various reasons – sometimes the Governing Body asks them to help with missionary activities in Armenia, sometimes they get married to an Armenian and stay in the country, or it can be for other reasons. Also, the congregation hosts a number of non-native English-speaking foreigners from Europe, Africa, and Asia, such as can be a French couple who served as special pioneers in Africa and came to Armenia for a few weeks to use medical services or JWs from Arab countries, where the WTBTS is under a ban, who participate in the meetings via Zoom. However, more than half of the members of the English congregation are Armenians who happened to speak English or learned it intentionally to be

[16] Personal preference is not the only factor – sometimes JWs are asked to attend another congregation because there are fewer people there. Sometimes the choice is predicated on convenience – for example, in cases when there is only one congregation in the area or when one's work schedule is compatible with the meeting schedule of a particular congregation. Yet sometimes, people whose proficiency in the language of the congregation is very low refuse to change the congregational affiliation. For example, some member the Russian congregation speak rather poor Russian to the point that sometimes they have to switch to Armenian during discussions. This situation is also common for the English congregation. This is less common for the Armenian congregations, but a few times I met Russian speakers in the Armenian congregations who would answer in Russian.

a part of this group – some have a near-native proficiency, while others really struggle with reading and expressing themselves. All over the world, it is not uncommon for JWs to learn a different language in order to embrace more people in their public ministry, and Armenia is not an exception.

Over the last decade not only have the number of congregations grown, but the linguistic and cultural diversity within the WTBTS has exploded as well. In addition to three Russian and 25 Armenian congregations,[17] one can attend Persian (Farsi),[18] English, Kurdish, and sign language congregations. The cultural diversity greatly exceeds linguistic diversity, for one can encounter Americans, Georgians, French, Thai, and Ukrainian JWs in the meetings. Despite this diversity, they share a tremendous commonality – they are enthusiastic worshippers of Jehovah and dedicated members of his organization.

Each congregation comprises up to 150 members[19] and is run by a body of male elders, who are appointed by the Governing Body – a group of administrative and theological leaders of the Watch Tower Society that reside in the United States. The elders handle questions related to correct implementation of WTBTS teaching, to the behavior of the members of congregation, to administrative and financial logistics, to organizing help for members in need, among many other things. Approximately 20 congregations form a circuit administered by a *circuit overseer* who visits the

[17] Outside of Yerevan, there are six Russian congregations (in Gyumri, Abovyan, and Zorap) and over 25 Armenian congregations.

[18] Persian congregations cater to Iranians who live in Armenia. It is one of the most clandestine congregations because the government of the Iranian Islamic Republic shows little tolerance to conversion of Muslims into Christianity. This rule spreads beyond the borders of Iran – if a Muslim Iranian citizen demonstrates interest in or converts to another religion while abroad, they can be severely persecuted upon their return to Iran. For this reason, only JWs of Iranian background who know and feel the cultural and political context very well are allowed to proselytize to Iranians in Armenia. This congregation's existence is not publicized to the point that the official website of the WTBTS – www.jw.org – has information about the meeting place and time of each and every congregation in Armenia except for the Persian congregation. So, a random person from the street cannot attend a Persian JW meeting without a preliminary screening.

[19] There is academic literature that connects the success of JWs with the small size of congregations, because it arguably boosts closeness between the members and enhances the sense of community (Aguirre and Alston 1980; Alston and Aguirre 1979; Cooper 1974).

congregations twice a year to keep an eye on the spiritual atmosphere in the congregations, to check on the relationships between members and elders as well as to address other issues that require his attention. The administrative center of the WTBTS in any country is called *Bethel* – the Armenian Bethel is located in Yerevan. The Bethel is the coordination hub and backbone of the JW community in the country – all of the communication with the Governing Body, with the local authorities, and between various congregations is facilitated and controlled by the Bethel.[20] It controls financial flows of the JW community in Armenia, addresses issues that occur during public ministry, and obtains building permits for the construction of places of worship, to mention a few.

Figure 2. The Kingdom Hall in downtown Yerevan[21]

[20] It does not mean, however, that the Bethel is omnipotent. In order to get access to archives and other information within the community of JWs, I got a permission from the Armenian Bethel. This permission allowed me to interview members of the congregations, participate in extra-curricular activities, and attend Zoom meetings. Nevertheless, the elders of the Russian congregation overruled that permission and denied me access to the online meetings because they were concerned about the safety of the JWs who participated remotely from Russia.

[21] The insignia "JW.ORG" is a relatively recent addition. When I first visited this Kingdom Hall in 2015, it was absolutely unidentifiable as JWs' place of worship for a bystander.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, JWs gathered for meetings at least twice a week in a place called the *Kingdom Hall* that can be used by up to eight different congregations, as is the case with the KH in downtown Yerevan. Overall, there are eight KHs in Yerevan. Some of them – in Masiv, Kentron, and Davtashen – have two large rooms where two different congregations can convene at the same time, but most congregations assemble at different times and/or on different days of the week. I will focus mostly on the Russian, Armenian, and English congregations that confer in a Kingdom Hall located slightly outside of downtown Yerevan. This KH was built in 2009, when the pressure on JWs from the state and society was much higher. This is reflected in the outer appearance of the building as it did not have a single sign identifying this building as a place of gathering of JWs until recently.

About 15-20 minutes before a meeting starts, streams of elegant, well-dressed people start flowing into the Kingdom Hall. Nicely combed men of all ages wearing tidy suits, ties, and shoes are accompanied by women wearing nice clothes and neat hairstyles. Although their suits are not necessarily expensive, for many Armenian JWs cannot afford expensive clothing, they are always clean, ironed, and spotless. When I attended my first meeting, the KH did not have a sign indicating its affiliation with the WTBTS, I had no doubt that I was in the right place – such concentration of nicely dressed people on a regular afternoon almost unmistakably meant they were JWs going to a meeting. Some of them come to the meetings by walking from their apartments located in downtown Yerevan just a mile or two away. Others take an overcrowded *marshrutka* – a van designed for 12 people, but usually transporting more than 20 – from the outskirts of Yerevan where they live in small rooms in overcrowded dorms without showers or proper restrooms. A few come by car – an unattainable luxury for the absolute majority of JWs in Armenia, – so the small impromptu parking lot in front of the KH is spacious enough to accommodate all the vehicles. They

warmly greet each other and, having split into smaller groups, share their recent achievements in public ministry; they talk about other brothers and sisters and discuss recent news proving how corrupt and volatile this world is and how wonderful the new world will be. They ask about each other's health, give advice regarding all possible problems, and inquire about family members. Often, in response to a question like "how are you today?" they answer, "Good, I gave away two brochures on the way to the meeting" – their well-being is often measured in how successful they are at spreading the Good News. These conversations move inside the KH where everyone takes their usual seat and gets prepared for the meeting, while ministerial servants[22] prepare and test the equipment: computers, screens, and microphones.

Even though everyone knows each other, the congregations are visibly split into smaller informal groups that maintain closer ties both within the KH and outside of it. They sit together during the weekly gatherings, often commute together to and from the meetings, do public ministry together, and spend fun time as a group. In some congregations this divide is stronger and more discernible than in others. For example, the cohesion of the Russian congregation (Rus. Русское Центральное Собрание) as a whole is tangibly lower than the cohesion of the Armenian (Arm. Երիտասարդական Ժողով) and English congregations. However, when a new visitor comes, a genuine joy of having a new brother or sister overtakes and unites the congregation. My very first visit to this congregation prompted me to write these notes:

> My presence was immediately noticed by everyone in the congregation, although there were about 60-70 people. People were looking at me during the entire meeting. One lady offered me water in the middle of the service. Right after the final song, there was a whole line of people who wanted to meet me. They were so genuinely happy that I

[22] A ministerial servant is the equivalent of a *deacon,* which can be translated as servant. He usually serves as an assistant to the elders in a congregation. The circle of responsibilities of the ministerial servant can include taking care of the equipment, handling and organizing literature, disseminating information among the members of the congregation, among other things.

> came to the meeting. They were very surprised when I told them that I found out about the meeting on the Internet. Those who met me would quickly re-tell my story to the others who surrounded me. They were praising me for my curiosity and literally poured their smiles on me, and I felt no tension whatsoever when I was talking to them.

Every time I come to a new congregation, I am immediately surrounded by multiple members asking questions about me and my relationships with Jehovah, introducing themselves, and telling me how happy they and Jehovah are that I came. This cordial and sincerely warm reception is a signature trait of the JW community. Recalling their first visit to a congregation meeting is a cherished memory for most JWs. For me, the openness and genuine affection during my very first visit incentivized me to choose this community for my research, but for many people it becomes a pivotal point that changes their lives entirely.

Meetings

Up until the COVID pandemic, very few people used gadgets here – smartphones and tablets were so rare that seeing me reading off of the screen of my smartphone, most JWs would often think that I did not have necessary materials and would offer me a paperback magazine and a Bible. Getting ready for the meeting, they usually prepare their paper Bibles and notebooks, as well as the *Watchtower* magazines and meeting workbooks with multiple notes and highlighted passages in the article that they read beforehand for the meeting. On a hot summer day, when the temperature in Yerevan often rises over 100 F, they would also get a hand fan and some water to cool off in the overheated KH that has no air-conditioning.[23] Not once have I heard a complaint about how hot or cold it is in the KH or how difficult it is to get here – it is immediately apparent that overcoming these issues is perceived as a negligibly small price for the joy and privilege of worshipping Jehovah and Jesus as a community.

[23] During the pandemic, many KHs were renovated and equipped with air conditioners.

Although in Armenia, being late is not frowned upon as much as it is in the U.S. and events and meetings often begin significantly later than scheduled, JWs are extremely punctual and always start meetings on the dot. Each congregation holds an hour-and-45-minute-long meeting twice a week – on a weekday and on a weekend. The mid-week meeting usually takes place in the evening in order to accommodate those who work, while the weekend meeting is often scheduled much earlier in the day. These meetings open and end with a song followed by a prayer. Both on the weekdays and weekends, the opening part is followed by a talk that either addresses a certain relevant issue or focuses on a passage from the Bible.[24] These presentations last 15 minutes on a weekday and 30 minutes on the weekend. The weekend public talk can be prepared and given by a baptized male member of the congregation, an invited member from a different congregation, or a circuit overseer.[25]

These frequent exchanges break the isolation of congregations from one another and undoubtedly increases the consistency across the WTBTS. Many JWs openly take pride in this uniformity of worship – in one given week, millions of JWs across the globe start and finish their meetings with the same songs, listen to similar public talks that were prepared following similar guidelines from the headquarters, read the same passages from the Watchtower magazine, and

[24] The structure of meetings is not uncompromisingly set in stone – this order can be reversed for various reasons – for example, to accommodate a public speaker from another congregation.

[25] Twice a year, JWs hold large conventions – a three-day regional convention in the summer and two one-day circuit assemblies – in fall and spring. Before 2016, JWs in Armenia used to rent a large venue for these large gatherings. However, now there is a large convention hall built in a re-designed Soviet cement factory located in Balahovit, slightly outside of Yerevan. The hall can accommodate up to 1,500 believers at one time with 1000 indoor and 500 outdoor seats. Just like regular meetings, conventions are organized by linguistic principle – for example, all Russian congregations of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh) gather in the convention hall. The program of a convention usually consists of public presentations similar to those delivered during the weekly meetings. In the middle of the day, during a lunch break, hundreds of believers split in smaller groups and share food they bring from home. There is no place where everyone would be able to sit together and eat – many go outside and stand while eating, others go to their cars or take benches outside. During the pandemic, in-person conventions and regular weekly meetings were discontinued – now all the convention events are pre-recorded, and the members of congregations watch them online.

answer the same questions. JWs frequently say that this impressive coordination of effort and massive work to render the New World Translation Bible in 200 languages, translate magazines and brochures into over 600 languages (400 of which are available online) and songs into over a hundred languages would not be possible without Jehovah's blessing and support. For JWs, this emphasis on content consistency across linguistic, cultural, and political borders is yet another confirmation of belonging to God's organization.

In a mid-week meeting, the short public talk is followed by the Theocratic Ministry School that consists of three staged sketches[26] and aims to "train publishers to be effective preachers and teachers of the good news" (Theocratic Schools 2022). Although men participate in these short performances too, more often they feature women – after all, women comprise up to 75% of the congregation.[27] For female JWs who are not allowed to give public talks or lead discussions in the Kingdom Hall, the Theocratic School is a time to show their merit and contribute to the meeting – many of them prepare and rehearse sketches beforehand following instructions provided by the JW literature and perform them using their acting talents. And when children go on the stage to act out one of the sketches, everyone in the meetings follows them with eyes full of adoration and awe.

Usually, these performances present amicable encounters with non-JWs. So, at the beginning of my fieldwork, these performances seemed useless to me as they never addressed possible situations where a person would be insistently indifferent or even hostile to the JWs' preaching.

[26] The first sketch enacts a probable scenario for an initial conversation with a proselytized – opening phrases, effective emphases, compelling use of the Bible, and establishing contact with the incentive to continue this conversation later. The second sketch presents a follow-up visit or a phone call and underscores the necessity for continuity with the previous discussion and maintaining interest in the topic. The third sketch usually focuses on an in-depth Bible study and emphasizes best ways to organize the learning process. At the same time, in recent years, these sketches that are prepared and acted out by the members of each individual congregation have often been replaced with videos designed by the WTBTS and played during meetings.

[27] This is generally consistent with other scholar's findings throughout the world (Munters 1977). However, when the Theocratic Ministry schools were established in 1943 women were not allowed to participate. Female members were allowed to participate in the 1960s.

However, later it became clear that JWs do not aim to change the opinion of those who are indifferent or hostile and concentrate on those who are receptive to preaching yet uncertain towards and unknowledgeable about the Bible. So, for a preacher, these performances are an invaluable source of opening lines, hooks to capture and retain a listener's attention, and importantly experience in applying them. In 2022, the WTBTS took one step further – it introduced an interactive element to these sketches. During one of the meetings, the first sketch was not enacted but demonstrated as a video. It featured two female JWs talking to a woman about God. After a few opening lines, the video was paused, and the message on screen read "How would you respond if the householder says, 'I don't think God exists'?" Then, the audience gave several options. Some suggested specific brochures, while others advised focusing on certain logical schemas that would nudge the proselytized to the right direction. This exchange of experience and opinions increases the efficiency of the Theocratic Ministry School.[28]

The theocratic Ministry School on a weekday is followed by a song that marks the middle of the gathering. The second part – a Bible study in the midweek meeting and a *Watchtower* magazine study on the weekend – are the heart and core of the JWs' meetings. Both study sessions are structurally quite similar – for each, there is an article that serves as a study guide, and each is organized in an interactive style. An article is usually split into smaller sub-sections of one to two paragraphs that are accompanied by one or several questions helping readers discern what they should focus on and what they should take away from reading this sub-section. Each study session is moderated by two male members of a congregation – one of them reads the sub-sections and the other moderates the Q&A portion of the study.

[28] In the past, the elders provided thorough analysis of the performed sketch, and the audience was invited to comment on delivery, gestures, and use of pictures. At the same time, "women [could] not offer criticism of a male speaker" (Whalen 1962:108–9). Today, the elders' comments seem to be a formality and offer little substantial feedback.

Most JWs prepare for these studies diligently and read the articles in advance. They highlight important passages and even write answers down. Once the question is announced, those who would like to answer raise their hands, and the moderator invites a few of them to answer the questions using a microphone. The questions rarely invite members to discuss personal preferences, express opinions, or think far beyond what is said in the passage. Here is an excerpt from a Watchtower study article in the Kilikia congregation:[29]

> Paragraph 11:
> According to Matthew 7:1,2, what did Jesus tell us to stop doing, and why can this be a challenge?
>
> Read Matthew 7:1,2. Jesus knew that his imperfect listeners tended to be critical of others. Note that he said: "**Stop** judging." We may try hard not to judge fellow believers. Yet, we are all imperfect. If we find that at times, we are being critical, what should we do? Listen to Jesus, and work hard to **stop** judging.
>
> Comments:
> **Elder-moderator**: According to Matthew 7:1, 2,… Why can this be a challenge?
> **Male member**: Jesus said: "Stop judging that you may not be judged" (Matthew 7:1)
> **Moderator**: Well done!!
> **Female member**: It can be difficult for us [not to judge] because we are imperfect, and we tend to see the bad in others.
> **Moderator**: Yes, thank you.

These typical answers show that, for many JWs, engaging with an article is often reduced to re-reading a part of the passage that contains the answer to the question. At the same time, many are able to write the discussed passage into a larger biblical context and make more refined inferences, although that does not happen very frequently. Still others like going off on tangents focusing on their opinion and/or life experience. Yet in all these cases, the moderator usually comments very little, if at all, on the quality of the answers and rarely adds anything.[30] The moderator accompanies

[29] The full study article is available through this link www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/watchtower-study-december-2021/Listen-to-the-Voice-of-the-Fine-Shepherd/#p0

[30] There are notable exceptions to this rule – when some experienced members may expand on an answer, give

each answer with a "thank you," "yes, correct" or "well-said" even in cases when the answer makes little sense or is minimally relevant. So, the elders' role in the meeting is often limited to reading a text and to choosing the person who will answer the question.[31] Intentionally or unintentionally, this system creates a strong impression of the objectivity and neutrality of the received knowledge. None of those present in the meeting produce knowledge – the elders simply facilitate the learning process, while others use WTBTS literature, videos, and the Bible to find the Truth.[32]

Going beyond the questions provided in the magazines is not completely off the table, although it rarely happens. Once, in the English congregation, the entire discussion was far from smooth – almost every time a question was announced, there was an awkward pause before someone would volunteer to respond. The facilitator of the discussion, started to ask questions that were nowhere in the study article in order to stimulate participation. Since the topic of the discussion was about donations, he asked, "How do we know that the elders in the Governing Body in New York do not spend the money we donate?" When this question failed to trigger a desired reaction, he shared his personal opinion and told that he had had an opportunity to see the rooms of the members of the Governing Body when he was in Brooklyn. He remembered that the rooms lacked any luxury and were modest and simple. Also, he emphasized that the members of the

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additional biblical references, or connect an answer with other topics previously discussed in the congregation. I discuss these cases in greater detail in Chapter V.

[31] Quite naturally, new members who are not well-versed in the Truth may make mistakes and say something that contradicts JWs' beliefs. In these cases, nobody corrects the mistake immediately during the meeting. As Mher Nahapetyan, a former unbaptized publisher recalled, "I remember that once I said something during the meeting, and it turned out to be against the Truth. But nobody said anything during the meeting. Only later, the young boys that had been studying The Bible very delicately told me that I was wrong, and I shouldn't say it like that. But they didn't say anything during the meeting."

[32] In January 2022, the WTBTS released a new Bible course "Enjoy Life Forever!" available in a traditional book format and as an online interactive page (it is available at https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/enjoy-life-forever/). This book introduced a significant break from this approach and included more open-ended questions. It asks the reader "How do you view the Bible?", "Do you think that the message of hope found in the Bible could make a difference in your life now?", "Do you think we can trust that Jehovah always knows what is best for us?" Nevertheless, this emphasis on one's personal attitude differs from the overall tendency of WTBTS literature to stay close to the written text.

Governing Body dined together with the other Bethelites and did not stand out. In other words, he was able to deliver the point by digressing from the suggested discussion questions. In general, I noticed that the American members of the English congregation are usually much more comfortable with expanding their comments beyond the immediate question or material in the article, although some local elders do that as well. When I shared this observation with one of the American JWs, he said that in the U.S. the discussions are usually more robust and flexible. The Armenian JWs, regardless of their congregational affiliation, seem to prefer accuracy over deeper engagement with the text.

Members of a congregation do not equally contribute to or participate in the study. In the Russian congregation, I would usually sit with the same people who I got to know very well. Antonina – a 70-year-old dedicated JW serving as a *pioneer*,[33] has her hand always raised and is always ready to give a short yet eloquent answer to a question. Anush, who is in her 20s, grew up and went to school in Russia and raises her hand every so often. Olga, who accepted the Truth at the beginning of the 2000s, prepares for the meetings very strategically – she chooses a few questions that she would like to answer, and she enthusiastically throws her hand up when that question is announced. She gets visibly frustrated and upset if the moderator does not choose her -– on many occasions, in private conversations, she asked me why, in my opinion, she is not selected and what she could do in order to ensure that next time she would be selected to participate in the study. At the same time, Olga gets very anxious when she is selected – when she is handed the microphone, her voice starts to tremble as she nervously tries to spit out her answer as quickly as possible. After

[33] A *pioneer* is a full-time evangelizer who spends 70 hours a month doing public ministry. As well as *auxiliary pioneers* who spend about 30-40 hours a month spreading the good news, pioneers do not get paid for their dedicated work. Only *special pioneers* who are selected to preach in territories where it is dimed most necessary receive small remuneration in order to cover their basic expenses. Starting from March 2023, the number of hours was reduced to 50 for pioneers and 15-30 for auxiliary pioneers.

the meeting, she insistently asks me and others, "Was my answer fine? Was it too long? Was it silly?" When I asked her why she was so eager to participate in the meetings, she answered:

> Well, first, it shows that I diligently prepare in advance and take these meetings seriously. Then, we all participate – we answer and listen to each other's responses, so it is just how I show my respect for others. Plus, when I prepare, I learn what to say during public ministry. Overall, it shows that I care about this congregation – I am sure Jehovah watches me and notices it.

For Olga, attending the meetings and participating in the Bible or Watchtower study is an immensely important part of being a dedicated worshiper of Jehovah. For Narek, another long-time JW in his 70s, participation is very different – he sometimes skips meetings and almost never participates in the congregation studies, although he is very dedicated and considers himself very knowledgeable about the Bible. Outside of the KH, his life revolves around public ministry – he never loses a chance to talk about Jehovah – on the street or in public transport, to a taxi driver or to a grocery store worker. Yet he appears to regard the meetings as a responsibility of medium importance – for him, it is definitely not as much of a source of excitement or as important to him as a manifestation of belonging to Jehovah's flock as in Olga's case. Then, as the meeting continues, and everyone is filled with awe, makes gleeful sounds, and even applauds when a three-year old girl mutters a short answer she rehearsed with her parents at home. In the next moment, everyone rolls their eyes, shakes their heads, or quietly chuckles when someone, like sister Grushina, who is known for long and often irrelevant responses, is selected to answer a question. JWs do not fuse together into a faceless, homogenous mass but remain colorful mosaic pieces united by their dedication to Jehovah.

With people coming in and out of the room, with Olga having shared candies with us in the middle of the meeting, with occasional children's cry or quite frequent phone calls that many in Armenia usually answer without leaving the room the official part of the meeting comes to an end.

The congregation implodes with cheerful talk, hugs, smiles, and laughter. If it is close to the end of the month, the elders loudly remind everyone to submit their field service reports containing the number of hours they have spent in public ministry, the number of brochures and magazines they have given away, the number of videos they have shown, and the number of Bible studies and return visits they have had.[34]

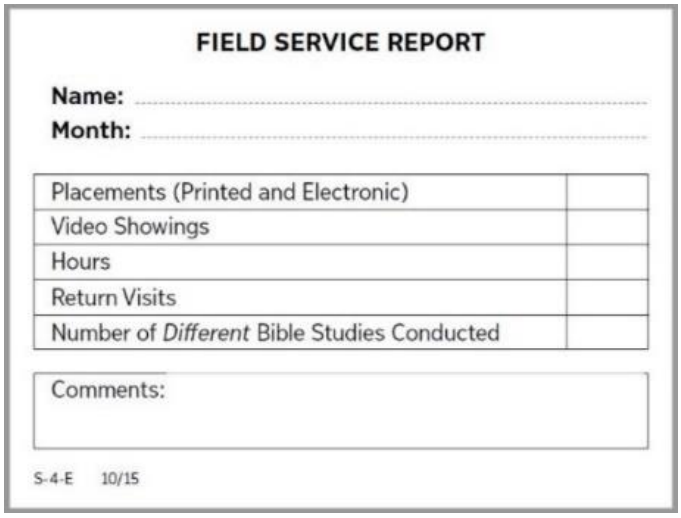
As everyone is slowly moving towards the exit, some people deposit donations into two small boxes at the entrance – one reads, "for the needs of the local congregation" and the other – "for the work of the worldwide Kingdom."[35] Some people donate a quarter or two, others – a few dollars, which usually depends on the material well-being of the contributor. Without clear guidance on the appropriate amount for donations, some members struggle and feel moral remorse for being unable to contribute more. During one discussion in the Armenian congregation, a female JW in her 60s, said, "I used to be ashamed when I was unable to give a significant amount of donation, but then I told myself never to be ashamed of that – Jehovah appreciates any contribution." Others praise the organization for not directly soliciting money during meetings as it is done in some other Churches, "this woman, my neighbor is from the Pentecostals. So, she told us that they must pay 500 drams[36] at every meeting. That is a lot of money for me! Can you imagine?!" (Anush, Russian Congregation).

[34] During the COVID pandemic, sending someone a link to a video or an article is counted as a literature placement; if a JW sends a text message or makes a phone call to someone they previously talked to, it counts as a return visit.

[35] There is no part of the meeting when donations are solicited from those who are present – contributions are not mandatory, but voluntary, and are given before or after each meeting. Neither is there a suggested amount for offering – "anyone can regularly 'set something aside' to give 'just as he has resolved in his heart'" (How is Our Worldwide Work Financed?). Once all the contributions have been made, two elders remove the donated money from the boxes, count it, write down the amount retrieved, combine and put it into one envelope, and take it away before members of the next congregation enter. The donations from the two boxes are combined – the inscriptions on the boxes do not literally mean how the donations will be spent but suggest the types of expenses that the WTBTS uses this money for. At the end of the month, the elders announce how much was donated by their congregation and how much was spent for various needs. Some scholars argue that this aspect is very attractive for potential converts (Cooper 1974:716).

[36] About one U.S. dollar.

Figure 3. Field Service Report Form



FIELD SERVICE REPORT

Name: .....

Month: .....

Placements (Printed and Electronic)	
Video Showings	
Hours	
Return Visits	
Number of *Different* Bible Studies Conducted	

Comments:

S-4-E 10/15

Occasionally, different congregations have meetings back-to-back in the same Kingdom Hall. Although members of different congregations often know each other, I noticed that apart from the most active members, they do not communicate very much across congregational lines. Often, they leave the KH in the same small groups that they were sitting together with. On the way home, some of them occasionally talk to passers-by, give away a few *Watchtower* magazines or brochures about family happiness or about questions all teenagers ask – later, this time is included in the field service report as public ministry. They are not consumed by preaching entirely – they discuss the meeting, as well as their families, neighbors, and work, while eating ice cream, talking about the weather, or examining passers-by.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Wider Armenian Society

As a small group, Anush, Nadezhda, Elena, Olga, and I are walking away from the Kingdom Hall. Pointing at a passerby who is wearing shorts, Olga shakes her head, "A real Armenian man would never wear shorts in public – ever! But now, because of the influence of this American idea

that '*I do whatever I want*,' they are adopting and practicing this habit that is radically alien to the Armenian culture." Belonging to the Soviet generation, Olga views the post-Soviet social, economic, and political changes as a rapid decay of Armenia and a deterioration of Armenian culture and society. She defends traditional Armenian culture, while, perhaps not without bitter irony, destroying traditional values and Armenianness is what JWs in Armenia are most often accused of.

Figure 4. Cardboard cutouts in Armenian national costumes in the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Armenia (Bethel)

In the lives of many current JWs, accusations of having corroded Armenianness or not being Armenian at all had started long before they joined Jehovah's Organization. For example, Nadezhda was born and grew up in Soviet Azerbaijan, where Russian culture and language were the medium of intercultural communication, so many Armenians living there did not speak Armenian. When

Nadezhda and her family had to flee Azerbaijan and move to Armenia, she spoke only Russian. Having heard me speaking Armenian, Nadezhda praised me and added in Russian, "At the beginning – right after we came to Yerevan from Baku – I didn't speak Armenian at all, and people started laughing at me. They asked me if I was Russian. But I said [*emphatically*], 'I am Armenian!' So, I made it my goal to learn Armenian and, կամաց-կամաց (Arm. literally means "little by little") I learned it."

As in the cases of Olga and Nadezhda, taking pride in being Armenian is very common and slips into the JWs' discourse in various forms – as stories about fighting Azerbaijanis in the independence war in Nagorno Karabagh in 1992-1994, as complaints that English street signs in Yerevan signal about the dissolution of Armenianness in the global world, or as direct expressions of love for Armenia:

> When those events in Baku started, they were saying that we could apply for a refugee status in the U.S. and go to America. I did not want to go there. First of all, my mother wanted to go to Armenia, so I made her dream come true. I am so happy. Plus, I am sure I would not be able to live there – I do not know the language. Ok, maybe I would remember something from school – I learned English at school. But anyway, I am Armenian, and I wanted to live with Armenians here. And they all speak Armenian. I love it here." Hrach, Russian Congregation

This well-articulated and apparent identification that JWs have with Armenia, Armenians, and Armenian culture is equally noticeable among older and younger generations.[37] The way one's love for Armenia is expressed is not very different within community and outside of it. Many young Armenians, both JWs and non-JWs, say, "my parents [*or a spouse – A.T.*] want me to go to California, but I can't imagine living anywhere else but here – I know everyone and everything here, I love it here" (young male JW, English congregation). An older female JW shared with me a poem that she

[37] Scholars have noted that identification with local culture, language, and modes of identification is more persistent that the popular imagination claims (Pinto 2005; Wilson 1977). Holden (2002) consistently depicts JWs as a closed community whose members have weak ties with the wider society.

had written for her grandson who lives in Russia:

> Եթե հայ ես դու, դու հայ էլ մնա/ If you are Armenian, you should stay Armenian
> և օտար երկիր դու մի գնա/ And you shouldn't go to a foreign country
> Եթե հայ ես դու, դու հայ էլ մնա/ If you are Armenian, you should stay Armenian

This expression of love towards Armenia runs parallel to emphasizing themselves as a unique group that stands out from the world and transcends cultures, and languages, as well as political borders and systems. A few minutes before she so emphatically celebrated her Armenianness and her dedication to learning the Armenian language, Nadezhda proudly said, "There are eight million of us around the globe. Jesus said that his people will come from many nations. And it doesn't matter whether we're Russians, Armenians, or [*quietly*] Azeris." The emphasis on the unity of the worldwide JW community runs throughout sermons, WTBTS literature, as well as personal stories and is frequently reflected in real life – JWs from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds often work and go on vacation together, marry each other, and help one another in emergency situations. Often, this international aspect is used to enhance one's commitment to the Truth or to prove that the WTBTS is indeed "chosen." Once, talking about the international assemblies, Narek exclaimed, "Can you imagine these conventions – international conventions – there are whole stadiums of people?! And do you understand how much work it requires, money to rent a stadium?! But it is the best proof that Jehovah supports his organization, since things like that are possible."

The meetings, the Watchtower magazine, multiple online videos from the official website of the WTBTS (www.jw.org) – all emphasize how JWs over the world demonstrate this beautiful, sincere, and wholehearted love towards one another. They draw a vivid picture of peaceful and

harmonious community amidst the pain and chaos of the world.[38] And this is one of the most common ways in which JWs experience their community. In the English congregation, during a discussion about how JWs all over the world show their brotherly love towards each other, a young female publisher shared her story:

> My mother went to Minsk [*the capital of Belarus* – A.T.] to have surgery. Naturally, she quickly found a local congregation of JWs there and attended a few times before she had the surgery. Since she would need to stay in the city for rehabilitation for several weeks, she decided to rent an apartment. But a couple from this congregation said – 'You should come and stay at our apartment. We will go and live with our relatives during that time.' So just like that, people that she'd never seen before gave her the keys to their apartment and left for three weeks. This amazing support is unparalleled. For example, I cannot imagine that Catholic people who don't know each other would do the same for each other.

This JWs-centered understanding of "us" and "them" is extremely different from JWs' feeling and viewing themselves as a part of the wider Armenian society. Yet, the same members of the community professes and practice both understandings without ever viewing them as contradictory and constantly cross this line.

Of course, the picture of absolute love and brotherly relationships in the community depicted by WTBTS literature is slightly too idyllic. Although a serious conflict within the congregation would most likely result in one's leaving the group, subtle antipathy or disaffection are noticeable. I observed tension between various members of congregations when I tried to understand how the congregational sub-groups are formed; I often noticed gentle yet poorly

[38] For example, this short article described a JWs disaster relief mission in Colombia – "Employees at a major supermarket where the Disaster Relief Committee purchased many of the supplies [for suffering members of the JW community – A.T.] expressed great admiration for the relief efforts. One worker at the supermarket said: 'I knew that Jehovah's Witnesses visited our homes to bring us the message from God's Word, but this beautiful work of helping those who are most in need amazes me.' Despite the challenging circumstances, our brothers are maintaining their spiritual routine. We know that Jehovah will continue to provide both materially and spiritually for our dear brothers as they remain 'no part of the world.'—John 17:16" (Relief Efforts Sustain Our Brothers in Colombia 2021). It is common for the JW literature to stress how people outside of the WTBTS admire the cohesion, dedication, and self-discipline of JWs. Also, the literature often emphasizes that these wonderful qualities of the JW community are contingent upon staying outside of the world.

concealed derision of certain members whose presence and participation make others roll their eyes or quietly chuckle. In a private conversation, Antonina noted, "You know, I do not really like Lyudmila, because she is a little too loud for my taste. She is always like, 'me, me, me.' I don't like people like that. Once at a meeting, as usual, she was saying, 'I did that, I do that.' And I happened to say: '*I* is the last letter in the alphabet' (Rus. Я – последняя буква в алфавите).[39] And she got really offended." If children misbehave during the meeting – older members (usually women) shake their heads as a sign of disproval and often give castigating looks to the parents. After the meeting, they discuss how spoiled the kids are and suggest that parents are inept.

Yet congregations are different – while the Russian Congregation is noticeably fragmented, the Armenian congregation is more cohesive and consolidated.[40] It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons that determine the clearly different characters of these congregations – the only well-pronounced difference I noticed was a higher degree of reservation and calmer enthusiasm on behalf of the elders in the Russian congregation. This lack of unity is noticed not only by me as outsider, but also by the members of the congregation. Anush from the Russian congregation remarked,

> You must have noticed that our congregation is not very close-knit. There is no friendship here. I can't do everything to make and maintain friendships with everyone here alone, so I understand if you want to go and try the congregation on Komitas [*another Russian congregation in Yerevan*]. I have heard they are very close to each other there.[41]

[39] In Russian, the personal pronoun 'I' [Rus. "Я"] happens to be the last letter in the Cyrillic alphabet, so this Russian expression means that 'I' is the least important thing and should be mentioned last. It is somewhat similar to the English phrase "there is no 'I' in a team" but without a strong emphasis on group belonging.

[40] The membership in the English congregation is most fluid in comparison to the Russian and Armenian congregations – before the pandemic, there were often many members who would join the congregation for a short period of time while they were in the country, so the turnover in the congregation was relatively high. On the other hand, there is an active core that embraces most members of the congregation, while this core is pronouncedly absent in the Russian congregation.

[41] It is beyond any doubt, that the lack of cohesion in the Russian congregation is not caused by ethnic, linguistic,

Although in everyday life, personal preferences and differences quite expectedly influence relationships within the community, during times of hardship JWs come together to help each other by all means possible – they find jobs through communal networks, they take care of sick brothers and sisters, they organize funerals for deceased JWs who have no family, they share their gadgets with poor members of the congregation who cannot afford them. And this support has immense importance in Armenia – the last years of Soviet rule as well as the first decade of independence were extremely challenging for Armenia and Armenians who stayed in the country. Mass devastation after the disastrous earthquake in 1988, the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabagh, famine during the economic blockade, and extremely high levels of unemployment and poverty were overwhelming. In popular memory, this period is remembered as "dark and cold years" (Arm. մութ ու ցուրտ տարիներ), because in 1992-94, electricity was supplied for only one or two hours a day and water supplies were very irregular as well.

In the 1990s, amidst the inability of the weak state to provide essential services for the population, the importance of social connections and a system of mutual support significantly increased compared to the previous and following periods. The social cohesion and personal networks that have always played a significant role in Armenian society became the only tool for survival; one's relationships with neighbors and friends were often indispensable for finding jobs, procuring food, clothes, or medicine, maintaining social respect, and receiving psychological support. Simultaneously, this system further increased social control over one's actions because public disproval of one's behavior or decisions could result in one's exclusion from these social networks and, therefore, endanger one's survival, as well as the well-being of one's family. As I show

gender, or age differences – none of the smaller groups is organized by any of these principles.

below, public disproval of JWs forced families to castigate and repudiate their JW relatives for being social "deviants," which often created conflicts. Therefore, one's membership in the JW community can be like a double-edged sword – it is a source of the so-needed social ties and support, yet it can damage one's existing social and familial connections.

Public Attitude towards Jehovah's Witnesses

When our group reaches the Opera House, in the very center of the city, we part ways. Olga goes to her large apartment where she has been living alone since her only son moved to Russia with his family ten years ago. Elena returns to the house that she shares with her sick son whose wife is openly contemptuous of Elena. Nadezhda takes a bus to a dorm where she has been living for almost 30 years. And Anush catches a *marshrutka* to the city of Ejmiatsin – the administrative center of the AAC located 10 miles away from Yerevan – where she lives with her parents and siblings.

Having left the group, I caught a taxi to go to my apartment located slightly outside of the city center. Having picked up on my non-Armenian accent, the driver asked me where I was from and what I was doing in Armenia. When I briefly described my research, he exclaimed:

> I do not understand these Jehovists.[42] What are they doing in Armenia? We are the first Christian nation; we have our Armenian Apostolic Illuminator Church.[43] No Armenian would ever leave their Church – it is our everything. For thousands of years, many different things happened, but the Church has always been there. It has not changed. People always clung to it. Our Church is the oldest and it has always been the same.

This argument is a very common reaction to JWs in Armenia that depends little on one's educational, class, or age background. Being the first Christian nation is a corner stone of today's Armenian identity, and therefore JWs are viewed as redundant in this Chirstian land. Many times, I

[42] It is a common way to refer to the JW in Armenia and in Russia as "Jehovists" or even "Jehovahs" (Rus. Иéговы (Егóвы), Arm. Եհովականեր).

[43] Literally, he said, "Հայ Առաքելական Լուսավորիչ Եկեղեցի."

heard non-JWs saying, "If JWs really want to turn people into Christians, they must go to Muslim countries – here, in Armenia, everyone is already Christian" – as if JWs' presence and preaching among Armenians compromises and denigrates Armenian Christianness (I address this aspect in greater detail in Chapter IV).

Wishing to make the taxi driver say more about his attitude towards JWs, I used one of the JWs' counter-arguments – "Although people in Armenia consider themselves Christians, they do not read or know the Bible," to which he exclaimed:

> "But we have our Armenian Church! The Bible must be read in the Church by people who were trained to do it! Priests must understand it and tell us. I cannot understand it. Why would I read it?! I think that if one obeys God's commandments, one is close to God. Reading the Bible is not going to bring you close to God. You have to be a kind person. I am not really against the JWs. I don't like that they always want to talk to you. They stop you on the streets, they knock on your door. Why? I do not need it – I have my faith.

Although there are occasional violent attacks on JWs in the streets of Yerevan – their literature carts are knocked over, they sometimes get verbally assaulted or asked to leave the area and never come back – in the last ten years, the more reserved attitude shown by the taxi-driver has been prevalent. Even Armenian JWs agree that over the last ten years, people have been more tolerant of JW public ministry compared to the 2000s. One long-time JW noted,

> [At the end of the 90s] people started spreading fake news, spreading false information about Jehovah's Witnesses – that Jehovah's Witnesses do not get married, that Jehovah's Witnesses don't take showers, that they don't have families, that they never go to doctors, that they want to die, that they take kids away from their families. All this false information and news and TV – all these media were spreading fake news. Later, when people learned more about Jehovah's Witnesses, when they got to know their neighbors who were Jehovah's Witnesses or had relatives who were Jehovah's Witnesses, little by little, people understood that all that false information was in fact false. And now many people speak with respect about as compared to 10-15 years ago. (Gena)

Just like Gena, today many JWs claim that worldly people are more tolerant because they all know JWs, they have neighbors, acquaintances, friends, or JW family members and, therefore, they

know that JWs do not pose any danger to anyone. Yet my fieldwork demonstrated very clearly that people's actual personal experience with JWs correlates very little with their attitude towards JWs. First, the aforementioned negative beliefs about JWs are nearly ubiquitous in Armenia, which means that the overall attitude towards JWs is still mostly informed by stereotypes rather than by practical knowledge acquired over the course of interactions or co-habitations. Often people clearly distinguish between the JWs that they know and JWs as a phenomenon in Armenian social life. For example, Aghavni, an older female JW from an Armenian congregation, said,

> I have a neighbor, she is Robert Kocharyan's[44] supporter. And right before the [2021] elections, I talked to her and she said, "If Kocharyan gets elected, you know what we will do to all these [Jehovah's] Witnesses?! They are traitors of Fatherland!" I was surprised and asked her, "My dear [Arm. ազիզ ջան], why are you saying this? You know I am your neighbor, and I am a witness!" She says, "I didn't mean you…" I said, "But I am one of them!"

These two levels of thinking about JWs – an abstract and very personal – seem to inform a great deal of the overall attitude towards JWs in Armenia. At the abstract level, the very presence of JWs is politicized and is sometimes presented as a national security problem. At the personal level, being a JW is just an aspect of one's personality that rarely determines how the person is treated.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Family

The nuances of the inter-personal relationships between JWs and so-called "worldly"[45] people (Arm. աշխարհիկ, Rus. мирские) are very discernible at the family level. In my conversations with non-JW Armenians, one of the most common accusations against JWs has been their deleterious effect on family. JWs are presented as brainwashed cult-followers who want to seize the property of their relatives, refuse to have children at all[46] or forbid their children to have friends,

[44] Robert Kocharyan was the president of Armenia between 1998 and 2008 (see Chapter IV).

[45] I use this term several times throughout the dissertation. In all those cases, I employ the term to refer to non-JWs.

[46] Having children is an interesting aspect of being a JW – unlike in many other zealous Christian traditions where having

go to school, and spend time with their grandparents – in a word, they seek to destroy the family and traditions.[47] With this image of JWs, it is not surprising that many people view having a JW in their family as a disastrous plight. Sometimes, they try to protect "healthy" family members from the deleterious influence of the cult and limit communication with JW relatives. Often, conflicts occur because newly converted JWs stay away from family gatherings, such as birthdays or weddings and funerals that take place in a church. In the culture, in which belonging to family is regarded as of paramount importance, this gesture is understandably interpreted as offensive and even aggressive. At times, JWs demonstrate too much fervor in sharing their newly obtained passion for serving Jehovah, which alarms and troubles other family members.[48] If rigidity is shown on both sides, the tension can grow into an open conflict and seriously damage family ties.[49] However, in most cases, time and several mutual concessions bring family relationships to a new equilibrium. There are two general patterns that JWs' relationships with their immediate and extended families fall into. Below, I provide several accounts to illustrate these patterns.

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children is viewed as one of the main purposes of life, JWs can voluntarily decide not to have children and dedicate their lives to serving Jehovah, i.e. to full-time ministry. WTBTS literature presents volunteer childlessness as a necessary sacrifice in certain situations, such as serving as a circuit overseer or a Bethelite (Watchtower. Why Do they Have no Children? 2000). In general, JWs do not incentivize having or not having children leaving this decision for the couples. At the very beginning of my fieldwork, I was surprised by how few children I saw during the meetings – in a congregation of 70-80 people, there were about five children under the age of ten. In general, JWs in Armenia seem to harbor a similar attitude to having children as the larger Armenian society, perhaps with one difference – there is no expectation to have a child immediately after getting married. Penton (1985) argues that before 1975 when the expectations of Armageddon were very high, childlessness was strongly advised for the newlyweds (265).

[47] Some scholars call this genre an "atrocity tale" (Bromley, Shupe Jr., and Ventimiglia 1979), which is "an event which is viewed as a flagrant violation of a fundamental cultural value" (43). It triggers an emotional reaction to conversion and mobilizes and legitimizes efforts to establish control over the behavior and actions of the recruit.

[48] James Beckford (1985) also argues that recruits' family members are often shocked that a new faith can "engage the interests of a member of a family to the exclusion of other interests and in isolation from other kin" (104), which serves as a source of a conflict. At the same time, he claims that JWs' recruiting is not controversial because they "have not targeted single, middle-class, young people [and] have not drawn their recruits so swiftly into full-time work for the movement's growth" (122). Andrew Holden goes as far as to claim that those "who voluntarily join sectarian movements often do so at the expense of their family's happiness" (Holden 2002:112), which essentially describes JWs as unhappy and miserable.

[49] Sometimes, non-JW family members impose immense pressure on their JW relatives and force them to leave the community (Gena).

An Idyllic Family of Jehovah's Witnesses

The first pattern – an idyllic situation when all the members of the immediate family and some of the extended relatives accept the Truth and together shift their life rhythms according to the demands of the JW community. This option is the least conflictual because the family members stay in synch with one another and with the rules of the WTBTS. These families are usually regarded as an example of dedication to Jehovah and as an example of what gifts he bestows upon those who obey his commandments.[50]

Aleks and Ani are a couple that easily fits into the definition of an idyllic JW family. Aleks is in his 40s and Ani is in her late 30s, and they have been married for about ten years. Their relationships with Jehovah had started long before they got married, so they were building their family as two fully dedicated followers of Jehovah from the very beginning. Aleks comes from a Russophone Armenian family of intelligentsia, but of course everyone in the family speaks Armenians as well. His mother Lyuba, an instructor at a university, was the one who invited JWs into their house back in 1989 – both Lyuba and her son wholeheartedly embraced the Truth from that moment. Like for many JWs, that life changing day is imprinted in Aleks' memory in great detail:

> I was a teenager then and one day I come home and there is a Jehovah's witness. She was talking to my mother about God and the Bible. Of course, I joined the conversation. She asked me, "Did you know that God has a name?" I said, "No!" She showed me in the Bible – she showed me [*emphatically*] – not just told me but proved me with the Bible that it was in fact true. It struck me to my very core. I thought: 'Oh my

[50] The views of scholars on the nature of marriage withing the WTBTS vary significantly. According to Herbert Stroup (1945), the WTBTS advice to postpone marriages until after Armageddon negatively affected the relationships between JW spouses as husbands often neglected their views spiritually and materially. Penton (1985) argues the policy of male domination has a negative effect on relationships between spouses because it leads to abuse (270). Holden (2002) holds a similar view that "people who voluntarily join sectarian movements often do so at the expense of their family's happiness" (112). Some scholars studying JWs argue that one of the spouses' becoming a JW increases the risk of divorce (Stroup 1945; Whalen 1962). Yet, drawing on Zambian material, Karla Poewe (1978) argues that JWs "experience greater success than members of other denominations in maintaining stable marital unions" (313).

> God, I went to the church and not once did they even mention the name of God!' They [*the priests of the Armenian Church*] of course said something like My God and Lord Jesus, but I did not know that God had a name. It was a moment of revelation for me.

In the many conversations and interviews I have had with JWs, many have mentioned that discovering God's name was a moment when they realized that they in fact found the Truth. It is impossible to overestimate the enormous significance JWs assign to learning God's name. First, learning God's name is equated with understanding him.[51] Second, for many, this fact serves as a confirmation of a preexisting belief that priests in the Church are ignorant or deceiving because they either do not know the name of God or hide it. Aleks' wife, Ani, discovered the Truth when she was in high school and although she acknowledged that God's name was important for her too, she said:

> For me it was a striking revelation that people will be resurrected later and now they are asleep. They are not in Heaven or in Hell. The idea that we will be living together with our relatives forever, with the ones we love. When I heard this, I said to myself: 'this is what I need.'[52]

The promise of resurrection of the dead and a chance to hug their loved ones again looms large in the minds of JWs – and it is only a small fraction of their general focus on the New World (Arm. Նոր Աշխարհ, Rus. Новый Мир). The Kingdom of Jehovah is not an abstract ideal world – for most JWs, it is as real as a next year's vacation is for most people – one needs to work hard to deserve it, it has to be thought through in minute details, it is going to be pleasant, and, of course, everyone looks forward to its arrival.[53]

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[51] For example, one of my informants said, "So when I met the name Jehovah for the first time, it actually was in the Russian Bible of the Synod translation. Is in Exodus 3:15, I read this name and I was so surprised because I realized that before I didn't really recognize God" (Oganes, Armenian Congregation).

[52] Aleks corrected Ani, "We believe in it not because we just want to believe in a fairytale, but because we see that everything Jehovah communicated through his Word is always true. That is why we believe that this understanding of the afterlife is correct and that's why we believe it's going to happen."

[53] JWs make real plans for the New World, and they imagine it as people who have never been to Greece prepare for their trip there – through books, films, and contemplation. Talking about the future earthly Paradise is one of the most popular topics for or even a genre of conversation among JWs. Numerous times in various contexts, I witnessed how JWs were discussing what they are going to do after Armageddon. Olga usually says, "I don't need much. But I know

When Aleks and Ani invited me for dinner, their big family and I gathered around the table in their spacious three-room apartment in the very heart of downtown Yerevan – near *Kaskad*: Aleks, Ani, their two children of 9 and 2 years old, both mothers-in-law, and Aleks' grandmother, Nona. I was not the only person who was somewhat disturbing the idyllic unification in the Truth – Aleks' grandmother Nona "was not in the Truth" either. At first, I did not even understand she was not a JW, because she participated in the traditional prayer that precedes meals and generally participated in the conversation. Only later, when we were discussing how the Truth differs from other religions and I said, "Some people believe that one has to approach and understand God not through the brain, but through the heart," she responded, "I agree with that. I think God is in one's heart." Apparently, Nona's perception of the Divine greatly differs from a clearly defined personality of God present in the teaching of the WTBTS with clear rules, prescriptions, and taboos. Although they have all lived together in one apartment, Nona has resisted the proselytizing fervor of her closest family members for over 30 years. And although Nona and the others had very different understandings of God, they found a *modus vivendi*, in which everyone was entitled to his or her own opinion. This mutual respect has resulted in a very peaceful atmosphere and harmony in the household.

Besides the almost unanimous acceptance of the Truth, the members of this family were fortunate to have many of their friends and co-workers to become JWs or, at least, to show no disproval. Aleks' early interest in WTBTS teaching was shared by his closest friends – he recalls,

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that I am going to have a little donkey and together we will travel around the world, because I have always wanted to see it. Now it is impossible – the world is a very dangerous place." Others want "to see what is there in the depth of the ocean" (young female JW from the English congregation) or "to have a small house with a garden with lots of flowers" (Antonina). Some images are extremely minute – Khachik, a young male JW from the Armenian congregation asked me, "In your opinion, how tall will the buildings be in the new world?" I said that I had no idea, to which he replied, "the buildings are going to be one-story high. You want to know why? Because otherwise, someone is going to look down upon others, which will be unacceptable. Plus, when we look at the illustrations in the *Watchtower* magazine, the buildings always only have one floor. Since the Faithful Slave depicts them that way, it must be true."

"when I went to college at the beginning of the 1990s – my group was very cohesive, and we were all good friends. We used to spend a lot of time together. So, by the time we graduated, all the males were JWs, and some of them now serve as elders in different congregations." Lyuba and Ani's stories were different, but still very positive:

> **Ani**: "In my college cohort, the situation was the opposite [*of Aleks' situation*]. We have always been very close – we still get together every now and then, but none of them accepted Jehovah – no one accepted the Truth."
> **Lyuba**: "The same with me – it seems to me that it is so obvious that the Truth is the Truth, but people are reluctant to acknowledge it. At work no one wants to hear about it. Everyone knows I am a JW, and they like me as a person, but they do not convert."

Aleks and Ani, surrounded almost exclusively by their JW relatives, have the freedom and necessary support to build their family in accordance with the commandments of Jehovah. The fundamental rule articulated by Aleks during the dinner was accepted and shared by everyone in the family, "Jehovah created the family in such a way that the man is the head of the family, and the woman is an addition – she is a helper. The only way for family to work properly is to follow this pattern, because it brings harmony into the family." In the U.S., this gender inequality is frequently mentioned as an argument against JWs because of its obvious patriarchal overtone – the subjugated position of women is viewed as a contradiction to the aspirations for gender equality accepted in the American ideology and policies, as well as wider liberal circles. However, in Armenia, this concern is never voiced because these views fundamentally correspond to the prescribed gender roles in the wider Armenian society.[54]

[54] In the public sphere and politics, Armenian women have attained a certain level of equality with men – there are female members of the government, MPs, and other officials. Nevertheless, important political decision-making largely remains the province of men. In general, women are represented in the labor market and sometimes work as much or more than their husbands, and, simultaneously, the entirety of everyday domestic work falls onto their shoulders. For example, drinking coffee is one of the most widely spread rituals in Armenia, yet I have never seen a man making or serving coffee if there is a woman around – it automatically becomes her responsibility. Usually, when I tell my informants that I live alone in Yerevan, they all automatically assume that I starve, because there is a general belief that men cannot cook anything but barbeque.

The apparent harmony in Aleks and Ani's family is the result of both hard work and perhaps some luck – almost the entire family and many friends embraced Jehovah, while those who stayed outside of the JW community showed a lot of understanding and acceptance towards this non-traditional worldview and lifestyle.

An Uneasy New Equilibrium in the Family

Others are less lucky than Aleks and Ani – their involvement in the JWs community often causes multiple conflicts within their social milieu, including family members and friends. This second pattern includes families where certain members become JWs, while others remain outside of the Truth. In these situations that comprise a majority of JWs' stories, the initial tension and even conflicts are almost inevitable because almost 90% of Armenians do not "tolerate a marriage with a JW" (Babayan 2020). Unlike Aleks and Ani who have almost unconditional support within the family, many members of the JWs community must often demonstrate greater flexibility in order to maintain relationships with their families and close friends. There are many strategies utilized by both sides, but in the long run, the families either find a new equilibrium or fall apart.

In many cases when most relatives remain outside of the JW community, their attitude towards newly converted family members is defined by three factors: actual changes in a neophyte's behavior, the influence of the aforementioned stereotypes, and a general stigma attached to being a JW that can bring shame upon the family and therefore ruin relationships with neighbors, co-workers, or society as a whole.[55]

Although many JWs see Armenian culture and the rules of social life in Armenia as very compatible with the Truth, almost everyone has to make certain changes in their lifestyle,

[55] In his analysis of family conflicts allegedly caused by one member's joining a destructive religious organization, James Richardson (1991) points at this aspect and argues that the hostility of the rest of the family is sometimes overlooked by other analysts.

personality, or habits.[56] For example, over half of Armenian men are smokers – smoking is ubiquitous in public transport, restaurants, and even hospitals. Not only are JWs not allowed to smoke, but they also cannot have any business with cigarettes whatsoever. For example, before coming to the Truth, Sako owned a little convenience store that "had the best selection of cigarettes in town and everyone knew that." Although alcohol and tobacco were the staples of his business, he followed the demand of the elders and changed the specialty of his store. In addition, before the Christmas holidays, he and his wife, Angela, got rid of all of the festival paraphernalia, including Christmas lights, fireworks, and candles, which they were previously selling in the store. Angela who also accepted the Truth, recalls, "I went to the dumpster, and I dropped everything there and I came back, and I was thinking that Jehovah is my friend and since I am worthy of his friendship, I will do anything to make him happy."

Sako and Angela's friends and family could not understand what pushed them to sell their successful business. In addition, Sako and Angela's devotion to Jehovah went much further than their convenience store. They stopped celebrating conventional religious and national holidays, as well as birthdays. Yet these changes, which some family members viewed as strange and negative, were counterbalanced by the transformation of Sako's personality. For example, according to Sako, his sister said to him:

> Yeah, it's true that you [*Sako*] no longer celebrate festivals with us, but, you know, once I remember being with you in your car and you were driving. And there was a guy who

[56] Some of the habits that JWs are expected to leave behind are very personal. Although the JW community or family cannot control whether one continues to do them, they remain a matter of personal conscience. For example, one of the former JWs told me that he did Bible study in his teen years, and he came across a passage that condemned masturbation as an action that displeases Jehovah, "I was shocked – did they expect me to stop doing it?! I honestly brought this question up in a conversation with the two guys who I studied the Bible with. I told them, 'Look, it is unreasonable to expect a young boy to have no sex and to keep his hands away from himself.' They said that those were the rules, but I saw support in their eyes, I am sure they also did that, secretly from their peers and families" (Mher, ex-JW, 55 years old)

> cut you off and you got so angry that you got out of the car and beat him up. Then you got in the car and continued driving. And now that you have this religion, you've become so calm and balanced and not aggressive. I really like that.

Besides being more reserved, all male JWs are expected to "clean up" their language and stop cursing, abstain from obscene conversations, avoid any dishonesty at work, in family life, in dealing with friends, and, of course, withdraw from any illegal activities, which range from involvement in criminal networks to evading taxes. Some, like Sako's sister, gladly accept it, while others often drift away.

In Armenia, groups of male friends often endorse the ethos of machismo in practice, which makes them greatly incompatible with JWs' demands. Most of my male informants who had been involved in such groups before becoming a JW noted that their conversion eventually estranged them from their former friends. Hakob, a 45-year-old male JW who was baptized at the age of 24 and who was a member of such a gang recalls,

> By the time I started studying the Bible, I had seen a lot. I decided to start changing things. I had friends and they had a good attitude towards me. But when I understood that our paths are different, I told them, "I'm going my way, you're going your way. You can come with me but I'm going my way." We continued to stay in touch, and we could grab a bite together and drink together, but no more than that.

Being a member of the JW community and of a group of worldly male friends at the same time inevitably leads to compromising the rules and expectations of one of the groups. At the same time, there are fewer behavioral changes that are usually expected from female JWs[57] since Armenian culture already imposes strict rules of moral and social conduct on women.

Certain changes in a neophyte's ethos of behavior or actions can also set family members

[57] Perhaps, one such expectation is a more modest clothing style, which is often welcomed by older family members. One of my male informants recalled, "My mother-in-law told me, 'I don't know what they teach you there [*in the JW community*], but since they say that a woman should wear a long skirt - I really like that'" (Sako).

against the new religion. For example, for Oganes,[58] a long-time male JW, who found the Truth during his adolescence, said:

> At the beginning my family was really happy that I started to study the Bible, because they thought it was really good. Also, they knew that it would keep me far away from bad company – from the streets. But when I became really dedicated to Jehovah and got baptized, their attitude rapidly worsened. They were trying to pull me out because they didn't want me to go to the meetings since they started to understand that *I was not going to do military service* as my age of conscription was approaching. I was already understanding that it wouldn't be right to go to the army and learn to fight.

Military service is one of the most contentious problems between JWs, on the one hand, and the state, society, and even families, on the other.[59] Arguably, it is one of the reasons why JWs face a great deal of intolerance in Armenia. The social stigma attached to those who "groundlessly" avoid military service – and being a JW is definitely not on the list of reasonable exemptions – pushes the families of young male JW converts to reject this choice since it brings disgrace and shame upon the family and may ruin its reputation. Besides, as I mentioned above, public opinion and social connections have always been extremely important. Avoiding the army due to belonging to a cult may sustain serious damage to a family's social standing. However, as I show in Chapters IV and V, evading military service is not the prime source of intolerance towards JWs in Armenia.

For many families, it is social pressure and fear of stigma of being a JW that creates a chasm between family members. While military service concerns a very small portion of the new converts, public ministry – the key activity of JWs that implies conspicuous public presence – is a duty of all servants of Jehovah. Oftentimes, non-JW family members are ready to tolerate the rejection of

[58] Oganes got baptized in the mid-1990s at the age of 17.

[59] Armenia has been heavily relying on universal military conscription in the armed conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan that has lasted in various forms since the beginning of the 1990s. The social attitude towards universal conscription military service is quite controversial. On the one hand, it is considered a duty of all young men and those who serve in the army are viewed as heroes. Yet, because of the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan that causes dozens of casualties even in the most peaceful periods, military service poses a great risk, and therefore it is very common to try to bail out recruits through a system of bribes or by using personal connection.

holidays, missing a funeral or a wedding of a relative, and personal disagreements over religious views under one request – to conceal one's JW-ness from the public. When Sarah, a young female JW, and her sister Neli joined an Armenian congregation, their father showed understanding and acceptance of his daughters' choice, although he himself did not accept the Truth.[60] According to Sarah – the problem was public ministry:

> My dad wasn't against the Truth, you know. He even went to one of the meetings to see what we were doing there. And he liked it. He said, "What you're learning here is good – it is like school." And he got used to me not celebrating major holidays, but he really had a problem with me doing public ministry. The thing is he lived on the same block as us, but separately from us. So, everyone knew each other on the block, and he felt the social pressure. He felt shame when he would see me preaching on the streets. So, basically, he was OK with me being a Jehovah's Witness, but his opinion really depended on the opinion of others around him.
> Neli: [*continuing Sarah's thought*] So, in Armenia, social opinion is everything and the thing is that it is fear of condemnation that makes family members turn away, not necessarily the fact that you are not celebrating holidays with them. But, you know, eventually they change when they see difference that the Truth makes in our lives.

It is not uncommon that despite all these reasons, all family members, regardless of their attitude to Jehovah, "always stand behind each other's backs and defend each other" (Hayk). Although initially, family relationships can cool down, eventually, members of the extended family accept the fact that they should not expect their JW relatives to attend birthday parties. Many JWs say that in their extended families, they are known as Bible experts, and they often receive phone calls from their relatives who ask them what the Bible says about various issues. It is not an uncommon scene when, after a meeting, some elderly JWs are picked up by their non-JW children. Often it happens that eventually, relatives become more receptive to the ideas professed by JWs and join the organization as well.

Yet, non-JW family members are not the only ones who show flexibility and make

[60] At the time of the interview, both sisters were members of the English congregation.

concessions in order to maintain ties with their relatives. Although the WTBTS unambiguously requires full conformity with the rules regarding holidays and birthdays, there are cases when members of the community push these rules to the background or work around them. This grey area is especially pronounced around celebrating birthdays and the New Year.[61] One of the first most widespread compromises that JWs make with their relatives concerns that the intensity of their proselytism. Often the relatives' demand is expressed in the formula, "You can do whatever you want, but don't drag me into it" (Gena). When JWs yield to this request and pull back on the intensity of their preaching or on offering brochures, books, or videos, the family equilibrium is often restored.

There are a few ways in which celebrating holidays and birthdays can be worked around in order to avoid family conflicts. First, in Armenia, as well as in the U.S., people often exchange gifts with their JW relatives, friends, classmates, and colleagues on a day that does not overlap but is close to the celebrated occasion. For instance, JWs give gifts or pay visits a week before birthday or New Year to avoid controversy.

Yet, some JWs consciously disregard the non-holiday rule. Over the period of my fieldwork, I noticed multiple times that JWs casually brought up their relatives' birthdays in conversations with each other. Sometimes, it was mentioned tangentially, as in a phrase "I am short on dough this month – I sent money to my grandson in Russia, it was his birthday last week" (female JW). These subtle admissions that they indirectly participate in celebrating birthdays never evoked any objection

[61] As in many post-Soviet countries, the New Year festival is the most important national holiday of the year. It is considered a family holiday as, traditionally, relatives and friends gather around the table, pay visits to each other, give gifts, and generally spend time together. This special time falls between the New Year and Christmas/Theophany. The latter holiday is celebrated on January 6th, according to the Armenian ecclesiastical tradition.

or condemnation on behalf of the other JWs participating in the conversation.[62] The only exception was that the relative whose birthday was mentioned was a child – so it seems that JWs show greater flexibility with their non-JW grandchildren, nephews, and nieces when it comes to birthday celebrations, because unlike grownups children would not be able to understand the reasoning behind disregarding their birthday.

In other cases, birthdays are featured more prominently in JWs' lives. In one private conversation, a female JW told me unprompted,

> I have cooked so much food – for my birthday. I thought, 'What if someone will come?' And I cooked just in case. It is not that I was going to have a birthday party, but my relatives could come, and I could not possibly have nothing to feed them. I said to folks in the congregation, 'Come, we will have some tea.' And they were like: 'Are you going to celebrate birthday???!!!' and I said, 'We'll just have some tea. What is it against Jehovah to have some tea?'

When I asked her whether anybody had come 'to have some tea,' she said, "No!" without hiding her disappointment. She said that her grownup daughter who lives in Russia did not call on that day either, which also greatly upset her. She does not view a tea-drinking gathering as a transgression against Jehovah – being a very dedicated JW, she clearly interprets this very rigid rule in the way that fits her situation best. Importantly, she does not do it secretly – she was upfront about it with her friends from the congregation.[63] Although their attitude towards birthdays can be similar to their attitude towards national holidays, such as the New Year[64] or Women's Day, religious holidays, such as Christmas or Easter, enjoy nothing but JWs' indifference. JWs generally view the

[62] Although on multiple occasions, I have heard this topic being discussed by only four JWs, so I do not claim that it is a ubiquitous phenomenon in the JW community.

[63] As far as I know, this situation did not attract the attention of the elders and no sanctions followed, which means that either this woman's friends or the elders did not consider it a grave violation.

[64] For example, a few of my female JW informants admitted that they cooked special holiday meals for their non-JW husbands who aggressively rejected their spouse's decision to follow the Truth. Generally, their husbands demanded that all the necessary preparations for celebration and hosting non-JWs friends or relatives be executed by their JW spouses.

Armenian Church as the main persecutor of JWs in the country, so religious festival celebrated under the auspices of the ecclesiastical authorities are completely ignored.

Clearly, when both JW and non-JW family members make mutual compromises, the chances for peaceful co-existence significantly increase. Yet, sometimes, despite all efforts from one or another side, families fall apart. Below is an account by Lyova Margaryan, one of the leaders of the Armenian community of JWs, about his family's reaction to his joining the JW community:

> … My relatives really disliked my choice. My father, my sisters, and brothers outwardly rejected it. For many years – they didn't talk to me. I was trying to explain them, but they said, 'It is your personal choice, but we do not accept it' […] Until now we communicate very little. Of course, I've always tried to restore our communication. But they didn't want to stay in touch. My sister and my brother went to live in Russia 20 years ago. And there has been no communication with them at all. My parents died. As with other relatives – since I am a Jehovah's witness, we haven't had much contact. They didn't want to communicate with me […] For example, in 2001 when they started a criminal case against me – none of my relatives showed up in court to support me. Let's say, when people commit a real crime, their relatives still come and support them in court. But my relatives never showed up – they didn't set their foot in court. They never asked themselves this question, 'why is our brother being tried in court?'

In this case, the family ties between Lyova and his parents and siblings became weaker, and they finally completely drifted apart. The eventual disintegration of family saved them from a protracted conflict that could poison their lives for years. While there are many similar cases, sometimes the conversion of a family member has an effect of explosion. This can happen within both nuclear and extended families.

In 2014-15, many conservative Armenian media outlets, *Iravunk'* (Arm. Իրավունք) and *Aravot* (Arm. Առավոտ) (Budaghyan 2015; Davtyan 2015a, 2015b) started circulating a story about "the hell in the Khachatryan family" "because of the Jehovah's witness daughter-in-law." As commonly happens in Armenia, Albert Khachatryan and his family – his wife Alvard and their three children – lived in his parents' house comprising a traditional multigenerational family. Albert's

mother-in-law was a JW, and Alvard started to study the Bible and eventually attend meetings. Albert did not follow his wife's steps but evinced tolerance to her interest towards the Bible and her visits to JWs' meetings. However, Albert's parents met their daughter-in-law's faith with absolute and uncompromising rejection:

> My daughter-in-law turned my house into hell. And we didn't know why, but in the last four-five years, it became obvious that it was my son's mother-in-law who preached to her daughter, so that she became a Jehovah's Witness. And my son followed her – eventually, he cut off his ties with his friends, family, and relatives. Then his wife started to work on us too – she demanded that I give them my house. You know they have it in their program. I started to study the Bible with them, and I saw that according to their teaching, they aim to destroy the family and get the house – that's what's most important – the house […] And they teach that if in their family anyone is against them, they have to be aggressive – it is even written in their books. (Lyova Khachatryan)[65]

As a measure of resistance to JWs' influence, Lyova Khachatryan, Alvard's father-in-law, "decided to baptize his grandchildren in the Armenian Apostolic Church" (Budaghyan 2015) and throw them a birthday party, which could not possibly be accepted by their parents. Also, he brought other accusations against Albert and Alvard and claimed that "they beat their children and put them in the corner for not going to Jehovah's Witnesses meeting" (Budaghyan 2015). With these accusations, Lyova appealed to the ombudsman in Armenia in order to start the process of claiming custody rights over his grandchildren, which did not yield any results. According to Albert, the last drop was when his father ordered him and his wife to leave the house and his mother physically attacked Alvard. In revenge, he made an unsuccessful attempt to explode a gas reservoir in his parents' house. Afterwards, Albert, Alvard and their children had to hastily move out and cut off all their ties with Albert's parents.

[65] This is an excerpt from an informal interview that Lyova Khachatryan, Albert's father, gave to Sona Davtyan, a journalist of the newspaper *Iravunk'* in December 2014. Lyova Khachatryan became the face of a larger campaign supported by various anti-JW activists and politicians. This interview first brought this case to the attention of a larger audience. The two parts of the interview are available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1BHuUJJxPA&t=3s and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXmAn-qRNuo

In general, family can become a battlefield between JWs and non-JWs. In Armenia, where social ties and connections are very strong and dense, disobeying the accepted norms and rules is often viewed as a disrespectful act and an attempt to destroy the family and society. In many conversations that I had with both JWs and non-JWs whose families were able to find a new *modus vivendi*, they always stressed the importance of compromise and patience – those who accepted the Truth did not insist that everyone in the family evince interest in the Truth, while the non-JWs tolerated the changes – no birthday wishes, no New Year feasts, and no church-related events. In cases similar to that of the Khachatryan family, when one or both sides lack understanding, families often fall apart. And in some situations, pressure from the family members can push a newly converted JW to leave the community.

The Holidays and Leisure Time

In this section, I aim to show how JWs' lives and interests stretch beyond meetings, preaching, and studying the Bible.[66] The strict ban on religious and national holidays, as well as birthdays, in no way indicates that JWs do not have celebrations or never have fun. The close personal networks between JWs show how the JWs community extends far beyond the KHs.[67] Often in smaller groups that the congregations are unofficially split into, JWs spend a lot of time together studying the Bible, having dinners, shopping, or travelling.

There is one regular calendar event that takes place every year – the Memorial of Jesus' death (Arm. Հիսուսի մահվան հիշատակի երեկոն). Unlike regional conventions and other larger

[66] Although many entertainment options are not technically forbidden for JWs, dances, school clubs, and sporting events are strongly discouraged as "unwholesome associations" or "a waste of precious theocratic time" (Penton 1985:275).

[67] In academic literature, JWs are often described as a unified group where every member strictly follows the prescriptions from the governing Body and shows little deviation (Blankholm 2009; Cooper 1974:708; Holden 2002; Knox 2018a:293). This view misrepresents the diversity within the WTBTS regarding theological positions and social issues. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, 16% of JWs in the U.S. accept homosexuality (Pew Research Center 2022), which is strictly prohibited by the official teaching.

gatherings of JWs that are scheduled on different days, this event takes place on the same day for all JWs around the world. Not only do all the members of the community come wearing their finest clothes, but, importantly, they also bring their relatives, friends, and new Bible students.[68]

As the KHs are unable to accommodate all of the active and inactive publishers, as well as guests, JWs rent venues around the city: concert halls, old Soviet cinema theaters, and community centers. Attending my first Memorial, I was expecting a grand event that would compensate for the lack of other regular holidays, but the event was much more modest and less festive than I had imagined.

All three Russian congregations of Yerevan gathered in an old Soviet concert hall in the city center. Two male JWs were welcoming guests at the entrance and since people did not arrive all at once, their flow into the hall was gradual and therefore did not attract attention. For an outsider, the event was inconspicuous, although the venue was located only a hundred yards from the busiest street in the city. Overall, there were about 350 guests and some of them were visually non-JWs because they were wearing regular clothes, like jeans and sweatshirts, which would be impossible for a member of the community.

As with all JWs' gatherings, the memorial began with a song and a prayer followed by a 45-minute talk about the importance of Jesus' sacrifice and the meaning of wine and bread.[69] When the talk was over, all those present prayed before the climactic part of the Memorial – partaking of the emblems, i.e. bread and wine. While everyone remained seated in complete silence, four plates with

[68] This day is so important that the annual official statistics of the WTBTS that reflect growth or loss in membership and the number of baptisms in a given area in a given year also includes the number of visitors on the Memorial evening. Usually, it is interpreted as the number of people who are close to the Truth or sympathizing with it. For example, although the average number of publishers in Armenia in 2019 was 10,702, the number of the reported Memorial attendees was 20,968 (www.jw.org).

[69] That evening I managed to attend the Memorials of all three congregations – Russian, Armenian, and English. The biblical verses and the overall structure of the talks were the same.

unleavened bread looking like typical matzah were circulated in the hall – the plates were passed from person to person, but not a single piece was taken. At the end, all four plates were returned to the organizers with their content remaining untouched.

After another prayer, four glasses of wine were sent around the hall in the same manner as the plates with that difference that some of the guests were smelling the wine – yet again, nobody partook of the emblems. According to the teaching of the WTBTS, only the anointed ones[70] partake of bread and wine. Although in today's Armenia, there may be about a dozen anointed servants of Jehovah, this number can fluctuate. One of the elders of the English congregation clarified:

> …[in Armenia] there are people who receive blood and body of Christ, but are they anointed? We do not know. It is not our business to intervene and dissuade them. But there are not many – a handful. There is one who is very young – he is not yet 30. He thinks he is anointed. Is he? We can't know and we don't ask these questions. Also, it happens that people start receiving wine and bread, but later understand that they are not anointed. It happened in Armenia too. They do not have to be elders or men – they can be regular publishers. We do not know how many anointed there are in the world and in history, but in the last few years, their number has grown very rapidly all over the world. We do not know what it is related to.

What truly surprised me in the case of the anointed ones is that although their status in the future world is expected to be very high, their position among today's JWs seems to be that of equals. There has not been a single time when the existence or personality of the chosen servants of Jesus would be discussed or even mentioned by regular JWs without my explicit asking. Usually, when I inquired about the anointed ones, most regular JWs could not say anything specific – neither who they were nor how many of them were in Armenia or what they were like.

At the Memorial, apart from the different venue, the bread and wine ritual, and a larger number of people, nothing else differed from a regular JW meeting. Before the event started, people

[70] As I mentioned in Chapter I, according to JWs, 144,000 anointed servants, or the "little flock," will eventually co-rule with Christ in Heaven. There are no outward signs of being chosen for this mission – they feel this calling inside.

were discussing their families and their achievements in public ministry, gossiping about other people who were present, asking me questions about who I was and when I was going to join the Truth myself. In a word, they were doing and saying all the things that they were usually doing and saying at weekly meetings – there was no elated or ecstatic spirit amongst those present. And at the end, just like after the meetings, they left to go home.

As the WTBTS's year calendar does not imply other regular events that presuppose any predetermined rituals, scripts, recipes, and ways of interaction, most JWs organize their leisure time themselves.[71] They invite each other for dinner, go shopping together, set playdates for their kids, or even go on vacation together. Oftentimes, each congregation has core activists who take it upon themselves to organize these events.

Dinner parties are very common, both in the wider Armenian society and among JWs. Some of them are well-planned with lots of intricate dishes cooked in advance, while others are more spontaneous and smaller in scale. Usually, a hostess and female guests help in the kitchen and run back and forth between the kitchen and the living room where a big table is set, while men enjoy a conversation around the table.[72] When the table is ready and guests have gathered around it, a male JW says words of prayer. Unlike American dinner parties where it is a common expectation that all the guests can split into smaller groups and have different conversations, a typical Armenian dinner is organized around a central conversation, in which everyone is expected to participate either

[71] How JWs spend leisure time is in no way universal and can be very culturally specific. For example, in a conversation with an American JW who had spent several years in one of the European countries prior coming to Armenia, I asked if there were any tangible differences between JWs in that country and Armenia. He answered, "Oh, Armenians are so much more hospitable and open! My wife and I lived in Europe for years, and maybe only two or three times we were invited to somebody's house for dinner or to just hang out. There, if they want to get together, they go to a restaurant. Inviting anyone to your house is very uncommon. In Armenia, it is different – we have been here for only a few months, and we have already been invited to dinners at least ten times."

[72] I always offer my help in the kitchen, and to my surprise, it is rarely rejected, although it is extremely uncommon to see a man in the Armenian kitchen. Both JWs and non-JWs hostesses usually allow me to participate in both cooking food and taking it to the table.

actively or passively. As at any normal dinner, a conversation can go in different directions – sometimes it is more aligned with the themes and interests typical for JWs, such as sharing personal stories about coming to the Truth with an emphasis on Jehovah's help and guidance or talking about how the latest world events fit into their expectations of the approaching Armageddon. Lighthearted anecdotes about amusing first encounters with JWs or incidents during public ministry often follow heartbreaking personal stories about losing loved ones and hopes to see them again in the near future. In all these cases, being members of Jehovah's organization remains a common framework.

Yet, at other times, dinner conversations may revolve around topics that are less typical for JWs – for example, politics. JWs emphasize political neutrality as a core value of their organization, and they zealously uphold this commitment at the institutional level. Yet, while participating in elections and saluting the flag are relatively easy to avoid, political events at the country scale are more difficult to be indifferent towards. In April 2018, the Armenian political system underwent a drastic change during a series of events that are commonly known as the "Velvet Revolution" (Arm. Թավշյա Հեղափոխություն). In just a few days, seemingly the entire population of the country went to the streets to demand the resignation of the newly elected Prime Minister, Serzh Sargsyan, who had previously served two terms as the President of Armenia. Life in the country was paralyzed – most classes in schools and colleges were canceled, roads and transport hubs, such as the airport and the metro system, were blocked by the protestors.[73]

On one of the days, during the revolution, a few JWs invited me to join them in the city center to have some coffee and to shop. They stayed away from the marches and chanting of anti-government slogans, although they were clearly curious about everything that was unfolding around

[73] My parents came to visit me in Armenia during the nation-wide block-the-road rally, so I had to walk about 10 miles to the airport to pick them up, and then we walked back to the city together because buses and taxis could not operate.

them. After we hung out on the Northern Avenue, the central pedestrian street of Yerevan, for a few hours, one of the female JWs invited us over to her house for dinner. When we sat around the table and prayed, the conversation quickly slid towards the political situation in Armenia. Talking to me, one of the sisters said, "I want to send something to my friends in California. I do not know what it can be, but I think a baseball cap inscribed with [the inscription] 'Դուխով.'[74] I really hope they will elect Pashinyan[75] – Nikol is good. You know that when he was in prison, our brothers preached to him, so he knows about the Truth. I think he will treat us well" (Nune, a female JW in her 50s, Armenian Congregation).

In those days, without exception, people in all of the congregations discussed current events. And although the absolute majority of them did not participate in the protests in any capacity, some took a more active stance. An elder told me:

> …Of course, you can watch the protests – you want to know what is going on in this country, because you want to be alerted. But you cannot lose your neutrality. The Witnesses must be impartial. There is one teenager from the Witnesses, who participated in blocking the streets. The elders invited him to talk and explained that he could not participate, because it goes against our beliefs. You know, there are brothers and sisters who do not understand what neutrality is. So, they would honk as the others do or cover their license plates so it could not be identified by police.

Yet, JWs harbored very different views on the nature of revolution. Some showed sympathy towards its aspirations and goals, others expressed skepticism over the possibility of change, while some even harshly criticized the protestors in support of the current authorities[76]

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[74] The word "Դուխով" became a motto of the Velvet Revolution. Being a borrowed Russian word, it means "with bravery and spirit."

[75] Nikol Pashinyan is the leader of the Velvet Revolution who eventually became the Prime Minister of Armenia.

[76] Ani and Aleks opposed the prospect of political changes because they were afraid of possible negative shifts in JWs' relationships with the authorities. During our dinner, they agreed that "over the last ten years, the situation around the Jehovah's Witnesses has improved. These authorities have been building normal relationships with us. With the protests, we do not know what is going to happen. We cannot know what the new authorities are going to do. No one knows. Now the situation is very good – especially if we compare it with Russia. But it can all change very quickly like it did in

> These stupid protesters – first, they disturb others and they do not know what they are doing. Teenagers want to behave like hooligans. They shout, 'քայլ արա – մերժի Սերժին,'[77] and I want to ask them, "Why don't you like Serge Sargsyan? Do you really think someone else will be better? Don't they understand that the next one will be, at best, as bad as this one?!"" (Olga)

Although some attitudes towards the political situation in the country are informed by one's affiliation with the JW community, other factors, such as class and generation, seem more influential. Like many other average Armenian citizens, some JWs put their hopes for a more prosperous economic future on this revolutionary movement to fight against corruption. Those JWs who were better situated financially preferred stability over the hypothetical improvements offered by the protestors. In addition, the younger generation was more prone to support and even participate in the protests and rallies, while those who had lived through the collapse of the Soviet system and "cold and dark years" showed much more reservation towards rapid and radical changes. The conservatism of the older generation of JWs is also noticeable in their obvious support of the current Russian government and Vladimir Putin personally, even though all Armenian JWs are well-aware of the plight of their brethren in Russia.[78] In general, all these differences are often perceptible at the level of attitudes, yet at the level of practice, JWs remain politically neutral, although with occasional exceptions.

Some gatherings of JWs have little to do with the Truth or with politics, especially when they are organized by JW youth. Several times they invited me to join them: on a ski trip to Tsaghkadzor,[79] at a picnic in a garden, barbecue in a backyard, and for a few bike rides, to name a

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Russia."

[77] This was one of the most popular slogans during the Revolution, which literally means "Make a step – reject Serzh [Sargsyan]."

[78] Many JWs indirectly expressed their support of the Russian invasion to Ukraine because "Americans left the Russians no choice" (Narek).

[79] A famous Armenian ski resort located about 35 miles away from Yerevan.

few. The Truth and Jehovah's name were brought up explicitly only a few times during these meetings. For example, at the beginning of our trip to Tsaghkadzor, when all of the expected participants – seven young men and eight young women aged between 20 and 35 years old – gathered in a minivan, Grigor, the head organizer, read a prayer before we departed. Most of those present did not know each other, so we all introduced ourselves by briefly saying our name, age, what congregation we were from and how long we had been in the Truth,[80] although a few girls were just studying the Bible and had not yet gotten baptized. Half-way to Tsaghkadzor, we made a quick stop to read the "daily text"[81] – a few people tried to interpret it and suggest what wisdom we could learn from the passage. It lasted no longer than five minutes, and then everyone immediately returned to talking about their jobs, studies, families, and hobbies.

It would be tempting to say that apart from these few instances, the trip had very few references to Jehovah or religion in general and that it mostly resembled a usual gathering of young people.[82] Yet, it was very different from how young people in Armenia spend time together. What became noticeable right away was a unique gender dynamic[83] – there was no gender tension as

[80] Naturally, I stood out in this crowd, and they asked me a lot of questions about why I had chosen the JW community as the object of my study. Later in the trip, I noticed that they did not treat me with the typical cautious attitude I had become accustomed to – I was quickly accepted and treated as one of them.

[81] The "daily text" is a short paragraph from an older issue of the Watchtower magazine that serves as an interpretation of biblical verses. It is presented and viewed as "spiritual nourishment from God's Word" (Family Schedule—The Daily Text 2005). The daily text (Arm. օրվա խոսք, Rus. стих на день) is available either electronically through www.jw.org and the JWs' app or in printed form as a brochure.

[82] Only once, in a similar gathering, they remembered to utter a customary prayer before a meal – in all other cases, it was not a part of the routine.

[83] I have participated in multiple youth gatherings in Armenia that were organized in a similar manner and setting – a trip, a hike, a picnic. In general, they greatly reflected the gender norms and dynamics widely accepted in the larger Armenian society. In groups where people do not know each other, women and men tend to spend time separately. Even when they are a part of one larger group, they sit and talk in little gender clusters. Attempts to cross gender lines are often shy and slow. In the Armenian culture of machismo, girls cannot seem needy and overtly interested, for it is considered "uncool" or right away inappropriate. Although there are exceptions, as a rule, women do not initiate closer contacts because it is considered a male role. Women are expected to be "prey" for flirting and other forms of attention – not "hunters." At the same time, getting married and having children is considered one of the main goals a woman

would be typical in non-JW setting. Although gender clustering was still conspicuous, boundary crossing was intentional and very unstrained. The boys were half-hugging the girls who were complaining that they were cold, and the girls would rub a guy's cheeks so that he would not get frost bite. Although the atmosphere could at times be flirtatious, the usual guard often demonstrated by young Armenian women in order not to seem very needy or too outgoing was almost completely absent, while the boys were not any more insistent than the girls. Here, the "prey-hunter" framework clearly did not work. After another similar event a few months later, Hov, a male JW in his late 20s, who had experience of forming friendships with "worldly" people and JWs, shared with me his impressions,

> My parents have been in the Truth for a long time, and technically me too, but I was not all in for a long time – I did not participate a lot. Everything changed when I started hanging out with the young JWs. It made a huge difference. First, with the secular friends – and I have a lot – all you can talk about is girls and cars. That's it – nobody is even able to think about anything else. And here it is very different. You can do a lot of things with [young] brothers and sisters, but you feel like a person.

In this group, everyone knew that men would not try to abuse girls or seek sexual relationships outside of wedlock.[84] As I show in Chapter V, women are often attracted to the JWs community because the gender dynamic there is less predatory that in the wider Armenian society.

Public Ministry

Before the COVID pandemic started in 2020, JWs were a normal part of urban landscape in

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should pursue in her life. With this, chastity is valued extremely highly. Men, on the other hand, learn to be "aggressive" and insistent when it comes to the opposite sex, so unsurprisingly, male signs of attention towards women are generally seen as having sexual intentions. For example, it is equally common for teenage boys and very old men to look at a passing young girl and ostentatiously demonstrate interest in her. This type of behavior is often internalized at a young age and practiced automatically regardless of men's actual sexual preferences. For men, sexual innocence is not of much value – premarital sexual experience is not frowned upon as in case of women, and sometimes it is even encouraged. Although a more liberal format of relationships between genders is professed and practiced in today's Armenia, this traditional framework still dominates the gender expectations and behavior in groups where people know each other superficially.

[84] All those present were single. It is difficult to say whether this as well as other similar gatherings were organized with an intention of facilitating the creation of new couples.

Yerevan – walking up and down the city streets and approaching people with questions about God and the future of this world, offering brochures and magazines about recipes for family happiness or a harmonious relationship with oneself, or setting up a literature cart with colorful books in many languages in parks, next to metro stations, schools, and hospitals. Apart from obeying Jehovah's commandments, public ministry and spreading the Good News are the main responsibility of JWs, although they usually view it as a privilege rather than a duty.

As I mentioned above, during the meetings and private talks, JWs share anecdotes from their public service and brag about cases when they were able to give away a large number of magazines. Often, JWs modify their lives – change or even quit jobs – to pursue "the goal of becoming a full-time pioneer" (Shushan). They overcome their timidity and fear of talking to strangers on the street. At the same time, approaching a person that they know can often be more intimidating. Besides, JWs frequently endure verbal animosity and even physical attacks when doing what pleases Jehovah most.

Although there are rules that all JWs have to follow and expectations that every member of the community must meet, it is participation in public ministry that defines their standing in the organization. If members of a congregation do not report any preaching for six months, they become an *inactive publisher*. This does not, however, entail one's severing the community – they are still expected to follow the rules of the organization, but they are not considered full-time publishers.

Public ministry starts before the publishers appear on the streets or knock on a door. It starts with changing into proper clothes. Khachik, a male member of the Armenian congregation in his late 30s, puts on a suit, a tie, and a pair of nice dress shoes, "the Bible says that if you serve God you have to look nice, so people are not disgusted by you." When I asked him why looking nice necessarily means wearing a suit, he said he had never thought about it. A similar "habitual" attitude

to clothing is very common in the JW community. On her way to doing public ministry, Antonina changes pants that she often wears to work for a conservative below-the-knee dress. For her, changing clothes is an important ritual, "I don't think women can't wear pants – at home or at work it is permissible to wear pants, but when you are representing Jehovah, you have to look correspondingly. I always carry a change of clothes in case I will have a chance to do public ministry." In general, one's dress style is regarded as a sign of being a pious Christian that serves as an outer expression of internal faith. The wrong fashion choice can even call one's faith into question:

> I am not longer doing public ministry with Hasmik. We used to do it all the time, but then she started wearing these bizarre and extravagant things during public ministry. Imagine, you wear a cocktail dress and a broad-brimmed hat, and you approach people and start talking to them about God! She looked so vulgar! Of course, people were weirded out! I didn't say anything, but I am no longer doing public ministry with her. (Olga)

In Olga's opinion, her ministry partner's appearance did not meet the expectations dictated by the context. As a result, she deemed her co-religionist unworthy to talk about Jehovah, to proselytize with, and therefore to represent Jehovah's organization. In other words, Olga clearly used the dressing rules as a way to measure of her partner's consistency with JW ideals.

Like Olga, many JWs whose family members live far away or reject the Truth do public ministry with their coreligionists. Often, as they leave a meeting in the KH, they give each other hugs and quickly make arrangements to "serve together" next week. Not infrequently, they book a public service session with a brother or a sister on each day of the week. In small groups and pairs, they develop little rituals – sometimes they finish field ministry with eating ice cream as a way to reward themselves, eat an ice cream on a bench in a park, or have coffee on a balcony during the warmer part of the year. These frequent and regular gatherings in small groups and pairs also serve

as a way to provide mutual support.

Starting in 2014, JWs adopted a new method of public ministry – service with a book cart. Although relatively new, this type of preaching has become so common and popular in Armenia that anti-JW activists often regard it as the most egregious religious offensive against traditional Armenian Christianity. Many of them view it as more outrageous than the notorious door-to-door proselytism that JWs are often resented for.

Tatyana, Lena, and Garegin (all three are from an Armenian congregation) bring their literature cart to one of busiest streets in Yerevan not far from the central square every Sunday. The display normally features books and brochures in Armenian, Russian, English, and Chinese. The literature display service is not pushy – they do not try to offer the literature to those passing by but stand there talking to each other, yet always ready to answer questions.

Figure 5. Jehovah's Witnesses doing public ministry in downtown Yerevan

People walking by the bookstand have different reactions: some try to actively ignore it and even increase their pace in order to leave the display behind as quickly as possible; some show a lot of interest in the scene and even stop in front of the bookstand but prefer not to interact with the preachers; still others approach and take a booklet or ask for a brochure with advice for teenagers, married couples, or those who recently lost their loved ones.[85] In most cases, a few hours spent there go undisturbed without serious incidents. However, occasionally, JWs and their literature carts attract nationalistically minded people of all ages and genders. These encounters can be rather innocent. For example, when an older woman stops at the display attracted by the colorful brochures and then realizes that they belong to JWs, she exclaims, "Oh my God!" and quickly walks away with an angry expression on her face. Yet sometimes it gets more violent – for example, when a young father holding his little daughter approaches JWs and knocks over their literature cart while saying to his daughter with a calm voice, "See, my dear, what daddy did? He did a good thing – that's what you should do too." Many of these cases are spontaneous – they are not organized or coordinated. However, organized actions against JWs' public ministry also exist. Many people voice complaints about JWs' door-to-door preaching as well – while some argue that JWs should be thrown out of the country altogether, the majority simply do not want to see JWs in the streets or on their doorsteps. Yet, in some infrequent cases, people show support for JWs during the incidents and even defend their right to proselytize.

Despite frequent cases of animosity and physical assaults, JWs consistently spend much of their free time spreading the literature, knocking on doors, and serving with the literature carts.

[85] A few times during my observations, people approached the JW preachers and asked for something using gestures. Immediately, Tatyana would dig through her bag looking for a brochure. She explained, "I already know them. They usually ask for the Watchtower magazine in Farsi. We usually do not put them on the stand, so they have to ask."

Interestingly, out of the hundreds of JWs that I have spoken with, very few said that their first encounter with the Truth took place randomly on the street. In the absolute majority of cases accounting for 98% of the personal stories recounted to me during my research, the first experience with the servants of Jehovah happened through personal networks – relatives, friends, co-workers, or neighbors. Proselytizing turns out to be the most contentious and conflict-producing activity of JWs and it yields very few recruits. In other words, public ministry is not very consequential for increasing the number of Jehovah's followers. And many JWs do not regard recruiting new members as a goal of their public preaching. They often understand that the chances to spark interest in the Truth during a random encounter are not very high. The effectiveness of their public ministry is often measured by the overall awareness that people in Armenia have of Jehovah and his organization. The teaching of the WTBTS emphasizes that the New World will be established when the "good news of the Kingdom will be preached in *all the inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations* [emphasis is mine]" (Mathew 24:14 New World Translation). Since public preaching increases the level of awareness of Jehovah's Kingdom, it greatly contributes to the coming of the New World.[86] As one of my informants indicated, "[Back in the 1990s] people didn't even know anything about Jehovah's Witnesses – they could not even repeat the name Jehovah oftentimes. But now, I don't think there are people in Armenia who don't know the Creator's name" (Hayk).

Home Family Worship

Apparently, JWs spend a lot of time with their coreligionists – they attend meetings, do public ministry together in the streets, go from house to house in their assigned district; they also

[86] Armenian JWs proselytize not only in Armenia, but they also go on voluntary missions to Russia, Iran, Turkey, and other countries. In Iran, Christian proselytism to the Muslim population is severely punished by law, so Armenians focus exclusively on the Armenian population. Armine, a 50-year-old female JW from the Russian congregation, went to Iran as a babysitter and proselytized in her free time, "we would read the names on the building tenants. For example, you read: Chinese, Russian, Armenian – we would ring the bell and talk to people, but if the name was Persian, we would not call." In other countries, the target audience for their public ministry mostly depends on their linguistic capacity.

visit each other in their spare time and even travel together. "Family worship" (Arm. Ընտանեկան երկրպագություն, Rus. Семейное поклонение) provides yet another opportunity to connect with Jehovah and with the members of the community. The WTBTS encourages its members to "set aside a period each week […] to worship together – discussing, in a relaxed setting, spiritual matters that are tailored to their needs" (Who Are Doing Jehovah's Will Today? 2016:13).

There are multiple activities that the family worship can be centered upon – parents can help their younger children learn about various biblical topics using special coloring books, comics, videos, and songs, among many others. In cases, when JWs do not have a family, WTBTS literature suggests that family worship "can be well-spent with God on a Bible study project of your choosing." Yet another option is to get together with other brothers and sisters in order to read an article from older issues of the Watchtower magazine or to spend from 30 minutes to an hour discussing the "daily text"[87] in depth. For this purpose, Narek, Antonina, Movses, Dina, Hrach, and Arvin usually get together a few times a week.

In the past, under Narek's tutelage, they would closely examine the passages from the brochure "What does the Bible actually teach?" which is a version of a catechesis for all beginners.[88] Later, when most members of this circle became non-baptized publishers,[89] they started to gather more often or have zoom sessions and discuss the daily texts. Unlike during the meetings, where the process of asking and answering questions is strictly controlled by the leading elder, these smaller

[87] At the same time, I know many JWs who never participate in any type of regular Bible studies outside of the KH.

[88] This book has undergone multiple editions. The latest interactive course "Enjoy Life Forever!" was released in 2022. These study materials introduce novices to the fundamentals of the Watch Tower beliefs, views, and principles. The information is presented and organized in a manner typical for the Watch Tower literature – the student reads a paragraph or two and answers questions regarding the presented information.

[89] A non-baptized publisher is a Bible student who passed the interview and is generally considered a member of the congregation, but who has not yet been baptized.

studies allow more time to penetrate the issue at hand. Carefully reading every sentence, they diligently examine a chosen text, which can last from 30 minutes to several hours, but there is always a reward waiting for the participants at the end – coffee or tea, or sometimes both, with traditional Armenian pastry, *gat'a*. During the study, it is not uncommon that Narek asks every one of those present what they think about a passage, offers additional questions, and sometimes tricks his disciples by intentionally nudging them in the wrong direction. I will address the power dynamic in this and other similar groups in Chapter V, but here I would like to emphasize that discovering and learning the Truth never stops for JWs – it is established within the walls of the KH; it continues during family worship sessions; and it is reiterated over and over again during public ministry.

One of the most impressive changes that occurred during my fieldwork in the JW community in 2017-2022 was the development of the JW Library smartphone application. Although it was first released in 2013, the app has received wide acceptance in Armenia only recently. In general, the smartphones that became more common in Armenia during the COVID pandemic greatly facilitated examination of the daily texts. If before every reference to a biblical passage had to be found manually in a paperback Bible, in the app or on the official webpage of the WTBTS www.jw.org it can be done in one klick. The app offers access almost to the entire library of the WTBTS – tracts, the archive of the *Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines,[90] meeting workbooks, brochures, programs of conventions, and much more. JW Broadcasting is a section of the website that offers a gamut of high-quality videos for children and adults that cover biblical topics, everyday advice on topics like "How to Manage your Money,"[91] as well as updates from the Governing Body[92]

[90] One can have access to the digitized issues of the Watchtower magazine back to 1950 in English, to 1986 in Russian, and to 2000 in Armenian.

[91] https://www.jw.org/en/library/videos/#en/mediaitems/LatestVideos/docid-502100006_1_VIDEO

[92] Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, the Governing Body issued regular updates related to the

about the latest development within the WTBTS and the non-JW world. In a word, it is a JW analogue of television.

Often, if a member of a congregation has a question and approaches an elder seeking answers and clarifications, he or she may first be recommended to "do their own research" using all the tools provided by the app – in a split second, it propels the user through the archives of tracts and Watchtower articles in search for relevant information. For family worship, it suggests topics for conversation and offers multiple templates for activities. Besides serving as a source of spiritual food, news, and recommendations from the members of the Governing Body, the app offers language lessons for those publishers who would like to expand their field service by including another language.[93]

The JW app and website facilitate public ministry, Bible studies, and family worship. They create a parallel Internet experience where a faithful publisher does not encounter *impure* and *false* information from the outer world. And the JW app and website are only one part of a larger picture – oftentimes, a JW's morning starts with receiving multiple messages, GIF pictures, or videos related to biblical topics or the Truth. Individual or group chats in apps like Viber or WhatsApp create a continuous connection with brothers and sisters. Since the start of the COVID pandemic, these gadgets and apps have become an indispensable part of their lives, so many older JWs learned to skillfully operate smartphones and tablets much better their average peers in the wider Armenian society.

Among younger generations of JWs, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are more popular –

Organization's stance on virus treatment, vaccination, and measures of precaution recommended for all JWs.

[93] Danny Cardoza (2019) provides an excellent and detailed overview of the www.jw.org website and the app and analyzes the effect of this immersive experience on the formation of JWs' subjectivity and ethical selves.

their profiles and pages do not differ from any other non-JW user: the same multiple pictures and videos edited with filters and overlays and posted to create a visually twisted image of the user; the same posts advising on how to get six-pack abs in a week or mocking the tanking Turkish economy. No one can tell the difference, and no one is trying to emphasize it.

Generally, JWs do not shy away from modern technology and the opportunities they offer to proselytize, work, and socialize with brothers and sisters, as well as with non-JW friends and family members. They actively combine both religious and worldly aspects of the Internet and technology, which, on the one hand, further strengthens their ties to the community, yet, on the other hand, reinforces their connectedness with the world around them.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Employment

In addition to the multiple connections that JWs have with the society through family members, neighbors, and technology, employment is a major area where JWs are often immersed in the *world*. Sometimes called a "working class" organization (Beckford 1975b:136),[94] JWs are noticeably absent from the higher echelons of power, show business, and senior management in major companies, although there are occasional exceptions to this rule.[95] One of my informants, a 45-year-old male Armenian JW who moved to California says, "I want my daughter to get a profession that would provide enough for her and her family, but she would still have time to dedicate to Jehovah." In one form or another, the Watch Tower literature and community often broadcast this message to remind publishers that the life should be organized around serving

[94] Simultaneously, Beckford (1975b) notes that certain positions in the JW community are occupied almost exclusively by middle class people. For example, he argues that in the 1970s, in Britain, very few elders and no circuit overseers had manual occupations (141). The situation in Armenia draws a very different picture – some elders do come from a working-class background. Although it was more common in the 1990s and the 2000s when the Armenian JW community was afflicted with a shortage of male members in general and elders in particular.

[95] Also, Armenian JWs express pride in their brothers and sisters who achieved popularity as athletes, such as tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams, or celebrities, such Michael Jackson and Prince.

Jehovah. Building a career is not directly criticized as long as it does not distract from this key pursuit. Only a few employment options, such as political or military career and, perhaps, a blood transfusionist, are off limits. According to WTBTS teaching these professions unequivocally contradict the Bible. All other vocations are on the table – doctors, lawyers, professors, accountants, – but Jehovah should always come first. And there are a few ways to achieve that.[96]

Some JWs leave their lucrative jobs in the army, business, or even the semi-(criminal) world and join a crew of JW skilled manual workers whose business schedule and ethics are largely in synch with the rhythms of the community (I address these cases in Chapter V). In Yerevan, there are a few well-known groups of JW stone carvers and constructions workers. These crews benefit JWs in various aspects. First, they provide employment opportunities for the members of the community. In the struggling Armenian economy, finding a job is extremely difficult. At the same time, the state has very few resources to regulate the employer-employee relationships, which means that workers often depend on the whims of business-owners. In this environment, working with JWs provides protection from frequent unfair dealings and fraud on behalf of non-JW employer. Plus, brothers and sister have a safety net in difficult situations as in the case of Sergey, a young Russian-speaking JW, who moved to Armenia without having any command in Armenian. Understandably, he had a hard time finding a job, but eventually, his employment issues were solved through the community when he started to work in a stone-polishing firm owned by a fellow JW.

[96] According to academic literature, class diversity among JWs is not unique to Armenia but has been a feature of JW congregations throughout the world for decades (Beckford 1975b; Penton 1985:255; Wilson 1977). In general scholars that Protestantism facilitates upward mobility by promoting education (Hallum 2003) and entrepreneurship (Burgess 2020:IV) and by providing employment opportunities through in-group social networks (Orellana 2021; but, see Krasteva-McCauley 2014). Some of the scholars of the WTBTS agree that JWs are more successful in the job market because of their level of literacy (Cross 1973) and because JWs are often honest workers which is rewarded by employers (Poewe 1978:311). On the other hand, some scholars argue that being a JW may force one to give up one's job to avoid hostility at a workplace (Holden 2002:122) or to dedicate more time to public ministry (Penton 1985:258). Holden (2002) also points out the "negative" effect related to the lack of career aspirations among young JWs (136). As I show later in this chapter and in Chapter V, various trajectories are possible in Armenia depending on the socio-cultural context.

Women also enjoy mutual support – through word-of-mouth information about potential jobs is quickly disseminated throughout the congregations. For example, one of the members of the Russian congregation has been involved in the caretaking and nursing industry. Since she has an extensive data base of clients who ask her for recommendations, she forwards job offers that she cannot take herself to her unemployed sisters. Sometimes, JWs choose employers from the community because they provide schedule flexibility which is so important for all publishers. For example, Anush left her previous job in a jewelry store owned by a "worldly" employer and started to work for a business owned by a JW. She said that she no longer had to worry about her work schedule interfering with congregation meetings and public ministry, which used to be a problem before.

Expectedly, in Armenia where JWs often meet little tolerance, one may find it difficult to get or retain a job if they do not hide their membership in the JW community. Sometimes, even evincing interest in JWs' teaching and organization can get one in trouble with an employer. Preaching at a workplace with non-JW employees is very complicated for JWs as spreading the Good News can get them and their non-JW co-workers in trouble. Olga says, "I used to leave magazines or brochures in the places that I visited for work. But then one time, the owner – I think he was sick in his head – found the magazines and fired the entire crew because of this. I felt terrible." Gena, a male JW in his 40s, recalls,

> There was one moment around 2003, when I was trying to find a job and I would always say up front that I was a Jehovah's witness. And they would immediately ask to leave their place. They'd say, "We don't want to have a Jehovah's witness here." So, in order to avoid those situations, I bought a car and became a taxi driver. Now I am my own employer. And over the years, I have gotten a lot of permanent clients.

Self-employment, as in the case of Gena, allows JWs to avoid having to navigate the tricky job market and relationships with employers. In this case, one does not need to negotiate one's work

schedule and work ethics with the business owners in order to make sure that Jehovah comes first. Younger generation JWs often opt to pursue a career in IT, private tutoring, or small businesses, such as photography or tourism, which provides the same flexibility and independence.

Among JWs, stories of biased treatment of JWs are often mixed up with those about the advantages of being a JW in the job market.

> A lot of business owners, at least as far as I know, prefer to hire Jehovah's Witnesses, because the Witnesses don't lie and they treat people well, you know. But when it comes to proselytizing, they say, "Stay away from us and don't preach – you are wrong." So, it's strange – they like our behavior and lifestyle, but they don't like our faith. (Gena)

The emphasis on honesty and integrity at a workplace as one of the key attributes of a faithful JW is ubiquitous in the JW literature and talks. In their dealings with worldly employers and coworkers, many publishers see themselves as representatives of the WTBTS and feel personal responsibility for the entire community[97] because their behavior "reflects on who [they] are and it reflects upon the name of Jehovah" (male JW from the English Congregation).

So just like in a family, equilibrium at a workplace is achievable as well – except for the radical cases described by Olga and Gena, most JWs work side by side with their non-JWs colleagues without any tangible tension. Describing her relationships with business owners and colleagues at the workplace, Arusik, a young female JW from the English congregation told me:

> I always work with the worldly people, and I've never had any issues with them. Of course, I never come to a new workplace and say, "Hi, my name is Arusik, and I am a Jehovah's witness." I come and start working. They get to know me better. They see me as a person. And later, when they find out I am a witness, they already know me as a person. Many are really surprised – they are like, "Wow, we would never say" […] When I started working here and they did not know I was a witness. So, when they were talking about celebrating the New Year, I told them I didn't care about it. You know, I

[97] In general, honesty and obedience before the law are valued highly in the community. JWs often express pride in the fact that apart from the court cases related to conscientious objection, there have been no JWs convicted for any other conventional crime, such as stealing, fraud, or murder. Also, they regard this as a sign or proof that the Truth and the WTBTS are in fact led by Jehovah and Jesus.

> told them how it makes no sense, it is a pagan festival. And they all agreed. They said it made sense. Later, when they found out I was a JW, they took my stance towards New Year negatively. Because now it was about me being a JW. Like they stop thinking when they find out that you are a JW.

According to my observations and interviews, many JWs use this strategy and downplay their affiliation with the JW community at the initial stage of getting to know someone. Just as at the family level, strong personal ties and a willingness to make concessions result in a comfortable relationship if JWs do not proselytize to their co-workers. Apart from the corporate events associated with calendar festivals and birthdays, being a JW remains at the background, given, of course, that persistent preaching is also significantly toned down.

Overall, the socio-economic composition of the JW community is diverse, although the majority of the members belong to the low-income strata of Armenian society. Talking about socio-economic class in post-Soviet Armenia is difficult because the radical transformation of the economy in the 1990s and 2000s made class identification precarious and unstable. Many occupations that guaranteed a middle-class position in the Soviet system almost completely disappeared after the mass deindustrialization of the country. Most engineers and researchers lost their jobs and socio-economic standing. Medical personnel and teachers continued working, but their salaries, as well as their financial and social security decreased significantly. In independent Armenia, as in many other post-Soviet republics, one's level of education, more often than not, has little correlation with one's actual employment or financial security.[98] In Chapter V, I will analyze in greater detail the influence of the discrepancy between education and economic opportunities on the attractiveness of the JWs' organization for the representatives of the Soviet and post-Soviet

[98] According to the report of the World Bank (2020) and the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia (2021), one's level of education is a poor predictor of one's well-being. For example, while people with a college degree comprise about 25% of the total population, they still account for 16% of all poor people in the country. In the case of those who only have a high school diploma, this ratio is 40 to 47.

intelligentsia.

Drawing an average social-class profile of an Armenian JW is difficult not only because the criteria of well-being and class belonging are very unclear. In addition, the WTBTS does not publish or, as far as I know, even collects statistics regarding its followers' social standing. Yet the real obstacle is that JWs are quite diverse regarding their social and economic status – those who have a secondary school diploma are attending meetings and do public service with university professors, artists, and lawyers;[99] in the Kingdom Hall, refugees from Azerbaijan who 30 years later still live in small rooms in dormitories and subsist on meager pensions sit next to the manager at the *Grand Candy* company, the largest dessert producer in Armenia. Based on my observations Armenian JWs can be split into several socio-economic groups. The first group is comprised by those involved in *skilled manual labor*: construction, service, artisanry, photography, etc. The second group includes pensioners and the unemployed – the most vulnerable section of the Armenian society and the JW community. The third, and perhaps least numerous, group encompasses those of the white-collar class with higher financial security who work as managers, lawyers, doctors, and college professors. This last group is the least numerous in the community, but the positions of leadership in the congregation are mostly occupied by its members.

The COVID Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the regular rhythm of life all over the world, and Armenia was not an exception. During the first couple of months, the authorities were able to

[99] Some scholars point out the overall low level of education among JWs. For example, in his dated research, William Whalen pointed out that in among JWs in New York in 1962, "hardly any hold college degrees – one Western State university with more 16,000 students lists only one Jehovah's Witness" (Whalen 1962:204). Some note that although WTBTS never banned obtaining college degrees, one's decision to go to college may result in ostracism at the level of the congregation (Penton 1985:273). Among JWs in Armenia, obtaining a college degree can be discouraged by some parents and strongly supported by others. In fact, the JW community may even facilitate this process when it incentivizes certain members to acquire expertise in the area of need, e.g. jurisprudence.

partially enforce wearing masks and maintaining social distancing – measures that were very unpopular in the gregarious and outgoing Armenian society. But after the 44-day war with neighboring Azerbaijan for control over Nagorno Karabagh in September-November 2020 that ended in Armenia's defeat, the authorities did not have the resources to coerce the anti-COVID measures. Consumed by the political crisis in the country and the trauma of their unexpected military defeat, most Armenians completely neglected any precautions regarding COVID. As many other Armenians, some JWs adopted a skeptical attitude towards the danger of the virus,[100] yet many of them also sought to follow the recommendations of the Governing Body that took COVID very seriously.

When COVID struck, the WTBTS, in accordance with its principles of being obedient to the secular authorities in cases that do not contradict the Bible, discontinued in-person meetings in all JWs' congregations all over the world, halted door-to-door public ministry and preaching with literature stands, and, in general, recommended implementing all measures of precaution to stop the spread of the virus. Through the JW Broadcasting members of the Governing Body sent updates and advice on issues related to the pandemic and encouraged messages about Jehovah's support and about the pandemic being a clear sign of the Last Days. Apart from ensuring the safety of their followers, the Governing Body looked for ways to adapt to the new circumstances and to stimulate participation in the new communal life.

As I mentioned above, in the pre-pandemic era, very few JWs used smartphones and tablets during the meetings, public ministry, Bible studies, or family worship sessions. For most members of

[100] At the beginning, many Armenians did not take the virus seriously, considering it no more dangerous than the regular flu. Wearing masks was viewed as an unnecessarily strict measure that was actually causing more harm than good to one's body. During the first week upon my arrival in Armenia in August 2021, I met only seven people wearing masks. In all other cases masks were either absent or were worn on one's arm instead of one's face.

the community, these gadgets were too expensive and too unnecessary to purchase. It all rapidly changed, when the regular bi-weekly meetings migrated to Zoom and having an electronic device became the only way to retain one's connection with elders, brothers, and sisters. During this rapid transition, the mutual support and help that are manifest in various aspects of JWs' lives significantly smoothened the transition. In many cases, JWs who had extra devices in the family shared them with those in need. Besides, they taught older JWs how to use Zoom, the JW Library app, Viber, WhatsApp, and other platforms and messengers that became the main avenues for JWs to share their brotherly love and support.[101] During my last pre-pandemic visit, less than 10% of the Russian congregation members had electronic devices, and I was very surprised to see how my elderly acquaintances comfortably used Zoom when I participated in an online meeting in 2021.

Although Zoom meetings allowed the congregation members to stay closer than they would otherwise be, they could not completely recreate the immersion into the JW world as in the KH. Most participants did not turn on their video cameras and microphones and remained invisible to the others and/or muted during the meetings. It inevitably affected the strictness of the dress code and mode of conduct during the gatherings – people had conversations parallel to the discussion, received phone calls, and drank coffee while sitting on their comfortable couches at home.[102] The meetings no longer consumed a large portion of the day as they used to since commuting to and from the KH became unnecessary. The chat function of the Zoom meetings was sometimes available to the participants, so they were able to chat with one another during the meetings.[103] The

[101] During the pandemic, the communication between the elders and other members of congregation was facilitated by messengers. Not only the links to Zoom meetings, but also the monthly field service reports were sent over Viber and WhatsApp. Donations could also be submitted electronically via various local mobile or bank services.

[102] Quite a few times, I was invited to watch a meeting broadcast with one of the Witnesses. During the meeting, we had many semi-related conversations while drinking coffee.

[103] In the English congregation, the chat function was turned off, but in the Russian and Armenian congregations, this

overall structure of the meetings did not change, and after the final prayer, the audience would explode with greetings, smiles, and questions about health and well-being. In the English congregation, people split into break-out rooms and continued talking, but just like before the pandemic, some people left the meeting right away, while others would stick around to quench their thirst for human warmth and closeness.[104]

Public ministry, although discontinued in its previous forms was not abolished, but was adjusted to the new reality. Now phone conversations serve as a core activity for public ministry:

> In the district where we live, there is one phone code. So, we use that code and call everyone – we offer people to talk about God, and a lot of people who didn't use to want to listen to others listen to us now. And they listen with joy. We send them all kinds of digital literature [*via smartphones*]. We continue preaching, but in most cases, we preach at a workplace and with relatives and friends. That's how most of our public ministry is being done now. We write letters and we send them via post service. (Ara)

Making calls and writing letters were not local Armenian initiatives, but a worldwide effort by JWs to adjust to the new reality. Handwritten letters had been a common method of JWs' public ministry in many countries for decades before the pandemic. In Armenia, this way of preaching was difficult due to the idiosyncrasies of the local post service.[105] However, with the start of the

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option has remained available throughout the pandemic.

[104] According to the elders, "there were actually a lot more people attending the zoom meetings because those who were always interested but did not want to spend time going to the meetings joined by Zoom" (Oganes). In general, my observations confirm this fact – often one Zoom profile was used by a whole family of four or more people. So, when about 80 Zoom profiles connect to the meetings, the number of participants could exceed 200, which would not be possible during a regular in-person meeting, simply because KHs had limited capacity. Besides, people, whose commitment or interest did not use to be strong enough to attend in-person meetings, could now comfortably attend the meetings without spending much of their time and energy on the commute.

The Russian congregation hosted many online visitors from former Soviet republics, including Russia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. In addition, public talks during the meetings were often given by brothers who were physically located in other countries and even continents. As a result, the cohesion of the worldwide JW community that used to be abstract became more tangible and real despite the discontinuation of the local in-person meetings.

[105] First, unlike in the U.S., a letter cannot be sent to an anonymous "current occupant" because the name of the recipient is required. At the same time, databases of homeowners in Armenia are fragmentary and difficult to acquire. In addition, there are no mailboxes in Armenia, and in order to deliver a piece of mail, post office workers call the addressee or a mail person attaches an orange notification sticker to the door of a recipient.

pandemic, many JWs turned towards letter-writing as a way to preach. These letters and phone calls amidst the pandemic, the difficult economic situation, as well as the political and military crisis in Armenia were intended to comfort their recipients and kindle their interest in biblical topics. Besides sending letters to relatives, friends, and acquaintances, many personally delivered them and left envelopes under doors. Often, besides a handwritten letter, the envelope contains a brochure and a small business card with a QR code to access www.jw.org.

Smartphones and messengers greatly facilitated preaching as well. JWs could send out texts, photos, GIFs, and videos to multiple recipients in one click, which was very convenient when giving a paperback brochure or a book was impossible. If before, the materials distributed by JWs were almost exclusively produced by the WTBTS, during the pandemic the messages were very diverse in their origin and nature. As part of this information distribution, I received text messages with sayings ascribed to Einstein about human stupidity, explanations for why Alen Delon is single and lonely, and even TikTok videos with carved avocados. These messages were intended to emphasize all the ideas that are usually highlighted in WTBTS literature – that one needs God's guidance and the Truth or that creativity is a gift given to humans by Jehovah. Yet, the means of expression of those ideas were very personal and unusually "worldly" – the absolute majority of the materials were not originally created to convey JWs' ideas but were employed to serve a new purpose.

All these simple daily routines helped many JWs retain their dedication to Jehovah and the Truth. As Arvin, a 70-year-old JW from an Armenian Congregation, puts it "Now we speak to people on the phone. Even if you speak about their health, you do public ministry […] We speak with people. We always speak. So, even if we die – the resurrection is guaranteed." In certain ways, the JWs all over the world felt closer than they used to, although locally, the robustness of their organization might have waned. In addition, new ways of preaching, such as smartphone messengers

and delivering handwritten letters, made JWs slightly more independent from the leadership of the organization.

In Armenia, as in many other countries in the world, vaccination engendered serious public debates about its actual purpose, efficacy, and necessity. When vaccines became available, public skepticism regarding the nature of the virus and the efficacy of masks turned into a distrust of vaccination. This suspicion quickly became fertile soil for various conspiracy theories presenting vaccination as a biological weapon aimed at rendering one infertile, turning Armenians into obedient zombies, or just another way to "finish the Armenian genocide started over one hundred years ago."[106] Despite the efforts of the Armenian government to incentivize people to get vaccinated, by February 2022, Armenia had one of the lowest vaccination rates in the world.[107]

Submerged in this sea of contradictory information, JWs were very cautious around the idea of vaccination. For a long time, the overall attitude of JWs towards vaccination was similar to that of an average Armenian, and one could hear a JW rehearsing all the anti-vaccination arguments that were circulating in the country:

> No, I am not vaccinated. I am afraid – they do not explain anything – side effects, possible reasons not to be vaccinated. My friend's neighbor – a young girl in her mid-30s got vaccinated and she died in 5 days. I am afraid. […] I want to postpone the shot if I want to get pregnant. Maybe they will give me 6 months. Then we will see whether it is necessary (a female JW in her 20s, Russian congregation)

However, starting in the middle of 2021, through the broadcasting platform on the www.jw.org, the Governing Body started to unequivocally support vaccination, and the opinion of most JWs started to shift. Importantly, the leaders of the WTBTS emphasized that getting

[106] I heard this opinion in a conversation with a taxi driver in Yerevan in November 2021.

[107] According to the data provided by the World Health Organization (see www.covid19.who.int/table), less than 30% of the Armenian population had received two doses of the vaccine by then.

vaccinated is a personal choice,[108] yet they clearly indicated that they approved of vaccination as the correct step. Anush, a young JW, admitted that navigating the information field related to vaccination was incredibly difficult without JW Broadcasting, "I was the last in my family to get vaccinated. I was doubting this step for a long time – there was too much useless and false information out there. Even doctors said not to get vaccinated. And when they tell you not to – it is very difficult to say 'yes.' But [JW] Broadcasting was the best advisor and mentor. So, I got vaccinated."

Anush was not unique in her deference to the advice from the Governing Body. In general, the number of vaccinated JWs started rapidly growing in the fall of 2021. Since the organization does not collect statistics[109] about the vaccination rate among its members, it is impossible to say precisely, but according to my observations and the opinion of some elders, the overall attitude towards vaccines became much more positive and many JWs got vaccinated. At the same time, many JWs retain their firm anti-vaccination stance and refuse to undergo the procedure. One of the informants who became my friend asked for my opinion about vaccination and said, "If you say it is necessary and it is going to be fine, I will go and get it tomorrow." The next day, I accompanied her to a clinic where she got her shot.

Conclusion

Just like Armenian society, the JW community is very complex and multilayered. Just like the urban landscape of Yerevan carries traces of multiple epochs, the baggage of traditional, Soviet, and global cultures and trends are noticeable in the JW community. JWs are not an isolated or segregated group as they are often imagined and presented, but a vibrant community that retains its integrity,

[108] For example, see 2021 Governing Body Update #6 of June 16, 2021 https://www.jw.org/en/news/jw/region/global/2021-Governing-Body-Update-6/

[109] None of my informants said that they had to report their vaccination to the elders of their congregation.

yet is deeply embedded into the surrounding society. Despite the tension between them, the wider Armenian society and JWs share many fundamental principles – they detest "liberalism" with its immorality, homosexuality, and uncontrolled sexual behavior, they honor patriarchal principles of family structure, they declare that believing in God is very important, although their faiths manifest themselves very differently. Most followers of Jehovah continue having close relationshipswith their family members, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and friends. In many cases, the social networks of community members undergo little change after conversion. Yet sometimes, JWs re-orient their social ties towards the community and maintain only superficial connections with the *"world."*

At the same time, the WTBTS demands time and commitment from its members, which creates almost uninterrupted involvement in the world of serving Jehovah. Public ministry, community meetings, Bible studies, and extra-congregational gatherings create a unified community where members support each other, have fun with each other, and, importantly, identify with each other. JWs' loyalty to Jehovah's Organization is very high and strong, although it does not mean they have no other commitments or allegiances.

This chapter serves as a foundation for the analysis of the relationships between the Armenian state and Armenian society, on the one hand, and JWs, on the other, in Chapter IV. Also, it builds a background for Chapter V which focuses on the reasons for joining and leaving the JW community.

CHAPTER III. JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND THE STATE

> … The secular Gods are also, in a way, jealous of those who follow ideologies, including religious ideologies that contradict their secular ideals. (Fox 2020:7)

Jehovah's Witnesses can be regarded as one of the most contentious religious organizations of the last hundred years. Ever since the First World War when Bible Students (the self-designation of Jehovah's Witnesses until 1931) were first imprisoned for conscientious objection (Penton 1985:50), the tension between JWs and governments all over the world has been ebbing and flowing without, however, ever dissipating completely. Although there is an overall assumption that western democratic countries do not engage in discrimination against religious minorities (for details, see Fox 2020; Grim and Finke 2007; Schleutker 2016), the history of JWs shows that the degree of democratic development serves as a poor predictor of governmental policies regarding religious minorities, including JWs. Nevertheless, the type of political regime and overall principles of legitimacy employed by a given political establishment may determine its reasons for and intensity of discriminatory policies. For example, the political and ideological changes that took place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1980-90s had a significant impact on the character of the relationship between the state and religious minorities.

Besides the political regime, a tradition of religious diversity and tolerance as well as the separation between Church and state are often viewed as a significant factor determining the treatment of religious minorities. If the dominant ideology represents a certain religious institution as a nation-maker and an unalienable element of the nation's selfness,[110] religious diversity is often

[110] For example, in 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church adopted the "Foundation of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church," a program document that reflected the Church's socio-political objectives. According to this document, "a Christian must preserve and develop his/her national culture, national self-consciousness. When a nation, civil or ethnic, completely or partially constitutes a mono-confessional Orthodox community, it, in a way, can be perceived as a united community of faith – an Orthodox people [nation]" (Social Conception of the Orthodox Church

perceived as a violation of congruency between ethnic and religious affiliations. For this reason, scholars often argue that violence against and the persecution of JWs are instigated by national Churches (Baran 2007, 2011; Knox 2003, 2019; Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011; but see Fox 2020). However, a comparative analysis of Orthodox-majority countries in Eastern Europe suggests that while Orthodoxy strongly emphasizes correspondence between the ethnic and the religious and, therefore, rejects religious diversity, the implementation of this ideology almost exclusively depends on the interests and desires of the political elites.

JWs often regard intolerance on the part of governments, priesthood of other Christian churches, and society as a proof of their righteousness and Biblical fulfillment.[111] JWs often attribute the lack of tolerance on behalf of priests of other Christian churches to the success of the WTBTS in attracting new followers. The recent wave of persecutions against JWs in Russia was interpreted as evidence "that we are living at the end of the last days of this system of things" (WTBTS 2020b).

Jehovah's Witnesses experience various forms and degrees of discrimination in many countries within and outside of the post-Soviet space. Here, I focus on government-based religious discrimination, which, following Jonathan Fox, I define as "restrictions placed by governments or their agents on the religious practices or institutions of religious minorities that are not placed on the majority religion" (2020:3).[112] The overall goal of this section is to evaluate if there are patterns in

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2000).

[111] For example, John 15:19 reads "because you are no part of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you. Keep in mind the word I said to you: A slave is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

[112] Other definitions of religious discrimination may focus on more radical forms of discrimination or differ from that of Fox in scope. For example, Philip Jenkins (2007) addresses religious persecutions, which he defines as "an effort by government to repress major activities by a given religious group, commonly with the goal of eliminating that group in the long or short term, or at least reducing its significance to nothing" (3). Thomas Farr (2008) associates religious persecution with egregious abuse, torture, rape, unjust imprisonment on the basis of religion (116). Paul Marshal (2009) intentionally uses a less specific definition in order to embrace the diversity of manifestations of religious discrimination, which he defines as the denial to anyone of rights "connected with practicing one's religion […] because of the religious

degrees and forms of religious discrimination against the JWs worldwide, as well as to pinpoint the major political actors related to the state that instigate religious discrimination and persecutions against the JWs.

Literature review

In this section, I aim to outline a range of factors that influence state policies towards JWs in various contexts. I will start with a review of the scholarly literature regarding the reasons for animosity towards JWs on behalf of the state and wider society.[113] Then, I will review the literature on religious nationalism and the role of religion as a legitimation tool. This review will serve as a framework for the analysis of specific cases in this chapter and Chapter IV.

Over the tumultuous history of the 20th century, JWs have faced a great number of external governmental, societal, and religious pressures in different socio-political and socio-economic regimes ranging from totalitarian Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union to the liberal and capitalist United States with Colonial and post-Colonial Africa and Asia in between. Although these cases of persecutions had multiple idiosyncrasies, there have been many similarities as well. Simultaneously, since WWII, the WTBTS has significantly softened its radical stance against worldly governments and chose the strategy of "disciplined litigation" (Côté and Richardson 2001) as its main method of adapting to the existing religious and political climate in a given country. As a result, the overall character of the WTBTS became less removed from the world and allowed for more points of intersection between JWs and the larger society. While in some countries, such as the U.S., Canada, and the UK, these changes allowed JWs to reach a *modus vivendi* with the state and the rest of the society, in other countries, intolerance towards JWs has remained very high. These tribulations

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beliefs of those who are persecuted and/or those who persecute" (26).

[113] Often, the authors do not make a clear distinction between the state and society or see them as co-dependent.

and inconsistencies incentivized scholars to account for the contentious nature of the relationship between the state and JWs. The scholarly explanations tend to focus on two dimensions: first, the idiosyncratic characteristics of the JWs community that may instigate hostility and persecution towards them and, second, the contextual factors that force the state and society to regard JWs as a threat.

Hostility as a Result of Jehovah's Witnesses' Idiosyncrasies

Focusing on the JWs' specific traits, Andrew Holden (2002) characterizes them as an organization with an excessively sectarian and otherworldly orientation that is hardly compatible with modernity and the wider society (also, see Lawson 1995; Woolley 2005; Dericquebourg 1989; Penton 1985:138). According to this view, the tension between JWs and the larger society is caused by the former's intentional non-involvement with the rest of the world. Elaborating on this explanation, scholars have pointed to specific practices that alienate JWs from society and incentivize the authorities to impose restrictions on WTBTS followers. These practices include blood transfusion (Chryssides 2019:231; Holden 2002:28; Knox 2018a; Luca 2004; Woolley 2005), political neutrality (Chu 2004; Garbe 2008:139; King 1984; Makki 1996; Reynaud and Graffard 2001a), theological differences (Chryssides 2021), insistence on proselytism[114] (Holden 2002:75; Knox 2018a:245; McAninch 1986:1001; Stark and Iannaccone 1997:136), rejection of common holidays (Chryssides 2021), strong ties to the U.S. (Bergman 1996b:90; King 1984), JWs' disengagement from society (Jubber 1977; Rogerson 1969; Zygmunt 1970), their "confrontationist and conspiratorial attitude towards the state" (Cross 1977:84), and rigid, patriarchal practices (Knox

[114] As proselytism aims at recruitment, accusations of "brainwashing" can also be included into this category. Voiced by several scholars, this approach criticized cults for "massive social pressure to substantially modify a person's worldview" (Ofshe and Singer 1986). Although such accusations against JWs are common at the level of practice, at the academic level, JWs were rarely accused of brainwashing (but, see Bergman 1996a; Montague 1977).

2018a:53–54; Liedgren and Andersson 2013:4).

Drawing on the comparative analysis of various cases of persecution of JWs and following Wilson's similar conclusion (1973), I argue that, while the aforementioned specific traits may engender a somewhat reserved attitude towards JWs on behalf of the state and society at large, they do not serve as triggers of persecution and violence. Neither can specific traits of JWs' theology and practice account for the wide range of attitudes and policies towards them on behalf of the state and the wider society, as these traits are more or less consistent throughout the world and history, while the treatment of JWs varies and fluctuates significantly across geographic locations, cultural contexts, and historical periods. Often, factors external to the theological and practical idiosyncrasies of the WTBTS engender a negative reaction of the larger society towards JWs' views, actions, and even their very presence. The comparative perspective shows that, while the practices of JWs transform very slowly, their relationship with the larger society and the state is much more turbulent and can worsen and improve rapidly. Moreover, as the analysis below demonstrates, certain WTBTS practices become problematic and contentious in specific socio-political and ideological contexts. For example, JWs were criticized for their practices of shunning, ban on blood transfusion, alleged "brainwashing," child sexual abuse, to name a few. The state and society view these practices as problematic because they infringe on *individual human rights*. Simultaneously, in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space, these issues are rarely mentioned at all, while JWs are regarded as a threat to *collective rights* on cultural and political identity and independence.

Contextual Reasons for Hostility

In this subsection, I engage with academic literature that accounts for the contentious relationship between religious minorities and the state with a focus on the treatment of JWs.

Historians have conducted a large body of research focusing on state persecutions against

the WTBTS (Baran 2007, 2014; Bergman 1997; Chryssides 2019, 2021; Cole 1974; Dericquebourg 1978; Knox 2004, 2018a; Melton 2021; Yonan 1999). Written from a historical perspective and rich with minute historical facts about the WTBTS and violence against JWs by the state and society at large, this research pays less attention to the mechanics of hostility as intolerant attitude towards religious minorities is frequently treated as common sense.[115]

A significant body of literature focuses on the idiosyncrasies of local contexts that can trigger anti-JW sentiments. For example, some scholars emphasize the correlation between overall social hostility towards religious minorities and governmental discrimination (Barro and McCleary 2005:1343; Grim and Finke 2007:638). They argue that if a society at large harbors animosity towards a particular religious minority, the state elites may start to openly persecute that group to earn a political dividend. Jonathan Fox (2015:58, 85) argues that this correlation is unclear and contingent upon multiple factors that can trigger or reverse it. Likewise, Beckford (1975b:33–34) and Bergman argued that societies with a high level of anti-Semitism have a harsh reaction to JWs' teaching because it is "heavily oriented towards Old Testament theology" (1996:91; also, see Blaich 1993; Reynaud and Graffard 2001a) and rejects the doctrines of Trinity and Hell, which makes JWs closer to Judaism than Christianity. This explanation is very plausible for certain socio-political contexts, such as Nazi Germany, but it seems to require that anti-Semitism be a part of the official political course of the state in order to inform the policies regarding JWs. Besides, this explanation presumes that society and policymakers have a high level of familiarity with the theological nuances of the teaching of the WTBTS, which, according to scholarly literature and my observations, is

[115] For example, Gabriele Yonan writes in the article about JWs in Nazi Germany: "Jehovah's Witnesses refused to say 'Heil Hitler,' refused to participate in the processions, refused to sing the national anthem and the Horst Wessel Lied, and above all refused military service, oath to the flag, and all activities connected with the military establishment. *For this they were bitterly persecuted* from the very beginning of the National Socialist regime" (emphasis added, Yonan 1999:309). The negative reaction to JWs' practices is presented as self-evident common sense.

usually extremely low. Finally, the comparative analysis of JWs, Adventists, and Mormons below shows that the overall theological orientation toward Judaism works as a poor predictor of treatment of a religious group (King 1984).

Some scholars (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000; Juergensmeyer 1993) argue that a general level of religiosity in a given country directly correlates with the level of intolerance towards religious minorities, which instigates persecution of JWs, as well. Concerned with the phenomenon of religious violence, this approach considers religion through the idea of a cosmic war that is concerned with ultimate order and ultimate horizon and, therefore, is prone to incite war rather than tolerance (also, see Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000; Brubaker 2013). On the other hand, Beckford (2012) suggests that a low level of religiosity in a given society results in a high degree of religious illiteracy and lack of awareness about how religious organizations work. In these cases, the *modus operandi* of non-traditional religious movements and groups engenders fear and suspicion. Taking advantage of these feelings, anti-cult movements further promote "allegations of a sci-fi nature about the supposedly weird and dangerous goings-on inside cults" (106). Other scholars prefer to measure the level of the politicization of religion rather than elusive "religiosity." According to them, if religion is politically salient in a given society, the government and other political groups are incentivized to instigate physical, legislative, and symbolic violence against religious and ethno-religious others (Hadžić 2020).

Below, I address the politicization of religion in cases of populist mobilization and securitization of religious diversity in greater detail.

Focusing on the specificity of local contexts, various researchers (Baran 2006, 2007, 2014; Beckford 1975b:35; Bergman 1996b:91; King 1984) suggest that the WTBTS's close ties with the U.S. make its members a natural target for suspicion and hostility in countries that experience

tension in their relationships with the U.S. My observations as well as the comparative analysis below suggest that connections to the west is in fact a significant factor instigating a reserved attitude towards new religious movements.[116] Yet this is only one part of a more complex phenomenon of perceiving JWs as subversive agents of the enemy. Regardless of who the enemy is, JWs are often depicted as a fifth column supported by the adversary even when this connection makes little sense. For example, the Nazi government accused JWs of being communist agents (Côté 2007:13; Dirksen 2002:230). Simultaneously, in the communist Soviet Union, the JWs were accused of working for the Nazi Germany (Knox 2018a:254). Also, in Armenia, JWs are frequently regarded and presented as agents of Azerbaijan and Turkey, countries that are neither western nor Christian, while in Azerbaijan, JWs are accused of being Armenian spies (Corley 2009b). These situations strongly suggest that it is not the JWs' strong ties with the U.S. that engender animosity towards them. Rather their image as religious and political aliens promotes the idea of them working in the interests of the enemy, whoever it may be. In this case, the cause-effect relationship seems to be reversed as animosity towards JWs precedes the accusations of their working in the interest of the enemy.

Often, the scholarship on intolerance towards JWs posits religious competition as a catalyst for the pressure and persecution faced by the WTBTS. Some scholars claim the society and state's negative attitudes towards JWs are a result of purely religious disagreement between the WTBTS and other more mainstream Christian groups. These disagreements concern different theological views and interpretations of the Bible (Baran 2007:261, 2011:428; Chryssides 2021:17; Ochs 2002). Further developed, this position incorporates political reasons as well and claims that the backlash against

[116] In Armenia, it is very common to hear that "all new religious sects were created in the U.S. by special services like the CIA, and they all pursue one goal – to destroy nations all over the world to ensure U.S. domination" (Michael, anti-JWs activist, Armenia).

the JWs is caused by their denunciation of all other religious traditions as greedy and hypocritical organizations that prioritize wealth and power over serving God (Baran 2007; McAninch 1986:1008, 1010).

Another source of tension is often seen in JWs' successful recruitment practices that does not respect existing, locally specific agreements between religious organizations regarding their spheres of influence (Baran 2006:640, 2011:431; Beckford 1975b:59; Wilson 1973:148) and poses a threat to the dominant religious organization (Baran 2006:640; Fautre 2016:41; Fox 2015:50; Fox, Finke, and Mataic 2021; Piccioli and Wörnhard 2016:43). According to this view, JWs' disregard for class, racial, or ethno-religious principles of religious affiliation breaks the rules of religious competition, which engenders a hostile response on behalf of other actors in the local religious field. Further developing this view, rational-choice theory scholars claim that dominant religious organizations pursue the monopolization of their religious influence and push the state to limit religious freedom, which may instigate religious persecutions against minority religious groups, including JWs (Gill 2005:3; Stark and Bainbridge 1987:95). Following this approach, some scholars argue that in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union where the ethno-religious principle prescribes that national and religious borders be congruent, state policies limiting JWs activities are a result of pressure from the dominant Churches (Baran 2006, 2007, 2011, 2021; Fox 2020:VI; Jubber 1977:124; Knox 2004, 2019; Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011:109; Richardson 2020; Sarkissian 2009:473). Fox also argues that "states that are associated with a particular religion are more likely to engage in government religious discrimination," (2020:50) yet the conflict requires a trigger.[117] These views emphasize the stakes that the Church has in limiting religious competition and tend to depict

[117] But see Driessen 2010 who argues that the rapprochement between dominant religious organizations and the state does not necessarily entail that one religious tradition will become the dominant identity in these countries (65).

the state as a conduit for the Church's agenda. So even though the state may benefit from this collaboration, it is not regarded as an initiator of discrimination of JWs.

Other scholars cast doubt on the ability of this approach to account for the violence towards JWs and assign the leading role in the state-Church relationships to the former. For example, Michael Ochs (2002) argues that the Georgian Orthodox Church's tacit or open support of violence against JWs is only one part of the Georgian state's policy towards the WTBTS that aims to "steer angry hordes against defenseless minorities"[118] (271). Vjekoslav Perica (2002:173–75) claimed that rather than exercising influence over the state authorities, the Serbian Church often endorsed the existing policies of the state. Ani Sarkissian also claims that Orthodox Churches tend to link themselves to the state, irrespective of which political force controls the government (2009:495; also, see Philpott 2007:513). Irina Du Quenoy (2018) claims that while the Russian Orthodox Church has always demanded that the state limit religious competition, the tightening of religious policies stemmed from the state's security and legitimacy concerns rather than the Church's pressure (162; also, see Papkova 2011, 2013; Papkova and Gorenburg 2011).

Some scholars emphasize the mutually beneficial nature of an alliance between an insecure state and an insecure dominant Church, because "for the insecure regime, the support of a hegemonic religious organization can give it popular legitimacy. For a religious organization, establishment brings both benefits from the state, and access that allows it to cement its monopoly status and limit religious competition" (Sarkissian 2009:493; also, see Gill 2005:17, 2008). Exploring the origin of religious liberty and the state-Church relationship, Anthony Gill (1998:III, 2005:16–17) argues that political legitimacy is the primary reason why the state regulates religion, including

[118] There is a whole academic tradition that explains persecution against religious minorities in general and JWs in particular as an attempt to channel the anger and dissatisfaction of subjects or the electorate against religious minorities (Barro and McCleary 2005; van Klinken and Aung 2017; Rogerson 1969:58; Wilson 1973:146–48)

cooperating with a dominant Church and/or persecuting all or certain religious groups. He argues that in cases where religious actors strengthen or undermine the state's legitimacy, the political elites treat religion with utilitarian practicality (1998:62). They seek rapprochement with a religious organization if this alliance incentivizes citizens to agree that "obedience to the government is morally correct" (2005:16). If a religious organization undermines the legitimacy of the civic authorities or serves as an alternative center of loyalty, the state will seek to suppress it (Gill and Keshvazarian 1999). This approach treats the alliance of the state and the dominant Church as contingent upon their concurrent interests and agendas, although the leading role is assigned to the state. Further developing this approach, Robert Hefner (2015) claims that religious policies involve a "diverse assortment of actors, discourses, and powers"(128) as well as a varied array of ethnoreligious imaginaries, which signify the involvement of not only religious and secular actors, but also conflicting discourses and ideologies. In this and the following chapters, I employ Hefner's approach and treat the existing religious policies as an outcome of alliances and power struggle between the state, non-governmental actors, international institutions, and other religious organizations in a given domestic and geopolitical context. In other words, although the existence of a dominant Church is a factor that increases a likelihood of restrictions on religious freedom, specific religious policies in a given state are contingent upon multiple conditions in domestic and international politics, such as pressure from the international organizations to impose civilizationally alien principles of religious diversity, the politicization of religion by populist and nationalist rhetoric and actions, or the lack of a government's legitimacy, among other factors.

Saba Mahmood (2015) argued that in middle-eastern countries, western religious groups that "privilege notions of personal conscience, belief, and individual choice" (147) engender conflict with local communitarian understandings of religious liberty because they intrude on the existing

principles of social vision and division.[119] The communitarian principle sees religious liberty as the right of a people to retain their religious selfness, rather than as individual religious rights, which pushes the state and dominant Church to try to suppress the activities of western religious groups (also, see Martin 2005; Pollis 1993:395). The material below suggests that the dominant Church's primary motif in suppressing certain religious minorities is not in limiting competition. First, most people in the analyzed Orthodox-majority countries are not church-goers. Since most people are not affiliated with any religious organization, they cannot be an object of direct competition. Second, while JWs are certainly one of the most oppressed religious minorities, they are not the most numerous "challengers" of the dominant Churches as they are exceeded by Pentecostals and Baptists, who are two to three times more numerous.[120] Therefore, the fierce rejection of JWs by the dominant Church cannot be explained solely by competition. Comparing the treatment of JWs in the Orthodox-majority countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union strongly suggests that Saba Mahmood's distinction between collective and individual rights is highly consequential for religious policies in Orthodox-majority countries. The dominance of Orthodox Churches is predicated on the (semi-)automatic enlistment of all members of a corresponding ethnic group into the ranks of the Mother Church. Western-style religious organizations disentangle ethnicity and religion and argue that one's relationship with God is an individual venture. This stand-off[121]

[119] According to western liberal ideology, the state should minimally interfere with religion in general and the issues of religious identity, in particular (Lerner 2013:614). In his analysis of new religious movements, Beckford (1985) also emphasizes that a negative attitude towards "cults" is often rooted in the ideas of individual autonomy from the collective, because the "capacity [of cults] (real or imaginary) to dominate and control nearly all aspects of a member's life … angers and alarms the anti-cultists" (101).

[120] Both at the level of practice and level of analysis, there is a tendency to tie the size of a religious group and the likelihood of persecutions against it into a cause-effect relationship. For example, Fox argues that larger [religious] minorities "are more likely to be perceived as a security or political threat" (2020:53), which can instigate discrimination.

[121] This conflict can also be described as a subset of a phenomenon that Samuel Huntigton called a "clash of civilizations" (1996). Although mostly preoccupied with the macro-level, his approach can be applied to a qualitatively different religious ideology imported from outside and planted to a different paradigm of social order. In this case,

threatens the ideological foundation of the Orthodox Churches' dominance, which pushes them to seek the state's support in limiting the influence of these alternative ideological views. Thus, the most persecuted groups are not the most populous, but those that successfully and insistently undermine the hegemonic principles of the existing social and political system; those that are most contentious, publicly visible and, therefore, most ideologically problematic. I address the ideological challenge posed by JWs and their public presence in greater detail in this chapter and Chapter IV.

A significant body of academic literature connects persecutions against JWs with their threat to the state. According to Zoe Knox, "[Jehovah's] Witnesses are particularly vulnerable in times of war, when their refusal to enact the most visible symbolic act of patriotism, such as pledging allegiance, saluting flags, singing anthems, and bearing arms, leads to conflict with governments demanding heightened displays of loyalty" (Knox 2018:91; also, see Bergman 1996:87; Rogerson 1969:42; Stoll 1990:106–107). Although this observation is often correct, it does not fully account for cases of severe persecutions of JWs in times of peace: Nazi Germany before 1939, the Soviet Union after 1945, post-independence Eritrea, or Russia between 2017 and 2022. Neither does it explain why war does not always trigger discrimination against JWs' military neutrality and pacifism. Moreover, the governments sometimes alleviate their discriminatory policies against JWs during an ongoing war, as it was in the U.S. in 1943. Besides, the war as a self-sufficient explanation fails to account for the cases when JW conscientious objectors were persecuted more harshly than other "disloyal" pacifists. This and the following chapters show that an armed conflict increases the likelihood of religious discrimination, but it cannot fully account for religious persecution.

In the first fundamental sociological research of JWs conducted in the early 1970s, James Beckford noted that the government can launch persecutions against JWs as a reaction to their

different civilizational paradigms coexisting within one society will likely engender a "fault-line conflict."

vitriolic criticism of the state or as a result of the state's weakness, insecurity, and instability (1975:59; also, see Admiraal 2012; Sarkissian 2009:473; Du Quenoy 2018). Beckford used the latter reason to explain the persecutions of JWs in Malawi and Zambia – two states that had recently obtained independence and, therefore, had vulnerable legitimacy (also, see Jubber 1977; Wilson 1973). Fouad Makki (1996) claims that JWs' beliefs and practices challenged the nascent and, therefore, unstable nation-state in Eritrea, which caused harsh persecution against them, and Zoe Knox (2018a:47) makes a similar observation regarding post-Soviet states. Barro and McCleary (2005) suggest that major changes in a political regime are likely to entail a closer alliance between the state and a dominant Church, which increases pressure on religious minorities.

Shifting away from legitimacy crises and focusing on economic instability, Grim and Finke (2007) argue that economic crisis is likely to trigger religious persecutions. Their approach predicts that the likelihood of religious persecutions wanes with economic development in a given society. At the same time, other scholars argue that a state in good standing is more likely to limit religious freedom and claim that "strong and stable regimes are in a better position to engage in discrimination due to their increased resources" (Fox 2015:51), that economic development is likely to correlate positively with state regulation of religion (Buckley and Mantilla 2013), and that democratic development is more than compatible with state favoritism of the dominant Church (Driessen 2010).

The comparative analysis below suggests that the religious economy approach serves as a good predictor of discriminatory or liberal religious policies of the state towards JWs and other religious minorities. It has a higher explanatory power than singling out specific socio-economic or socio-political contexts, such as war or economic or political crisis, as instigators of religious

discrimination.[122] This approach postulates that in their activities both secular, religious, or political actors try to reduce the cost and increase the benefits (Finke and Stark 2000; Gill 2008; Iannaccone 1995; Iannaccone, Stark, and Finke 1998; Sarkissian 2015; Stark and Iannaccone 1994) and argues that in a given circumstance, they will try to reach their goals in the most cost-effective manner. Elina Schleutker (2016) contends that the attitude towards religious freedom depends on the degree to which "different actors (e.g., political parties and religious organizations) are successful in advancing their preferences" (750). Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary (2005) argue that a high degree of adherence to the majority religion is likely to incentivize the authorities to limit or persecute other religious groups and favor the dominant Church, because such policies can bring them political dividends (also, see Finke, Martin, and Fox 2017; Fox, Finke, and Mataic 2021; Gill 2008). Talking about Bulgaria, Ghodsee (2009) argues that authorities tend to accept a certain level of religious tolerance of new religious movements because persecutions cause divisiveness and the possibility of violence, whereas some level of religious freedom "might better serve the interests of elites who profit from trade and taxation" (241).

Following the same logic, another strand of literature focuses specifically on the conditionality of membership in the EU and other western institutions, such as the Council of Europe and/or NATO, and the role this membership plays in promoting democracy and human rights (Flockhart 2005; Kelley 2004; Dzebisashvili 2015; Casier 2011) in Eastern European countries and post-Soviet states. Some scholars argue that the success of conditionality is contingent upon the real prospects of becoming a member of the EU (Bieber 2011; Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017). However, another body of research suggests that local factors can be more consequential for the

[122] Yet the religious economy approach serves as a poor explanation for why JWs are perceived as a higher threat than other religious minorities and why they are persecuted more harshly than others.

overall success of democratization. These factors include culturally specific rejection of certain norms (Börzel and van Hüllen 2014), the political orientation of the local elites (Casier 2011; Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit 2012), objective constraints, such as a country's ties with geopolitical rivals of the EU (Aram 2019), and the socio-political polarization of the local population (Vettori 2013), to name a few.

An analysis of the policies of Eastern European Orthodox countries and post-Soviet states demonstrates that when the state is politically and economically vulnerable and relies on international aid or membership in international organizations, it is more likely to abandon or alleviate its discriminatory religious policies in exchange for the desired economic or political support from outside. In other words, if religious intolerance jeopardizes a country's beneficial relationship with the EU, the authorities may ameliorate their religious policies. For example, many governments in the former Eastern bloc and post-Soviet space softened their religious policies and agreed to tolerate religious diversity as they strongly aspired for membership in the EU, the Council of Europe, and NATO since all potential members were required to adhere to principles of religious freedom (Giorgi 2021). At the same time, however, if external benefits are the only major factor restraining religious persecutions, discrimination can (re-)commence if international demands become less costly for the political elites.

Also, Chapters III and IV show that local cultural traits and the orientation of the elite are as significant as the prospect of the EU membership. The literature on conditionality rarely makes analytical distinction between linguistic, religious, and sexual minorities.[123] Nevertheless, these cleavages often have different degrees of importance for domestic actors and engender different

[123] The influence of conditionality on policies regarding ethnic groups has been subject to separate studies (Hillion 2003; Hughes and Sasse 2003), yet in these cases, ethnic groups remain analytically undistinguished from religious groups and other minorities.

types of resistance or acceptance. For example, the policies regarding religious and ethnic minorities are indeed subject to amendment if the incentives offered by the EU are significant (Hillion 2003; Ibryamova 2013). At the same time, the freedom of the expression of sexual orientation has traditionally been rejected in most Eastern European and post-Soviet countries, so the promotion of LGBTQ rights and gender equality under the pressure of the EU has had rather limited success in this region (Chiva 2009; Guasti and Bustikova 2020).

Another stream of scholarly work addresses the question of why the state may consider religion in general or certain religious groups in particular as a threat. The *securitization theory* suggests that religious discriminatory policies may ensue when a religious group is perceived as an objectively existing security threat (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000; Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998; Fox 2020; Taureck 2006). Securitization, that is presenting a certain group as a danger, manifests itself as a performative speech act (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000:708; Vuori 2008) or as specific political measures (Cesari 2013:V) and lifts the policies towards this group above "normal politics," which allows the political elites to introduce exceptional political actions and make extraordinary claims for power and legitimacy (Fox and Akbaba 2015). The theory considers a wide range of reasons for the securitization of religion in general or a specific religious group. Causes for securitization include external threats and religious terrorism (Cesari 2013; Fox and Akbaba 2015), internal religious fundamentalism (Lenz-Raymann 2014), or religious subversive opposition to the existing state ideology de-legitimizing the existing regime (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000).[124] A socio-political

[124] There is a growing body of literature connecting religion with populist mobilization. Populism scholars describe religion as a mobilizing factor that "helps populists turn religion into a tool of power consolidation within societies" (Yilmaz, Morieson, and Demir 2021). In this case, politicization of religion and political mobilization can center on the defense of national identity "against evil forces, and the enemies of the blessed people of God" (Zúquete 2017:449; also, see DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). In other cases, religion can serve as point of reference for "a civilizational identity understood in antithetical opposition to" (Brubaker 2017:1194) a civilizational other who can also be defined in religious terms. The postulated security threat posed by the religiously defined "other"

system or a state ideology that takes a particular stance towards religion are especially prone to considering religious groups as a threat. As I show below, in the context of strict separation between religion and state, as in case of French secularism, "some aspects of the actual practice of religion are seen as a threat to the *raison d'être* of the state" (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000:720; also, see Fox 2020:V; Marzouki 2013). Also, if the state ideology is closely connected to a dominant religious organization, as in case with Orthodox-majority countries, religious groups that openly challenge this alliance are likely to be regarded and presented as a danger (Helbling and Traunmüller 2016). To sum up, different legitimation strategies employed by the political elites may entail different modes of interaction with and perception of various religious groups.[125]

Although not explicitly following the securitization theory, numerous scholars highlighted the ideological stand-off between JWs and the state as a reason for religious persecutions. Pauline Côté argues that JWs are persecuted because of their ideological opposition to and competition with the state, because states and especially dictatorial regimes "with their unilateral and monopolized methods of mobilization, are not ready to accord a position of political neutrality to any of their citizens and, especially, organized groups, even if religious" (1993:84; also, see Côté 1999). Likewise, other scholars claim that the competition between the state and religion is especially pronounced in Communist, monarchist, militarist, or Islamist states (Barro and McCleary 2005:1344–45; Dericquebourg 1978; Schleutker 2016:746), which engenders strict control over religious "deviations" on behalf of the state.

Similarly, various scholars argue that one of the causes for persecutions of the WTBTS in

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allows political forces, be they incumbent or contending political actors, to gain political traction and support.

[125] For example, Alberta Giorgi (2021) explores how the populist shift in Eastern Europe affected the attitude towards religious minorities and religious policies in general.

Nazi Germany was JWs' refusal "to acknowledge the supremacy of the nation over God or to sign a statement repudiating their religion" (Feig 1990:168; also, see Bergman 1996:89–90; Reynaud and Graffard 2001:IV; Yonan 1999:309–10). Christine King (1984) claims that "the real reason for the clash between this sect and the Nazis resides in the clash of two totalitarian systems. Each system promised a thousand-year Reich, each system expected its membership to demonstrate total support and unquestioning obedience" (also, see Côté 2007:14; Reynaud and Graffard 2001a:15) Besides, King argues that the inability of the Nazi regime to eliminate this ideological rival was a blow to the reputation of the state as it was perceived as a weakness (202). In other words, since JWs openly and publicly defied the Nazi state, it had to defend its monopoly on legitimate violence and on the imposition of principles of vision and division.

Scholars who focus on infringements of the religious rights of JWs in contemporary European democracies also stress the importance of the ideological opposition between JWs and the state. Beckford argues that "French suspicion of 'cults' rests mainly on the fear that they might divert citizens away from rational ways of thinking and, consequently, from loyalty to the Republic" (2004:34; also, see Finke et al. 2017:68–69). Numerous scholars regard persecutions of JWs in newly independent states with vulnerable ideological standing as a consequence of attempts of the government to eliminate alternative sources of legitimacy and loyalty (Aguirre and Alston 1980:191; Dericquebourg 1989; Jubber 1977; Knox 2018a; Makki 1996; Pinto 2005; Wilson 1973:149).

To sum up these views, claims and actions of religious organizations can bear political overtones even if they claim that they are apolitical or neutral simply because they serve as alternative centers of loyalty and offer alternative ideologies, moral norms, and principles of legitimacy. This may "challenge the state's claim to monopolise the regulation of public life (and to authoritatively regulate certain areas of private life as well)" (Brubaker 2013:15; also, see Garnham

2007:202; Philpott 2007; Williams 2007). In a similar vein, Pinto (2015) argues that JWs' views on "secular authorities resulted in their becoming a target for the police authorities in Angola, who did not tolerate the dissemination of ideologies which could challenge the sustainability of the colonial system" (1). However, there are several aspects that strengthen or alternatively soften this challenge. First, if a particular stance towards religion comprises *raison d'état* – for example, radical separation or alliance with religion, – the state will regard the religious groups that contradict this stance as a threat. Alternatively, religious organizations that openly profess their adherence to the state ideology, as is the case with the Orthodox Churches in the Orthodox-majority countries, will be supported by the state.

Second, the intensity of a potential ideological conflict between the state and a religious group depends on the position of the religious group on the *private-public* spectrum[126] (Casanova 1994:II). This means that if a religious group "abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation, and redrawing boundaries" (65–66) it will face increasing opposition from other political actors, the most powerful of which is the state (also, see Williams 2007). In other words, a religious group's public conspicuousness and, therefore, the visible incongruence of its ideology and claims with other political, religious, and social ideologies entails a high likelihood of animosity towards it (Beckford 1985:III; Giorgi 2021; Piccioli and Wörnhard 2016:44–45).

If we view the degree of intolerance experienced by a religious group as contingent on this

[126] Jose Casanova addresses various approaches to understanding *the public* ranging from Goffman's understanding of public space as a field of public life where face-to face interaction occurs to the view on public space as a sphere where political struggle takes place. Following Casanova, I regard *public space* as a stage upon which anyone, including a religious group, can make socio-political claims that can potentially redraw normative and/or taken-for-granted principles and boundaries (Casanova 1994:43).

group's opposition to the hegemonic social principles and on its public conspicuousness, we can account for a more severe persecution of JWs compared to other religious minorities. Even though many countries that persecute JWs are religiously diverse, the majority of religious groups face little pressure on behalf of the state and society because of their low public profile. Although their stance towards certain principles of socio-political systems is comparable to that of JWs, they may encounter less intolerance.

Below, I analyze the persecution of JWs in western democracies, post-socialist Orthodox-majority countries, and totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany. The first two groups have multiple cultural, political, and historical parallels with Armenia. Therefore, the analysis contextualizes the development of religious freedom in post-Soviet Armenia in a larger regional, historical, and cultural context. The analysis of the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany is important for several reasons. First, it clearly demonstrates that evasion of compulsory military service cannot account for the great intolerance of the state towards JWs. Second, it shows that governments promoting a strong ideology have little tolerance to any manifestations of deviation.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Western Liberal Democracies

In this section, I address the relationships of the JWs with governments in countries that are frequently referred to as *western liberal democracies*. These countries have several common characteristics, such as democratic regimes and Christian majority (at least historically). Besides, many of them are members of various supra-national organizations, such as the Council of Europe and the EU, which imposes a certain legal framework on the governments' religious policies. Importantly, all these states declare their adherence to religious freedom, yet, today, only Canada and Estonia are generally considered to implement neutral policies towards religious minorities, including JWs (Fox 2020; Marshall 2009). Simultaneously, the overall level of religious discrimination in all of

these countries has risen between 1990 and 2014 (Fox 2020:137), although discrimination against other minorities has declined.

Conscientious Objection

Although freedom of religion has been considered an essential right in these countries, their treatment of JWs has been far from unproblematic. It was very noticeable during the periods of intense military confrontations, such as the World Wars and other more local conflicts during the Cold War. During WWII, the JWs were persecuted and outlawed on both sides of the front line (Dericquebourg 1978:439–43). In May 1940, the Government of Finland dissolved the local JW community as a legal entity based on the accusation that "the religious group's activities weaken state defense, disrupt good order and violate the regulations in the Criminal Code" (Møller 2018:112). The Canadian authorities followed Finland's suit and outlawed JWs in July 1940 when "the deferral cabinet passed an order making it a crime to meet and worship as a Jehovah's Witness" (Kaplan 1990:69). In Canada, the legal ban was followed by imprisonment of JWs for willful disobedience of military orders (Socknat 1981:157). The same year, British authorities started to imprison JWs on the charges of "using 'this organisation' as a cover for their fifth-column work against the war effort" (Besier 2018:193). Besides, the British JWs faced limitations on the importation of WTBTS's literature from the U.S.; their publications and even speeches were regularly censured and prohibited.

During the period between 1940 and 1945, in the U.S., 3,992 JWs were imprisoned for violating the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 (Elliff 1945:811). The number of convicted JWs accounted for 75% of all verdicts related to religious or conscientious objection. In their objection to military service, JWs were separated in a special category of objectors, because their

claims were religious in nature, but not pacifist.[127] In courts and hearings of the Selective Service boards, JWs argued that they should be exempt from both military and civilian services on the grounds that they are all ministers of religion (Tietz 1954:130). The boards of the selective service had to decide whether each individual JW applicant fit into the range of criteria of a regular minister.[128] Based on the number of convictions of JWs, the boards and courts did not accept the reasoning of the JWs that "witnessing" and "publishing" are ministerial work.

In most of these countries, JWs were able to recommence their legal presence upon the end of WWII, albeit with some restrictions. For example, they were able to obtain state registration in France on September 1st 1947, yet the distribution of the Watchtower magazine remained illegal until 1975 (Dericquebourg 2016:68–69). Although the harshest prohibitions and persecutions were discontinued after the Second World War, the issue of conscientious objection continued to be a source of serious friction between the WTBTS and many western governments. During the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, the French government continued forcing JWs to comply with conscription laws. During the Algerian War (1954-1962), JWs conscientious objectors faced imprisonment on charges of inciting people to avoid military service, and their magazine "La Tour de Garde" ("*the Watchtower*") was prohibited (Dericquebourg 2016:68).[129] Simultaneously, the

[127] The explanation of the nature of this class of objectors was as follows, "The Jehovah's Witness objects to all man-made wars and Governments, but says he is not a conscientious objector to all wars, since he would fight and kill in defense of Theocracy, his property and his brethren" (Selective Service System 1950:3). In one of the letters to the Department of Justice, a JW wrote that they are "not pacifists, even as God and Christ are not pacifist" (as quoted in Elliff 1944:811).

[128] In 1941, the Director of Selective Service stated, "whether or not they stand in the same relationship as regular or duly ordained ministers in other religions must be determined in each individual case by the local board, based upon whether or not they devote their lives in the furtherance of the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, whether or not they perform functions which are normally performed by regular or duly ordained ministers of other religions, and finally, whether or not they are regarded by other Jehovah's Witnesses in the same manner in which regular or duly ordained ministers of other religions are ordinarily regarded" (as quoted in Elliff 1945:818–19).

[129] Simultaneously, in the U.S., the situation regarding JWs' status as ministers of religion changed to their benefit. Between 1945 and 1954, most courts sided with JWs on this issue (Tietz 1954).

authorities offered alternative military service to the JW conscientious objectors. However, JWs rejected this offer because the law implied that the unarmed service was to be conducted under the auspices of military personnel. In 1993, only a few years before universal conscription in France was abolished altogether, the institute of alternative service in France was withdrawn from under the supervision of army personnel, which allowed the JWs to benefit from this system of alternative military service. Among western democracies, France did not stand out with regard to its persecutions of JWs on the grounds of their refusal to serve in the army, especially during active armed conflicts. At different periods, the United States, Italy, Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia also practiced imprisonment of the JWs for violating conscriptions laws and for rejecting alternative military service directed by military personnel (Beckford 1975b:37; Introvigne 2016).

Only by the end of the 1990s did JWs in western liberal democracies obtain the right to choose alternative military service directed by non-military personnel and secure their right to public proselytism. The issue with conscientious objection was settled for two reasons. First, JWs litigated against the governments and won important lawsuits. The second reason was related to the general shift away from the system of universal compulsory military conscription in the west. Ever since many NATO members de-jure and/or de-facto have been relying on a system of enlistment by contract, which gave conscientious objectors an opportunity to opt out of military service.

Importantly, many countries, regardless of the political regime, have imposed restrictions on JWs because of their pacifist orientation. Usually, politicians and scholars argue that discrimination against the JWs is a direct consequence of JWs' refusal to serve in the armed forces (Bergman 1996b:87; Ferrari 2020; Jubber 1977; Knox 2018a; Lawson 1995:24; Luca 2004:66; McAninch 1986:1007; Perica 2002:15; Sprague 1946; Tietz 1954), which weakens the military power of a country. Yet, the absolutely negligible number of JW conscientious objectors objectively cannot

seriously weaken military forces and, therefore, cannot account for the harsh treatment of JWs. For example, in 1939, the Finish authorities organized a training of the reservists that was rejected by eleven pacifists, nine of whom were JWs. Notwithstanding the insignificant number of JW conscientious objectors, their religious organization was banned in less than a year (Møller 2018:117). The Finnish case suggests that intolerance towards JW conscientious objectors was not informed strictly by military and security considerations. The insignificant number of those who refused to serve in the army and the fact that conscientious objection never turned into a wider trend render this explanation insufficient. According to a special report of the U.S. Government on conscientious objection:

> In terms of numbers, the problem of the conscientious objector in World War II was extremely small. Statistically, therefore, the Selective Service policy toward conscientious objectors had a minor relationship to the overall problem of military manpower procurement. Nor were conscientious objectors numerically important in any age group. The consideration given them did not affect the successful filling of induction calls for the armed forces except in a few counties in the United States where registrants of the so-called peace groups were heavily concentrated and their deferment left an insufficient number of men. In spite of this, no State encountered serious difficulty in meeting its calls on account of the System's conscientious objection approach. Selective Service System 1950:4

Although the U.S. authorities recognized the minor harm of conscientious objection for the draft system, they continued to impose strict control over conscientious objectors.

Conscientious objection as a reason for the maltreatment of JWs does not explain yet another crucial aspect, namely why JWs were often prosecuted more harshly than other categories of pacifists. James Beckford (1975b:34) and Joseph Zygmunt (1977:47) argue that JWs underwent especially harsh treatment for avoiding military conscription compared to other categories of

conscientious objectors.[130] Describing the situation in Britain during WWII, Marley Cole pointed out that "of all conscientious objectors registered, Jehovah's Witnesses represented less than three per cent, but the newspaper reports, often long and mostly unfriendly, created the impression that there were very few conscientious objectors besides Jehovah's Witnesses. In some instances entire front pages of newspapers, supplemented with caustic editorials, were devoted to single and exceptional cases" (1974:16; also, see Knox 2018a:130; Piccioli and Wörnhard 2016:46). This especially negative attitude towards JW conscientious objectors indicates that military concerns were not the sole cause of the negative attitude towards JWs but were yet another factor that contributed to the already existing prejudice against them. Besides, during WWII, they did not claim to be pacifists, but pledged their loyalty to a different kind of war. This stance coupled with their challenge to the existing system of religious tenets (e.g. how religious ministry is defined) brought into question the fundamental principles of legitimacy of and loyalty to the state followed by the wider society, which effectively moved JWs' arguments into the ideological dimension. Similar doubts about the compatibility of JWs' teaching with loyalty to the nation and state had instigated persecutions of and violence against JWs in various western countries due to JWs' refusal to salute the flag or recite the pledge of allegiance.

Saluting the Flag

If conscientious objection has been a part of the WTBTS doctrine since the early days of Charles Russell's presidency, the rejection of saluting the flag and other national symbols was introduced later. During his presidency, Joseph Rutherford consistently emphasized the primacy of the WTBTS over secular governments and organizations. In 1925, WTBTS followers were told that

[130] Nathan Ellif (1945) has an opposite view. He argued that "the claims of exemption as ministers by Jehovah's Witnesses apparently have been tested no more strictly than the claims originating from members of other religious groups"(817).

in case there is a conflict between WTBTS teaching and earthly governments, they were to comply with the WTBTS rules (Bergman 1999). Later, this general stance was implemented in a ruling that JWs cannot salute the national flag. In 1935, in his radio speech, the President of the WTBTS Joseph Rutherford declared that he would not salute the flag of the United States because it breaks the covenant with God (Rutherford 1936). The Year Book of Jehovah's Witnesses for 1936 said:

> The saluting of or salutation to a flag means this: 'I depend upon what that flag represents for my salvation.' Those who love and serve God in spirit and in truth look to Jehovah God for salvation, and not to any man or any man-made organization. It therefore follows that the saluting of any flag by those who are in a covenant with Jehovah God to do his will constitutes the breaking of that covenant with God, and such covenant-breakers are guilty of death. (WTBTS 1936b:22)

This speech and the position regarding the flag salutation reflected a more general transformation that had been taking place within the WTBTS during the first half of the 1930s. The collective identity of the JWs has been transforming and shifting towards a more dramatic opposition vis-à-vis the world and a more militant definition of their earthly mission (Zygmunt 1977). The rejection of this world and its values constitutes the core message of the JWs public ministry, magazines, and radio broadcastings.

Following these recommendations of the Governing Body not to salute the national flag, young JWs, William and Lillian Gobitas, refused to pay homage to the flag in their local school and, therefore, were expelled. Although the WTBTS tried to dispute the expulsion, in 1940 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of the school, which upheld the expulsion and allowed school authorities throughout the country to expel students on the grounds of their refusal to salute the U.S. flag (Manwaring 1962). In an 8-1 ruling, Justice Felix Frankfurter noted that "[n]ational unity is the basis of national security" (as quoted in Knox 2018:69). He also remarked that:

> …The ultimate foundation of a free society is the binding tie of cohesive sentiment. Such sentiment is fostered by all those agencies of the mind and spirit which may serve

> to gather up the tradition of a people… The flag is the symbol of our national unity, transcending all internal differences… (as quoted in Manwaring 1962:139)

This decision was made at the background of substantial societal intolerance towards those who refused to salute the flag (McAninch 1986). It was not uncommon in the U.S. to argue that persons who refused to pledge allegiance to the flag should be forced out of the country (Bergman 1997). Both in the court decision and in popular sentiment, the flag salutation was equated with loyalty to the nation and, importantly, commitment to national security. Even though, at the time when the decision was made, the U.S. remained neutral, the Second World War was going at full speed in Europe made national security one of the most pressing issues, which undoubtedly influenced the society in general and the judges in particular.[131]

Nevertheless, this decision of the Supreme Court was soon reversed. Although the war against the Axis Powers was at its peak, in 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the forceable flag salutation was a violation of the right of free exercise of religion secured by the First Amendment. Although the WTBTS had the upper hand in this confrontation with the U.S. school and court systems, this situation exacerbated the negative perception of JWs in the U.S. (Chryssides 2021:25). Following this decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, many other countries ruled in favor of the WTBTS in cases about flag salutation, such as Canada (1945), Argentina (1984), India (1986), and Mexico (1999) (Martínez-Torrón 2000).

Some scholars argued that it was JWs' anti-patriotic stance against saluting national symbols that triggered intolerance and violence against them (Bergman 1997:1001; Chryssides 2021:30; Cole 1974; Knox 2019:IV; Lawson 1995; Melton 2021:144; Peters 2000; Yonan 1999; Zygmunt 1977). At

[131] In their turn, the JWs were intransigent with regard to the flag salutation in order to be consistent in their policies worldwide (Reynaud and Graffard 2001b). A few years earlier, they refused to demonstrate respect to Nazi national symbols, such as the swastika or Hitler's portraits, and to celebrate Nazi national holidays. Jerry Bergman argues that the WTBTS was concerned with consistency in applying religious principles and, therefore, could not compromise its position with regard to the salutation to the U.S. flag (1997:230).

the same time, this particular stance attracted public attention only in specific socio-political circumstances. First, this practice became problematic only in countries where the flag and anthem salutation was mandatory for all school students. In other words, where states sought to impose unity and cohesion upon the members of society, JWs' refusal to salute the national emblems was regarded as anti-social and anti-state. Second, exogenous factors, such as war, made the state and society vulnerable and sensitive to any manifestation of dissent. In this case, the JWs' position was viewed as a security threat.

Legal Status and Tax Exemption

In several cases, European governments avoid direct encroachments on the rights of JWs but use administrative resources to put pressure on the WTBTS. For example, in 1998, based on the tax audit of the Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, the French tax authorities assessed a 60% tax on all donations and demanded that the JWs' Association pay over 50 million U.S. dollars in taxes, including penalties and interest (Dericquebourg 2016:69–70; Country Reports on Human Rights Practice 1999:1257). According to the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (Report by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights: France 1999):

> 'Unpopular' minority religions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, have been singled out for close scrutiny. Their fiscal management has been examined with an intensity that suggests harassment. For the first time, the 1992 tax law on 'hand donations' has been applied to religious groups and association, enforcing a 60-percent tax on 'hand donations' made by more than 200,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the last four years.

Effectively, by demanding the 60% tax on donations, the French authorities called into question the status of the French branch of the WTBTS as a religious organization. In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favor of the French Association of Jehovah's Witnesses and recognized the supplementary tax demand as an infringement of religious freedom.

Similar attempts to dispute JWs' legal status as a religious organization had taken place in

other European countries. For example, in the 1950s, the Ministry of Commerce of Denmark ruled that the JWs needed to obtain a commercial license in order to distribute books and magazines (Cosmus 2018:52–54).[132] Equating the WTBTS with a commercial organization and applying corresponding rules to its operation required that literature be distributed only during legal business hours, which greatly hindered JWs' preaching activities. Later, based on the audit of the JWs' account, the fiscal authorities revealed that their income from literature sales exceeded their expenses and the WTBTS "must therefore be considered as operating with a view to obtaining an economic profit" (Eastern High Court's Decision of 24 September, 1954 as quoted in Cosmus 2018:53).[133]

In both French and Danish cases, the authorities used administrative mechanisms and existing legislation to challenge the status of the WTBTS as a religious entity.[134] However, in the Danish case, the unfavorable decisions of state agencies and lawsuits against the JWs were the result of individuals' actions. The series of disputes between the WTBTS and the Ministry of Commerce was instigated by disgruntled excommunicated JWs. There seems to have been no intentionality on behalf of the Danish authorities to go after the WTBTS.

However, the French case was very different in this regard. Drawing on the ideology of *laïcité*, the French authorities' actions were coordinated at multiple levels with the involvement of the

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[132] Although today JWs distribute their literature and the Bible for free, until 1993, the books and subscriptions for their magazines were sold as a part of public ministry.

[133] In the U.S., in 1943 case *Murdock vs Pennsylvania*, JWs were charged for breaching the law that required a license for commercial distribution of literature. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the JWs and stated that "this form of religious activity occupies the same high estate under the First Amendment as do worship in the churches and preaching from the pulpits. It has the same claim to protection as the more orthodox and conventional exercises of religious (Brace 2020:43).

[134] In the U.S., there were similar court rulings that treated religious groups as business entities for taxation purposes, however, they have not targeted the WTBTS (Richardson 2004). Besides France and Denmark, other European countries, such as Austria (ECHR 2012) and Italy (Piccioli and Wörnhard 2016:117), attempted to revoke or deny the tax exemption status of the WTBTS.

legislative and executive branches (Beckford 2004). The ideology of *laïcité* in France demands that religion be completely excluded from state institutions. Moreover, it seeks to inculcate non-religious principles of ethics and rationality. This is the most salient aspect of the ideology of *laïcité* as it "represents a pervasive alternative to religion that is at the heart of state schools, local authorities, regional administration, the Civil Service, and national politics" (Beckford 2004:32; also, see Bauberot 1998; Dericquebourg 2019:74).[135] Therefore, the legal and administrative mistreatments of JWs can be regarded as a result of their incompatibility with the ideological foundation of the French socio-political system. Beckford aptly describes how *laïcité* informs the actions of French authorities towards new religious movements and JWs in particular:

> French suspicion of 'cults' rests mainly on the fear that they might divert citizens away from rational ways of thinking and, consequently, *from loyalty to the Republic* [*emphasis is mine* – A.T.]. Thus, although anti-cultists in France have borrowed some of the American ideas associated with 'brainwashing,' they align these ideas with a distinctively French preoccupation with social solidarity founded on individual freethinking. Their concern is not only with the psychological manipulation and exploitation of cultists but also, and more importantly, with the allegedly harmful effects of cultic excesses ('les dérives sectaires) on the social and political fabric of the Republic. (Beckford 2004:34)

France's focus on social solidarity and unity collides with the ideology of the JWs that does not value and even straightforwardly refutes the significance of the nation and the Republic.

JWs and the European Anti-Cult Movement

Although the JWs have been able to attain legal recognition in democratic countries during periods of peace, some governments have indirectly questioned the JWs' status as a religious organization trying to reduce them to the level of a "cult." For example, after the "anti-cult" turn in

[135] The reaction to other religious movements in France makes this preoccupation of the state and society even more well-articulated. Chrystal Vanel (2013) notes that "most French people showed only indifference to the building of a Mormon temple in a Paris suburb. No national newspaper headlines were devoted to the project, and French television did not report much on it" (143). Since Mormons do not challenge the legitimacy of state principles and do not directly insist on supremacy of their religious principles over those of the state, they are not viewed as a serious danger to the French Republic.

French religious policies in the 1980s, the authorities adopted a more intolerant stance towards religious groups that were labeled as "destructive cults" (Dericquebourg 2019:72–73; Luca 2004). This shift coincided with the popularity of brainwashing theories that warned against various (pseudo)-religious cults that entrap new members through a series of sophisticated psychological techniques that take advantage of human weaknesses (Clark 1979; Delgado 1977; Singer 1979; Singer and Ofshe 1990; for the overview of the brainwashing theories, see Robbins and Anthony 1982a; for the critic of the brainwashing theories, see Richardson 2007). Buttressed by the brainwashing theories, the anti-cult shift resulted in a series of governmental policies and actions that sought to thwart the growth of religious communities like the JWs in France. In 1998, the French Government created an official government agency with the telling title – *the Inter Ministerial Mission of Resistance to Cults*[136] (Fr. "Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre les Sectes") that was transformed into *the Mission of Vigilance and Fight Against Cult Abuses* (Fr. "Mission de Vigilance et de Lutte contre les Dérives Sectaires") in 2002 (Dericquebourg 2015). According to most scholars and officials, this rapid anti-cult shift was a reaction of the government to cases of collective suicides in certain religious groups, such as the Order of the Solar Temple (CESNUR: Center for Studies on New Religions 2001; Fox 2020). The popularity of these "brainwashing" theories in academia and political discourse (Richardson 1991) further increased the suspicion and animosity towards non-traditional religious groups, including JWs.

As a part of the anti-cult campaign, the National Assembly of France commissioned an investigation into the situation with cults in the country. In 1995, a special parliamentary board generated a report on 173 dangerous destructive cults (Guyard 1995). The authors of the report

[136] The French word "sect" is closer in meaning to the English "cult." While in English the word "sect" does not bear negative connotation, its French equivalent is very negatively charged. The same distinction is true for German "Sekt," Russian "секта," and Armenian "աղանդ."

urged the obstruction of the growth and deleterious influence of the cults in France and advised that the strict principle of the separation between state and religion "be completed by a more positive approach that will bestow the state with the care to assure everyone's free exercise of the religion that he chooses" (Guyard 1995). This report drew a particularly frightening, if unrealistic picture of the rapid expansion of the WTBTS in France. Although the report did not have legal power and could not be enforced by law, the publication of the report contributed to the overall atmosphere of suspicion towards religious minorities in France.[137] According to reports of religious groups, their members faced increased intolerance after having been placed on the list (Country Reports on Human Rights Practice 1999:1256). In 1996 and 1997, following France, the Belgian Parliament generated a similar 660-page report that contained a list of dangerous religious groups, including the JWs. In 1998, Belgium established the Information and Advisory Center for Surveillance over Harmful Sectarian Organizations (Fautre 2004).

During the same period, the German Bundestag established an Inquiry Commission on "so-called Sects and Psychogroups" that worked between 1996 and 1998. As in the case of France, the German Commission was concerned about abuse, neglect, brainwashing, and illegal enrichment purportedly practiced by the destructive cults, such as the JWs (Besier and Besier 2001; Seiwert 1999, 2003, 2004). Effectively, in these cases the status of JWs was indirectly lowered compared to other religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church or Lutheran Church, as they were treated as a dangerous group.

[137] The construction of new Kingdom Halls was one of the areas heavily affected by the report. Heads of local administrations who issued construction permits were harshly castigated by the anti-JWs activists and general public. "To avoid this criticism, they then tried to withhold the permits" (Dericquebourg 2016:66). So, public discontent directly affected the decisions made on behalf of the politicians and public officials, although it never took the form of official legislation.

Child Sex Abuse

During the last decade, besides labeling JWs as a destructive cult, several western democratic countries have initiated investigations into the WTBTS's compliance with requirements to report allegations of child sexual abuse to secular authorities. In 2016, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia investigated 1,006 cases of alleged child sexual abuse that had been reported to the JWs starting from 1950 (The Response of the Jehovah's Witnesses ... to Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse 2016). Of the 1,006 alleged cases and about 1,800 alleged victims of sexual abuse, the Royal Commission directly interrogated two survivors of child sexual abuse that had taken place in 1989 and 1992. These two victims had left the WTBTS by the time of the investigation, while most other alleged victims, who still were active publishers, were reluctant to cooperate with the Royal Commission.

In the final report, the Royal Commission recognized that the Watchtower Bible Tract Society of Australia failed to report cases of child sexual abuse to the police and instead preferred to manage these allegations internally. Although 383 alleged perpetrators were dealt with by the police, the Royal Commission established that those cases became known to the police through channels other than the JWs' Organization. In other words, it was concluded that the WTBTS covered up cases of sexual misconduct when it was possible.[138]

[138] Several scholars criticized the report of the Royal Commission on several grounds (Folk 2020; Introvigne and Amicarelli 2020). First, they argue that the investigation's methodology was flawed because the Royal Commission's focus on the 'institutional response' did not allow for a clear distinction between one's membership in an institution and his or her private life. Most incidents that were reported to the JWs' elders were cases of incest, molestation, and other sexual misconduct that took place between family members. As the absolute majority of 1,006 reported cases rarely concerned improprieties within institutional settings, Holy Folk criticized this conflation of institutional abuse and family abuse as unwarranted (Folk 2020; Introvigne et al. 2020). However, in light of the Royal Commission's preoccupation with the issue of reporting cases of child sexual abuse to the police this criticism loses its thrust, because the Royal Commission did not intend to establish whether the JWs' Organization induces child sexual abuse. Besides, within the JWs' community the institutional rules and regulations spread far beyond purely institutional settings. These institutional regulations provide members with guidance for private and family lives, which renders the distinction between institutional and familial settings minuscule. Although the internal rules of the WTBTS directly claim that "the congregation's handling of an accusation of child sexual abuse is not intended to replace the secular authority's handling

The Australian inquiry into institutional responses to child sexual abuse and related matters embraced not only JWs, but other religious organizations as well, including youth detention centers, out-of-home care centers, and sports clubs. In other words, the investigation was not initiated and designed to target JWs specifically but was a reflection of a larger public preoccupation with the child sexual abuse within various institutional settings. Despite the criticism of some scholars, the final report of the Royal Commission does not seem tendentious and biased. Even the media that often tends to overdramatize news about JWs noted that the Royal Commission found JWs' policies regarding child sexual abuse "outdated" (Sydney Herald) and "not child or survivor focused" (Washington Post), which can hardly be called sensationalist and scandalous.

Although the investigations of child sexual abuse within the WTBTS in Belgium and the Netherlands had certain similarities with the Australian inquiry, they differed from the Australian report in several crucial aspects. First, the Belgian investigation was initiated by the aforementioned Information and Advisory Center for Surveillance over Harmful Sectarian Organizations (Fr. Centre d'Information et d'Avis sur les Organisations Sectaires Nuisibles, *or* CIAOSN) that seeks to limit the influence of religious organizations that are deemed unwanted and deleterious. In other words, in Australia, the investigation targeted child sexual abuse practices in various religious and secular institutions, while in Belgium, the investigation was a part of the anti-cult campaign that aimed to expose the alleged negative effect that JWs have on society (Introvigne and Amicarelli 2020; Jadin and Jirofleé 2018).

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of the matter" (Shepherd the Flock of God 2020:14:4), they do not unambiguously require that the elders report abuse cases to the authorities. Therefore, the Royal Commission's statement that the WTBTS of Australia failed to report cases of child sexual abuse to the authorities does not seem contingent upon this methodological conflation. The second objection against the report concerned the retrospective application of the legal requirement for religious organizations to report cases of sexual abuse to the police. According to Folk, today's rules and expectations should not be applied to cases in the past.

In addition, the Belgian investigation was initiated and advocated for by ex-members of the JWs' community who had grievances against the WTBTS and tried to present it in a radically negative light. Third, unlike the Royal Commission, the CIAOSN did not interrogate survivors of the child sexual abuse and did not have access to any documents regarding the alleged and confirmed cases. The 36-page final report summarizes the conclusions of similar investigations that had taken place in other countries, including Australia. The two-page evaluation of the WTBTS's policies regarding child sexual abuse in Belgium draws almost exclusively on cases previously publicized by Belgian media. Only the last paragraph alludes to "multiple testimonies, direct and indirect, of persons who had been subject to sexual violence within the Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium including children" (Jadin and Jirofleé 2018:22). Based on the available evidence, the CIAOSN members concluded that "the extent of the problem of treatment of sexual abuse of minors can be explained by the vertical and uniform internal functioning of the Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses" (Jadin and Jirofleé 2018:18).

A similar investigation in the Netherlands was commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice and Safety and relied on two types of data. First, the authors of the report received 751 allegations of child sexual abuse among JWs through an open Internet survey. Later, the investigators interviewed six current members and four former members of the JWs' community of the Netherlands (Folk, Introvigne, and Melton 2020). In the conclusion, the report recommends that the WTBTS amend its approach to reporting child sexual abuse cases to secular authorities.

Besides the aforementioned countries, similar investigations were conducted in Spain, Switzerland, and other European countries. While investigations in Australia, Belgium, and the Netherlands were commissioned by the authorities, in Switzerland, Spain, Finland, and many other

countries the inquiries were directed by advocacy groups. The common trait that unites these inquiries (with the notable exception of the Australian Royal Commission) is the suspicious and often openly hostile attitude towards the WTBTS on behalf of the experts and activists conducting the investigations.

Disfellowshipment and Shunning

Besides the accusations of avoiding military service and engaging in brainwashing practices, the WTBTS was charged with violating human rights of its disfellowshipped members who are subjected to ostracism and shunning on behalf of their former coreligionists. This issue stems from the demand of the WTBTS that the remaining members of the JWs' community cut all social ties with an excommunicated person. For example, answering the question "*How should we treat a disfellowshipped person?*", the official website of the WTBTS says (WTBTS 2014a):

> 'Stop keeping company with anyone called a brother who is sexually immoral or a greedy person or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner, not even eating with such a man.' (1 Corinthians 5:11) Regarding everyone who "does not remain in the teaching of the Christ," we read: 'Do not receive him into your homes or say a greeting to him. For the one who says a greeting to him is a sharer in his wicked works.' (2 John 9-11) We do not have spiritual or social fellowship with disfellowshipped ones.

The practices of shunning have been a reason for multiple lawsuits against JWs. In the 1987, after being disfellowshipped from a JW congregation in the U.S., Janice Paul brought a lawsuit against the Governing Body of the WTBTS because she had been shunned on many occasions by her former co-religionists and friends (Paul vs. Watchtower Bible Tract Society of New York 1987; Introvigne 2021a; Ptasiewicz 1988). The Court ruled that:

> imposing tort liability for shunning on the Church or its members would in the long run have the same effect as prohibiting the practice and would compel the Church to abandon part of its religious teaching […] Shunning is a practice engaged in by Jehovah's Witnesses pursuant to their interpretation of canonical text, and we are not free to reinterpret that text. (Paul v. Watchtower Bible Tract Society of New York 1987)

Similar cases took place in Italy (2007), Germany (2010), Canada (2018), and the Great Britain (2020) (Introvigne 2021a), and in all cases the verdict of the 1987 lawsuit in the U.S was upheld.

However, the situation changed in March 2021, when the court of the Belgian city of Ghent found the local community of JWs guilty of inciting hatred and discriminating against former members. Importantly, the court reversed the logic that underlaid the aforementioned lawsuits regarding the practices of shunning. According to the Belgian court, a religious group's theology cannot be an excuse for an encroachment on human rights (Fautre 2021). Therefore, the court qualified the principles of supremacy of human rights that are emphasized in the Belgian political and ideological discourses as more important than the right of the free exercise of religion.[139]

The media have used cases of shunning to portray the practices of JWs in a negative light. There are quite a few publications about the JWs' practice of cutting ties with disfellowshipped members (Baldas 2018; Morgan 2019; Peron 2020; Salo 2018; Soriano 2017), although none of them addresses it from a position of neutrality. They usually emphasize the hardship related to leaving the JWs' community and possible psychological damage caused by ostracism, which leads to attempts to murder family members or commit suicide (Baldas 2018; Salo 2018). In general, these media reports reflect and further contribute to the overall attitude towards JWs that regards one's membership in the WTBTS as potentially dangerous.

Blood Transfusion Controversy and Parental Custody Disputes

One of the most controversial issues related to JWs is the WTBTS's ban on blood

[139] Many scholars and advocates of religious freedom expressed their concern about the Ghent case because it may set a precedent for ruling against JWs' right to practice shunning of excommunicated members (Fautre 2021; Introvigne 2021b; Richardson 2021). These possible changes in judicial interpretation of religious freedom and practices of shunning can potentially result in new restrictions on JWs' activities.

transfusion. Since the 1940s, when this stance was first clearly articulate in the literature,[140] JWs' refusal to accept blood transfusion instigated multiple court cases and anti-JWs campaigns. The blood transfusion controversy includes several contentious points, namely one's right to religious freedom vs. one's right to life and the right of parents to reject blood transfusion for their children, which leads to questioning the unreliability and untrustworthiness of JWs as custodians. Importantly, in western countries, JWs' position regarding blood transfusion has generally been considered through the lens of protection of individual rights.

Court decisions indicate that although the right to religious freedom is enshrined in the legislation of most democratic countries, it has often been overruled by courts as of lesser importance compared to the right to life, especially, but not exclusively, when the patients were underage. For example, in Melbourne, Australia, Stephen Jehu, a child of JWs, died after his parents refused to permit blood transfusion (Chesterman 1965; How 1961:68). After the parents were convicted of manslaughter, almost every Australian state passed a statute that granted medical personnel a right to administer blood transfusion to minors in cases when parents objected to this procedure. The legislation has not been amended since, and until now the courts regularly force underage patients to receive blood transfusion in cases when their lives are in danger (The Guardian 2018).

Similarly, in the 1980s, the Italian court convicted JWs Giuseppe and Consiglia Oneda of premeditated murder because their daughter who had died of a blood disorder did not receive the prescribed blood transfusion (Piccioli and Wörnhard 2016:108–10). This verdict engendered public

[140] Zoe Knox (2018a:V) provides a detailed description of the scriptural basis and history of the blood transfusion doctrine developed by the WTBTS. Also, she describes the massive effort on behalf of the WTBTS to educate the general public and medical personnel on the benefits of the rejection of blood transfusion and addresses the response of the medical community. In addition, Knox analyzes the effect of this doctrine on the internal cohesion of JWs' community.

animosity towards the Onedas and the entire JW community. However, the debates around this case paved the way towards wide acceptance of the principle of "informed consent" not only in Italy, but in the EU, in general. In the 1990s, the members of the EU made several steps towards securing the rights of patients to decide whether blood transfusion is acceptable for them.[141]

Nevertheless, the Italian courts continued limiting parents' authority in cases when minors' lives were in danger (Conti et al. 2018). A similar approach was adopted by other countries, such as Belgium (Deneyer et al. 2011), France, Canada (Supreme Court of Canada 2009), and the United States (Anderson 1983; Moore 1982). Simultaneously, in other countries, such as Denmark (Cosmus 2018:55–56), the Netherlands (Deneyer et al. 2011), and the UK (Garraud 2014), the patients are allowed to refuse blood transfusion even if they are underage (Chaytor 2010). In the United States, the legal practices regarding blood transfusions have undergone a transformation since the 1940s. In the past, the courts used to force adult JWs to receive blood transfusion on a number of occasions (Moore 1982), yet more recently, the courts have sided with patients even if underage and in a high risk of death (Burbank 2007).

In general, JWs' refusal to accept blood transfusions has been one of their most contentious practices that caused numerous court cases and interventions on behalf of authorities in western countries. Regularly, as in the aforementioned case of the Oneda family in Italy, a child's death launches media and anti-cult campaigns against JWs. The cases of JW parents refusing to consent their children receiving blood transfusions are regularly covered by newspapers and TV, which contributes to the overall negative attitude towards JWs.

In several cases, JWs' stance on blood transfusion has been used against them in cases when

[141] The 1994 Amsterdam Declaration and the 1997 Oveido Declaration endorsed the patients' rights to accept or refuse medical treatment and vaccination.

custody rights were at stake. In the 1970-80s, in Denmark, local authorities denied several JW couples an opportunity to adopt (Cosmus 2018:66–70). The case officers emphasized that the decision was made because children would be exposed to danger since JW couples would refuse blood treatment in cases of medical necessity.[142] The National Adoption Board of Denmark stated that adoptees' well-being was dubious as JW parents had "a markedly deviant attitude to life as compared to the surrounding community" (as quoted in Cosmus 2018:69).

In several western European countries, the governmental and social disapprobation of the JWs has manifested itself in court custody cases that decided which of two parents would retain guardianship over underage children after separation. In cases when one of the parents was a JW, courts' rulings were premised upon the idea that membership in the WTBTS is deleterious and dangerous for one's well-being. Therefore, with all other things being equal, courts granted parental rights to a non-JW parent in order to guarantee children's security. For example, when Mrs. Hoffman from Austria became a JW, she left her husband and took their two children. While her husband's appeals in two lower courts were declined, the Supreme Court of Austria overturned the decisions of the lower courts and granted the parental rights to the father (*Hoffman vs Austria* 1993). While the lower courts also admitted the potential negative consequences of the JW teaching for children's upbringing, they found this argument insufficient for denying Mrs. Hoffman's parental rights. The Supreme Court of Austria claimed that:

> …the lower courts also failed in their decisions to give due consideration to the children's welfare [...] That the mother, as has been established, would refuse to consent to the children's receiving a necessary blood transfusion constitutes a danger to their well-being, since requesting a court to substitute its consent for that of the mother [...] may in urgent cases involve a life-threatening delay and medical intervention without

[142] Refusal to celebrate Christmas and birthdays was also mentioned as potential harm to children's psychological well-being.

> seeking the approval of the person entitled to take care of the child is considered contrary to the law [...] It has also been established that if the children are educated according to the religious teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses, they will become social outcasts. In the initial decision as to which of the spouses is to have the right to provide care and upbringing, these circumstances cannot be ignored. (As quoted in Case of Hoffmann v. Austria 1993)

Importantly, the Supreme Court considered Mrs. Hoffman, her husband, and their children's previous affiliation with the Catholic Church a sufficient reason to keep the children with the father, who had not changed his religious association. Apart from that, the JWs did not have official registration in Austria until 1998, which allowed the Supreme Court to officially equate it with a sect or cult, which automatically lowered its status compared to that of the established religious communities, such as the Catholic Church.[143]

Overall, the consistent discrimination against the JWs in western democracies "undermines assumptions that the West is secular and maintains religious freedom" (Fox 2020:204). The persecutions against pacifist groups and conscientious objectors, such as JWs, soared during military conflicts. During these periods, the JWs were regarded as saboteurs weakening the countries' unity and solidarity. During periods of peace, conscientious objection frequently continued being qualified as insubordination, which resulted in imprisonment of JW recruits. Parallel to defending their right for conscientious objection, JWs have been struggling to obtain legal status allowing them to enjoy the same rights as other more established religious groups in various spheres, such as education, taxation, and employment regulation, among other things.

There are several general factors that seem to influence governmental policies towards the

[143] According to the Court's opinion: "Since in any case the children do not belong to the faith of the Jehovah's Witnesses, their education according to the principles of this sect (which is not, as the appellant rightly points out, a recognised religious community) […] contravenes Article 2, paragraph 2, of the 1921 Act" (as quoted in Case of Hoffmann v. Austria 1993). The example of Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries demonstrates, governments frequently deprive the WTBTS of an official registration and then, use the illegal or semi-illegal status of the organization as a substantiation for the discriminatory treatment.

WTBTS in democratic countries. The first factor concerns the presence of a dominant religious institution that is generally perceived as a part of the historical legacy of the country. The preferential treatment of traditional religious organizations is obvious in Austria and Italy's prioritizing the Catholic Church over the JWs in cases related to parental rights and taxation status. The advantageous position of traditional religious organizations is evident in France, Germany, and Belgium's double-tier system of categorization of religious groups, where "cults" are seen as inferior.[144] Besides, this system results in a discriminatory state financing of religion, so that certain religious groups receive state financial support and others do not. Nevertheless, the relationships between the dominant religious organizations and the state do not define governmental policies towards the JWs as none of the traditional democratic states has a clearly articulated ideology of religious nationalism demanding that religious and national boundaries overlap.

The second factor is related to a country's security and possible precarious international position. As the cases above show, during wars, the pressure on JWs on the part of democratic governments significantly increased. Mostly tolerated during periods of peace, conscientious objection was viewed as a serious threat to countries' security and, therefore, was generally suppressed. The exception was the U.S., where the Supreme Court ruled in favor of conscientious objectors in 1943 – at the peak of WWII. In addition, in the countries with a well-articulated state ideology, such as France with the ideology of *laïcité*, the JWs are frequently perceived as a security threat to the state and society as a whole.

In general, the presence of JWs has been subject to *securitization* in western liberal

[144] In general, at the everyday level, this system of distinguishing between acceptable churches and sects or cults seems to exist in nearly all countries where the majority traditionally belonged to one religious institution. However, in most cases, it is restricted to the popular discourse, while the state does not necessarily recreate it at the administrative level (for example, in case of Mexico, see Navarro 1994:25).

democracies. In several contexts, the JWs were deemed a security issue for a country and/or society. Anti-cult initiatives in France and Germany and, importantly, the Parliamentary reports about the alleged dangers of the cults drew on the assumption that JWs are not a religion, but a destructive cult that pursues the goal of destroying the *modus vivendi* of the society. This presumption justified later governmental attempts to weaken the influence of the JWs and prevent their growth. Similarly, immediately before and during WWII, U.S. authorities perceived the JWs' refusal to salute the flag as a threat to national unity and national security, which again substantiated discriminatory decisions of the court and police towards the JWs.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Orthodox Countries

In this subsection, I focus on the relationship between JWs and the governments that align themselves with one religious institution that often positions itself as a representative of an ethnic group. This group often constitutes the majority in a country and is often defined in ethnoreligious terms, while the dominant Church claims to embrace all the members of this group. Here, I address the question of the influence of dominant Churches on the intensity and modality of discrimination against JWs. More specifically, this section focuses on JWs in the states with Christian-Orthodox majorities. First, in most of these countries, the state has developed close alliances with dominant Orthodox Churches (Flora, Szilagyi, and Roudometof 2005). With differing degrees of success, all Orthodox Churches sought to build a closer relationship with the state and demanded an exclusive, privileged position in the religious field of their respective country. Simultaneously, the actual degree of affiliation with Orthodox Churches was consistently low throughout this region immediately after the collapse of the Eastern bloc (Mitrokhin 2004). Low affiliation coupled with the conspicuous proliferation of foreign religious groups and traditions undermined the claims of Orthodox Churches to automatically enlist all members of their corresponding ethnic group.

Second, after WWII, most of these countries fell under the influence of the Soviet system that was dismantled in the 1980s and 1990s. The Soviet legacy and somewhat similar experience of transition to democracy predetermined parallels in the treatment of religious minorities in these countries.[145] Third, in many of these countries, such as former Yugoslavia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, religion has been politicized in the course of political and military conflicts with other ethnoreligious groups.[146] Usually, the opposing sides of these conflicts referred to religious shrines, churches, and other monuments to substantiate the claims that the contentious territory historically belonged to their ethnic groups (Perica 2002:203). This emphasis on the religious component of ethnic identity increased the salience of religion in domestic policies as well. As a result, belonging to a religious tradition/institution has become one of the prominent markers of ethnic and political boundaries. Chronologically, I limit this analysis to the post-Soviet period, because before the collapse of the Communist regimes, the influence of the Churches had been mostly suppressed by the government. And only with the collapse of the Eastern bloc, religious institutions became independent or semi-independent political actors.

Generally, in these countries, JWs have faced many of the same challenges as in western democratic countries, including imprisonment for avoiding military conscription (for Romania, see Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011; for Serbia, see Perica 2002), refusal of the authorities to grant them status as a religious organization (for Georgia, see Awake 2002; for Serbia, see Djenovic 2009; for Romania, see Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011), and refusal of the authorities to grant them tax exemption (Moraru 2019; Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011; Richardson 2017).

[145] As Ethiopia and Greece do not share the Soviet past with other Orthodox-majority countries, I will talk about them only tangentially.

[146] The conflict between Georgia on the one side and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the other, did not have a strong religious component as Orthodoxy is the religion of the majority on all the sides of the conflict.

Simultaneously, there have been a number of issues that JWs do not experience in the west – violent attacks on the JWs (often inspired or carried out by Orthodox clergy), the forceful prohibition of large assemblies of JWs under pressure from the dominant Church, and most importantly, the overall mode of securitization of religious diversity that emphasizes collective religious rights over individual human rights as it is common in the west.

Additionally, relationships between JWs and the state in this region were significantly influenced by pressure from the western governments and supra-national organizations, such as the U.S. Department of State, the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the ECHR. Membership in or aspiration for association with these organizations was contingent upon the compliance of the Eastern European and post-Soviet countries with rules regarding respect for human rights, including religious freedom. As many of the former members of the Soviet bloc joined these international organizations, they had to adjust their legislation and policies according to these requirements.

Religious Liberalization of the 1980-90s

At first, in many of the post-Soviet Orthodox majority states, the relationships between religious minorities, including JWs, and the state authorities developed along a similar volatile trajectory. Immediately after the dismantling of the Soviet system, riding the wave of liberalization and democratic euphoria, many governments allowed religious freedom that was often more flexible and permissive than in the western liberal democracies. In Russia, the first sign of the liberalization of Soviet anti-JWs policies manifested in the official permission given to thousands of JWs to travel to Poland for an international congress of the WTBTS in 1988 and 1989 (Baran 2007). During the 1990s, the WTBTS held a number of large-scale national and international meetings in Eastern European countries. In order to organize these gatherings, JWs rented large sporting facilities,

including Olympic-size pools, to administer *en masse* baptisms (Baran 2007:263). In Ukraine, following the official registration of the JWs' community in 1991, large conventions were organized in Lviv and Odesa. In 1993, the "Divine Teaching" international convention in Kyiv was attended by over 64,000 JWs from over 30 countries (Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses 2002).

Starting in the early 1990s, the WTBTS was recognized as a legal entity in many countries of the Eastern bloc, which effectively stopped or significantly reduced the persecutions of the previous period. During the first several years following liberalization, JWs were able to enjoy freedom to proselytize, organize new congregations, and build Kingdom Halls. The WTBTS obtained legal status in Russia and Ukraine in 1991 (Knox 2019:135; Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses 2002), in Moldova in 1994 (Baran 2011:425), and in Bulgaria[147] in 1998.

In some countries, such as Georgia and Romania, the existing legislation on the religious organizations did not allow to clearly define the status of the JWs until the 2000s (Awake! 2002; Moraru 2019). During the 1990s, Georgia did not promulgate a law on religious organizations, and therefore, JWs' legal status was not clear. In 1998, Georgian JWs registered two legal entities, including the 'Union of Jehovah's Witnesses,' a union of local residents with purely religious goals, and the 'Representation of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, USA, in Georgia' (Ochs 2002:241–42). Yet, these organizations had the legal status of a regular legal entity that had no religious connotations or any special religious rights and privileges. In Romania, JWs were able to obtain official registration in 1990 (Moraru 2019:30–31). Yet the 1949 Law on the General Status of Religion that was enforced until 2006 qualified the WTBTS as a prohibited religious group, which made the legal status of the group unclear.

[147] Bulgarian JWs were denied registration in 1994, on the pretext of their rejection of military service and blood transfusion. The authorities presented the latter practice as a threat to public health (Anderson 2002:19). Following their 1995 appeal to the ECHR, the JWs in Bulgaria received official registration in 1998.

In most cases when JWs had issues with official recognition, they did not encounter much resistance or governmental pressure. During the first decade following the dissolution of the Soviet system, the number of WTBTS's followers in the Orthodox-majority Eastern European countries increased manifold. If by the end of the 1980s, the JWs' community in the entire U.S.S.R. enlisted a little over 25,000 members, at the beginning of the 2000s in Russia alone, the JWs community exceeded 107,000 members (Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses 2001:37). Overall, JWs success in Orthodox countries was very uneven. For example, in 2000, the ratio of publishers to non-JWs in Bulgaria was 1:8,230, while in Russia it was 1:1,379 and in Georgia – 1:386. Despite these differences in success of JWs, Orthodox Churches always urged the authorities to put a check on the growth of this "sect" and viewed JWs as harmful, even in cases like Bulgaria where JWs showed very modest results (Nikolaeva 2009).

The Turn Towards Religious Protectionism

The transition to the market economy and democracy in post-Soviet countries was not as swift as had been expected. The socio-economic and socio-political changes were accompanied by a deep economic crisis and rising ethnic tension[148] that weakened and eroded the political support of the incumbent political regimes and opposition (Dimitrov 2009; von Soest and Grauvogel 2015; Way 2008). These challenges forced the political elites to seek closer alliance with the Orthodox Churches in order to enhance their legitimacy amidst the rising popular disproval of the economic and political reforms (Admiraal 2012; Flora et al. 2005; Knox 2004).

[148] Almost all large ethnic groups in Eastern Europe have ethnic enclaves that are located outside of the borders of their respective national states. For example, there are regions of compact settlement of Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo, of Hungarians in Romanian Transylvania, of Belarussians and Russians in Ukraine, to name a few examples. Ethnic heterogeneity within each individual country contributes to the diversification of the religious landscape, as ethnic identity is often tightly connected to religious affiliation.

The shift away from the communist internationalist rhetoric and a turn towards nationalist ideology brought about the necessity to implement a nationalist principle, "which holds that political and national units should be congruent" (Gellner 1983:1). The political elites, therefore, sought greater correspondence between ethnic and political boundaries and greater cultural homogenization within the borders, including religious uniformity (Flora et al. 2005:41–42). These aspirations on behalf of the political elites were supported by the Orthodox Churches, because "the institutional structure of Orthodox national churches mirrors the ideal of a nation-state, with each people ideally constituting a single ethno-religious community" (Wanner 2007b; also, see Ghodsee 2009:228; Sarkissian 2009:472; Stan 2007; Iveković 2002; Knox 2007:79; Richters 2012:20; Peteva 2003:38; Pollis 2005).

Starting in the second half of the 1990s, many post-Soviet states with Orthodox majorities started to seek closer alliance with corresponding Orthodox Churches and other religious organizations that sought to represent an entire ethnic group (Admiraal 2012; Sarkissian 2009; von Soest and Grauvogel 2015). As a result, many Eastern European Orthodox states adopted legislation that granted the Orthodox Church the status of a legally recognized dominant religious institution (e.g., Georgia) and/or acknowledged its exclusive historical role (e.g., Russia and Romania).[149] Through further politicization of religion, local political elites manipulated the religious landscape in their countries in order to consolidate political, economic, and ideological power. The state

[149] A notable exception is Ukraine that did not have an autocephalous Orthodox Church whose legitimacy would be recognized internationally and domestically. At the onset of Ukraine's independence, there were four Churches of the Eastern rite – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and the Ukrainian Catholic Church. None of these Churches could claim to represent all the Orthodox believers in Ukraine. The impossibility to rely on a dominant Church forced the Ukrainian authorities to implement more flexible religious policies (Casanova 1998; Wanner 2007:135–36). Even when the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was granted official recognition on behalf of the Patriarch of Constantinople in 2018, an open alliance between this Church and the Ukrainian authorities did not follow because a significant number of Orthodox believers continued affiliating with the other Orthodox Churches (Mudrov 2019).

introduced practical and legal changes to promote the ideological framework that regarded one's affiliation with a national Church as an ideal manifestation of nationhood.

For instance, in 1997, the Russian Parliament passed a bill that clearly distinguished between traditional and non-traditional religious groups. The new law acknowledged "a special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia, in the formation and development of its spirituality and culture, [while] respecting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religions that comprise an inalienable part of the historical legacy of the peoples of Russia" (Law on Freedom of Conscience 1997). According to this law, religious groups had to prove they had carried out legal activities in Russia for 15 years in order to be registered and enjoy the rights of a religious organization.[150] This law clearly intended to hamper the proliferation of new religious movements in Russia (Du Quenoy 2018:163). At the same time, the law did not explicitly grant the Russian Orthodox Church exclusive status, rights, or privileges (Mitrokhin 2004:360). Similar legislation that imposed a hierarchy on the existing religious diversity was adopted by Serbia in 2005 (Ilic 2005; Djenovic 2006), Bulgaria in 2002 (Ghodsee 2009), and Belarus in 2002 (Wanner 2007:134). In Romania, this distinction was first introduced by the 1948 Decree and was upheld in the post-Soviet period by a series of bills that privileged the acknowledged denominations by paying monthly salaries to clergy, providing tax exemptions, and giving the Churches access to the school curriculum (Andreescu 2008:142–43; Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011:7–9; APADOR-CH Helsinki Committee Report 1997). The Romanian Law on the Freedom of Religion adopted in 2006 introduced strict criteria for receiving the status of a religious denomination, namely 12 years of uninterrupted legal presence in Romania and membership comprising at least 0.1% of Romanian citizens (about 22,000 people) (Andreescu 2008:151).

[150] A later, amended version of the law abolished this requirement.

In 1995, the new Georgian Constitution recognized "the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the state" (Constitution of Georgia 1995). In 2002, this recognition was further enhanced by the Constitutional Agreement between the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church that provided the Church with several privileges in the sphere of education, property owning, missionary activity, and draft evasion, among other things (Constitutional Agreement 2002).

The rapprochement between the political elites and national Orthodox churches in Orthodox-majority countries was often perceived by the clergy as a moral obligation and, simultaneously, as a *card blanche* to protect the nation from "religious deviants." The priests of the Georgian Orthodox Church organized multiple mob attacks against JWs in 1990-2000s (Religious Persecution in Georgia 2002; Human Right Watch 2002; Fox 2020:VI; Langlaude Doné 2012; Ochs 2002). Although the official authorities deplored these acts, local police rarely intervened to stop the violence and sometimes even participated in the raids against JWs (Djenovic 2009; Ochs 2002). Similar acts of violence against JWs initiated by Orthodox priests took place in Greece (U.S. Government Report on Human Rights 1990:1136), Ukraine (Coynash 2020), Romania (APADOR-CH Helsinki Committee Report 1997), and Moldova (Baran 2011:431; Fox 2020:173).

The clergy of the Romanian and Greek Churches actively lobbied for the prohibition of JWs' activities in their respective countries. In 1996, the international convention of JWs in Bucharest was cancelled as a result of campaigns by the Orthodox Church (Human Rights Watch World Report 1996, "Romanian Conventions Held..." 1997). The head of the Romanian Orthodox Church Patriarch Teoctist issued an open call to resist JWs who "reject the culture and state [which] they regard as tools of the devil and terrorize the world with the imminent tragic end of the world" (APADOR-CH Helsinki Committee Report 1997). This letter instigated a campaign against the

convention, including negative media reports, rallies of nationalists and religious activists, and involvement of the authorities. The culmination of the tension was the declaration of the General Secretariat of the Government of Romania that proclaimed that it was "totally inappropriate to try to improvise such an international event in Bucharest, during July or in the future" (APADOR-CH Helsinki Committee Report 1997). Eventually the tension was diffused, and the convention took place, albeit not in Bucharest, but in Cluj-Napoca and Brasov. Although the WTBTS was not illegal in Romania at that time, the nationalists and religious activists disrupted a convention of JWs. While the authorities eventually intervened to stop the infringement on religious freedom, they clearly sympathized with the intruders.[151]

Importantly, the actions and rhetoric of the Orthodox clergy were not framed as a theological dispute with JWs or as a struggle over potential flock. It was clearly written into an ethno-religious frame of reference. The Eastern European Orthodox Churches have been emphasizing the historical specificity and non-universality of individual human rights and the supremacy of traditional moral and cultural norms. They argued that religious freedom referred first and foremost to the right of a collective to retain its traditional faith and lifestyle, while the western liberal understanding of religious freedom as an individual right was argued to be detrimental for the peoples of Eastern Europe. In 1999, the Metropolitan Archbishop Kirill (a future Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church) argued that in 1997:

> ...the west gave Russia an ultimatum that the national legislation on the freedom of conscience be brought to agreement with the western, or more accurately American, liberal standard […] The role of the commonly recognized and truly universal standard regarding human rights and freedoms cannot be the most liberal one, but the one that

[151] Similar cases when the religious and civil activists, as well as state officials interrupted religious gatherings of JWs were common throughout the region (for Russia, see International Report on Human Rights 2008:464; Fagan and Corley 2008; for Bulgaria, see Nikolaeva 2009; for Serbia, see Djenovic 2006).

> would organically and without contradictions reconcile any universal and mandatory principles with local, national, and cultural ones." Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia 2016:33–34

The dominant Orthodox Churches, therefore, positioned themselves as protectors of an ethno-religious group from an existential threat coming from the west and liberal principles. In this light, JWs along with other western religious groups and the "alien" religious and social values that they propagate were presented and perceived as a security issue. For example, the posters spread by the Orthodox activists in Bucharest on the eve of the aforementioned JWs' international convention read:

> TO ALL ROMANIANS! Does Romania need now an international Jehovite convention . . . July 19-21? Christians—let us oppose this convention! […] They seek to divide our people and to cause religious quarreling. ALL YOU ROMANIANS, fight against this convention! […] The Romanian Orthodox Brotherhood . . . calls all Orthodox believers to a protest meeting, which will be held Sunday, June 30. We will ask the authorities to cancel this satanic convention. COME SO THAT WE MAY DEFEND OUR FOREFATHERS' FAITH. May God help us! [*Orthography is original – A.T.*]. (Romanian Conventions Held Despite…1997)

This quote by Patriarch Teoctist shows that the Orthodox clergy accepted and promoted the nationalist discourse and the role of the Orthodox Church as a protector of the nation. Both the clergy of the Dominant Churches and the state elites promoted religion as a public declaration of political loyalties and ethnic belonging. Unlike the preoccupation with individual religious rights and freedoms as well as physical and psychological well-being of believers that often belied the tension with JWs in western democracies, Eastern European Orthodox states regarded and presented religious diversity as a security threat to national unity and to their very ethnic existence (Merdjanova 2001:491–92).[152] For example, in 2000, in one of his public presentations, the aforementioned Metropolitan Archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill said:

[152] Perhaps with the exception of cases when JWs' rejection of blood transfusion was used as a reason to deny a registration (Bulgaria) or to revoke it (Russia).

> If the liberal idea is fundamental for our state, then in full correspondence with the liberal principle of checks and balances it should be countered by the cultivation of the system of traditional Russian values in the spheres of upbringing, education, and formation of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the question about legislation, education, culture, social relationships, social moral is a question of whether our *national civilization* will be preserved in the coming century, whether it will find its place in the world community of nations, and whether we, as *an Orthodox people*, will survive" Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia 2016:55

The mission of defending culture and values assumed by the Orthodox Churches found support among various strata of society. Cooperation between the Orthodox Churches, the state, and intelligentsia against foreign religious groups was fostered not only through legislative acts and symbolic recognition of the dominant religious traditions, but also through the anti-cult movement. The explosion of religious diversity in Eastern European countries in the first years after the fall of the Communist regimes incentivized Church leaders, religious and secular conservative activists, as well as certain bureaucrats and scholars to create a more structured movement against new religious organizations. This newly formed anti-cult movement was ideologically rooted in the western anti-cult campaign[153] (Merdjanova 2001:491) and attempted to disseminate its views and legitimize its claims through media and administrative channels. Also, they appealed to the authority of academia by claiming that the phenomenon of "brainwashing" is a scientific and therefore objective fact. In 1993, a Russian Orthodox activist, Alexander Dvorkin[154] founded the Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center (SILICC) under the umbrella of the Moscow Patriarchate that became and organizing center for the Russian anticult movement (Baran 2007; Knox 2019:144).

[153] In 2000, Marat Shterin and James Richardson (2000) argued that the Russian policies towards new religious movements, including JWs, were a result of the direct influence of the Western treatment of "cults." However, twenty years later, the Russian approach to the treatment of unwanted religious diversity seems more idiosyncratic. Although for a short period, during the 1990s, the anti-cult movement followed the western approach of presenting new religious movements as detrimental for the individual psyche and physical health, it later shifted its focus towards the cultural incompatibility of the cults with traditional values of Russian society.

[154] Dvorkin was under direct influence of the American anti-cult movement of the 1970-80s as he received his education in the U.S. in the Orthodox seminary.

Dvorkin presented himself as a professor, which imbued his claims and rhetoric with academic objectivity, although he never attempted to disguise his partiality.[155] Numerous times, the most popular Russian TV channels have invited him to participate in political talk-shows as an expert of religion. These attempts coupled with the SILICC's routine collaboration with Russian scholars and European anticult activists through a series of publications, conferences, and lectures allowed the Russian anti-cult movement to gain significant legitimacy and ideological weight with the state and society (Baran 2006:644; Shterin and Richardson 2000).

The anti-cult movement was not confined to Russia – almost all new independent states in Eastern Europe had similar activists who urged the society and state to protect local cultures from the influence of deleterious cults. The Russian anti-cult movement and Dvorkin personally were able to export their views on the new religious organizations. For example, the term "totalitarian sect" (totalitarian cult) that is argued to have been coined by Dvorkin is widely used throughout the post-Communist region in administrative, academic, and everyday discourses (Baran 2011; Blagoev 2017; Borisenko 2013; Sys 2016). As a result, a negative image of new religious movements, including JWs, as agents of the west engaging in brainwashing practices and pursuing the goal of destroying local culture and traditions permeated everyday discourse and became popular among wide strata of society. Besides the negative image of new religious movements in the popular imagination, many politicians and state officials adopted a radically negative attitude toward religious diversity. This attitude created a complex system of state treatment of non-traditional religious groups and JWs in

[155] For example, in his book titled "*Sectology. Totalitarian Sects. An Attempt of Systematic Analysis*," Dvorkin described the Governing Body of the WTBTS as follows: "The fifth president of the Watchtower Organization was Milton Henschel. He was the second youngest member in the Governing Body - the one member younger than Henschel was 69 in 1992, two others were 75 and the remaining two were 80 and 90. They all are very old men - they fall asleep during the meetings of the Governing Body, and at the moment when a decision must be made, they need to be woken up. Henschel was elected because he was the only one who had some energy left in him" (2000:160). Although the book is a clear example of the Orthodox apologetic literature, the very title and the organization of information in the book are designed to create an impression of scholarly investigatory work.

particular. Intolerance against and attacks on JWs often took place when they had legal status in the country.[156] *De-jure*, the governments declared their commitment to freedom of conscience and JWs could freely exercise their religion. However, in practice the authorities often neglected and even supported cases of violence against JWs inflicted by right-wing, Orthodox activists, and even police.

Religious Freedom and Western Influence

To a great extent, the discrepancy between the declared commitment to and simultaneous practical hindrance of religious freedom on behalf of the state was a result of a political, economic, and military dependence of the region on western governments and organizations. After the collapse of the socialist bloc, Eastern European countries sought to build close relationships with the EU and the U.S., seeing them as guarantors of economic growth and military security. Different degrees of association with these organizations required conformity with their rules and standards, including the freedom of religion (Andreescu 2008; Chiva 2009; Fokas 2018; Ibryamova 2013; Noutcheva 2006).[157] Therefore, political elites had to change national legislation accordingly in order to maintain and develop these relationships. Simultaneously, local political actors often had a higher degree of independence and refused to comply with the newly imposed western norms. The Council of Europe and the ECHR have served as the main vehicles for enforcing the changes in national and local legislation and policies towards JWs. They pressured Eastern European countries to amend restrictive legislation against minority religions (Andreescu 2007; Baran 2011:422–23; Górecki 2020;

[156] In the west, JWs endured physical violence at the time of military conflicts, when out of security concerns both the state and larger society rejected JWs' pacifism.

[157] Some scholars argue that conditionality was efficient only in cases when local actors are ready to take advantage of the new institutional and legal framework. For example, in Romania and Bulgaria, Turks and Hungarians are politically organized and mobilized, which gave them an opportunity to take advantage of the political changes imposed by the EU. Simultaneously, the Roma minorities lack political representation and therefore are almost unaffected by these changes (Dobre 2003; Ibryamova 2013:351; also, see Guasti and Bustikova 2020). Other scholars claim that conditionality did not play a significant role in the amelioration of the policies regarding minorities because "EU conditionality is not closely temporally correlated with the emergence of new strategies and laws on minority protection" (Hughes and Sasse 2003).

Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011). Most cases filed by JWs to the ECHR against the inactivity of the authorities in cases of violations of JWs' religious rights were ruled in favor of JWs and the governments were forced to bring real policies into compliance with their declared values and assumed commitments. Major changes adopted under this pressure concerned religious minorities' right to proselytize (Richardson 2017), obtaining an official status or a status equal to that of the dominant Church (Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011:32), issues related to conscientious objection (Côté and Richardson 2001), and the negligence of the authorities when investigating cases of violence against JWs (Richardson 2017). Besides, European and American politicians have regularly emphasized the importance of religious freedom in negotiations with Eastern European countries (Andreescu 2008:454; Pintilescu and Fatu-Tutoveanu 2011:116). As a result of this strategy of extraversion,[158] the aspirants for membership in the European Union and NATO mostly eliminated state-level discriminatory practices (Moraru 2019; 2020 Report on Religious Freedom: Bulgaria 2021).[159]

The positive influence of the ECHR on the freedom of religion is especially noticeable in comparison with the countries or territories in Eastern Europe that do not recognize its jurisdiction. First, there are a number of unrecognized states in the post-Soviet space, such as the Transnistrian Republic, Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh), Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. In these territories, JWs could not seek redress from international organizations, such as the ECHR, because the latter did not have jurisdiction over the governments of unrecognized states (Baran 2011:432). JWs from Nagorno-

[158] This term was coined by Jean-François Bayart (2014) in reference to a process of embracing foreign cultural elements by subjecting them to local goals. It is used to describe how various actors, such governments or cultural entrepreneurs, adjust their policies and actions in order to obtain desired resources from outside, e.g. donor organizations and international agencies, among other things.

[159] Some scholars argue that after the accession of the Eastern European countries to the EU, conditionality lost its thrust. As a result, these states lost the incentives to further ameliorate their legislation and practices regarding religious and other minorities (Chiva 2009; Ibryamova 2013).

Karabakh and the Transnistrian Republic filed complaints to the ECHR in 2010 and 2011 correspondingly, but no action was taken until March 2022.[160] In these territories, JWs do not have official registration, and their activities, especially public ministry, are restricted. Besides, in these states, the treatment of JWs is frequently contingent upon the personal attitudes of the local officials.

The influence of the Council of Europe and the ECHR is especially telling in the case of Russia. The country ascended to the Council of Europe in 1996 and, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, mostly complied with the decisions of the ECHR, although Russia's 1997 Law on Religion and 2002 Law on Combating Extremism provided the authorities with practical tools to put pressure on JWs. In 2004, the Moscow District Court outlawed the JW organization as a legal entity (Slupina 2019). In 2010, the ECHR overturned this ruling and demanded that the Russian authorities rescind the nullification of the registration of the JWs' community in Moscow. Nevertheless, JWs in Moscow received registration only in 2015, while in other Russian cities, such as Taganrog and Samara, more local communities of JWs were outlawed on extremism charges (SOVA Center 2014).

In 2014, after the annexation of the Crimea, Russia's voting right in the Council of Europe was revoked, which made Russia's future in the organization precarious. A full exclusion from the Council of Europe would entail Russia's complete withdrawal from under the jurisdiction of the ECHR. This rupture between the Russian authorities and the ECHR made Russian politics similar to that of the unrecognized states, which heightened the pressure on religious minorities. In 2017, the Russian Constitutional Court declared the supremacy of domestic legislation over international legal acts, which meant that decisions of the ECHR could be implemented only if they were

[160] According to the ECHR ruling, Armenia had effective control over Nagorno Karabagh and therefore was held responsible for the enactment of discriminatory policies toward JWs (Christian Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in the NKR V. Armenia (Application no. 41817/10)).

compatible with the Russian legislation (The Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation 2017). Two months later, JWs were outlawed as an extremist organization throughout the Russian Federation; their legal status as legal entity was eliminated, and their property was confiscated (Baran 2021; Slupina 2019). Despite the denouncement of the ban by the Council of Europe, the U.S. Department of State, and international human rights organizations, the Russian police have continuously raided homes of JWs, while courts have doled out dozens of prison sentences (for details, see https://jw-russia.org / Accessed February 2023).

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the relationship between European international institutions and the Russian authorities reached the lowest point in post-Soviet history. Under these circumstances, the lack of compliance with the decisions of the ECHR on behalf of the Russian authorities could not further exacerbate this rupture. In June 2022, the Russian Parliament adopted a law that officially established the supremacy of decisions made by the Russian courts over the ECHR (Gosudarstvennaya Duma 2022). Besides, it prescribed the Russian authorities not to implement the decisions of the ECHR ruled after March 15th, 2022. As a result, the Russian authorities received an opportunity to expel JWs from the Russian socio-political and religious landscape because they conspicuously undermined the increasing ideological monopoly of the state and challenged the idea of "symphonic relationships" (Knox 2003) between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church. This de-facto withdrawal of the Russian judicial system from under the jurisdiction of the ECHR aggravated the plight of JWs in Russia.

This brief overview of state-JWs relationships in Orthodox-majority countries in the post-Soviet period allows us to delineate factors and patterns that influence and define the character of these relationships. First, the aspiration of the Orthodox Church to form a close alliance with the state created certain affordances for the limitation of religious competition. Without exceptions, all

Orthodox Churches preferred to appeal to the state, demanding preferential treatment and other privileges. Despite this consistency in the agenda of the Orthodox Churches during the post-Soviet period, religious freedom in general and attitudes toward JWs have changed along very different trajectories. The elevation of the Orthodox Churches to the level of the National or Traditional Church coincided with attempts of the political elites to boost their own support and legitimacy through state-Church cooperation. Yet, the countries seeking closer European integration amended their legislation and policies to guarantee a level of religious freedom that at least minimally complied with the requirements of European institutions.

Simultaneously, the Orthodox countries that did not pursue full European integration demonstrated significantly more rigid attitudes regarding JWs and other religious associations. In the case of Russia and the unrecognized states of Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh), the absence or a significant deterioration of their relationships with the western human rights institutions usually entailed increased pressure on JWs' activities. This suggests that the presence of national Orthodox Churches does not necessarily result in a lack of religious freedom for JWs and other religious groups. Although the Church always aspires for "symphonic relationships" with the state, it is the latter that plays the role of the conductor and, therefore, defines the degree of cooperation. The political elites choose to cooperate with the dominant Churches as long as it corresponds to their political and ideological interests. This strongly suggests that while the dominant national Churches play a significant role in the anti-JWs campaigns, they are a *directed* rather than a *directing* power.[161]

[161] Georgia may be an exception as the Georgian Orthodox Church has enjoyed support and recognition unmatched by any political actors in the post-Soviet period. Therefore, it has had enough political influence and power to impose its political agenda on the Georgian political elites.

The second pattern regards the character of the tension between the state and JWs. In western democracies, JWs are often confronted because of their alleged infringement on human rights. Indeed, their practices of shunning, "brainwashing," and their ban on blood transfusion are argued to violate individual's rights. In Orthodox-majority countries, the state and the Church are foremostly preoccupied about the potential harm that JWs can cause to the collective rights of the local population. Views on JWs as seeking "to divide our people" revealed in the position of the Russian Patriarch and Romanian anti-JW poster are very similar to those shared by other anti-JW activists throughout the region. JWs and other religious minorities are regarded as a threat to ethnic integrity and identity.

In other words, the Orthodox Church can be described as *a collectivistic religion* that is "not merely individual belief in the private sphere (à la John Locke) but a public declaration of affiliation with historically, culturally, and linguistically constituted groups" (Ghodsee 2009:241; also, see Jakelić 2019; Pollis 1993; Stoeckl 2014). Therefore, it serves as yet another source of legitimation for ethnically framed nationalism where ethnic groups are seen as culturally homogeneous and self-governing entities. Without denying the Orthodox Church its own agency, I argue that the alliance of the Church and the state is contingent upon the latter's reliance on the ethnonationalist frame of legitimation.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Nazi Germany

In this subsection, I do not pursue a goal of describing all the minute details of the JWs' experience in Nazi Germany, especially since there are excellent scholarly works that eloquently provide that information (for example, see Bergman 1996; Garbe 2008; Hesse 2001; King 1984; Wrobel 2006). As in the subsections above, I will focus on the facts that elucidate the character and trajectory of the relationship between JWs and Nazi authorities. The choice of Hitler's regime is

obvious for several reasons: first, the Nazi state attempted to establish total control over the German society and required indisputable loyalty of *all of its citizens*. Second, the persecutions of JWs were very severe and entailed imprisonment and hundreds of deaths. Finally, the history of JWs in Nazi Germany is investigated better than the plight of JWs in other totalitarian systems, such as Stalin's Soviet Union (a notable exception is the book by Emily Baran 2014) or Fascist Italy[162] (Piccioli and Wörnhard 2016).

It is important to note that the attitude of the German state towards JWs did not become negative just with Hitler's ascension to power in 1933. The authorities of the Weimar Republic were seeking ways to suppress the undesired religious group long before. In 1924, discussing the organization of the Bible Students, the Minister of the Interior remarked: "[I would not] recommend at this time initiating new German Reich legal regulations in order to hinder its activities. Even if the activities of the sect are undesirable to the state, combating it for as long as possible should rather be left to the churches, against whom its attacks are primarily directed" (as quoted in Besier and Besier 2001:36). Although Weimar Germany did not welcome JWs, it did not persecute them and did not attempt to amend its liberal legislation in order to create legal grounds for limiting JWs' activities. There were multiple attempts to limit the activities of the WTBTS in different *länder* (states), but JWs were usually able to defend their rights in courts of higher jurisdiction. During the Weimar period, the attitude of the general public towards JWs was not welcoming either, and they were frequently accused of conspiring with the U.S., Communists, and Jews (King 1984:149). Major German religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church, advocated for limiting JWs activities throughout the country, yet the state remained largely neutral.

[162] In addition, Italian JWs were not very numerous during the rule of Mussolini as there were less than 200 publishers in Italy when WWII broke out (Piccioli and Wörnhard 2016:9).

After their ascension to power in January 1933, the German National Socialists tried to consolidate power in their hands and suppress alternative centers of loyalty (Bendersky 2000:VIII). As JWs had a long history of being regarded as a subversive group, it did not take long before the new authorities made their first steps toward suppressing the WTBTS in Germany.[163] During 1933, there was no consistent or coordinated Reich policy towards JWs. For example, the bans on literature and public ministry were imposed in certain German regions and later canceled. Simultaneously, NSDAP, the ruling party, showed little concern about the WTBTS at the country-wide level (Garbe 2008:73). At the beginning of April of 1933, JWs were outlawed in several German lands, such as Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Bavaria, and Saxony (Garbe 2008:IV; Reynaud and Graffard 2001a:6).[164] Their assets were seized, and their literature was confiscated and burned in a bonfire. According to an official of the Prussian Ministry of Interior, it was "obvious that [the German Bible Students] tend to be in complete opposition to the present state and its cultural and moral structures. Naturally, in harmony with their goals, the 'International Bible Students' consider the Christian-national state that emerged from the political uprising as an especially distinctive opponent and have accordingly radically increased their resistance" (as quoted in Garbe 2008:85).

However, when the expertise showed no traces of Communist propaganda in WTBTS literature, and after the U.S. State Department advocated JWs' right to worship, JWs in Prussia and Magdeburg were allowed to recommence their public ministry and spread their literature (Chu

[163] Besides, in their publications, JWs had harshly criticized National Socialism before the NSDAP came to power (Penton 2004:251–55). Therefore, the Nazis had personal reasons to go after JWs, although it is impossible to know for certain whether the content of JWs' earlier literature was known to the Nazis.

[164] I used the book "The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Nazis: Persecution, Deportation, and Murder, 1933-1945" by Michael Reynaud and Sylvie Graffard only as a supportive source because their work does not meet the requirements of an academic work. For example, the quotes and excerpts from documents are provided without references to the sources, which makes them almost unreliable. At the same time most information found in the book is corroborated by other scholarly sources.

2004:331–32; Garbe 2008:92–93; Penton 2004:11). Yet, in May 1933, JWs were completely banned in Prussia on the grounds that they "are verbally and by writings agitating the people against the state and ecclesiastical institutions. In affirming that both are Satan's works, they undermine the very foundations of communal life."[165]

Despite this high pressure, JWs organized a large assembly in Berlin-Wilmersdorf on 25 June 1933. During this event that was attended by about 7,000 members, the WTBTS promulgated the *Declaration of Facts* that was sent to all German government officials, while 2,500,000 copies were distributed publicly (Yonan 1999:318). Besides, JWs sent a personal letter to Adolf Hitler that briefly summarized the information in the Declaration of Facts. The *Declaration* clearly articulated the political neutrality of the JWs and stated that they did not have any connections with the Jews or Communists. At the same time, it did emphasize that certain points of the political program of the NSDAP were in agreement with the JWs' aspirations.[166] For example,

> "The people of Germany have suffered great misery since 1914 and have been the victims of much injustice practiced upon them by others. The nationalists have declared themselves against all such unrighteousness and announced that 'Our relationship to God is high and holy'. Since our organization fully endorses these righteous principles […] Satan by subtilty [*sic*] endeavors to set the government against our work […] Instead of our organization's being a menace to the peace and safety of the government, it is the one organization standing for the peace and safety of this land." As quoted in Penton 2004:283

Regardless of the intentions behind this document, the *Declaration* did not have any positive

[165] The excerpt is taken from a document signed by the Secretary of the Ministerial Chancellery (as quoted in Reynaud and Graffard 2001:8–9).

[166] JWs, various scholars, as well as political and religious activists have radically different views regarding the nature of this document and intentions of the JW leaders. The WTBTS and some scholars construe it as a uncompromised rejection of National Socialism and Hitler's regime (for example, see Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose 1959; Yonan 1999). This view presents the harsher persecutions that ensued later as a result of the JWs' opposition to the Nazis that was clearly articulated in the *Declaration*. Other scholars argue that the *Declaration* was "nothing short of a cowardly, self-serving statement in which [the president of the WTBTS] Rutherford and his German associates attempted to ingratiate the Witness community with the Hitler government"(Penton 2004:12, also, see Penton 1985; Reynaud and Graffard 2001a:13; Thornton 2004). Still other scholars are more cautious in their evaluation of the document and characterize it as offering "just a hint of compromise" (King 1984:151).

influence on the attitude of the Nazi authorities towards JWs. On June 24th, 1933, a day before the assembly in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, the WTBTS was outlawed throughout Germany. However, under the pressure of the U.S., in October, the restrictions imposed on JWs' activities were partially lifted.

In November of 1933, JWs refused to participate in the plebiscite about the approval of the Nazi government. While 95% of the eligible voters cast their ballots, JWs openly disobeyed the order to vote despite significant pressure (Garbe 2008:141).[167] According to a report by Gestapo, "the supposedly religious convictions of the International Bible Students could simply not be harmonized… with the civil duties in the National Socialist state" (as quoted in Garbe 2008:140). Although JWs tried to emphasize their political neutrality, it is clear that the Nazi bureaucracy and general public regarded them as political opposition subversive to state principles. This view was not just an internal institutional perspective – it was publicized and spread among Germans. For example, SA troopers forced JWs to march through the streets carrying placards that read "We betrayed our fatherland because we didn't vote" (as quoted in King 1984:141).

Besides this instance of open defiance of the official policies, JWs refused to salute the swastika and utter *Heil Hitler*, for which many of them lost their employment and were imprisoned (Chu 2004:333; King 1984:154). After a final and complete ban was imposed on the WTBTS in 1935, the pressure increased, and several years later, German authorities started to forfeit the parental rights of JWs and to remove their children in order to raise them as good Social nationalists (Bergman 1996b:89; Reynaud and Graffard 2001a:X–XI). In 1936, JWs reported cases of forced sterilization of JW women (WTBTS 1936a).

[167] For example, JW shop owners were ransacked, and some JWs were taken to the voting polls by force. One JW later recalled: "During the night following the election, a mob gathered in front of our house and chanted that we betrayers of the people should come out […] Then they painted across the house wall: "We betrayed our people and betrayed Germany!" (Garbe 2008:141).

Despite the official ban, increased legal pressure, and multiple cases of incarceration, JWs continued their public ministry and carried on their practice of sending letters and telegrams to German officials, such as judges and prosecutors (Reynaud and Graffard 2001:41, Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses 1974), which caused an outburst of anger from Hitler himself (Bergman 1996b:89). This campaign of sending clarifying statements and messages denouncing the persecutions of JWs was not confined to Germany, but embraced citizens of 50 countries (Helmreich 1979:395; Wrobel 2006:93).[168] This ostentatious and bold defiance of the authorities further exacerbated the negative attitude toward and treatment of JWs.

After the official ban in 1935, many JWs, especially those of the draft age, wound up in camps. In 1938, imprisoned JWs were allowed to leave the camp if they signed a declaration of renunciation of the WTBTS (Bergman 1996b:93; Buber-Neumann 1949:227). Even when WWII broke out in 1939 and the persecutions of JWs, especially conscientious objectors, became more severe, very few JWs signed the declaration[169] – a fact the JWs carry with immense pride up until today (Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses 1974). Even in the face of a death sentence, the absolute majority of JWs chose to remain loyal to WTBTS teaching. Although several high ranking Nazi officials, expressed their admiration of JWs' unshakable devotion (King 1984),[170] their resoluteness further strengthened the view on JWs as a dangerous group whose influence needed to be curbed

[168] A similar campaign was organized in 2017 when the Russian Supreme Court recognized the JW organization as an extremist organization and completely outlawed it in the Russian Federation.

[169] The declaration read: "I declare upon oath that I will not carry on any activity for the Bible Students, that I will be no longer a Witness of Jehovah, be no more active as a Witness of Jehovah, and also that I will have no further association with Jehovah's Witnesses. It is known to me that a violation of this statement means lifelong imprisonment" (The Persecutions of Jehovah's witnesses in Germany 1936:29).

[170] King says that "Himmler saw their potential usefulness and had plans for them as a vanguard of Nazism, to be settled in eastern Europe after the war was over and even Rudolph Höss, who ordered the punishment of many Witnesses in Auschwitz, admitted that without the issues of military service, they were harmless as a group" (164; also, see Helmreich 1979:397). Margarete Buber, herself a political prisoner in Nazi concentration camps, described how camp overseers often respected JWs for their honesty and integrity (1949:224–38; also, see Bergman 1996:98).

(Bergman 1996b:97–98; Wrobel 2006:91).

By 1937, the literature of the WTBTS became unapologetically anti-Nazi and anti-Hitler[171] as JWs unceasingly continued their proselytizing activities. Starting from 1937, JWs had few chances to be released from the camps. Even when acquitted by courts or freed after imprisonment, they were placed in "protective custody" by *Gestapo* (Helmreich 1979:396). Until the fall of the Nazi regime in 1945, over 13,000 JWs were persecuted in Germany and occupied territories and 1,490 of them were executed (Wrobel 2006). Of those executed, only 250, i.e. about 15%, were conscientious objectors (Chu 2004:335).

In his paper about the experience of JWs in concentration camps in Nazi Germany, Jerry Bergman (1996b) asked a question "Since they did not actively work against the Nazi system more than any other government they lived under, why did the Nazis not just leave them alone? The Witnesses were comparatively small in number and posed little threat to the Nazi government" (111). JWs were not the only religious group that was affected by the Nazi regime. With the Nazis' ascension to power in 1933, the freedom of all religious organizations in Germany was significantly curtailed. The Nazi ideology regarding religion in general and Christianity in particular was not consistent or uniform (Helmreich 1979; King 1984). Some high Nazi officials were strictly anti-Christian, while others considered themselves pious Catholics (King 1984:I). The regime built relationships with each religious group in different ways considering multiple factors, including the willingness of a group to cooperate with the state and its degree of loyalty to the regime, as well as the theological position of the religious organization.

The Calvinist and Lutheran Protestant Churches were largely put under the control of the state, although there was no internal unity with regard to the acceptance or rejection of national

[171] For example, Hitler was described as the biblical beast of prey (King 1984:159).

socialism by all the members (King 1984:8–13). The same is true for the Catholic Church, although it had more institutional and administrative autonomy in Germany. Both Churches welcomed Nazis' policies regarding JWs (Garbe 2008:81). Newer religious movements, such as the Church of the Latter-Day Saints or Adventists, mostly embraced Nazi ideology and mainly offered their loyalty to the regime – at least, at the institutional level, which, of course, does not indicate that all their members personally accepted this position.

Several scholars claimed that the closeness of JWs' theology to Judaism – an emphasis on the name Jehovah and the Old Testament in general – was one of the reasons for the hostile treatment of the group (Beckford 1975b; Bergman 1996b). Christine King's excellent comparative analysis of the Nazi treatment of various religious movements suggests the opposite (1984).[172] She compares several religious movements in Germany and notices that only Christian Scientists did not have a strong theological association with Judaism.[173] Yet, these religious organizations faced different treatment – Mormons fared well under Nazis, and Adventists and Christian Scientists underwent sporadic persecution at the beginning of Nazi rule but were able to build a good dialogue with the state, while the plight of JWs was dire.

The most telling case is related to a small sect within the Seventh Day Adventist group, called the Reform Movement. Although this Adventist group mainly shared the theological views of the main-stream Seventh-Day Adventists, it had an uncompromised anti-state stance and refused to

[172] King says "… no sect's teaching, in itself, could guarantee its safety" (1984:72)

[173] Mormons, for example, accepted the Old Testament as well, while Adventists obeyed Sabbath, which was a very conspicuous tie with Judaism. Both Mormons and Adventists made several drastic steps[173] to distance themselves from Judaism and show their ideological support for the regime. For example, Mormons expelled Jews from their ranks and removed Old Testament passages that mentioned *Zion*, *Israel*, and *Judah* from the list of the readings. Adventists' literature expressly supported Hitler's ideas, the word "sabbath" was replaced with a German word "Ruhetag," and even the Jewishness of Jesus was questioned (King 1984:III–IV). Yet their principal theological orientation towards Judaism was not significantly lower than that of JWs.

bear arms (Helmreich 1979:383). And while the mainstream Adventists found a *modus vivendi* with the Nazi state and were even allowed not to bear arms (the only group that had this privilege besides Catholic priests), the Reform Adventists were treated by the Nazis as harshly as JWs (Blaich 1993:277; King 1984:110–19). In other words, the similar theological views of the two Adventist groups had little effect on the actual treatment they underwent in Germany.

Conscientious objection was one of the most contentious problems in the relationship between JWs and the Nazi state especially when WWII broke out. All pacifists were regarded as dangerous as they did not share the ultimate value of the German state and gave their loyalty to biblical principles. In 1940, after a mass execution of 130 JW conscientious objectors, Hitler made a remark: "These 130 executions had acted like an atmosphere-clearing storm. Thousands of like-minded individuals, on hearing of these shootings, had lost the courage to attempt dodging war service by referencing to one or another Bible passage" (as quoted in Helmreich 1979:397; also, see Kehoe 2019). Hitler was clearly bothered by the pacifists' refusal to bear arms and JWs' loyalty to the Bible. Besides, he intended to instill other Germans with fear in order to prevent future acts of disobedience.

Most police reports regarding JWs and Reform Adventists presented these groups as subversive to the state. Besides being accused of being Judeophiles, they were regularly presented as Communist, American Communist, and Internationalist, among others (Garbe 2008:85; King 1984).[174] In North America, JWs also faced issues regarding flag salutation and their legal standing at around the same time. No wonder, the U.S. Consul in Germany who intervened on behalf of JWs in May 1933 expressed sympathy regarding the German anti-JW policies:

[174] However, other groups, especially also Mormons, that had headquarters in the U.S. and had international networks of communities did not endure any persecutions. The purported collusions of JWs and Reform Adventists with Communists seem to be an effect of negative attitude towards these religious groups rather than the trigger of animosity.

> I have gone into the activities of the [Watch Tower] Society and of its agents, and have read some of the pamphlets which have been distributed by the Society widely in Germany, and I can see that objection could reasonably be raised to them by the German Government. Although acting as a religious society, the pamphlets contain comment of not a purely religious character. Quoted in Helmreich 1979:393

Discussing JWs and Reformed Adventists, Christine King argues that "these groups show that a totalitarian state cannot tolerate rivals and that a rootless and new society, self-consciously seeking legitimation, may expend a great deal of energy in the suppression of what might appear to a more confident and established regime, to be harmless 'cranks'" (1984:202).[175] The attitude of Nazi officials towards JWs and the methods of countering JWs' zeal show that the ideological stand-off was the most important dimension of the JW-Nazi conflict. The intensity of the conflict was caused not only by JWs' tenacity and their public and ostentatious defiance of the key-principles and values of the National Socialist state but was significantly exacerbated by the conspicuous presence of JWs in the public space despite bans, arrests, prosecutions, and executions. JWs' tenacity revealed to the larger German society that the Nazi state was not invincible and omnipotent, because when it came to the neutralization of a small religious sect, "it was failing in its object" (King 1984:202).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to analyze the relationship between JWs and governments in various socio-political systems. The chapter did not pursue a goal to analyze all possible contexts in which JWs interact with worldly governments, but aimed at analyzing the conditions that are similar to those in post-Soviet Armenia. As such, this chapter serves as a contextual background for the next chapter on the relationships between the Armenian state and society, on the one hand, and JWs, on the other.

[175] Detlef Garbe (2008) agrees with this evaluation and claims that "in all areas of public life, the new state and its supporting party made demands that were incompatible with the religious convictions of Jehovah's Witnesses and their obligation to follow unconditionally and without exception the instructions of the Bible" (139).

The chapter demonstrates that the system of compulsory military service creates a likelihood of persecutions of JWs regardless of the specifics of a socio-political regime, be it a democratic or totalitarian government. Yet conscientious objection in itself cannot be considered a sufficient reason for persecuting JWs, because although they did not comprise a majority of conscientious objectors and their absolute numbers were insignificant, JWs endured the harshest treatment. While Adventist pacifists in Nazi Germany could claim exemption from military service, JWs were sent to concentration camps and executed. In their resistance to the government's pressure, JWs openly and expressly flouted the very principles of governmental and social order, such as the value of the worldly state, fundamentals of religious life, and the conventional boundary separating the secular and the religious, which engendered an extremely negative attitude towards them. In this context, the state persecution of JW conscientious objectors was one of the ways in which JWs could be maltreated along with mob attacks, termination of employment, being expelled from schools, among other forms of harassment.

It is JWs' conspicuous public resistance that singles them out as the most dangerous to the existing principles of vision and division. When the WTBTS softened its confrontational attitude toward the state starting in the 1940s onward, the relative level of tension reduced as well. In the U.S. and other countries where the dominant ideology does not establish the primacy of the state over religion, periods of tension with JWs are usually short-run and is quickly eliminated. In the case of France, the ideology of *laïcité* regards public religion and its principles as undermining the very foundation of the French state and society, which creates tension with publicly active religions like JWs. In this context, as well as in authoritarian regimes, such as Putin's Russia, or totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany, that have little or no tolerance towards alternative sources of

legitimacy or foci of loyalty, any publicly visible deviation from the existing state ideology is persecuted to the point of extinction or is driven underground.

In Eastern European countries where the Orthodox Churches seek a close alliance with the state and automatically enlist all members of a certain ethnic background into their ranks, the overall treatment of JWs as well as specific state policies towards them have changed significantly during the post-socialist period. Despite this aspiration on behalf of the dominant Orthodox Churches, the state has often changed its declared attitude and/or real policies regarding religious minorities and JWs in particular based on domestic and international pressures and demands. Therefore, the existence of a dominant Church increases the likelihood of animosity towards JWs, but only if the state also seeks an alliance with the Church. In addition, Eastern European governments tend to ameliorate their religious policies when such reforms are demanded from the EU and other western organizations as a condition of membership or other forms of association. In other words, financial, political, or security benefits from the West increase the influence of the EU, the Council of Europe, and the ECHR on religious freedom in these countries.

Finally, in Eastern European countries, the societal contempt toward JWs is often informed by the perception of self and community through a connection to a religious tradition or a religious institution. In this context, membership in the Orthodox Church is viewed as a constitutive element of one's ethnicity, which is one of the most fundamental and salient social identities in this region. Therefore, religious apostasy is viewed as an existential crisis that undermines the principles on which society is based. Although JWs are not the most numerous religious "aliens" in this region, due to their relentless public ministry and conspicuousness, they are the one of the most recognizable and often most abhorred religious minorities. The next chapter addresses the relationship between JWs and the Armenian state and society throughout the post-Soviet period.

CHAPTER IV. JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES, THE GOVERNMENT, AND THE ARMENIAN SOCIETY: IN SEARCH OF A *MODUS VIVENDI*

The collapse of the Soviet Union became a pivotal point in the history of religious freedom in Armenia. During the Soviet period, religious life retreated to the private sphere and was mostly invisible in the public space. Many religious organizations, such as JWs and the Society for Krishna Consciousness, were outlawed (Corley 1998:292), while others, such as the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Baptist Church, were under the control of the state. The dismantlement of the Soviet Union allowed for a new system of relationships between the state, society, and religious organizations. Overall, post-Soviet Armenia followed a trajectory similar to that of many post-socialist Eastern European countries that favored their national Churches and promoted their influence at the level of politics, education, and the army, among others (see, Chapter III). However, the privileged position of a national Church did not necessarily entail suppression of all kinds of religious diversity. Certain religious organizations were tolerated and even appreciated despite the significant number of their followers and real competition with the dominant AAC. Still other religious groups were met with outward hostility, which could not be easily explained by their size or theological message. In Armenia, several religious groups fell into the latter category – the Hare Krishna community, JWs, and, lately, "the Word of Life" Church.

In this chapter, I seek to account for the contentious relationships between JWs and the Armenian state and society and to examine the factors that affected the dynamics of these relationships throughout the post-Soviet period. I start with a review of literature on religious diversity and the position of religious groups vis-à-vis the state, Armenian society, and each other. In the next section, I analyze the influence of the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts on the unique character of Armenian Christianity with a particular focus on the idea of innate Armenian

Christianness. This section is followed by a brief description of the Armenian religious field and its major actors. Thereafter, I chronologically analyze the development of the relationship between JWs and the Armenian state and society starting from the 1970s when the first JWs groups were established in Armenia. I pay particular attention to how the overall ideological framework set by the political elites informed the growth of the general population's hostility towards any manifestations of religious deviation. I show why, despite the diversity of the religious market in post-Soviet Armenia, JWs quickly came to symbolize religious aberration and became one of the most important players in the Armenian religious field.

Literature Review

The JW community in Armenia has never been an object of academic study and has only been tangentially mentioned by scholars when describing the overall religious diversity of Armenia (Antonyan 2011; Mikaelyan 2014; Tchilingirian 2007a) or discussing the attitudes of general population (Corley 1998; Siekierski 2014) and other religious groups (Ohanjanyan 2014) toward JWs.

Overall, the development and the state regulations of religious freedom in Armenia have been researched unevenly. Given that the absolute majority of the Armenian population declares its adherence to the AAC, this dominant religious institution has attracted the attention of researchers looking into the socio-political position of the AAC in the post-Soviet period (Charles 2009; Tchilingirian 2007a), its relationships with the state (N. Mkrtchyan 2014; Nieczuja-Ostrowski 2020; Ogannisyan 2014; Petrosyan 2016), and its role in the formation and maintenance of Armenian national identity (Antonyan 2011, 2014; Guroian 1992; Matsuzato and Danielyan 2013; Siekierski 2009, 2010, 2014).

The academic tradition of regarding the AAC as a focal point of religious life in Armenia has obscured an intricate power dynamic. As I show in the next subsection, instead of serving as a

source of theological and moral guidance and providing a blueprint for rituals and ceremonies, the AAC serves as an extension of the Armenian Christian community. In other words, Armenians do not view their being Christians as contingent upon institutional affiliation with the AAC, knowing its theology, following the prescribed moral rules, or even participating in AAC rituals. Christianness and Armenianness merge together and need no external confirmation on behalf of the Church. This fundamental understanding of the nature of Christianity in Armenia has a significant influence on the relationship between the majority of Armenians, the AAC, and Protestant Christian denominations.

Several research projects investigating religious freedom in Armenia have been conducted by scholars working for international organizations, such as OSCE. They zeroed in on particular sets of issues, such as the rights of children belonging to religious minorities (Hovhannisyan 2014), religious courses in the public school curriculum[176] (Hovannisyan and Davtyan 2013), and the violations of religious rights in general (Danielyan, Vardanyan, and Avtandilyan 2009; Eranosyan, Ishkhanyan, and Ishkhanyan 2010). However, these investigations are often data collections about the violations of religious rights rather than their analytical examination. In this regard, they are similar to the reports of other international organizations, such as the Helsinki Group, or the Annual Report on Religious Freedom published by the U.S. Department of State. The publications of a long time defender of religious freedom in post-Soviet countries, Felix Corley, generally fall under the same category, although some of his works (Corley 1996a, 1996b, 1998) are more analytical in nature. Similarly, Hranush Kharatyan (2008) surveys Armenian legislation on religious freedom and emphasizes the continuity between international (European) standards and Armenian laws. Yet, she

[176] Satenik Mkrtchyan turns to this topic at a more analytical level and examines the influence of the course "The History of the Armenian Church" in schools on students' socialization, as well as on the formation of their identity and attitude towards other religious groups (S. Mkrtchyan 2014b, 2014a).

does not address the inconsistencies between the existing legislation and practical reality in the sphere of religious freedom in Armenia.

Of all the Protestant minorities in post-Soviet Armenia, scholars have paid most attention to Pentecostals since they are the most numerous religious group. As in the case of the Armenian Church, the question of identity remains central to scholarship about Pentecostals. For example, Anna Ohanjanyan (2014) explores how being a Pentecostal/Baptist is reconciled with being and feeling Armenian. Yulia Antonyan compares the practices of religious boundary-making in the community of Pentecostals with those in the AAC (2018).

Scholars analyzing religious freedom in Armenia offer various explanations for intolerance towards religious minorities. Ani Sarkissian (2008) argues that this animosity is a result of several factors, such as the low level of democratization and "the stealing of adherents away from traditional religions" (168). The last reason is used by the members of religious minorities as well because they regard social animosity as a testimony to the success of their proselytism. In academic literature, the emphasis on religious competition identifies the AAC as the main driver of religious antagonism in post-Soviet Armenia (Kharatyan 2007; Lusyan 2011; Namoradze 2008). According to this approach, the AAC lobbies "for government benefits and legislation which restricts the rights, and subsequently the growth, of minority religious groups" (Sarkissian 2008:175) and creates an atmosphere of intolerance. Following a similar approach, Alexander Agadjanyan (2014b) explores how the AAC strategically labels religious movements as "sects" (Arm. Աղանդ), which is a derogatory term in Armenia, when it senses ideological insecurity vis-à-vis these groups (83). According to these views, the Armenian state does not have an independent agenda in the religious market and appears as a wish-granting factory for the AAC. Therefore, a negative perception of religious diversity in Armenia by ordinary Armenians is presented as a result of the intentional

campaign of the AAC.

Grant Mikaelyan (2014) argues that social animosity towards religious minorities and JWs in particular is a result of a belief that they "are not religious movements but groups separated from the external world that work to pull a person out of the society" (239). In addition, researchers argue that intolerance towards religious minorities and JWs in particular are driven by their evasion of compulsory military service (Mikaelyan 2014), their abstention from civic participation, such as elections (Sarkissian 2008:173–74), as well as society's annoyance with their proselytism techniques. Overall, the academic literature on religious freedom in Armenia tends to oversimplify religious diversity in the country and often treats different Protestant groups as functionally similar because of their theological opposition to the dominant Armenian Church. This approach does not allow us to explore the question of why certain religious minorities, such as JWs, experience significantly more animosity in Armenia compared to other religious groups, such as the Pentecostals.

As I show below, discriminatory state policies are driven not so much by the Armenian Church, but by the interests pursued by the political elite (for a similar view, see Lusyan 2011:282). The vulnerability of the political regime and its reliance on western financial aid serve as far better predictors of religious (in-)tolerance in Armenia in the post-Soviet period. While the Church's demands have undergone little change since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the actual policies of the state regarding religious freedom have transformed significantly. These transformations have been more contingent on the international and geopolitical interests of the Armenian elites rather than on domestic social demand or pressure from the AAC. Social hostility towards religious minorities is influenced by state policies, media, and school curriculum, among other things. Also, the resentment of JWs and other proselytizing groups stems from the very logic of Armenian Christianity that is based upon the idea that Armenians are born Christian and therefore do not need

additional catechism or any other external confirmation.

Christianity in Armenia

In order to understand the nature of the strained relationship between JWs and the Armenian state and society at large, it is crucial to analyze the fundamental principles according to which Christianity is perceived and practiced in Armenia. These principles create a very unique power dynamic between the AAC, lay Armenians, and Protestant religious organizations, such as the JWs, and serve as an overarching interpretative framework for the Armenian religious field, as well as for individual and institutional attitudes, choices, and preferences.

Academic literature as well as dominant public discourse regard the Armenian Church and its official teaching as a legitimate source of the definition of what is officially Christian, *or* what is orthodox (Agadjanian 2014a; Antonyan 2011; Siekierski 2013). The multitude of extra-ecclesial Christian practices commonly practiced in Armenia have often been labeled as *folk* or *vernacular* Christianity in an attempt to account for a vibrant Christian life that does not fit into the teaching and practices of the AAC (Kryukova 2016, 2018, 2019; Manoukian 2019). However, this analytical imposition of the dichotomy of "official" and "popular" religion obscures the nature and dynamic of Christianity in Armenia rather than giving any epistemological benefits. At the level of practice, in Armenia, Christianity does not distinguish between official and folk Christian practices, but forms a continuum, where the AAC is not in the center and does not serve as a source of legitimate orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Christianity in Armenia can be characterized as a discursive tradition maintained through creating, (re)-negotiating, interpreting, and rejecting practices, beliefs, and principles with reference to the only legitimating source whose authority is indisputably accepted by nearly everyone. This approach establishes Christian orthodoxy not by referring to the presumed ideal-typical Christian

doctrine or the position of the Church, but by identifying the power that establishes certain practices as *Christian* and dictates which Christian practices are *correct* and which are *incorrect* (for a similar understanding of orthodoxy, see Asad 1986; Grewal 2016). The undisputed legitimizing source of Armenian Christianity is *belonging to the Armenian community*. According to Konrad Siekerski's (2014:23) apt description:

> One can also find a clearly expressed notion of the "innate Christianity of Armenians," which is presented as a contrast to the Soviet atheistic ideology, and which is believed to prevail over the current threats posed by competing religious denominations. According to this notion, an Armenian, even if he or she was not baptized and has not even the most basic knowledge of the Church's doctrines, is still considered "a bearer of Christianity," as if this were a part of the person's biological or genetic character. Consequently, the "Christian blood" that flows through the veins of Armenians is often viewed as precluding the possibility that their minds could have been fully secularized in Soviet times, or that they can nowadays be irretrievably "brainwashed" or "bribed" by some other religious group.

The key emphasis in this description is the self-sufficient character of Armenian Christianity that does not require external confirmation, enhancement, or influence in the form of catechism, evangelization, or even baptism. Understanding Christianity as an effect or consequence of one's belonging to the Armenian *azg*, usually translated as "nation," turns the Armenian community and tradition, as well as Armenianness into the basic source of legitimate Christian authority. As a result, "*Hay-k'ristonya* ('Armenian-Christian') is understood as one whole, so that the two parts of this expression must definitely be hyphenated" (L. Abrahamyan 2011). Christianness in Armenia is predicated on one's membership in the Armenian community so much so that one remains Christian even if he or she maintains little to no relationship with the institution of the AAC. In other words, being Christian is viewed as Armenians' birthright. This framework explains why Armenians who practice Buddhism can consider themselves Christians without any internal contradiction or reservation (Antonyan 2011) – being Buddhist, that is practicing a different religion,

does not revoke one's intrinsic, innate Christianness. Moreover, the innate Christianness of Armenians potentially imbues any practice with a hue of Christianity, and one's understanding of what is Christian is interpreted, negotiated, and sanctioned by the Armenian community of which the AAC is but a part.

The innate character of Armenian Christianity leaves little to no space for the priests of the AAC to impose the Church's teaching and practice. Therefore, the Armenian Christian community is emicly understood in Durkheimian terms as "a moral community made up of all the faithful, both laity and priests" (Durkheim 1995:43) with an important difference – the priests do not have higher authority to define "correct" and "incorrect" Christian practices.[177] This Christian community includes all Armenians while the AAC serves as its institutional extension with a certain degree of autonomy and its own rules. The Armenian Christian community and the AAC can be perceived as the same, yet, frequently, differentiating between the two is very important. This perception of the nature of the Armenian Church is crucial for understanding the attitude that Armenians have towards the AAC, clergy, and importantly foreign Protestant groups, such as JWs.[178]

Regarding themselves as intrinsically Christian, Armenians demonstrate a deep aversion towards any attempts from outside to define Christianity. They reject unity with the AAC when the clergy claim legitimate authority to define Christianness or try to assert the Church's indispensability for one' Christianity. In other words, there is deeply inculcated resistance that Armenians exhibit towards ecclesiastical authority and its attempts to put under control one's religiosity and

[177] This dynamic is significantly different in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, such as the Russian or Georgian Orthodox Churches, where the priests fervidly guard their monopoly on being exclusive bearers of special religious competence that is indispensable for sustaining one's Christianness.

[178] For example, it explains why Armenians express a high level of trust in the Armenian Church, yet they do not conceal their contempt for clergy and especially the head of the AAC, Catholicos Garegin II (Caucasian Research Resource Centers 2008; Kryukova 2019; Siekierski 2014). This contempt toward the Church hierarchs only targets the AAC, while the more inclusive Christian community of all Armenians remains respected and venerated.

importantly one's understanding of what is properly Christian. Konrad Siekerski provides a colorful example of such a rejection:

> While participating in a local religious feast attended by a number of clergymen, the author observed that, after the priests had left the place, a gathering of men started to discuss their [of the priests – AT] misbehavior. As one of them concluded: "We could make all this celebration without them, it is our feast and they have nothing to do with that. Always in Armenia it was the people who kept faith and traditions." (Siekierski 2014:29)

Siekerski explains this attitude by referring to the ubiquitous skepticism towards the moral character of Armenian clergy. Although this skepticism is undoubtedly an important factor, the informant emphasizes the self-sufficient, communal character of Armenian Christianity that retains its independence outside of the Church[179] and is not contingent upon any external sources.

Many towns and villages in Armenia do not have AAC parishes, and neither the leadership of the AAC nor the locals regard it as something that needs to change.[180] The locals often view having or building a church or having an organized parish led by a priest as unnecessary or unimportant for their being Christians (for example, see Antonyan 2018). Often, even if there is a church building in a town, liturgies led by the Armenian clergy take place only a few times a year or do not happen at all. Nevertheless, the absence of the Armenian priests in the everyday life of people does not impede the intensity of Christian practices. Quite the contrary, the locals use ancient (often half-destroyed) churches and ubiquitous local shrines – *tukh manuks, maturs, surbs*[181]– for an

[179] Other similar instances are discussed in Antonyan 2010; Kryukova 2016:107.

[180] According to a survey conducted in the mid-2000s, about 60% of respondents in Armenia said they did not know any clergy members (Tchilingirian 2007b).

[181] With the term *Tukh Manuks* (arm. Թուխ Մանուկ) local Armenians refer to ubiquitous sacred places, shrines, and various sacred artifacts, including natural objects, such as rocks and caves, and man-made objects, such as books and relics. Often, dreams serve as an impetus to build a *tukh manuk* or to designate an object as sacred. Usually, the local community takes care of all the shrines regardless of who initiated their erection. People come to these places to pray, to light candles, to get holy healing water, or to ask for healing from an illness. Inside of these shrines, one can find icons, pictures, and gifts that are left as a sign of gratitude for the abolition of disease. "There is no difference – to come here or to go to church. It is the same. The only difference is that they don't give away bread here, don't hold a [liturgical]

array of Christian rituals that do not require the participation of Armenian priests (Kryukova 2018). In fact, building and worshipping shrines and pilgrimages, as well as setting up *khachk'ars* (Arm. Խաչքար; lit. "cross-stones") and performing *matagh* (Arm. Մատաղ), among others, have been more essential to Armenian Christianness than attending liturgies, having or learning the Scripture, or having connections to a priest. Yet this vibrant Christian life does not stand in opposition to Christianity, but emphasizes belonging to it, as well as underscores practitioners' faithfulness and Christian piety.

The AAC accepts the communal orientation of Armenian Christianity because its social, political, and economic power is predicated on the idea of unity with the Armenian people. To put it bluntly, according to the logic of the Armenian Christian field, the Armenian people will remain Christian without the AAC, but the latter will be absolutely pointless without Armenians. The majority of the Armenian priests not only accept the extra-ecclesial practices, but also encourage them, although these practices further underscore the self-sufficiency of the laity's Christianness. In 2017, in a TV documentary about the aforementioned local shrines called *tukh manuks*, Armenian journalist Stepan Zakharyan asked an Armenian priest, Asoghik Karapetyan,[182] about the attitude of the AAC towards extra-ecclesiastical practices:

> **Stepan Zakaryan**: Father Asoghik, these Tukh Manuks are usually chapels where, say, the Church does not offer religious services (Arm. ծառայություն չի մատուցում), in Armenia. What is the Church's attitude to these beliefs that people go, light up candles, and so on?
> **Rev. Karapetyan**: You know, you gave a correct characterization – the Church does not carry out religious services. Yet the Church, in its depth, does execute services there because the Church is the community of believers. And if people by their own volition

service. Here, you're alone, alone with God – no one is around, no one is bothering you…You can come here and say to God all you want. I love to come here – I like it here" (as quoted in Kryukova 2019:257)

[182] At the time of the interview, the Reverend Asoghik Karapetyan was the Director of the Museums and Archives of the Holy See of Ejmiatsin. His high rank allows us to speculate that his view is close to the official position of the AAC.

> visit these folk shrines, then the Church is present there too and the Church is offering its official services there. For us, the Armenian Apostolic Church is not limited by the Christian period because the Church includes our entire national spirituality. (Poghosyan 2017)

This quote illustrates the primacy of people's practices of defining what the Christian church is. It also shows the limits of the power of clergy to impose its definition of what is Christian in the Armenian context because of the self-sufficient, community-centric view on Armenian Christianity. The Armenian Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy cannot be established through an appeal to extra-communal sources – sacred texts or special abilities/knowledge principally inaccessible to "laity" – everything that, according to the Weberian tradition, priests need to substantiate their claim for power (Weber 1993:5). In the Armenian Christian field, the Armenian priesthood is nowhere near holding a monopoly on knowledge or the ability to access the Divine and, therefore, is but an extension of the Armenian Christian community. Few members of Armenian clergy are dissatisfied with their position or claim a necessity to "ameliorate" so-called *vernacular* Christian practices and that Armenian Christianity should be brought under their control. These disorganized and futile endeavors have only engendered disparagement towards the clergy and, by proxy, to the whole institutional dimension of the AAC on behalf of many Armenians. This contempt is not an accidental short-term set of attitudes, but a reflection of a deep structural understanding of the position of the AAC in the community and the power dynamic in the Armenian religious field.[183] The presence, rhetoric, and actions of the AAC are welcome as long as it expressly acts in accordance with the foundational principle of homology of Armenianness and Christianness.

[183] Many scholars, the AAC's officials, and politicians castigated the AAC for the lack of effort to evangelize the Armenian population (for a variety of such appraisals, see Corley 1998:308–11). They claim that the AAC's attempts have been futile because of the debilitating legacy of the Soviet anti-religious policies, lack of trained clergy, and socio-political turmoil of the post-independent era (Guroian 1992; Sarkissian 2008:165–168; Tchilingirian 2007:287). However, these explanations ignore the power dynamic in the field of Armenian Christianity that does not allow for the AAC's imposition of its extra-communal principles onto the majority of Armenian population. In other words, the AAC simply cannot proselytize because this very idea is foreign to its ethos and would not be embraced by most Armenians.

Thus, with the agreement of most members of clergy, Armenians perceive the AAC as a powerful institutional extension of their Christianness – an extension that should work for the good of the community. In fact, the AAC's involvement in the late-Soviet movement seeking the independence of Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh), as well as in solving political crises and other internal and external threats (both putative and real) was widely appreciated.[184] Yet the moment the AAC in general or certain members of clergy in particular take a political stance that goes against the perceived interests of the community, the Armenian Church and its clergy are immediately excluded from Armenian Christianity and even from the Armenian community. For example, in December 2020, in the Armenian city of Sisian, an Armenian priest refused to shake hands with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan as a sign of protest against the latter's policies. This sparked backlash on behalf of the inhabitants of Sisian many of whom marched to the church in order to physically remove the priest from his position. Here is a comment from one of the participants of this march:

> "Dear friends, at this moment, we are marching from the [central] square in Sisian towards the church in order to throw that so-called "priest" out of the church. He has nothing to do with our spiritual life. He is a very "small" man since he refused to shake the Prime Minister's hand and he has to be removed from the church. The Church belongs to the people. And no one can dare to do these things pretending to speak on behalf of the people. Now we will remove him from the church – we'll throw him out, so that he never dares to enter the church again. He doesn't have a right to be our spiritual pastor in the town of Sisian. (Muradyan 2020)

To sum up, the ethnoreligious ideology emphasizes that being Christian is an innate characteristic of being born Armenian, which makes Christianness in its local understanding a salient element of Armenian identity. Armenians regard their Christianness as a self-sufficient quality that does not require any maintenance or external confirmation. Even when Armenian priests claim the right to interpret or practice Christianity, their claims are often rejected. This rejection is all the more

[184] The ambiguous position of Catholicos Vazgen I at the onset of the Karabakh independence movement was harshly criticized on many fronts (Corley 1998:294).

vehement when it comes to JWs' intrusive and publicly conspicuous proselytism, in which they outwardly discard the possibility of innate Christianity. JWs dismiss the understanding of Christianity as a simple consequence of being born Armenian and insist that Christians need to defer to the legitimacy of external religious sources – for example, the Scripture. They maintain that Christianity needs to be acquired and mastered – most likely under the tutelage of a more experienced or legitimate member of the group. Besides, the WTBTS with its strict hierarchy and the Governing Body located overseas requires regular attendance and participation in congregation life and public ministry. In other words, the WTBTS claims to have exclusive knowledge that can sustain one's Christianness. This approach disentangles Armenianness and Christianity and undermines the idea of innate Armenian Christianness. Therefore, Armenians vehemently reject this view as being completely alien to Armenia. Here is an example of a typical response to the public ministry of JWs in Armenia:

> Why are you showing me your fake Bible?! I am Christian, my parents and their parents were Christians. We are the first Christian nation that became Christian hundreds of years ago. Why are you trying to convert me? I am Christian! Go to the Persians, Arabs, or other Muslims and recruit them – they are Muslims so pitch it to them and stop hunting our souls.

JWs are perceived as a subversive power that undermines the idea of the innate Christianity of Armenians, which is one of the basic principles of Armenian identity. Their attempts to disentangle Armenianness and Christianity are viewed as an existential threat to the nation, the country, and ultimately to self-understanding. Overall, the western principles of freedom of religion that were formulated in the unique historical context of western Europe in the course of the Reformation, religious wars, and the Enlightenment clash with the local understanding of religion and religious freedom. In the Armenian context, proselytism makes little to no sense as one is born Christian and therefore needs no additional catechization. While most religious groups in Armenia

follow the basic rules of the local context, others, such as JWs, seriously disrupt the relative harmony of the Armenian religious field. As I show below, this is one of the main reasons why JWs are treated with antagonism in Armenia.

The Armenian Religious Field

During the Soviet period, religious life in Armenia retained a certain degree of vibrance especially with regard to extra-ecclesial practices, such as visiting multiple shrines, possessing the Bible and icons, or celebrating religious holidays. Nevertheless, it was confined to the private sphere and was almost completely invisible in public spaces. During the last years of the Soviet period and especially during independence, religion rapidly underwent a process of de-privatization and entered the socio-political sphere. Religious practices were no longer regarded as a private business but were increasingly viewed as existentially important for the future of Armenia and Armenians.[185] During the Soviet period, the Armenian Church was under the strict control of civil authorities, but after independence, this relationship became more interdependent, although the Armenian Church generally remained more dependent on the state than vice versa. In the post-Soviet period, religious liberalization and symbiotic state-Church relationships significantly influenced the Armenian religious field, which is composed of several categories of actors that hold different political and ideological weight in Armenian society, enjoy various degrees of support on behalf of the state and the majority of Armenians, and have considerably different numbers of followers.

The major religious organization in Armenia is undoubtedly the Armenian Apostolic Church. According to the 2011 Census, over 93% of the population of Armenia consider themselves

[185] It was especially obvious after 1988, when anti-Soviet attitudes and sentiments assumed a form of religious participation and affiliation with the Armenian Church.

its members (Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia 2011).[186] Excluding members of other religious groups, only 3% of the population directly or indirectly indicated[187] that they are not affiliated with any religious organization. These statistics demonstrate the dominant position of the AAC in the Armenian religious field with all the reservations described in the previous subsection. The AAC clergy has been promoting the image of the Mother Church that unites all Armenians around the globe and serves as an indispensable element of Armenianness and, importantly, Armenian statehood. The AAC proclaims that association with any other religious organizations is a precursor to the dissolution of Armenians into the modern, global world and a direct threat to the Armenian state and nationhood. The AAC took on the role of a space for the enactment, embodiment, and re-production of the ethnic-centered worldview, where being Armenian is simultaneously the highest value and the only principle of legitimacy. The idea of the fusion of Armenianness and being an AAC member has been shared and propagated by the Catholicos, the head of the AAC, the priesthood, as well as by most politicians in Armenia.[188] The rapprochement between the political elites and the Armenian Church was especially tangible during the presidencies of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. Later in the chapter, I analyze how this fusion of religious and national symbols molded a negative attitude towards JWs in Armenia.

The second category of religious actors includes traditional ethnic religious groups, such as the Jewish community, the Assyrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, the

[186] As I mentioned in the previous subsection, being Christian and being a member of the AAC are frequently perceived as the same. The census reflects Armenians' nearly ubiquitous identification as Christians. When the question is framed in terms of institutional belonging, the answer almost always is the "Armenian Apostolic Church," which does not necessarily imply any real affiliation with it.

[187] 1% of the respondents claimed that they are not members of any religious group; 2% said they did not have religious beliefs; and 0.3% refused to answer the question.

[188] The nearly universal support of this idea by politicians was more common before the Velvet Revolution in 2018. The new government has pronouncedly distanced itself from being untied with the AAC.

Russian Orthodox Church, and the Yazidis' religious community.[189] Most of these communities formed in the 19th century when the territory of contemporary Armenia was taken over by the Russian Empire. During the Soviet period, they did not function officially, and many of their buildings were destroyed or used as warehouses (Oganesyan 2018; Tokmantcev 2013). The situation changed when Armenia obtained independence, and these ethnic communities were able to reap the fruits of the declared religious liberalization. Unlike most other religious actors in the Armenian religious field, these ethno-religious communities were not regarded as posing a threat to the unity of the Armenian people and the cohesion of the Armenian state.[190] On the contrary, their very existence is consistent with the dominant discourse prescribing that ethnic and religious boundaries overlap. In this sense, the religious organizations that cater towards their respective ethnic groups indirectly emphasize the necessity for the ethno-religious unity of Armenians. The Armenian civil authorities have expressed their support of these religious organizations, while their religious leaders have collaborated with each other in various areas.[191] Not only does this close relationship underscore the normalcy of ethnic and religious fusion, but it also allows the Armenian state to demonstrate its dedication to the freedom of religion since these religious communities are a testimony that the Armenian government does not inhibit religious diversity. In addition, certain religious organizations in this group, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, are important

[189] With a few reservations, the Catholic community may also be included in this group. Although most of its members are Armenians, they live compactly in the Shirak province in the northwest of Armenia and in southern parts of Georgia. Apart from religious affiliation, their distinct western Armenian dialects and, most importantly, self-identification as a separate group called "Franks" (Siekierski 2016:323) allows us to regard this community as a subethnic group. In addition, unlike in Protestant Churches, one's membership in this church is a birthright. All these aspects narrow the distance between the Catholic community and the ethnic Churches, although its ethnic boundaries are blurry and permeable.

[190] Again, the Catholic community is an exception because its Catholic orientation has been regarded as a sign of division among Armenians.

[191] For example, a newly built Cathedral of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church was commissioned with a blessing from the Catholicos of All Armenians, Garegin II. Also, the Catholicos participated in the ceremony of the consecration of the new church in 2017 (Gabrielyan 2017).

geopolitically because their existence in Armenia highlights the political and military alliance of Russia and Armenia.[192]

The reality behind these ethno-religious groups is not as harmonious as at the level of official rhetoric. For example, the number of Russian churchgoers in the Russian Orthodox parish in Yerevan is surprisingly small, whereas Armenians constitute the majority of the community.[193] Only one of the five clergy members is half-Russian, while the others are Armenian. The priest in the Georgian Church is Russian, while most of his flock are local Armenians. In addition, the priests of the Russian parish as well as their counterparts in the Catholic Armenian Church propagate the idea that their respective Church represents true Armenian Christianity.[194] While they do not challenge the principle of congruity between ethnic and religious boundaries per se, they reinterpret its meaning and undermine the leadership role of the AAC in the pastorship of the Armenian people.[195] Yet the AAC and the Armenian political elites prefer to overlook this breach for several reasons. First, the aforementioned benefits outweigh the ideological losses. In addition, neither of

[192] A similar role is assigned to the "Blue Mosque" located in the center of Yerevan. For example, in 2015, the Armenian Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan participated in the 250th anniversary of the foundation of the Blue Mosque. In his official speech he said, "closely related Armenian and Iranian peoples who have a rich history and who take their beginning in one of the oldest cradles of humanity enriched the world with their fine cultural legacy" (The Government of the Republic of Armenia 2015). It is a good example of a general policy of the Armenian government that uses religious platforms to propagate diplomatic and geopolitical messages.

[193] It was true before the influx of Russian emigrants who arrived in Armenia after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

[194] The Armenian Church did not accept the decisions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451 CE and split away from what later became the Greek Orthodox and the Catholic Churches. For centuries after this schism, communities of Chalcedonian Armenians, i.e. those who accepted the Council in Chalcedon, argued that they represented the true pre-schismatic Armenian Christianity (Hakobyan 2012). Appealing to the same tradition, today the Russian Orthodox and Armenian Catholic priests often claim that "the Armenian Church was formed as an indivisible part of the ecumenical Church of Christ. But the Chalcedonian discord divided the Armenian Church. When the theological pressure increased, the Catholic Armenians dispersed and for centuries were in the minority, but they have always been present on their ancestral land" (as in Siekierski 2016:318).

[195] Although officially the Russian and the Armenian Churches maintain close contact, the parish of the Russian Church in Yerevan has very strained relationships with Ejmiatsin. The rupture followed the conversion of one of the promising alumni of the Ejmiatsin Gevorgyan Seminary into Orthodoxy at the end of the 2000s. Later, he joined the Russian Orthodox parish in K'anak'eṛ.

these communities has a lot of followers or engages in conspicuous forms of recruitment in public spaces. As a result, these "violations" remain unknown to the majority of Armenians and therefore pose no serious threat to the dominant political ideology.

The third group of actors in the Armenian religious field comprises the religious communities that are not the AAC, but whose presence in the Armenian religious landscape is legitimized by their relatively long historical presence in Armenia and the various degrees of their support of the dominant religious and nationalist discourses. For example, the communities of Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists who trace their presence in Armenia back to the 19th century are regarded as traditional and therefore, permissible. Their presence in Armenia is never emphasized in the media or among the political activists who aspire for the practical implementation of the ideological union between the Armenian Church and the state. Both Churches genuinely embrace the official discourse of the supremacy of the AAC in the mission for the preservation of Armenianness.[196] The following excerpt from my interview with a Baptist pastor reflects the perception of the Armenian religious landscape by the Baptist community:

> We are very close with the Armenian Church. You know we have been here for 200 years, and we have become Armenian. This church is Armenian – that is why we are using Classical Armenian in our services. We consider the AAC the Mother Church. For over nine centuries, the AAC was protecting the Armenian culture, Armenian language, and Armenian identity. There was not state, and the Armenians were saved only because of the Church. That is why the Church is immensely important. We have a very good relationship with the Armenian Apostolic Church – recently there was a conference organized by the AAC, I presented there as a speaker. I know a lot of people from Ejmiatsin (the residence of the Catholicos – A.T.), and I am in contact with the Catholicos. You know, I recently wrote a book about the Baptists in Armenia and on the back cover I wrote that we recognize the AAC as our Mother Church.

Untraditionally for Baptist Churches that usually prefer to use a vernacular language, the

[196] In the 1970s, there were discussions about the possibility of a reunification of the Armenian Baptists with the AAC under the leadership of Catholicos Vazgen I. Presumably for political reasons, these discussions never materialized in practice.

Armenian Baptists say the Lord's Prayer in classical Armenian which is still used as a liturgical language in the AAC. During the Sunday service, the pastor prays for people of Armenia, its army, leaders, and even for the health of the Catholicos of the AAC.[197] The Adventist Church also emphasizes its unity and closeness with the Armenian Church. For example, its building was constructed according to the traditional canons of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture, so that one can easily conclude that it is an Armenian church. Conscientious objection which used to be a marker of Adventism was declared to be a matter of personal conscience in the 1970s. Since then, young male Adventists decide for themselves whether or not they wish to bear arms. And today, most male Adventists of the draft age opt to serve in the military forces. In the Armenian case, very few potential Adventist conscripts choose the alternative civil service. In general, the lifestyle, aspirations, and ideological outlook of the members of these Churches differ very little from the majority of Armenian society. As most other Armenians, the members of these Churches continue to associate themselves with the Armenian Church regardless of their specific Protestant tinge.

The fourth group includes all of the "foreign" religious organizations that do not belong to the second and third groups and that are viewed as undesirable and dangerous for Armenian people as they "penetrate the country in order to weaken it […] and undermine the national identity and mentality" (Amirbekyan 2013). Most Armenians lump Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church "Word of Life," and many others, in the category of "cults" or "sects" knowing little to nothing about them apart from their names. This label is used in a clear derogatory sense and underscores the deleterious and dangerous nature of these religious groups.

Yet, the overall attitude towards the "sects" varies. Some of them are regarded simply as

[197] This tradition was borrowed from the liturgy of the Armenian Church.

suspicious or strange as is the case with the Pentecostals and most other Evangelicals. Other religious groups are viewed as the epitome of danger and duplicity. This last category has transformed several times in the past 30 years and has changed its focus. At the very end of the Soviet period and the first half of the 1990s, nationalist activists and some priests of the AAC viewed the followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (the ISKCON) community as undoubtedly the most unwanted religious group in Armenia. Despite the community's insignificant number of devotees (fewer than 200 people), an official registration obtained in 1990, and its members' active involvement in aiding those who suffered in the 1988 Armenian earthquake, it was the prime object of open hostility. The ISKCON preachers were attacked by activists from the nationalist political party "Dashnaktsut'yun," the priests of the Armenian Church (Corley 1998:323) and the Organization of Homeland Defenders, among others. In 1994, the worshippers of the Temple in Yerevan were arrested after a raid by the police. Also, the Armenian customs agency confiscated ISKCON literature sent from Moscow (ISKCON 1994). These repressions unfolded at the backdrop of a media campaign against the Hare Krishna community both on TV and in the press where they were consistently described as dangerous and anti-Armenian. Importantly, this pressure on the Hare Krishna Movement was efficient, and by the mid-1990s, the community almost completely disappeared from public space in Armenia.

Over the past decade, another religious organization, the "Word of Life" Church, has become notable in the Armenian religious landscape. This charismatic Church has grown to embrace a few thousand members. As in the case with most other Protestant denominations, regular Armenians know very little about the teaching or practices of this religious group, yet they generally

perceive it as dangerous and potentially destructive.[198] When the Church first appeared in the Armenian public discourse at the beginning of the 2010s,[199] few Armenians knew its name. Later, some representatives of Armenian showbusiness joined this Church, which increased its recognizability. The visible success of some of the members of the "World of Life" Church laid the foundation for the belief that "this affiliation is often one of the conditions of their success" (Aghalaryan 2012). This quote reflects a general concern that a foreign religious group can use its financial might and influence in order to promote its members who would later promote the interests of this group. Because of its foreign origin, the "World of Life" Church, as well as all "alien" religious groups, have been accused of being subversive agents of the enemies of the Armenian state, such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, and the U.S. (Mikoyan 2014). After the Velvet Revolution in 2018, the opposition political parties started a relatively successful media campaign, in which they claimed that incumbent Prime Minister Pashinyan "hires cult followers" (Yerevan Today 2019) or that JWs comprise his electoral base (Grigoryan 2020), which was to prove the subversive and duplicitous nature of the new government. In other words, the high public profile of the followers of foreign religious groups instigated high pressure on behalf of political activists, the Armenian Church, and therefore, regular people.

At the same time, other foreign religious groups are not subject to much intolerance and suspicion. Multiple Pentecostal groups and even Mormons do not engender a harshly negative reaction. They are rarely mentioned in the media, and regular people do not usually bring them up

[198] As is the case with many Charismatic Churches, in its worship, the "Word of Life" Church emphasizes healing practices, miracles, as well as dreams and visions. It also enforces the general Protestant requirement to actively participate in the life of a congregation.

[199] The "Word of Life" Church originated in the 1980s in the U.S., and its first followers came to Armenian at the end of 1990s.

when talking about the negative consequences of religious diversity.[200] Unlike the followers of the Hare Krishna Movement, the World of Life Church, and as I show below, Jehovah's Witnesses, these religious groups keep a low public profile.[201]

In the 1990s-2000s, a neopagan movement gained traction in Armenia. The brotherhood of neopagans called the Order of the Sons of Ari" (Arm. Արորդիների Ուխտ) was founded in 1991 by Slak Kakosyan, a Soviet dissident and a follower of Garegin Nzhde's ideology of ts'eghakron (Arm. Ցեղակրոն; lit. religion of nation). As the neopagans openly pursued the goal of the revitalization of the Armenian nation, many prominent politicians sympathized with them (Antonyan 2010). In the 1990s and early 2000s, Slak Kakosyan was a frequent guest on political talk shows, and the neopagan brand was recognizable. Since Slak Kakosyan's death in 2005, the movement has been less conspicuous and popular in Armenia.

Conspicuousness is related not only to public ministry, but also to the location and appearance of places of worship. For example, in the post-Soviet urban landscape, the Armenian churches are seen in the most prominent locations in all Armenian cities, including Yerevan.[202] Their central location underscores the importance of the Armenian Church. The places of worship that belong to the second group of religious actors, i.e. traditional ethno-religious communities, are also

[200] According to research on the public opinion of religious organizations in Armenia conducted in 2009 (Eranosyan, Ishkhanyan, and Ishkhanyan 2010), more than half of the respondents had never heard about Mormons, Baptists, Adventists, or Evangelicals, or did not know any specific information about them. My field observations fully confirm these findings.

[201] Although Mormons proselytize and can be occasionally seen on the streets of Armenian cities, their numbers are perceptibly low. Plus, Mormons do not rely on local Armenian-speaking followers but depend on missionaries from the U.S. who come to Armenia for two years and learn the language in order to conduct public service. Usually, their proficiency in Armenian remains subpar, which does not allow them to engage in a serious theological conversation. At the same time, their mastery of Armenian pleases the local population as it is extremely uncommon for foreigners to learn Armenian. When I joined the Mormon preachers in their public service, I noticed that most Armenians reacted positively to their attempts to preach – the locals expressed a lot of patience and interest in the message propagated by the Armenian-speaking American youth.

[202] During the Soviet time, they were less noticeable.

visibly present in the urban landscape of Yerevan and other Armenian cities. For example, the aforementioned newly built cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church marks the entrance to the Armenian capital on the way from the international airport, so that the very first church that visitors of Armenia see is a Russian church. Besides, both Russian churches in Yerevan ring church bells early on Sunday mornings and organize regular "processions of the Cross," marches with icons and other religious symbols around the church accompanied by singing religious hymns. Therefore, they are very tangibly present in certain neighborhoods of Yerevan. The places of worship of the remaining religious groups are usually very inconspicuous and often blend in with the surrounding buildings. Today there are about 40 non-traditional religious groups in Armenia. Some communities have only one place of worship, while others like JWs have many dozens of Kingdom Halls. In downtown Yerevan, there are Adventist, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Baptist, and Mormon churches as well as a KH of Jehovah's Witnesses. Yet, during my fieldwork few residents of the center were able to tell me where those churches were located; usually, people get surprised when I tell them that there are churches other than the AAC in the center of Yerevan (see, the Appendix II for pictures of these places of worship). One can live or work next to a place of worship for years without realizing the purpose of the building. This is especially true for the Mormon Church in the center that is located in the center of a very crowded market called Voski Shuka (Arm. Ոսկի Շուկա; the Gold Market), yet even among the workers of the market very few know about the church. The public visibility of the places of worship belonging to these groups is incomparable with that of the AAC and traditional ethno-religious communities.

Jehovah's Witnesses, State, and Society in Armenia

Although various religious groups drew public and state attention in post-Soviet Armenia, JWs eventually became the embodiment of the religious alien. While nationalist groups with the

support or negligence on behalf of police were able to suppress the Hare Krishna movement, JWs' growth was not hampered by the same hostility. Many people were willing to join the group despite the rising intolerance towards all foreign religious organizations. In the 1990s and the 2000s, the JW community was gaining approximately 700-800 new members per year; while in 1992, this religious group comprised about 250 members (Jirayr Avetisyan), by 1997, there were nearly 3,000 full-fledged publishers (WTBTS 1999a), not including those who had not yet been baptized or had just started the Bible study course. At the end of the 2000s, there were about 11,000 JWs in Armenia. As the number of WTBTS's followers was growing, the intensity, modes, and forms of intolerance towards JWs was transforming. Not only was the general population's attitude rapidly changing, but the state, police, the Armenian Church, and the media's treatment of JWs was also fluctuating in synch with the changes in domestic and international policies as well as in the socio-economic situation and the ideological framework.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Soviet Armenia

JWs' teaching first penetrated Armenia before the liberalization ushered in by *Perestroika*. According to the WTBTS's archives, Varduhi Terteryan who fled the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during WWI and later settled in France learned about the Truth from her brother who lived in the U.S. In 1936, she repatriated to Soviet Armenia and first introduced the teaching of the WTBTS to the locals.[203] It took several decades for the first permanent groups of JWs to form in Armenia. Some Witnesses came from Russia to participate in building and later operating the nuclear power plant in the city of Metsamor located a little over 20 miles from Yerevan. The history of the second prominent group is tied to the Avetisyan family whose patriarch, Sergey Avetisyan, learned the Truth from JWs in Russia and brought it to Armenia in 1974. Jirayr Avetisyan, one of

[203] Unfortunately, little is known about her life after her relocation to Armenia.

Sergey's sons, who accepted the Truth recalls,

> My father was always respectful towards the Bible, but he was not religious – he was not a believer [Arm. հավատացյալ], but he respected God's way. In that region, we had these sacred places – it could be a stone with other stones put around it. People would go there to pray. My father wanted to build a "chapel" (Arm. "մատուռ"), so that all the sacred things would be there. But in spring he went to Russia – he worked there as a member of a seasonal construction team. Usually, he would go in spring and come back in fall. At the time he was going to the Armavir region of Russia, Krasnodar province. And he met Witnesses there. They started to visit him and study the Bible with him. He listened to them, accepted it, and started to systematically learn [the teaching]. He came back to Armenia in 1974 and started to preach to our entire family.

Sergey was a zealous preacher and spoke about the Truth to his relatives and neighbors in the village of Nalbandyan in what is today the Armavir province of Armenia. Proselytism was sustained exclusively by his enthusiasm because at first, he did not have any auxiliary materials, not even the Bible. In later years, JWs from Russian cities of Armavir, Krasnodar, and Nevinnomyssk were coming to organize intensive Bible study sessions in the village. They were able to bring a typescript of the book "From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained"[204] that was in circulation throughout the Soviet Union since at least the early 1970s (WTBTS 2008:151). As Jirayr Avetisyan remembers,

> With that black and white book with the pictures and everything, they explained to us the plot of the Bible. How the Earth was created and lost, about the Flood, and so on until the end – the Book of Revelation. The whole Bible was rendered like that. My dad was explaining things to us, and we were accepting it. As kids we accepted its authority – it was close to our hearts, so we were talking about these things in streets, with friends… And we were trying to apply everything that was written. Sometimes, Witnesses from Russia would bring issues of the Watchtower typewritten or even handwritten. We were reading them, summarizing, discussing through translation – we were kids, and we didn't understand Russian – our father would translate for us.

These preaching efforts were very fruitful, and in August 1975, 16 persons were baptized

[204] In a few years, the Avetisyans were able to purchase an old Bible printed in 1883 in western Armenian and a few Bibles of the "Ararat" translation. At the same time, they obtained their first book in western Armenian "The Truth That Leads to Eternal Life" and used it widely in preaching.

including seven members of the Avetisyan family (four children, parents, and an over a hundred-year-old grandfather) and nine other villagers. It was the first small community of JWs in Armenia. By 1978, there were three groups of JWs in Armenia – in Nalbandyan, Yerevan, and Metsamor. All three groups included about 10-20 persons at most. The relationships with the larger village society and authorities were far from smooth. The Avetisyans' children were ridiculed by their peers for being believers, while the schoolteachers and principal demanded that they wear pioneer ties and pins or salute the flag. The KGB was also involved – they put pressure on Sergey to stop preaching and organizing meetings. Nalbandian was located close to the Soviet-Turkish border, and a vibrant religious community considered subversive and anti-Soviet could only be regarded as danger. As a result of the pressure, the Avetisyan family left Armenia and moved to Kharkiv, Ukraine, in 1979.

By the mid-1980s, there were already several groups of JWs throughout Armenia as new groups appeared in Leninakan (today's Gyumri), Hrazdan, Masis, and Martuni. The authorities and the KGB doubled their efforts to suppress the nascent movement. There were searches in the houses of JWs' leaders in Yerevan and Metsamor, but in both cases the police were unable to find religious literature or any other incriminating evidence. JWs were never arrested but they were invited to the KGB office for "conversations." Sometimes the police would deport Russian JWs who were coming to Armenia on short visits. One of the JWs' gatherings was personally attended by an official of the Communist party who asked the elders to discontinue religious meetings. At that time, there were already cases of imprisonment of JW conscientious objectors in Armenia.[205] However, since the JWs' groups were very small and the number of young Witnesses was insignificant, it was not a salient issue. Actually, a deficit of male JWs who would be able to lead a congregation plagued the community until the end of the 1990s. The first official congregation was

[205] One of these imprisoned JWs was Sergey Glebov (Ishkhanyan 1996).

established in 1989, and the Avetisyan brothers were asked to return to Armenia and serve as ministerial servants and then, as elders. Because of the shortage of experienced brothers, the next congregation in Armenia was not opened until 1994.[206]

This nascent community of JWs was forming at the backdrop of drastic socio-political transformations in Armenia. In general, before 1986, the Armenian Church and other religious groups, as well as any expression of religiosity were pushed out of public space (Corley 1996b, 1996c). Most priests and churchgoers of the AAC were Armenian repatriates from outside of the USSR, i.e. they were not truly locals. In the 1980s, there was little religious persecution in the Armenian Soviet Republic, except for the systematic and open mistreatment of the members of the ISKCON community who were imprisoned and harshly treated with drugs in psychiatric hospitals (Corley 1996c; Pranskevičiūtė and Juras 2014) and Pentecostals (Whooley 2009). The actions of the authorities to hamper the development of the JWs' groups do not seem to have been systematic or particularly fervid. As *Perestroika* took hold and the grip of the state loosened, religion became more visible and important in public and political discourses. Hit by the devastating earthquake in 1988 and by a growing conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabagh, Armenia was rapidly transforming from a relatively prosperous Soviet Republic into a society afflicted with poverty and political instability. At the backdrop of the political and economic transformations of the late Soviet period, the role of the Armenian Church was becoming more prominent in Armenian socio-political life for several reasons. First, the Church had served as a bridge with the Armenian Diaspora as well

[206] Before 1989, the groups were governed from Russia. After their appointment as elders, the Avetisyan brothers solved all possible issues, including disfellowshipment (excommunication). The elders would also undertake trips to Russia to submit proselytizing reports and to bring back magazines and other proselytizing materials on microfilm previously translated into Armenian and Russian in Leningrad (starting 1991 St. Petersburg), Russia.

as with the Soviet center in Moscow.[207] As such, it was regarded as a valuable source of domestic and international connections. Second, political mobilization around the status of Nagorno Karabagh increased the importance of national symbols. As a result, the Armenian Church was turned into an emblem of the restoration of Armenian national character and into a symbol of anti-Soviet resistance.[208] The members of the Karabagh Movement expected that Catholicos Vazgen I would actively support their political claims and greatly criticized him for taking a much more reserved stance (Corley 1998; Tchilingirian 2007a). In other words, the Church was expected to promote the political agenda of the National Movement and, later, of the independent state. Eventually, Catholicos Vazgen I expressed his support for the cause of the National Movement that was led by the future first president of independent Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan. In his address to the Armenian National Movement on November 9th, 1989, Catholicos said (Catholicos Vazgen I 1990),

> All Armenians, whether believers or not, we consider them true children of the Armenian Church without discrimination. I greet your organization, your national Movement, and I am happy to see so many of your delegates present here today […] The fundamental idea of the organization, or movement, has been expressed by the word National – by the National concept. That is very dear to our heart […] The national identity of the Armenian nation, the national ethos of the Armenian people, [and] the national ideology of the Armenian people has been forged here at Holy Ejmiatsin, especially, in the fourth and fifth centuries… Let it not be assumed that in the formation of the national ideology the Armenian Church was a follower or a conformist. No. The Armenian Church for the past seventeen centuries has been the author and the leader [in these matters].

[207] For example, on February 25th, 1988, Catholicos Vazgen I sent a telegram to the Soviet leader Party Mikhail Gorbachev in support of demands for the transfer of the territory of Nagorno Karabagh to Armenian control (Corley 1998:293). Besides, according to Pargev Shahbazyan, a personal secretary of Vazgen I, the Catholicos' position as a member of the World Council of Churches and his personal qualities made him a respected figure for some party officials in Moscow.

[208] Many recall the enthusiasm with which the political activists attended church services. As one of the eyewitnesses noticed, "the churches were full of middle-aged men who saw it as a way to express their Armenianness" (Peter Cowe). Importantly, this surge of participation in the church practices was apparently caused by anti-Soviet sentiments rather than genuine interest in Christian practices.

This short quote very concisely yet aptly delineates the ideological foundation for the social and political image of the Armenian Church in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods promoted by the Church itself. First, the AAC claimed to embrace all Armenians regardless of their actual religious beliefs and practices. Second, the Armenian Church formed the Armenian nation and therefore claimed to continue playing a crucial role in the Armenian society. The contours of future Church-state relationships, in which Church involvement in political life was regarded as normal and desired, could already be discerned at this stage.[209] While in other countries of the Eastern bloc and Soviet Union, the rapprochement between the civil elites and dominant religious organizations took place no earlier than the mid-1990s, in Armenia, the first steps towards ascertaining the dominant position of the AAC in the political and religious field were made even before independence. On June 17th, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia promulgated a law "On the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organizations." This law recognized the Armenian Church as "the national Church of the Armenian people and as an important bulwark for the edification of its spiritual life and national preservation" and simultaneously declared the equality of all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation (The Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia 1991). In Armenian legislation, this contradiction continued into the post-Soviet period and was partially reflected in the hierarchy of religious organizations in post-Soviet Armenia.

At this stage, the Armenian Church did not openly demand a privileged position and did not seek to seriously hinder the existence and activity of other religious groups for several reasons. First, in this period, imposing limitations and restrictions was firmly associated with the Soviet oppressive regime, while pluralism was in vogue. Importantly, both the Armenian Church leadership and

[209] As I mentioned above, it is important to note that the AAC was not viewed as a completely independent political actor – it was expected to support secular leaders and approve their policies.

political activists seem to have had an oversimplified and somewhat utopic understanding of the role and place of religion and Church in the life of the Armenian society. Soviet pressure and control over religion was viewed as the only obstacle keeping the Armenian people from embracing the Mother Church (for a similar view, see Whooley 2009:264). Having freedom of choice, Armenians were not expected to turn towards foreign religious traditions. The nascent religious diversity in Armenia was forming at the backdrop of the waning capacity of the state to control the religious field and many other socio-political spheres, which provided new religious movements with an opportunity to act more freely.

The Early Post-Soviet Period: Ter-Petrosyan's Presidency

The first years of independence only exacerbated the existing economic, political, and military issues. The central theme of the socio-political life in Armenia during the first years of independence was the problem of Nagorno Karabagh. The conflict with Azerbaijan escalated into a full-scale war in 1992, which further deepened the economic crisis in the country. The former economic ties between the Soviet Republics were disrupted, and dwindling economic resources were channeled to support military operations. In addition, Azerbaijan organized a blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh, and Turkey closed the border with Armenia. The unemployment rate skyrocketed as the Armenian industrial sector crashed. The economic collapse was so deep that according to the Human Development Report of the UN in 1995, over 80% of the country's population lived in poverty or significant deprivation (Human Development Report Armenia 1996).

The socio-economic crisis in all spheres of social and political life unexpectedly created a propitious ground for the rapid growth of the JW community. The increased supply of proselytism

met an equally high demand for JWs' message and practice. The crisis of the "dark and cold" years[210] damaged the social ties which have always been very important element of social life in Armenian society. As I show in Chapter V, many people were very attracted to the JWs' offer of a tightly knit community and social warmth and respect that the larger society was no longer able to provide. In addition, disappointment with the Soviet internationalist as well as post-Soviet nationalist ideologies rendered people more susceptible to the supra-national and millenarian ideology of the WTBTS (see Chapter V for more detail).

As many JWs who first joined the community during those years recall, they would engage in proselytizing "morning through evening" (Zhirik Avetisyan) because many of them were no longer employed. In 1992, the growing ranks of the community and religious liberalization allowed JWs to start door-to-door preaching for the first time. Before, this type of public ministry was inconceivable because of strict control by the police and KGB.[211] Also, people were more open to proselytism than in previous and future years for a number of reasons. First, after many years of state-sponsored atheism, religious and, more specifically, Chirstian themes generated high interest in the society. Yet at the same time, decades of suppression of organized religion and all practices related to parish life seriously weakened (or prevented the formation of) people's ability to recognize differences between various Christian denominations. Therefore, people were more open and receptive to proselytism on behalf of the non-traditional Christian groups because these groups were often regarded as a part of one Christian family. It was relatively easy to generate interest from a random passerby during public

[210] During the "dark and cold years" (Arm. մութ ու ցուրտ տարիներ), water and electricity supplies were disrupted because of the blockade and the closure of the nuclear power plant in Metsamor. Normally, electricity was available for only two hours once a day. The water supplies were very irregular because the water pumps also depended on the supplies of electricity. These issues were completely eliminated only by the end of the 2000s.

[211] Today, every congregation has its assigned territory where it conducts all types of public ministry, including phone calls and door-to-door preaching. In the 1990s, this system did not yet exist.

ministry, something that changed dramatically from the end of the 1990s onward. One long-time member of the JW community, Hayk, remembers,

> At that time, people didn't even know anything about Jehovah's Witnesses – often, people could not repeat the name Jehovah. They had a different kind of misunderstanding – we could talk to them for hours and even could go to them for the second and third visit, and they still wouldn't know who you were – a politician, a believer. They knew you belonged to a different church, but they didn't know which one. And people were more interested and open to the Truth than now.

As a result of high interest in religious themes, intensive public ministry, and a lack of animosity at this stage, the number of Bible studies and baptisms skyrocketed. While immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the JW community enlisted about 250 publishers throughout Armenia, in 1993 alone, they were able to organize four baptism sessions and administer about 700 baptisms. As a result, in one year, the group's membership grew almost 400%. Normally, JW baptisms take place during triannual conventions. As there were no conventions in Armenia until 1996, baptisms were administered "in rivers and lakes during special gatherings" (Archives of the Armenian Bethel) or in public swimming pools rented especially for that occasion.[212] In the next several years, the number of baptisms continued fluctuating at the same margin, and by the end of the 1990s, the number of JWs in Armenia exceeded 5,000.

This impressive growth was achieved despite a lack of infrastructure and proselytizing media. The WTBTS literature, other proselytizing materials, and even Bibles were scarce. A few books in Russian and Western Armenian were photocopied, and the Watchtower magazine was often copied by hand. New issues of the magazines were delivered from the regional administrative center located in the Russian town of Solnechnoye, Leningrad Oblast. As regular routes for literature delivery had not yet been established, magazines were delivered when elders would travel there or "when

[212] Also, JWs from Armenia participated in the international conventions that took place in Ukraine, Poland, and Russia.

somebody was coming from Russia or when somebody's friends were coming, they would bring literature" (Oganes). As there were no Kingdom Halls, some members of the congregations hosted regular meetings in their apartments.[213]

Together with the successful growth, JWs became more visible and recognizable in public space, yet for some time, JWs remained in the shadow of the Hare Krishnas', partially because the animosity towards the Hare Krishna Movement had a long history in Armenia rooted in the Soviet legacy of anti-ISKCON policies (for example, see Pranskevičiūtė and Juras 2014). In addition, not only did regular Armenians know nothing about the nature and origin of the JW community, but authorities and activists also lacked information about them.[214] Nevertheless, from 1993, the authorities started to imprison JW conscientious objectors, which was hardly surprising given the ongoing war with Azerbaijan. There was no clear procedure for handling conscientious objectors, so JWs recruits were sometimes sent to military bases where they usually underwent psychological and physical mistreatment that aimed at changing their attitude towards military service. In other cases, they were taken to court right away. In all cases, the conscientious objectors received from one to three years of imprisonment. Also, it was not uncommon for JWs to receive a second sentence for the same "crime" after being released from prison (Gena). The second sentences were often much more severe – up to four years of imprisonment in a maximum-security prison. When assessing the penalty, judges "took into consideration the character and degree of social danger of the committed crime because it was related to the weakening of the defense capacity of the army" (Hovsepyan

[213] Sometimes, zealous publishers would even tear down a wall in their apartments to enlarge the space and host more people during the meetings (Garik). Jirayr Avetisyan recalls, "we wouldn't make any noise. We used to appoint a few brothers who were responsible for organizing the process of leaving the venue, so that we wouldn't leave all at once. The brothers would split us into small groups that would leave over a long period of time."

[214] Below, I show that this general ignorance about religious groups in Armenia among state officials is common until today.

1997).

In many cases (Gena, Oganes), future JW conscripts sent an application to their conscription agency called *commissariat* in which they declared their conscientious objection and requested to substitute their military service with the alternative civil service. Often, the authorities did not reply, but sometimes they responded as follows, "Regarding your application […] we notify you that according to the legislation of the Republic of Armenia, every citizen must serve in the Armenian army. As the law on the alternative civil service has not been adopted in Armenia, you must follow the existing rules and serve in the Armenian army" (ECHR 2011).

Figure 6. Jehovah's Witnesses meeting in an apartment, the mid-1990s (Bethel Archive)

Yet, as I mentioned in Chapter III, JWs' refusal to serve in the army during the war cannot fully account for the decisions of the authorities to imprison conscientious objectors. First, even during the war in Nagorno Karabagh, when Armenia experienced a shortage of soldiers, there were certain categories of population that were exempt from compulsory military service. The first such

category included undergraduate and graduate students (aspirants). The second category included representatives of the so-called "criminal world" (Arm. Գողական աշխարհ). According to Soviet unwritten law, the real representatives of the criminal world were freed from military service without consequences. This rule retained its power in post-Soviet Armenia as well. While the lenient attitude towards the first category can easily be explained by the needs of the state to develop science and education, the latter category did not benefit the nation in any logical way. In the early 1990s, JW conscientious objectors who were taken to military bases against their will were sometimes confused with the representatives of this category as military personnel had no clear understanding of conscientious objection. For example, Gena recalls,

> When they brought me to the military base, they took me to the commander. I said that I refused to serve in the army or to wear a uniform. Honestly, the commander thought at first that I was a kingpin.[215] He said, 'Well, you have to give the phone number of your patron who will vouch for your status.' But I told him that I refuse because of the principles in the Bible. And his reaction was really terrible. He got very angry.

Therefore, both legal and unwritten laws implied the existence of "legitimate" excuses to be exempt from military service. Although some of these excuses did not benefit the state or society, they were deemed acceptable, while being a member of a foreign religious group and professing pacifism was not a valid excuse.

The proliferation of foreign religious organizations and their proselytism did not go unnoticed by the authorities. In December 1993, President Ter-Petrosyan signed a decree "On the Measures to Protect the Legality of Religious Activity on the Territory of the Republic of Armenia," in which he expressed a concern that registered and unregistered religious groups "undermine the moral and spiritual atmosphere in the Republic, spread disrespectful attitudes regarding military

[215] He used the Russian phrase "вор в законе" (Vor v zakone). A vor v zakone is a professional criminal who is respected by other criminals and obeys the accepted norms and rules of the criminal world (Siegel 2012). One of these rules forbade serving in the army (Varese 1998).

service […] and also impede the implementation of measures to enhance the internal stability of the Republic" (Ter-Petrosyan 1993). The decree did not openly break with the liberal tradition, yet it urged to control the implementation of the 1991 Law on Religious Freedom and to limit the unrestricted proselytism by the new religious groups.[216] Although JWs may seem to have been the primary target of that order, they remained unaffected by it until 1995. The Hare Krishna Movement, on the other hand, was severely mistreated between 1992 and 1995 (Corley 1998:323; ISKCON 1994).

Even though JWs continued their ministry mainly unimpededly, a generally negative attitude towards all religious "aliens" started to form in Armenia and especially in Nagorno Karabagh, close to the front line. In his article about religious freedom in Armenia written in 1998, Felix Corley (1998), using information that he had received from journalist Vahan Ishkhanyan and other sources, claimed that the animosity towards JWs and other religious minorities followed a military incident in Nagorno Karabagh. According to Corley's sources in September 1993, "a Jehovah's Witness serviceman in the air defense artillery refused to fire a missile at an attacking [Azerbaijani] plane" (324). In the aftermath of the incident, 51 persons were killed, and, later, over 60 JWs in Nagorno Karabagh were arrested, including older men and women. My original hypothesis connected this incident with growing intolerance towards JWs in the second half of the 1990s. However, after a closer investigation, I did not find any traces of this incident in the media or official documents. Neither could any of the war participants recall it, although its mere scale would have left a long-lasting impression. The data provided by the Armenian Branch of the WTBTS as well as multiple independent accounts from eyewitnesses confirm that during the war, there were as few as eight JWs

[216] Many of the stipulations in the decree were adopted as amendments to the Law on the Freedom of Conscience in 1997.

in Nagorno Karabagh, and all of them were women. Moreover, according to the verdict delivered by the ECHR in June 2022, there were no JWs in Nagorno Karabagh prior 1993 (ECHR, application no. 41817/10). The most substantial evidence against Corley's version, however, is the fact that when JWs applied for state registration in Nagorno Karabagh in 2009, the Chief of the Department for National Minorities and Religious Affairs prepared an expert opinion (I address it in greater detail below) to substantiate the rejection of the application. While the expert opinion referred to brain washing techniques in proselytism, and JWs' abstaining from voting and serving in the army, it never mentioned the incident, which undoubtedly would have become the most solid argument against registering JWs. Therefore, the incident with the military plane and the imprisonment of 60 JWs seems very implausible.

In an interview, one of my JW informants shared about his military experience in Nagorno Karabagh at the end of the 1990s, when he was taken to a military base against his will. When the commanders of the base were applying psychological pressure on him in order to force him to serve in the army, they told him a "real" story that allegedly had taken place at the front line. It went as follows, "there was a believer – from a different religion. He was sent to the front line to serve. Once, when he was out on patrol, the Turks [Azerbaijanis] came. So, instead of shooting at them or warning the others, he didn't do anything because he was also a pacifist. And the Turks killed him and the others." Although the details of this story differ from the account related by Felix Corley, their striking structural similarity strongly suggests they have the same origin. It may have been invented and used to persuade the soldiers who professed pacifism informed by their religious views. Later, Corley published a version of this narrative as a true story.

The first serious instance when the authorities put pressure on JWs transpired on April 14th, 1995. During the Memorial of Jesus' Death, which was taking place in the concert hall of the

Yerevan Programming Institute, police and the activists of a nationalist group called "The Organization of Homeland Defenders" (Arm. Երկրապահ Կազմակերպություն) stormed in looking for male JWs of military service age (18-27). They arrested seven young JWs but released them in three days because they all had official exemptions from military service (Garik).

JWs were not the only religious group that was raided in April 1995. Other religious communities, such as Pentecostals, were also targeted by the police and activist groups. This special attention towards religious groups on the part of the state coincided with the election of the new head of the Armenian Church, Garegin I, who was openly supported by the President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan (Tchilingirian 2007a).[217] At the same time, eyewitnesses and experts on religious freedom in Armenia (Eranosyan et al. 2010:7) claim that the raids were organized by the order of Vazgen Sargsyan, the head of the Ministry of Defense of Armenia who founded and controlled the Organization of Homeland Defenders (Arm. Երկրապահ) (Libaridian 2011:223). Also, he aspired to involve the Armenian Church in strengthening the Armenian army and statehood in general. It was his initiative to establish the institution of the chaplaincy in the Armenian army in 1997. Among other things, the Armenian Church chaplains were to serve as "a defense against the cults and sects" (Gyozalyan 2012).

The election of the new Catholicos and, later, the much contested re-election of Ter-Petrosyan for a second presidential term ushered in a rapprochement between the Armenian Church and the state, which entailed attempts to limit religious diversity in Armenia.[218] Although the status

[217] Ter-Petrosyan's demarch was regarded by many as intrusion in AAC internal affairs. As a result, the newly elected Catholicos was often called "Levonĕntir" (Arm. Լևոնընտիր; lit. elected by Levon).

[218] Even before the election of Garegin I, religious symbols were used at the official level to underscore the union of the two institutions. For example, on November 11th, 1991, during the presidential inauguration ceremony, Levon Ter-Petrosyan was sworn in having placed his right hand on the allegedly 7th century Bible called *Vehamor*. That invented tradition continues until today. Besides, the AAC Catholicoi have always been present at the swearing-in celebration.

of the Armenian Church was not addressed in the first post-Soviet Constitution of Armenia adopted in 1995, its privileged status was further confirmed and expanded in 1997 by amendments to the 1991 law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations." Amendments to Article 17 stipulated that "the right to freely preach and spread its teaching throughout the Republic of Armenia […] belongs exclusively to the Armenian Apostolic Church" (The National Assembly of Armenia 1997). Also, all religious organizations that had obtained state registration before had to re-register within a six-month period. State registration itself was given much more weight in the new redaction of the law – all the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the law were available only "from the moment of registration."[219] In addition, the amendments made obtaining state registration more difficult. While earlier a group of believers needed to comprise only 50 members for registration, now this threshold was raised to 200 with a stipulation that "children under 18 cannot be members of the religious organization regardless of their factual participation in the rituals." As a result of these restrictions, the Hare Krishna Movement lost its registration and became illegal in Armenia.

The registration of religious organizations, as well as controlling missionary activities in the country, was delegated to the State Council on Religious Affairs of the Republic of Armenia established in 1992. Yet due to limited resources, the Council was able to "accomplish very little apart from annual reregistration of existing groups" (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2000). Although JWs tried to obtain state registration starting in 1990, all their applications were rejected.[220] The Council demanded that JWs submit a detailed description of their theology, rules, and procedures and requested that certain aspects of it be changed (mostly, regarding public ministry).

[219] Although this stipulation did not affect real procedures, it reflected an attempt of the state to limit and control religious diversity.

[220] At the moment of their registration in 2004, they had filed more than 15 applications for the state registration.

According to one of the JW delegates, the head of the Council, Lazar Sujyan (Լազար Սուջյան),[221] admitted to JWs that "he was under a lot of pressure not to grant registration to Jehovah's Witnesses" (Jirayr Avetisyan). The appointment of a representative of the Armenian Church to the position of the head of the Council on Religious Affairs not only signaled the special position that the national Church enjoyed but also allowed the ecclesiastical authorities to influence the actions of religious rivals to a certain degree.[222] Although the priests of the AAC participated in raids against certain religious groups, such as Hare Krishna, they did not engage with JWs in the public space.

In general, the first President Levon Ter Petrosyan (1991-1998) professed relatively liberal views and was not personally a devout churchgoer. His religious policies and favoring the Armenian Church were rather pragmatic. Some scholars argue that during his tenure, the relationships of the Armenian Government and the Armenian Church were similar to the French system of *laïcité* (Petrosyan 2016:161). When Levon Ter-Petrosyan outlawed the rivaling political party *Dashnaktsutyun* in December of 1994, the political situation in Armenia as well as relationships with the Diaspora deteriorated. In order to placate the situation, Levon Ter-Petrosyan openly supported Garegin I, the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, as a candidate in the election of a new Catholicos of All Armenians (Nieczuja-Ostrowski 2020). The Armenian Catholicosate in Cilicia was under the influence of the *Dashnaktsut'yun* party since the Soviet period (Kouymjian 1961), so bringing the Catholicos of Cilicia to Armenia as a Catholicos of All Armenians was expected to appease the

[221] Lazar Sujyan was the first head of the Council and had a very close personal and professional relationship with the Armenian Church. For example, in 1999 when Catholicos Garegin I passed away, President Kocharyan appointed Lazar Sujyan to be a member of the funeral procession together with high ranking politicians (Kocharyan 1999). In 2013, he received the Order of "Saint Nerses Shnorhali" from the hands of Catholicos Garegin II, who praised Sujyan for always being "a protector and honest advocate of the interests of our Church trying to do everything possible that the Armenian Church has an opportunity to fully implement its blessed mission in the life of our people" (Armenpress 2013).

[222] It could be achieved, for example, by hampering the process of obtaining an official state registration.

opposition and increase the President's legitimacy. The ultimate goal might have been to eliminate the Catholicosate in Cilicia and consolidate control over the Armenian Church in Ejmiatsin.

At the same time, this rapprochement had a clear limit. On March 8th, 1995 in an interview, President Ter-Petrosyan said, "…it is true that along with the restoration of Armenian statehood, the church was relieved of its secular obligations. However, as a considerable number of Armenians live abroad, the Church will preserve its role of uniting the Armenian people. The activities of the Church in the nation's spiritual and moral education should not be underestimated" (Movsesian and Tchilingirian 1995:6). This claim underscored the separation between the Church and state and demarcated the sphere of Church influence and responsibility.

Until 1998, that is during Levon Ter-Petrosyan's entire presidency, the Armenian media were not particularly hostile towards JWs, and the number of newspaper publications related to them remained low. The spirit of the publications reflected the general atmosphere of liberalization of the first post-Soviet years coupled with a lack of information about the teachings, practices, and other nuances of the new religious groups in Armenia. The information about JWs published in the press was diverse in its agenda and style. Some newspapers published interviews with JWs that were significantly more neutral in their tone compared to later periods. However, at the end, editors could add a clarifying note that they were "printing this material so that [their] readers had an understanding of this social evil, while [they had] a deep antipathy toward all sects and sectarians, but particularly this one" (Khachatryan 1998). Other articles about JWs were polemical in character as they engaged in clarifying the idiosyncrasies of the WTBTS teaching pursuing the goal to prove that it was fallacious. For example, two articles in the newspaper "Lragir" published in 1996 and titled "the Word to 'Jehovah's Witnesses'" (Խոսք «Եհովայի Վկաներին») and "Jesus is the God Incarnate" (Հիսուս՝ մարմնացյալ Աստված) were polemical in spirit and resembled a theological

argument rather than a debate about the socio-political and socio-cultural consequences of religious diversity (Ascatryan 1996a, 1996b).[223] Other articles (Erekoyan Erevan 1996) were neutral and aimed at explaining the history and specifics of the WTBTS.[224] Simultaneously, there were articles that supported JWs and other religious organization in their struggle to profess their faith. In one such article, the author, Vahan Ishkhanyan condemned the Armenian authorities for "being far from such an understanding of democracy that would include 'alternative civil service'" (1996). What distinguishes the media publications during this period is not only their reserved and relatively neutral tone – the portrayal of JWs was not pronouncedly connected to the question of national security or the idea that they seek to eradicate the Armenian nation.

During the presidency of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, JWs had not yet become an epitome of the religious alien as they would in later periods. Inconsistent attempts to promote union between the state and the Armenian Church did not yield any tangible results. On September 26th, 1997, during a grand press conference Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1997) claimed that

> … nationalist ideology is a false ideology. I say it today and I will repeat it tomorrow. What do [politicians] mean when they say, "national ideology?" One thing – the whole nation must accept that ideology. I understand that the whole nation accepts one ideology only in totalitarian systems, only in ideology-driven states. And in democracy, no one can impose an ideology on someone else. In Armenia today, we have different ideologies […] and they are all "national" to me because each of them regards itself as the best way to solve national issues. If you impose a national ideology, you undo democracy. It is one or the other.

Although these words did not reflect the socio-political reality of Armenia in the middle of

[223] Interestingly, the articles were published in the section titled "Refutation of sects" (Arm. Եղծ աղանդոց), which refers to the 5th century Armenian theologian Eznik Koghbaci, who wrote a tract under the same title, in which he pursued an objective of establishing the primacy of the Orthodox Christian teaching over polytheism, Zoroastrianism, Greek philosophy, and the gnostic teaching by Marcion. Therefore, the newspaper represented these anti-JWs articles as a continuation of a centuries-long struggle of Armenian Christianity against false teachings. In later years, articles in different newspapers would usually be published in a section carrying this title.

[224] Here are some of the titles of the articles about the JWs published in 1996-97 in Armenia: "Jehovah's Witnesses: a Historical Sketch," "The Convention of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Yerevan," "A Word to the Jehovah's Witnesses."

1997, they indicated that aspirations for democracy and pluralism of opinions clearly remained the staples of the Armenian political system at least at the level of the president's declarations. Despite this overall ideological orientation, the authorities imposed several limitations on religious freedom and sought to enhance ties with the Armenian Church in order to boost the government's waning legitimacy.[225] Just like Catholicos Vazgen I before him, Garegin I lamented the low religious awareness among the population because of Soviet atheism and urged the government to impose restrictions on proselytism by foreign missionaries (Information Service of Ejmiatsin 1995:169). The AAC always remained dedicated to the idea of its indispensability for the successful development of Armenian statehood. As Garegin I claimed, "there are four basic truths – The Church, Fatherland, Language, and the Armenian Cause (Arm. Հայ Դատ). We all have to unite in these four, so that we could say to the whole world that our enemies failed […] Christianity has become SALT for the Armenian nation, and the Armenian Church is its SALT-SHAKER [*original orthography is preserved*]" (in Ghukasyan et al. 2013). While the Church leadership saw the state as the principal guarantor of the AAC's privileges, the Church itself did not undertake practical steps towards countering JWs' public ministry – attempts to organize Sunday schools and catechism classes were sparse and inconsistent.[226] Attempts to maintain the AAC's dominance in Armenian political, cultural, and social fields were undertaken through building and reconstructing churches throughout Armenia.

[225] There were several reasons for the legitimacy crisis. First, as I mentioned above, Ter-Petrosyan outlawed the rivaling political party *Dashnaktsutyun* in 1994 on the pretext that its administrative center was located outside of Armenia. Also, the presidential election of 1996 was deemed fraudulent by the opposition and caused mass protests in Yerevan (Astourian 2000:16). Importantly, after the brutal war in Nagorno Karabagh and devastating economic crisis, the Armenian society's faith in the ability of democratic reforms to bring about stability and prosperity significantly weakened. As a result, in February 1998 Levon Ter-Petrosyan resigned as a result of pressure from Robert Kocharyan whose overall political orientation was significantly more nationalist, conservative, and authoritarian. Under Kocharyan, democratic aspirations for liberalization yielded to a more nationalist-oriented ideology that influenced the attitude towards religious diversity in Armenia.

[226] As I mentioned above, catechism has not been a part of the ethos of the Armenian Church for centuries, because of the unique character of Christianity and Church-laity relationships in Armenia.

Simultaneously, the educational and catechetical components of this "Reconquista" (Antonyan 2011:327) remained at the periphery of the AAC's attention or were "outsourced" to the state (e.g. by introducing a course on Armenian Church history to the school curriculum in 2003).

While the Armenian Church enjoyed various legal and practical privileges on paper, the state did not and could not enforce them in practice. Only uncoordinated and inconsistent measures were taken towards suppressing religious diversity, such as Ter-Petrosyan's 1993 decree, the raids against non-AAC groups in 1995, instituting the chaplaincy in the army, and establishing the Council on Religious Affairs that was supposed to combat missionary violations in the country. However, due to the shortage of resources, as well as a lack of ideological and practical coordination, these measures were inconsistent and often remained unimplemented and rather symbolic. Rare attempts to suppress religious diversity, such as the "anti-sectarian" raids in 1995, were private initiatives of certain state officials that were implemented by efforts of non-governmental organizations. As well as in later periods, personal views and preferences of high-ranking officials, such as President Ter-Petrosyan or the Minister of Defense Vazgen Sargsyan, had more impact on specific actions in the sphere of religious diversity than a well-thought-out and consistent policy.

From Levon Ter-Petrosyan to Robert Kocharyan: The Turn Towards National Ideology and Jehovah's Witnesses

> "With what conscience do some people demand to register the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses and what kind of service do these people do to our country? Doesn't it seem that they care about these anti-national individuals' so-called "human rights" (although in our country Jehovah's Witnesses' right for freedom of conscience is not violated), but they do not have this good conscience towards our Fatherland and in the questions of our nation and our national interests." ("Hayots' Ashkharh," Hovhannisyan 1998)

Several key-processes characterized the development of the JW community and its relationships with the state and Armenian society at large during Kocharyan's presidency. First, until

2004, JWs could not obtain much-needed state registration that would allow them to enjoy rights guaranteed to religious organizations by the Armenian and international legislation. Second, several court cases against JWs were covered by the media in a radically negative light, which deepened intolerance toward JWs in Armenia. Although in 2004 JW conscientious objectors obtained a right to opt out of compulsory military service, they deemed the conditions offered by the Armenian state unacceptable. As a result, the issue of military service remained central for the relationships between JWs and the Armenian state until 2013.

At the end of the 1990s, Armenia underwent a quick and drastic political transformation. First, in 1998, President Ter-Petrosyan was compelled to resign due to a deep crisis of legitimacy (Libaridian 2011:216). His successor, Robert Kocharyan who had been a President of Nagorno Karabagh (1994-1997) and a Prime Minister of Armenia (1997-1998) was significantly more conservative and had more nationalist views as cited above. Although Kocharyan rarely participated in religious ceremonies, his administration clearly and visibly supported and promoted the idea of equating being Armenian and affiliation with the Armenian Church. As a result, the AAC was presented and treated as an important and privileged ally of the state. Although ordinary citizens and experts on religion in Armenia claim that Kocharyan did not have a special rapport with the Catholicos (Vardan Ascatryan; also see Petrosyan 2016 and Whooley 2009), the Armenian Church significantly enhanced its position during his presidency, both symbolically, legally, and practically. In domestic policies, Kocharyan implemented the policy of conspicuous[227] alignment with the

[227] A union of the Church and state was emphasized during the presidential swearing-in ceremony in 1998, when newly elected President Kocharyan entered the inauguration hall accompanied by Catholicos Garegin I and other Armenian priests (to see the video of the ceremony, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzUqmbY-UsU). Amidst the political turmoil that followed the resignation of Levon Ter-Petrosyan and the presidential election, the support of the Church instilled Robert Kocharyan with more legitimacy and created an impression of unity and reconciliation in the society. Remarkably, in 2003, when re-elected to a second term, Robert Kocharyan appeared on the red carpet alone unaccompanied by the Catholicos, as his power and legitimacy had been consolidated during the previous five years. The

Armenian Church that positioned itself as a representative of all Armenians and that buttressed the ideological agenda of the state.

The leitmotif of Armenian state ideology was well-expressed in Robert Kocharyan's inaugural speech given during the swearing-in ceremony in 1998,

> We must have a viable and effective state […] We will engage in laborious and multi-layered work. The type of work that will require internal social harmony, unification, meaningful political dialogue and cooperation […] The might of Armenia depends on having a strong state security system, which first of all implies an efficient and well-organized army […] The issue of Nagorno Karabagh is the issue of the entire nation. And we need to solve this issue with dignity […] The solution of the Karabagh issue will result in the victory of historical justice.

This address with its emphasis on the unity of Armenian people is in stark contrast with Levon Ter-Petrosyan's rejection of one national ideology as "false." This speech indicated a turn towards the ideology prioritizing the unification of the population around the ideas of a strong Armenian state, victory in Karabagh, and historical justice. Unlike his predecessor, Robert Kocharyan rejected the idea of concessions to Azerbaijan in peace negotiations and refused to establish diplomatic relations with Turkey (Libaridian 1999).[228] Under Kocharyan, resistance to the threat from the Turks and Azerbaijanis became a central idea of Armenian nationalism (Petrosyan 2016:164), which demanded absolute national unity. This ideology regarded religious and other types of diversity as a threat to the cohesion of the Armenian people and to the security of the Armenian state. In other words, it promoted the idea of ethnically framed nationalism where Armenians were

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entire ceremony was significantly more pompous than in 1998, which was meant to highlight the power of the Armenian state and its President. Although Catholicos Garegin II delivered a speech immediately after the oath ceremony, his blessing emphasized the leading role of the state (to see the video of the ceremony, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rQQhY6-470). To sum up, the reproachment between Kocharyan and the Church was very pragmatic in nature as it pursued the goal of boosting the legitimacy of the president.

[228] Ter-Petrosyan argued that the ultimate solution of the Karabagh problem would be impossible without mutual concessions and compromises with Azerbaijan and Turkey (Ter-Petrosyan 1997). Kocharyan and his supporters outwardly rejected this approach.

viewed as culturally homogeneous entity, in which one's affiliation with the AAC was presented as the ideal manifestation of Armenianness. Deviations from this "ideal" were presented and perceived as a security threat. Promoting this message undoubtedly aimed at enhancing Kocharyan's control over the Armenian political system.

In domestic politics, Robert Kocharyan relied on the Republican Party of Armenia, a national-conservative party founded in 1991. It was a ruling party between 1999 and 2018 (sometimes in alliances with other political parties), and as such it served as a backbone for political course during Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan's presidencies. Directly or indirectly, the presidents had effective control over the party. In its turn, as a parliamentary majority, the Republican Party controlled the legislative process, which allowed Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan to implement their political programs. Also, the Republican Party emphasized its support of the Armenian Church. For example, starting in 2012, Archbishop Navasard Kchoyan blessed all annual congresses of the Party with a prayer, which underscored the alliance between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities (Stepanyan 2012) and perplexed some journalists and politicians (Tert.am 2014).

It is important that the international position of Armenia during Kocharyan's presidency greatly influenced the development of Armenian policies regarding religious freedom. In its overall geopolitical orientation Armenian was closer to Russia, which was regarded by most Armenians as a guarantor of Armenia's security and economic development (Aram 2019). The two countries started to develop close cooperation in the military,[229] economic, and political spheres during the presidency of Levon Ter-Petrosyan. In general, Armenia's ties with Russia were closer than the Russian-Georgian or Russian-Azerbaijani relationships. Yet, Armenia could not put all its eggs in Russia's

[229] In the 1990s, the only Russian military base outside of Russia proper was located in the Armenian city of Gyumri.

basket. First, Armenia did not have a common border with Russia, which made economic cooperation problematic and limited. The railroads connecting the two countries was built back in the Soviet time and went through the territories of Azerbaijan and Georgia. As Azerbaijan blocked the railroad to Armenia in 1991 and Georgia's conflict with the region of Abkhazia disrupted the railway system, both routes became unavailable for Armenia. Second, the Russian government could not provide much-needed financial assistance to Armenia that would be commensurable with that of the West. Third, the Russian government was developing close relationships with Azerbaijan with its oil-oriented economy whose economic attractiveness was much higher than that of Armenia.

Importantly, the Armenian and Russian leaders, Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Boris Yeltsin and after 2000, Robert Kocharyan and Vladimir Putin maintained friendly personal relationships. It was especially true for Kocharyan and Putin whose political views were very similar – they both favored strong presidential power with a weak or absent opposition. Both leaders viewed the West as a means to improve their countries' economic situation and were unwilling to relinquish their control over the political system and make concessions in the spheres of democratic reforms, including the sphere of religious freedom.

The West – the European Union (especially Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) and the United States – was another center[230] of gravity for Armenia that served as an important source of political and diplomatic support as well as economic and humanitarian assistance. Plus, the U.S. weighed in at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the EU could give access to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development whose financial aid was important for Armenia (for more detail, see Delcour 2016). At the same time, financial and

[230] Iran was trying to fill the political vacuum after the dissolution of the Soviet system, but its influence in Armenia was incommensurably weaker than that of Russia and the west.

diplomatic support from the west was contingent upon the implementation of democratic reforms that were often viewed in Armenia as an intrusion on the domestic affairs of the country (Libaridian 2011:247). Kocharyan's administration demonstrated its willingness to introduce the necessary democratic changes in exchange for these types of support. At the same time, he sought to retain the same level of control over the domestic political, economic, and ideological spheres. As I show below, these dual intentions were reflected in the legislation and policies regarding religious freedom in Armenia during Kocharyan's presidential tenure.

State Ideology and the Armenian Church

The leadership of the AAC changed in 1999 when Catholicos of All Armenians Garegin I passed away. In the election of the new head of the Armenian Church, Robert Kocharyan supported Archbishop Garegin Nersisyan who was elected as a new Catholicos and Supreme Patriarch of All Armenians, Garegin II.[231] Just like the previous Catholicoi, Garegin II described religious diversity as a threat to national security.[232] The ecclesiastical authorities continued emphasizing the importance of the close union between the state and the Church, which was presented as a tradition sanctified by the century-long history of Armenian people. For example, in his speech at the celebration of the 10th anniversary of Armenian independence in 2001, Catholicos Garegin II said,

> Despite the ordeals, deaths and losses that we incurred during thousands of years, the

[231] There were several reasons why Robert Kocharyan supported the future Catholicos. First, Garegin Nersisyan was in opposition to Ter-Petrosyan, Kocharyan's political opponent, because during the 1995 election of Catholicos, Ter-Petrosyan did not support Nersisyan's candidacy. Second, Garegin Nersisyan regarded Kocharyan's ambition to strengthen the unity of Armenian people and enhance the state as advantageous for the ideological and political program of the AAC.

In addition, "as a Soviet-style church administrator, Archbishop Garegin always adapted church policy to the ruling party's ideology" (Petrosyan 2016:157). Finally, at this time, Nerisyan promoted the idea that the Holy See of Ejmiatsin should be controlled by a local, non-Diasporan leader, which would give Kocharyan an ally well-versed in the official as well as tacit rules of the political game in Armenia.

[232] In his speech at the World Council of Churches in Geneva in 2001, he defended the Armenian laws granting the Armenian Church exclusive rights and compared the freedom of conscience with anarchy (Brown 2001).

> Armenian people live as a nation […] and state, as a Church. With faith and free spirit, we shall serve our independent statehood and pursue its reinforcement and its improvement. […] Today, standing at the point of another celebratory anniversary and looking back, we re-evaluate our historical path and ancestral legacy. In the series of endless losses and ordeals, heroic exploits and victories, we value the necessity of an undefeatable union of state and Church, which would be patriotic and oriented towards national interests. We shall do everything so that Armenians preserve the spirit of unity [that they had] in the 1988 and love, with which they accepted the whole sacrifice for the sake of today. (Garegin II 2001b:24–25)

In 2001, Armenia celebrated the 1700th anniversary of the Christianization of Armenia, which was organized with close collaboration between the state and the Armenian Church. The preparations for this formidable event were launched in the middle of the 1990s, under the previous Catholicos Garegin I. Garegin II used these celebrations to reaffirm the role of the AAC in Armenian political and social life. During the celebratory events, the Catholicos of All Armenians had audiences not only with religious leaders from major Christian Churches, such as Pope John-Paul II and the Patriarch of All Russia, Alexy II, but also with politicians, including presidents of various countries and representatives of international organizations, such as the Council of Europe. In fact, the Catholicos was depicted as a representative of the Armenian state who was vested with power to represent the collective will or concerns of all Armenians. For example, in 2001, he held a meeting with Lord Russell-Johnston and the Directors of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, during which he "expressed deep concerns about multiple sects that in recent years infiltrated Armenia and about the activities of these religious organizations that having chosen condemnable forms of proselytism destroy the unity of people and sow the seeds of animosity between them" (Garegin II 2001a). The Catholicos used diplomacy to defend the claim of the Armenian Church to be the only national Church and to counter the demands of the international organizations and western governments to guarantee the freedom of religion in Armenia.

The synergy of the state and the Church did not remain purely symbolic but included

specific measures that sought to ensure the dominant position of the Church in the religious field of Armenia.[233] On August 22nd, 2002, Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan and Catholicos of All Armenians Garegin II signed the Concordat between the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church.[234] "Having considered the role and importance of the AAC in the development and enhancement of the Armenian state [and] considering the exclusive importance of the AAC for the spiritual, educational, and cultural life of the Armenian people," this document introduced the history of the AAC into the curricula of elementary and high schools.[235] When addressing the role of the AAC in the post-Soviet period, the textbook emphasizes how essential the Armenian Church is for Armenian statehood and underscores its privileged position in Armenian legislation. A group of experts who evaluated the content of the textbooks for this course in 2013 concluded that "the textbooks have a nation-centered character rather than a person-centered character" (Hovannisyan and Davtyan 2013:5) and that "in different parts of the textbooks, the authors tried to form a positive attitude towards the Armenian Apostolic Church by *equating national and religious belonging* and by assigning the highest importance to religious affiliation in one's identity, among other things" (3). In a short section about other religious organizations and communities in Armenia, the textbook for 9th graders said,

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[233] One of the symbolic signs of this union was the official recognition of Christmas, which is traditionally celebrated in the Armenian Church on January 6th, as a state holiday in 2001 (see Law about Holidays and Memorial Days of the Republic of Armenia 2001). This step further emphasized the importance of the Christian component of Armenianness and its tight connection to the AAC.

[234] As I mentioned in Chapter III, a similar document was adopted in neighboring Georgia the same year. A rapprochement between the civil and religious elites starting from the end of the 1990s was common in post-Socialist countries.

[235] In 2005, the agreement was reaffirmed and the subject of "The History of the Armenian Church" officially became a part of the school curriculum. The course on the history of the Armenian Church starts in the 5th grade and runs through the end of high school. The first two years cover the rituals and festivals of the Armenian Church. The following three years cover the history of the Church from its inception in 301 BC until today. And during the final year, it covers more abstract concepts, such as Christian piety, free will, morals, *inter alia*.

> At the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, various types of religious movements and totalitarian sects arrived in Armenia. Their members, taking advantage of Armenia's difficult socio-economic and moral-psychological situations, started active missionary activities. They were imposing the idea of 'new prophets' and the impeding end of the world on people, spreading 'special' views on family, nation, and statehood, and calling on people to refuse to bear arms, among other things. Those ideas were particularly harmful in the circumstances of the fight for liberating Artsakh [Nagorno Karabagh] and were naturally met with social condemnation and intolerance. (Ghukasyan et al. 2013:109)

The textbooks consistently promoted a view of other religious groups and religious diversity in general as alien to the Armenian culture. This understanding was shared by many Armenians because the Protestant-style proselytism and stressing individual religious rights were foreign concepts for the local practice of Christianity. Religious freedom in its western understanding was portrayed and perceived as dangerous for the Armenian people and state. For example, before 2013 a textbook for 8th graders suggested that students discuss the following question, "What danger does Protestantism pose to the Armenian Church and Armenian people?" (Hovhanisyan and Davtyan 2013:6). In other words, the idea of the indisputable fusion of Armenianness and belonging to the AAC was a leitmotif of the course, while any deviations from this standard were presented as dangerous for the Armenian people and the Armenian state.

Moreover, the approach employed by most teachers included multiple elements of practicing religion rather than simply teaching about it. Most classes on the "History" would start with the Lord's Prayer in classical Armenian, which excluded JWs and members of non-Christian groups (Hovhannisyan 2014:10). Up until today, many JWs' school students experience pressure because they cannot fully participate in class. For example, in 2007 in school #139 of Yerevan, a teacher of "History" advised 5th graders to keep away from their JW peers. The teacher also mocked JW students for not being willing to make a sign of the cross (Danielyan et al. 2009:30). Expectedly, other students often followed the teachers' suit and bullied their JW peers. In 2008, parents of JW

students of public school #94 reported mockery and abuse of their children to the police (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2009) claiming that the school teachers and principal failed to address the maltreatment. During the investigation, non-JWs students admitted the ongoing harassment of their JW fellows out of dislike for their religious persuasions. In this and other cases, JW parents had to change schools for their children because after the involvement of police the mistreatment only grew stronger. The Armenian media presented these cases from a different perspective emphasizing the subversive and destructive nature of JWs' demarches for the academic success of the students (Aravot 2009).

In 2007, the National Assembly of Armenia passed the "Law on the Relationships Between the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church." The law confirmed some of the previously granted rights, such as the exclusive right to proselytize. As the very idea of proselytism was alien to the AAC, it never truly took advantage of it, so the law was actually seeking to stop other religious groups from engaging in the practice rather than to uphold the rights of the AAC. Besides, the law allowed the AAC to control the process of training, hiring, and controlling school instructors teaching the "History of the Church," as well as to define the content of this course in general (Article 8). This step effectively removed this subject from the jurisdiction of the state. Also, the AAC became the only religious organization that received the right to administer marriage and divorce (Article 9)[236] and that was exempt from most taxes (Article 11). The law stipulated that if a priest of the AAC broke the law, "the police must immediately inform the head of the corresponding diocese or the head of the church administrative unit" (Article 12). In other words, this law seriously strengthened the already exclusive position of the Armenian Church in the religious and political field.

[236] Normally, marriages and divorces are registered by a special state agency.

Even before this law, in 2005, the amendments to the 1995 Constitution elevated the symphonic relationship between the state and the Armenian Church to a new level. While the previous redaction of the Constitution did not mention the Armenian Church at all, now it recognized "the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as a National Church in the spiritual life, in the development of the national culture, and in the preservation of the national identity of the Armenian people" (Article 8.1). The Constitution also guaranteed the freedom of conscience and equal rights to preach publicly with one important stipulation that the "expression of this right can be restricted only by law, if it is necessary for public security, health, morals or for the protection of rights and freedoms of others" (Article 26). This vaguely formulated restriction granted the government a right to potentially limit any religious activity should it be deemed a threat to national or public security, which effectively brought to naught the guarantee of equal religious rights.

Importantly, the securitization of religious diversity that had been a part of the public discourse and had been promoted by the Catholicoi of the Armenian Church, some politicians, and state officials became enshrined into the main Law of the country. Although previously, the Law on Freedom of Religion of 1990 and 1997, the Memorandum of intentions signed between the Government of Armenia and the Armenian Church in 2000,[237] and the Concordat of 2002 granted the AAC a privileged position, they did not qualify the existence and public activities of other religious groups as a threat to public and state security. Presenting any cultural and religious diversity as a danger for the Armenian nation was a part of the larger ideological framework employed under

[237] On March 17th 2000, the Government of Armenian signed a Memorandum of intentions with the AAC "highlighting the importance and value of the Armenian Saint Apostolic Church for the future development and enhancement of the Armenian statehood, its exclusive and special role in historic destiny and in the contemporary social life of Armenian people, as well as following the internationally recognized norms and principles regarding human rights and freedoms" (Memorandum of Intentions 2000).

President Kocharyan that would present Armenia as surrounded by enemies who seek the annihilation of Armenian statehood. This framework fully justified the authoritarian tendencies during Kocharyan's presidency and presented them as a necessary element of the larger struggle against the enemies of the Armenian state and people.

Anti-Jehovah's Witnesses Discourse in Armenia Under President Kocharyan

The securitization of religious diversity with a particular emphasis on JWs became observable in the Armenian media from 1998 onward.[238] The overall goal of the newspaper articles and TV reports was to inform the population about "the dangerous aspects of JWs' organization that destabilizes the foundation of the Armenian family, nation, and state" (Safaryan 2001a). Sometimes, the articles would simply consist of a long list of "facts" about JWs and their practices. While some of them were real, such as the rejection of blood transfusion, others were outwardly absurd. For example, journalist Aram Sarafyan claimed that JWs are forbidden to "have extra weight, […] show explicit satisfaction when having sex with their spouse, […] use the word "God" (Arm. Աստված), […] do sports, and obtain college education" (Safaryan 2001b; also, see Valesyan 2002). These false attributes drew a portrait of JWs as irrational, ridiculous, and undesirable misanthropes. Almost every newspaper article featured a mocking picture emphasizing JWs' dangerous and inhumane nature (see, Appendix III).

Several topics comprised the core of the anti-JWs message: JWs' corrupting and destroying the Armenian family, the danger they pose to the Armenian nation and statehood, JWs' refusal to

[238] I analyzed the following newspapers Hayots' Ashkharh (Հայոց Աշհարհ), Erkir (Երկիր), Aṛavot (Առավոտ), Hraparak (Հրապարակ), Azg (Ազգ), Hayastani Hanrapetut'yun (Հայաստանի Հանրապետություն), K'ristonya Hayastan (Քրիստոնյա Հայաստան), Zhamanaki Ughekits (Ժամանակի Ուղեցիծ), Lragir (Լրագիր), Avangard (Ավանգարդ), Ch'orord Ishkhanut'yun (Չորրորդ Իշխանություն), Iravunk' (Իրավունք), Ayzhm (Այժմ, no longer in print), Golos Armenii (in Russian). Also, I use the analysis of TV materials in the research "Freedom of Religion in Armenia" (Eranosyan et al. 2010) that confirms that television propagated similar views using channels controlled by Kocharyan. For the later period, I analyzed Internet news-portals as well.

serve in the army, and proselytism. Although the argument of brainwashing pervaded the anti-JW message, it was informed not by the desire to protect individuals from deleterious external influences, but rather to explain why people willingly turned against their country and people and destroyed their families. For example, Hasmik Movsisyan (1999) in her article titled "Jehovah and Decaying Family" writes,

> Of course, what mother-in-law would not want to have a smart and humble daughter-in-law, and what husband would not want an obedient and dutiful wife? And like that, having received permission from the mother-in-law, Jehovah's Witnesses invade a peacefully living family in the region of Masis and for one year give lessons to the daughter-in-law. As a result, she changes beyond recognition, becomes very quiet, reserved, and indifferent. In a word, she loses interest in every vitally important aspect of life. She says, "I am my own God" and closes the door to her heart from the world. She stops celebrating birthdays, avoids weddings, fun gatherings, and stops going to the church […] the most painful is that she is trying to raise her two daughters in this spirit. The daughters have already lost joy and pleasure in worldly life […] Nothing has the power to change her mind – neither her husband's supplications, nor advice, nor even … beating, while the family is gradually falling into decay.

This and many other articles (e.g., see Gevorkyan 2003) depict changes in the mood and behavior of a new convert that resembles hypnosis.[239] Yet this woman's mental health is of little interest to the author, while the effect of the "changes beyond recognition" on the children, husband, the family, and therefore the society at large is of primary concern. In other articles, JWs were claimed to have killed their friends and family members "to give blood to Jesus" while "singing lines from the Bible and being explicitly joyous that [their victim] is already in Heaven" (Hovhannisyan 2002). The information that "Jehovists have strictly secret days of self-sacrifice [when] by the order of the high-rank members dedicated believers kill themselves" (Hovhannisyan 1998a) coupled with colorful stories of suicides and cases of self-harm conjured a disturbing image

[239] In fact, a term that is often used in everyday speech and media is "zombified" (Arm. զոմբիացված) (Esayan 2001b). According to the modern popular culture, a zombie has only one goal – to consume human flesh; according to this logic, JWs have only one goal – to destroy everything around them, including themselves, their family, and the Motherland.

of a person programmed to destroy self, family, and nation.

During this period, JWs' deleterious effect on the Armenian nation and statehood became a separate genre in the Armenian media and everyday discourse. It emphasized the synergy of the Armenian Church and Armenianness, while becoming a JW and renouncing the AAC were presented as a first step towards losing one's Armenianness. Such religious "deviations" further contributed to the securitization of religious diversity in Armenia. JWs' political neutrality was depicted as a threat to the state and nation as well,

> What country will a small people like us have if we only yesterday obtained independence and if there is this virus/contamination that destroys the foundations of the family, weakens the spirit of patriotism, forbids participation in elections, loathes the national flag and anthem, disallows people to serve in the army, and forces them to turn away from the Armenian Apostolic Church – from the Church that for centuries has played an enormous role in saving the nation, protecting the culture, and preserving spirituality in the Armenian people? (Aghasaryan 2002).

JWs were incriminated with destroying the unity of the nation and undermining statehood. As journalist Hasmik Esayan (2001c) succinctly concluded, "every new Jehovist (Arm. Եհովական) results in a loss of one Armenian." In these and other similar quotes, the preservation of the Armenian nation and state was described as the ultimate goal and value, which fully corresponded to the ideological framework of Kocharyan's presidency. Those who did not share these goals and values and joined other religious organizations were declared scoundrels (Esayan 2001a), spies (Safaryan 2001b) or traitors of the nation (Sukisyan 2012), among other things. Unsurprisingly, proselytism was viewed as an attempt to confuse and ultimately tear people away from their family and nation. Media, colloquial speech, and even legislation used the term "soul-hunting" (Arm. Հոգեորսություն) to underscore the predator-prey type of relationships between JW proselytizers and potential converts (Esayan 2001c). Almost every article on religious diversity highlighted the foreign/alien origin of non-traditional religious groups. It was often claimed that Protestantism in

general and JWs in particular were created by the CIA in order to "weaken the power of already disunified societies" (Beglaryan 2000).[240] Generally, the publications hinted or directly stated that JWs must have a "powerful sponsorship of a powerful state that makes their world-wide operation possible" (Martirosyan 2000). Given the tension with Azerbaijan and Turkey, these claims about the subversive nature of JWs' activities were especially compelling for a larger audience.

The theme of betrayal of the nation was often tightly connected to the topic of conscientious objection. The line that I have heard hundreds of times during my fieldwork comprised the backbone of the argument, "Do you find that we should let the enemy come, take our lands, kill our children and women, loot everything?" (Hovhannisyan 1998c, 2001) or "What are you going to do when the Turks start killing you and your family?" However, complaints against JWs' destroying the Armenian family, nation, and statehood were more prominent and were viewed as more urgent than draft evasion, which was often presented as just another example of their deleterious influence. Although there were rare articles (Arakelyan 2002; Hovsepyan 2000) and TV reports about court trials of JW conscientious objectors, they were not in the focus of media's smear campaign. These anti-JWs attitudes were propagated regardless of the political orientation of a specific newspaper or a TV channel. Both conservative pro-government (e.g., "Azg") and oppositional (e.g., "Haykakan Zhamanak") newspapers unanimously agreed that JWs posed a threat to the Armenian family, nation, and statehood.[241]

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[240] This is only a part of a larger ideological message that depicted the west with its democratic principles, freedom of speech and religion, and individual rights as an alien and dangerous enemy of the Armenian state. This ideological message was very similar to that promoted by Putin in Russia, which shows the overall ideological orientation of Kocharyan's administration on Russia rather than the west.

[241] Even those newspapers, such as Aṛavot and Hayastani Hanrapetut'yun, that usually took a more reserved position regarding religious freedom (Eranosyan et al. 2010:34) were uncompromisingly negative towards JWs. Although certain newspapers, such as Hayots Ashkharh and Azg, published anti-JWs articles more consistently than other periodicals, such as Avangard, they all used similar arguments and rhetoric and equally zealously promoted the idea of indivisible ties between Armenians and the Armenian Church.

These examples demonstrate a striking homogeneity in anti-JWs rhetoric as regular people, experts on religion, officials, and priests harbored similar fears and appealed to the same images and arguments. According to media and interviews that I had with state officials and other eyewitnesses, this rhetorical and conceptual uniformity was not a result of a coordinated effort or policy on behalf of the state, the AAC, or the activists. The state lacked the capacity to enforce a unified policy regarding religious diversity. For example, the Council on Religious Affairs that was invested with power to restrict the illegal missionaries in the country, openly admitted its inability to enforce the 1997 Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations "due to lack of resources" (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2001). Under these circumstances, it was difficult to articulate and administer any coordinated policy regarding religious diversity. These cases illustrate that Armenian media, state officials, courts, the educational system, and priests of the Armenian Church perpetuated and reinforced the negative image of the JWs, which informed certain political decisions, court rulings, and ordinary people's attitude towards JWs without a centralized and coordinated external imposition.

One of the most publicized court cases against JWs in Armenia also showed the absence of a coordinated state policy regarding JWs. In 2001, the prosecutor's office in the city of Metsamor in the Armavir province of Armenia initiated a criminal case against Lyova Margaryan, an elder of the local congregation of JWs on the charge of "attempting an infringement upon the rights and personality of citizens on the pretext of engaging in religious activities" (Article 244 of the Criminal Code of Armenia).[242] Before the investigation commenced, police gave Margaryan two official

[242] Until 2003, Armenia used the Soviet Criminal Code that was adopted in 1961. In the spirit of Soviet atheist ideology, Article 244 seriously limited "any activity in the disguise of religious proselytism or other religious activities that are associated with causing harm to the health of citizens, with infringing on the rights of citizens, with involving underage children into these activities, as well as inciting citizens against fulfilling their social functions and civil duties." The maximum punishment for this crime was up to five years of imprisonment or exile.

warnings admonishing him against illegal proselytism. "On the third time, they realized I wasn't going to stop and started a criminal case" (Lyova Margaryan).

According to the prosecution side, Lyova Margaryan was accused of involving 12 underage children into a religious organization and of inducing a young male member, Aram Shahverdyan, to evade compulsory military service. The hearings took place in July-September 2001; from day one, they were closely covered by the media and attended by priests and other representatives of the Armenian Church, as well as by many JWs. In 2001, the case was examined twice by the District Court and the Court of Appeal and in both cases, Lyova Margaryan was acquitted.

The newspapers and TV reports openly criticized the court decisions of Margaryan's acquittal for "not hearing the voice of the society" (Babayan 2001) and for "not understanding the threat of JWs against spiritual, national, and state security" (Hovhannisyan 2001). Some journalists were more critical saying that "one unwillingly comes to a conclusion that the judge is also a JW or he was bribed by them – he doesn't care about the future of our country just like these sectarians" (Poghosyan 2001). On March 7th, 2002, the Court of Cassation upheld the previous verdicts of Margarian's innocence. In an interview, Lyova Margaryan said that the prosecuting side was greatly disappointed by the verdict[243] and

> was really preparing to appeal to the president of the Republic of Armenia. There was a Council for Human Rights led by the President where they really discussed the possibility of another appeal against Jehovah's Witnesses. They wanted to restart the criminal case again against me, but eventually the government in a roundabout way gave a sign to the head prosecutor not to start this criminal case again. Lyova Margaryan

Besides demonstrating the absence of a coordinated approach to the JWs' issue, the Margaryan case also showed the main complaints against JWs concerned their proselytism,

[243] In a conversation with journalists, the deputy-chief of prosecution, Sedrak Sinasyan said, "as a lawyer with 25 years of experience, and as an Armenian person, I strictly condemn what Margaryan did" (Poghosyan 2001).

deleterious influence on family as well as their evasion of military service.[244] Accusing JWs of introducing underage children to the sectarian life was presented as a strike against the Armenian family and society. Media reports drew a gruesome picture of JW children who were lost for their peers, schools, and society as a whole (Babayan 2001). The Margaryan case was unprecedented with regard to the amount of attention in the media and various social circles. It further facilitated the negative attitude toward JWs in Armenia at all levels of society.

Zeroing in on JWs was not incidental, nor was it a result of their particularly intense competition with the AAC – after all, there were other religious groups, such as Pentecostals, that were much more numerous than JWs. Yet, while competing with the AAC for the flock, Pentecostals attracted little attention from the Church, state, media, and ordinary people. Importantly, measuring the competition between the AAC and other religious organizations in terms of followers may distort the picture. The Armenian Church is not preoccupied with the number of churchgoers; active participation in church life is not required and not participating in the liturgy or rituals is not criticized as long as one does not engage with another religious group. During a regular Sunday liturgy, the largest cathedral in Yerevan, the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, is attended by only a few hundred believers, most of whom do not take the Holy Communion. Most visitors come occasionally to light up a candle or to attend rites of passage associated with the Church, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Therefore, competition between religious organizations and the AAC is ideological rather than practical. The dominance of the Armenian Church is predicated on the idea that all Armenians belong to the Mother Church regardless of their beliefs and practices. JWs and other religious groups reject the connection between Armenianness

[244] The prosecuting side did not openly accuse JWs of attempting to corrupt the nation and statehood, yet AAC priests who were present in the courtroom loudly made such remarks during the hearings (WTBTS 2003).

and the AAC, which undermines the ideological power of the latter.

JWs' conscientious objection played a role in creating animosity towards them, yet it alone could not explain the extreme antipathy they faced. Draft evasion was portrayed as just another evil in a long list of JWs' vices. Particularly strong hostility towards JWs in the media, official discourse, and everyday life was a result of JWs' tangible presence in Armenian public space. The ideological framework that described Armenians as culturally and religiously homogeneous could not tolerate public expressions of religious heterogeneity. In this context, JWs' public ministry continually and visibly challenged the dominant ideological frame of reference.

As I mentioned above, other religious groups, such as Mormons also engage in proselytism, but the number of preachers has always been incommensurably lower – under two hundred preachers throughout Armenia (Hranush Kharatyan). Besides, increasing animosity during Kocharyan's presidency pushed Mormons to further reduce the number of preachers in Armenia and "avoid high profile events"(Annual Report on Religious Freedom 1999). Given the inconspicuousness of the places of worship of non-AAC religious groups, religious diversity in Armenia became almost invisible, while the visibility of the AAC with newly built or restored churches was becoming more prominent. The only disruption in this nearly idyllic harmony was JWs' active public ministry. During the presidency of Kocharyan, the JW community grew more than twofold from a little over 4,000 members to almost 10,000 (Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses 1999; 2010). All types of their public ministry, such as street proselytism and door-to-door preaching,[245] created a tangible presence of JWs in the public space.

Complaints about proselytism were foundational for all types of anti-JW messages in the

[245] The literature carts were introduced in Armenia in 2016.

media as well as in official discourse and everyday attitudes.[246] The aforementioned soul-hunting became a key issue of religious diversity. Not only was it deemed morally unacceptable, but it also contradicted the 1997 Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations that granted the exclusive right to proselytize to the Armenian Church. In 1999, the deputy director of the Council on Religious Affairs, Sergey Vardanyan, claimed that JWs were denied state registration because they had "contradictions with the legislation of the Republic of Armenia" (Mkhitaryan 1999). According to Lyova Margaryan who was engaged in the process of obtaining state registration from 1995 onward, state officials "refused [to register JWs] saying that we did not serve in the army and that our proselytism is 'soul-hunting'" (as quoted in Eranosyan et al. 2010:114). Vardan Ascatryan, affiliated with the Council on Religious Affairs since 2000, explained the rejection of the JWs' application as follows,

> Jehovah's Witnesses could not register because any organization seeking registration had to prove that it would protect the foundations of social life – that it wouldn't cause any harm. They were applying, and we were saying, "You are proselytizing, it is unacceptable! You appreciate public ministry, but other don't. What if a fight starts? So, your actions destabilize public order. Don't' do it!" You have your own place – proselytize there, not in public spaces. If I see that you are talking to my kid on the street, am I going to calmly tolerate it?! No! And it creates a danger of fights. So, the street proselytism was the problem – you still see them now in the streets […] The military service was also a problem, because we did not have alternative civil service and they were imprisoned.

Of course, a desire to avoid potential fights cannot account for the tenacious unwillingness of the authorities to register the JWs' organization before 2004. Whether proselytism was qualified as soul-hunting, brainwashing/zombifying, violating legislation, or a fight-provoking activity, it was always at the forefront of the accusations against JWs.[247] At the end of the 1990s, police fined

[246] People who harbor anti-JWs sentiments in Armenia often claim that they are not against JWs per se, but they do not want to be proselytized to and do not want to see JWs on the streets.

[247] Besides, the emphasis on proselytism rather than conscientious objection as a cause for the denial of registration is

preachers and even opened investigations against administrative violations for breaking the prohibition of proselytism for foreign missionaries (Esayan 2001d).

Given the salience of the idea of the cultural, linguistic, and religious homogeneity of Armenians, in which all Armenians belong to the Mother Church, public manifestation of religious diversity was destroying the taken-for-grantedness of the dominant ideology. As "main perpetrators" JWs rapidly came to epitomize the national enemy in Armenia because they were the most publicly conspicuous religious group.

Mistreatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in the 2000s

Besides the Margaryan case, JWs experienced other types of enmity. They could not build Kingdom Halls or often even rent venues for large gatherings, such as conventions or the Memorial of Jesus' Death. In cases when it was possible, they were unable to rent the same venue two years in a row because "the authorities were always able to find out where we were gathering, and they would forbid that venue to let [them] organize the Memorial there the next year. So, the Witnesses had to change the venue every year" (Jirayr Avetisyan). The houses where regular meetings usually took place did not belong to the community because it was not registered as a legal body. Even after obtaining state registration in 2004, purchasing land and building KHs has been difficult because the authorities have used multiple excuses, such as the status of land or proximity to schools, to deny construction permits. Besides, the legal importation of religious literature was impossible. A few times, Armenian customs requisitioned the literature. In order to avoid these issues, the literature was brought into the country in small batches from neighboring Georgia hidden in the trunks of

confirmed by multiple independent sources – media, reports of international organizations, such as OSCE and the U.S. Department of State, and my interviews with state officials who made those decisions.

personal cars (Archives of the Armenian Bethel).[248]

As intolerance towards JWs spread to all strata of the Armenian society, it affected the everyday lives of rank-and-file JWs. Ordinary citizens filed multiple reports to police about JW proselytism, and in many cases directly assaulted the ministers in the streets. In the interviews, JWs often mention that in the 2000s, the attacks on them during public ministry were especially frequent compared to the 1990s or the 2010s. The attacks could come in the form of physical fighting (Ara), verbal abuse (Narek), destroying literature and throwing stones (Sako), and even attacking with a knife (Criminal Case, K'anak'eṛ-Zeytun Court of Yerevan, case #0084/01/08).[249] One of these cases was registered in the city of Aparan located north of Yerevan that according to JWs is the least tolerant city in Armenia with regard to JWs' presence. In September 2003, teenagers attacked JWs encouraged by a local priest (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2004).[250] In this particular case, the authorities did not push the investigation, and the perpetrators were not brought to account. In other cases, the courts inflicted a penalty of a maximum of 300 U.S. dollars for assaulting JWs.

In some cases, JWs lost their jobs because of their religious affiliation. In government-run organizations, JW employees often faced pressure to resign. Lilit, a long-time JW, recalls an incident at her workplace,

> I work as a teacher in a primary school [in Yerevan]. So, I never really had many issues with my students' parents and other teachers because in a primary school you're pretty independent. My students' parents are happy that we don't celebrate holidays like Christmas, because I do not demand that they chip in, which is common in other

[248] In some cases, customs seized special 'spiritual letters' from one congregation to another, which they said were meant for internal rather than proselytizing purposes" (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2001)

[249] Multiple criminal investigations were initiated as a result of various assaults on JW preachers around Armenia. Many of these attacks were also confirmed by international reports (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2009) and multiple videos on social networking websites, such as Facebook and YouTube.

[250] As a result of the particular animosity toward JW preachers, this territory remained unassigned for regular witnessing because of the danger for ministers.

> groups. I think my responsibility is to teach kids, and their spiritual growth is on their parents. They must do that, not me. At the time of Kocharyan, the principal of the school called me and said, 'You either leave your job or you sign a document that you are no longer a Witness.' He said that it was because the parents complained, but I knew that it was a requirement from the government that they do that.[251] I said, 'Try to fire me and you will talk to my lawyer.' And I called the legal department at Bethel. Everyone in the school was shocked. They were like, 'Look, she even has her own lawyer,' and they got very scared that I will take the case further. So, they dropped it and never since has anyone brought up my being a Jehovah's Witness.

A similar incident took place in the city of Stepanavan, in the province of Lori, where in December 2000, the chief of local police issued order 555-A, in which he ordered the firing of members of the police force who professed other-than-the-AAC religious views and who refused to disavow their faith. The order said that "unlike the traditional national Armenian Church, the newest religious movements and organizations are nothing but totalitarian cults and sects that have corrupting nature. Their activities are directed against individuals and families, as well as against the whole society" (Ishkhanyan 2001). The document appealed to the same rhetoric, logic, and images that were used in media, the Church discourse, and everyday talks. In February 2001, Zemfira Voskanyan, the head accountant of the Stepanavan police station, was dismissed on grounds of her membership in the JW community. She filed a lawsuit to the district court and in April 2001, was reinstated to her previous position (Corley 2001). In these two cases, JWs were able to defend their jobs because of legal support on behalf of the JW community – for example, Zemfira Voskanyan was defended by Lyova Margaryan and Drew Holiner, a U.S. lawyer from the JWs' regional center in the Russian city of Solnechnoye. In other cases, JWs employed by private businesses lost their jobs because labor protection laws were not enforced (for example, see Eghiazaryan 2011).

During this period, the idea of the negative influence of JWs on family and the upbringing of

[251] On the one hand, this comment suggests a greater coordination of the anti-JW policies by the state. However, given that similar incidents were not common throughout the country, the degree of coordination appears very exaggerated.

children penetrated judicial practice. First, in courts as well as everyday life one spouse's membership in a JW community was regarded as a sign of the quick deterioration of the family and served as a sound argument for divorce and, importantly, for terminating or limiting parental rights. Every year dozens of divorce disputes reached the Armenian courts in cases when the decision to divorce was not unanimous. Often, non-JW spouse statements described how their family life deteriorated when their partner joined the JW community. For example, in 2009 a non-JW husband petitioned the K'anak'eṛ-Zeytun District Court (Court case ԵԷԴ/0842/02/09) for a divorce from his JW-wife using the following argumentation,

> Over time, our family life started to get more strained because my wife started to often leave the house, neglecting me and our children. Later, she turned out to visit meetings of the so-called "Jehovah's Witnesses" sectarian organization forgetting about her family. Although for years I have tried to stay with her, asked her parents to intervene, all was in vain. The situation worsened when she tried to drag our little daughter and our son to that faith. For the past few years, living together was impossible. After a long time of this intolerable atmosphere and fights, with police intervention, my wife left the house and took the children with her. I do not want to see my children growing in the ranks of the sectarian organization because I think that their upbringing based on this ideology will negatively affect their yet unformed character and their psychological development.

This argument became a formula in dozens of other similar court cases every year – one spouse's becoming a JW created an intolerable atmosphere in the family, subjected the non-JW spouse and children to discomfort, and caused them harm. Most often, the courts did not openly consider one's membership in the JW community as a factor in making decisions. For example, in the case above, the court explicitly "attach[ed] importance to the circumstance that the defendant's being a sectarian (Jehovah's Witness) does not constitute grounds for stripping her of her parental rights". In other cases, because of the attitudes of individual judges this fact was taken into consideration. For example, in the case considered by the Ajapnyak and Davtashen District Court (case #1513/02/08) in 2008, independent experts claimed that a JW mother of a six-year-old boy "is

closely following the rules of the [JWs'] movement, […] which can have certain negative effects on the child's full-fledged psychological and moral development. Following this movement can result in a lack of independence and even addiction (Arm. կախյալություն)." Based on this argument, the judge ruled to "limit [the JW mother's] parental rights" in order to minimize the potential harm she could cause to her son. After a series of appeals filed by the JW mother, this decision was invalidated by the Court of Cassation. In later cases, courts did not openly consider one's affiliation with the JW community as a factor in parental custody disputes, yet attempts to use the "JW card" to win over judges' opinion is in practice until today.

Religious Freedom and European Influence

Despite this increasing animosity, JWs were able to evade the fate of the Hare Krishna community that was completely wiped out in Armenia in the 1990s. Besides, they were able to obtain state registration in 2004. This became possible after Armenia's accession to the Council of Europe in 2001 and the ratification of the European Convention on Human Rights in 2002, which increased the influence of European institutions and extended the jurisdiction of the ECHR over Armenia. The eagerness of the Armenian authorities to develop cooperation with the European institutions and governments increased their willingness to bring Armenian domestic legislation in line with European and international standards. However, that did not entail the automatic enforcement of the new legislation.

One of the three stipulations of Armenia's association with the Council of Europe was "to ensure that all churches or religious communities, in particular those referred to as 'non-traditional', may practice their religion without discrimination" (Parliamentary Assembly, Opinion 221 (2000)). Also, Armenia assumed a responsibility to adopt a law on alternative civil service within three years of accession and pardon all conscientious objectors. Effectively, these requests on behalf of the

Council of Europe were in direct contradiction to the demands of the Armenian Church, a significant segment of political elites, media, and ordinary people to impose further limitations on religious diversity. In other words, European integration required implementing policies that were internally viewed as a threat to national security. Between 2001 and 2013, Armenian legislation and policies regarding religious diversity and JWs in particular reflected an attempt from the authorities to keep a foot in both camps. On the one hand, the reforms allowed the Armenian authorities to report the implementation of the demands of the Council of Europe, the ECHR, and later the Venice Commission. Simultaneously, they often created a cumbersome system that impeded or at least significantly slowed down the implementation of reforms related to religious freedom in order to preserve the actual status quo and effective control over the domestic situation.

Alternative Military Service

In December 2003, the National Assembly adopted the Law on Alternative Service which came into effect on July 1st, 2004. It defined the alternative service as "not related to carrying, keeping, maintaining, or using weapons" (The Law on the Alternative Service 2003) and offered two types of service. The first option – military service in the armed forces without carrying weapons – implied 36 months of service, while the non-military type outside of the army was 42 months. Although the law directly stated the opposite, its provisions were of a punitive nature as the alternative service outside of the military was almost twice as long as the conventional 24-month military service. Although the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (the PACE) voiced its concern with the "the excessive length of the period of alternative civilian service," it nonetheless expressed "satisfaction at its excellent cooperation with the Armenian authorities, their open-minded attitude and the quality of the ongoing dialogue on compliance with obligations and commitments" (PACE 2004).

The implementation of the law was anything but smooth. In 2004, the first 19 JW conscientious objectors applied for the alternative non-military service and were granted permission from the state commission. They were assigned to various workplaces, such as psychiatric boarding hospitals and nursing homes. Almost a year later, in May 2005, they all resigned from their duties insisting that their alternative service was "carried out under military supervision […] where conscientious objectors carry out their duty [and] receive their instructions about the conditions and modalities of their service from the military" (The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2007). Also, their schedule did not allow them to regularly attend religious meetings as they often had to stay at the facility 24 hours a day. The authorities responded to JW alternative servicemen's resignation by instituting criminal proceedings against them. On the insistence of the Bureau on Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs, the conscientious objectors were tried in civil courts instead of military courts (Hranush Kharatyan), and in all of the cases, the Courts held that the defendants must serve prison sentences. In 2006, some of them were sentenced to prison terms varying from two years to two years and six months.

This development triggered a negative reaction on behalf of the European institutions which urged the Armenian Government to release the conscientious objectors and claimed that "continued sentencing of conscientious objectors is a violation of Armenia's Council of Europe commitments" (Corley 2004a). On September 12th, 2006, the General Prosecutor decided to terminate the investigation for the lack of *corpus delicti* because the existing criminal code did not consider an unauthorized abandonment of the place of alternative service as an offense. At the same time, the Government of Armenia submitted a draft of a law to the National Assembly to eliminate this loophole. The law was passed, which made abandoning the site of the alternative service a punishable offence, which clearly violated Armenia's commitments to the EU's demands.

JWs continued refusing to participate in alternative civil service under the supervision of military personnel until 2013. As a result, the practice of imprisoning JWs for draft evasion continued despite the adoption of the Law on Alternative Service. In addition, the sentences for this violation became significantly harsher than they were before the adoption of the law in 2003. If previously, an average sentence ranged from 12 to 18 months of imprisonment, after the 2006 conflict, it increased manyfold so that an 18-month prison term became the lowest and rarest sentence.[252] Another issue that became common was the denial of passports for conscientious objectors who had already served their term in prison. As in most post-Soviet countries, an internal passport is the main identification document required for employment or marriage, admission to college, or buying property. According to the existing rules, all male citizens applying for a passport must be registered with the military commissariat. However, commissariats refused to register JWs who had already served their prison terms because they continued regarding JWs as delinquents who were not cleared of their military duties. Whereas this "policy" had existed since the 1990s, it had been enforced relatively rarely; after 2006, however, this rule was applied in nearly all cases. After the intervention of the PACE, on July 28th, 2008, the military commissar informed JWs that the conscientious objectors could be unimpededly registered in the military commissariats after having served their prison sentences. However, this directive was not enforced in practice until January 2009.

Simultaneously, in Nagorno Karabagh which was technically outside the jurisdiction of the Armenian state, alternative service was not introduced, and conscientious objectors, JWs and some

[252] For example, in 2007 of 48 imprisoned JW conscientious objectors, four received an 18-month sentence, 15 received sentences ranging between 22 and 27 months, 24 received 30-month sentence, and five received 36-month sentences, which was the longest sentence allowed (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2007). In addition, before 2006, imprisoned JW conscientious objectors were often paroled after six months of imprisonment, which was no longer practiced after 2006.

Baptists (Corley 2005), were forced to serve in the army or face even longer imprisonment (up to four years). Sometimes, the "loophole" with jurisdiction was used by the Armenian military, so they forcefully and clandestinely took conscripts from Armenia to Nagorno Karabagh where the Armenian obligations before the European organizations had no legal effect. Armen Grigoryan, a JW conscientious objector, whose story was followed by international human rights organizations and media, such as Forum 18, was taken to Karabagh without warning in June 2004. He recalls his experience,

> I came to undergo the medical examinations at noon. They were running all these tests and I was going from doctor to doctor until about 4 pm. Then, they put me in the car and at a very high speed we went to Chaarbakh [an administrative district of Yerevan - A.T.]. They said that the last examination was going to take place there. But we didn't even enter the building, and at the gate they put me on the bus with other recruits against my will. I couldn't really do anything because the bus immediately started moving. My parents only knew that I went to undergo a medical examination at the recruiting office. And they thought that I was going to come back soon. They did not let me call my parents until we reached Egheknadzor. There, I called my uncle, and I told them that I was taken to Karabagh. (Interview with Ara)

When Armen refused to swear an oath and perform any military duties, he was tried in Nagorno Karabagh court. The prosecutor demanded a four-year sentence, but the court sentenced Armen to two years of imprisonment. Eventually, he was extradited to Armenia, where he was paroled in eight months. Overall, these attempts to slow down or obstruct the implementation of alternative military service were connected to the fear that potential recruits *en masse* would use it to evade compulsory military service. This was viewed as an unacceptable risk amidst the continuous political and military tension with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Between 2003 and 2013, Armenian conscientious objectors, the absolute majority of whom were JWs, were trying to bring the standards for alternative civil service closer to their understanding of conscientious objection.

Obtaining State Registration

Besides the implementation of the alternative service, the PACE also demanded that the Armenian authorities grant state registration to JWs. The absence of state registration created serious obstacles for JWs: they could not import religious literature,[253] purchase property, or build places of worship, among others. Therefore, obtaining a registration was important for the normal operation of the community (Lyova Margaryan). Despite multiple attempts, the State Council on Religious Affairs continuously rejected JWs' applications for the state registration on the pretext of incongruity with Armenian legislation, which included conscientious objection and illegal proselytism (Eranosyan et al. 2010:114).

The adoption of the Law on Alternative Service in June 2004 eliminated one of these incongruities with existing Armenian legislation, but public ministry remained a point of contention. In 1999, the officials of the State Council on Religion insisted that public ministry be removed from the organization's founding charter. JWs partially conceded to this demand having replaced the word "proselytism" with "witnessing" (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2000). Obviously, this compromise could not satisfy the state officials. Seeking other solutions, JWs appealed to the President's Human Rights Commission for help with obtaining registration, but the Council refused to intervene and recommended that JWs seek redress in court (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 1999). In 2001, negotiations between the representatives of JWs and the Council on Religious Affairs was put on hold due to the lack of progress. Also, the aforementioned criminal case against Lyova Margaryan created an additional impediment in the way of JWs' obtaining state registration. In Margaryan's opinion, "the criminal case was started in order to not allow the

[253] Although the JW community was rapidly growing in the 1990s, the WTBTS literature was mostly in Russian and sometimes in western Armenian. Only in 1998, the Watchtower magazine was published in eastern Armenian for the first time. Later, a team of Armenian translators working in the WTBTS regional center in Solnechnoye, Russia, started translating other brochures and booklets necessary for preaching and Bible-studies.

registration of the [JWs'] organization. We talked to the head of the Council on Religious Affairs in order to figure out when they were actually going to register us. And the head of the Council got really angry and shouted, 'There is a criminal case against you! How can we register your organization?!'" The continuing tension was resolved when Lyova Margaryan was finally acquitted in 2002 and when the Council on Religious Affairs was abolished by presidential decree on March 6th, 2002. Temporarily, the functions of the Council were supposed to be fulfilled by the government, but as eyewitnesses and international observers note it was a time of interregnum until the Government established a new Bureau on Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs (henceforth, the Bureau) in July 2002. In January 2004, the Prime Minister, Andranik Margaryan, appointed Hranush Kharatyan to be the head of the Bureau. She recalled her appointment,

> I didn't really want to accept the offer, but the Prime Minister called me and said, 'I need a solution for the issue with Jehovah's Witnesses. We need to register them. And I need someone who will do it in a way that won't trigger a negative reaction from the society yet will stay within the legal field […] I need a person who knows our history and people's problems and who will be accepted by the international institutions not as a traditional, nationalist-oriented person. I think you're the best person for that.'

Hranush Kharatyan[254] also claimed that when she was offered the position, she demanded that she "be free from any pressure from the Government. They agreed, and although [she] assumed a lot of unwanted duties, this main condition was met." Unlike her predecessors, such as Lazar Sujyan, and successors (Vardan Ascatryan), she did not have direct and personal relations and connections with the Armenian Church.[255]

State agencies continued to insist that JWs engaging in illegal activities as proselytism was

[254] An anthropologist with expertise in religious and ethnic minorities in Armenia, Hranush Kharatyan was a candidate who met these requirements. Before her appointment, she served as dean of the Department of Ethnography at Yerevan State University and was a member of the National Academy of Science.

[255] She even claimed that the Catholicos and the Church elite in general, disliked her, which eventually resulted in her demise, when a significantly more pro-AAC Government came to power in 2008 under Serzh Sargsyan.

forbidden according to the 1997 amendments to the Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations. Besides, Hranush Kharatyan accused JWs of not being proactive enough and of failing "to respond to her invitations to discuss how to amend their statute to get registration" (interview with Hranush Kharatyan; also, see Corley 2004b). Tigran Mukuchyan, the Deputy Minister of Justice, even claimed that "JWs simply imitated the attempts to register, they tried to create an impression that we did not want to register them, while in reality they themselves did not want to" (Arshakyan 2004). On October 8th, 2004, after many years of futile attempts, the JW community was registered as the Christian Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Armenian Republic (henceforth, the Organization). The government clearly pursued the goal to fulfill its international obligations and simultaneously to placate potential domestic discontent. Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan who earlier appointed Hranush Kharatyan with the main goal to find "a solution with Jehovah's Witnesses," said to journalists that "we don't need to go down the path of forbidding [JWs], but we have to give them an opportunity. Then, we will create such conditions that if they break the law, we will be able to ban their activity lawfully. I am surprised that our society focuses only on Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups even those that are registered are not less dangerous" (Khachatryan 2004). The government was trying to present the registration of JWs as just a step in the long-term strategy to eliminate the danger posed to the security of the state on behalf of all foreign religious groups indicating their fundamental opposition to the EU's perspective and demands.

Prime Minister Margaryan's concern about public reaction was far from being groundless. Granting state registration to JWs prompted a very negative response from politicians, religious leaders, media, and ordinary citizens. In the span of one week, news broadcasts were dedicated to JWs, while Armenian newspapers published dozens of articles in which journalists and their

interviewees from all strata of the Armenian society castigated the government for granting registration to JWs. Previously, TV and newspapers had paid such close attention to religious diversity in Armenia only during the Margaryan trial in 2001. The Armenian Church officially announced that because of JW registration "the religious situation in Armenia is getting out of control [and] cannot facilitate the health of the social consciousness, the preservation of the moral values in our country especially now that our Fatherland and people face various economic and social difficulties" (Information Service of Ejmiatsin 2004). Nationalist political parties, such as the Dashnaktsut'yun, claimed that JWs' "danger as an aggressive sect has not gone down – they adjusted to our legislation to have more opportunities to spread their sect around Armenia" (Esayan 2004). The students at Yerevan State University and the Medical University held anti-JW meetings where they suggested finding a solution for this "issue of national security" by organizing rallies and anti-JWs activists' groups (Zakaryan 2004). Similar calls for action were voiced by the youth wing of the ruling coalition that invited all Armenians to fight against the sects (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights 2005). These calls had been common in Armenia since the early 1990s, yet regardless of their organizers they were rarely realized in practice. Student rallies in this case did not materialize either.

Although social discontent dissipated rather quickly, the government did not escape reputational losses. The political and social activists fighting against foreign religious groups have been openly accusing the state of being unable and/or unwilling to check the spread of the problem. Often, activists appealed to the European and Russian anti-cult movements and policies (see, Chapter III). Referring to the French case of calling into question the status of JWs as a religious organization, as well as the investigations of activities of destructive sects that were initiated by the governments of Belgium and Germany, they claimed that

> …France is a member of the Council of Europe […] but it has religious police, and nobody says that they violate human rights […] When we research European experience, we see different things there. There are persecutions, pressure, raids, and fights against the religious organizations. As a result of police raids, there can be victims among the members of religious organizations there. (Aleksandr Amaryan in Eperemyan 2012)

These anti-cult groups were organized by secular leaders although they often cooperated with Armenian priests and professed their alliance with the Armenian Church (as they became especially active after Kocharyan's presidency, I address them in greater detail in the next sub-section). And just like with other elements of the anti-JWs narrative, they voiced opinions that were similar to those of state officials, pro-Russian activists, intellectuals, priests, and ordinary people.[256]

Having received their long-desired state registration, JWs were able to solve some issues related to literature import, buying property, and building Kingdom Halls (KH). In 2005, in downtown Yerevan, JWs opened a small office that served as the administrative center of the community until it moved to a newly purchased building in the Nor Arabkir district of Yerevan in 2008. In 2007, the JWs' Organization erected the first KH in Gyumri, the second largest city in Armenia, with financial assistance from the WTBTS headquarters (Archives of the Armenian Bethel). However, in some cases, building new KHs raised tension with the local population. In 2009, residents of Vanadzor who lived in the neighborhood objected to the construction of a new KH because it would be in close proximity to a school and kindergarten. Fearing that JWs would convert children, they tried to halt the construction by threatening the workers (JW volunteers), as

[256] For example, Ashot Sargsyan, the head of the Bureau on National Minorities and Religious Affairs of Nagorno Karabagh, commented on the refusal to register JWs in the unrecognized republic as follows, "it pains me to admit that we, Armenians, like to subordinate out national values to European so-called standards that, by the way, even in Europe are regarded with disdain. For example, in Belgium, they officially recognize four Christian traditions (Catholicism, Protestantism, the Anglican Church, and Orthodoxy), Islam, and Judaism. All others are called sects; they do not have any legal status and do not receive any assistance from the state. They, including Jehovah's Witnesses, are included into the list of 'destructive sectarian organizations.' And in France, the manipulation of consciousness that is used by JWs and by other sectarian organizations has been considered a criminal act since 2000" (Eghiazaryan 2010). Although the information is seriously distorted, it is clear that the anti-cult movement, legislation, and anti-western ideological framework inspired local activism against religious minorities in Armenia and informed the attitude of state officials.

well as dismantling and stealing building materials (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2009). Although conflicts between JWs and ordinary citizens were not uncommon before, official registration allowed JWs to appeal to police for assistance more freely. In this case, after the intervention of police and local authorities, construction resumed without further incidents.

With registration, importation of JWs' religious literature was legalized, and in June 2005, the first shipment was cleared (Yearbook 2006). However, later, the Armenian customs services tried to impede the literature import, which illustrated yet another instance when the Armenian authorities tried to appease the EU demands and simultaneously stall the practical implementation of new legislation. In March 2007, referencing the Customs Code of Armenia, the customs officers evaluated the cost of a literature shipment as 20 times more expensive than was declared by JWs (Administrative case #3095/05/08). As a result, the Organization was demanded to pay 65,000 U.S. dollars as opposed to the declared 3,250 dollars. The shipments were cleared only a year later, in April 2008, when the required amount was paid by the Organization. JWs' complaints, as well as financial and moral damage claims were dismissed when case were taken to the Administrative Court in 2008. Between 2007 and 2015,[257] the Organization was involved in over 50 court proceedings in Armenia, but when its complaints were rejected, it appealed to the ECHR. Only in 2020, the ECHR ruled that the demands of the Armenian custom authorities were not unreasonable and upheld the decisions of the Armenian domestic courts.

Despite the legal and practical obstacles to their activities, as well as growing animosity towards them, the JW community continued growing. Although it fluctuated, the number of baptisms remained relatively stable throughout this period with the lowest number in 1998 (351

[257] Usually, an average number of shipments that the Organization receives from Germany as donations vary from five to fifteen. Each time, the Organization pays a value added tax calculated based on the estimate of the State Revenue Service and not the declared value.

cases) and the highest in 2001 (961). Not only did the community become very salient in Armenian public space, but it also started to loom large as one of the primary antagonists in the nationalist ideology and overall discourse on national security. The ideological convergence of Armenianness and the affiliation with the AAC naturally lowered tolerance for visible deviations from this "norm." While other religious organizations either disappeared (Hare Krishna) or further lowered their public profile (Mormons, Pentecostals, Orthodox), JWs with their public ministry conspicuously defied the idea that Armenianness is contingent on affiliation with the Armenian Church. They also preached that the concept of the innate Christianity of Armenians is fallacious because being Christian requires learning the Scripture and following multiple prescriptions. Although they were not as successful in "stealing" the flock from the AAC as some other religious groups, they openly undermined the very foundation of the ideological dominance of the national Armenian Church, as well as the existing political and social systems. Political uniformity became a leitmotif of Kocharyan's presidency as he sought to suppress political rivals as well as alternative centers of loyalty and legitimacy. The AAC and many other religious organizations conformed to this vision of Armenian political and ideological systems. JWs, however, visibly violated the hegemony of the official ideology of cultural and political uniformity and unity in the country. Radical solutions for this issue were not available to the Armenian government because of its dependence on western political and financial aid that was given in exchange for a certain level of political and religious tolerance. In this context, Armenian political elites deemed the internal ideological and reputational losses related to legalization and accommodation of JWs acceptable. Moreover, the implementation of new progressive laws was usually extremely slow and inconsistent, which allowed the government to retain full control over the domestic socio-political situation and simultaneously report its compliance with the EU demands. Importantly, state policies regarding religious diversity under

Robert Kocharyan show that the AAC was not an instigator of restrictive measures and policies. In the atmosphere of the authoritarian tendencies of the Kocharyan administration, the state had little tolerance towards public displays of alternative ideological messages and initiatives, which drove the anti-JW attitudes and practical measures.

The Presidency of Serzh Sargsyan

In 2008, after a much-contested and violence-provoking election, Serzh Sargsyan became the new President of Armenia. Although the transition between the two administrations did not create nearly as much political and ideological rupture as Levon Ter-Petrosyan's resignation in 1998, the policies regarding religious freedom during Sargsyan's presidency had their distinct character. First, the ideological union of the state and the Armenian Church became even more publicly visible as the hierarchs of the Armenian Church made more frequent official appearances with high-ranking politicians. If previously the Church representatives attended important secular events, now the Prime Minister and even the President could often be seen at Sunday liturgies in Armenian churches, openings of new churches, and ecclesiastical gatherings, such as a Diocesan Representative Assembly at Ejmiatsin. Second, Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan (2008-2014) was a zealous follower of the AAC, which influenced religious policies as the state continued its investment into the ideology of defining Armenianness in ethnoreligious terms. For example, by his initiative, five Armenian traditional days of the commemoration of the dead (Arm. Մեռելոց) were declared national holidays (Ogannisyan 2014:62–63). These days were associated with the major holidays of the AAC, which additionally highlighted its privileged position.[258] Also, he was a member of the Supreme Spiritual Council of the AAC, i.e. he was personally involved in the process of decision-

[258] This legislative innovation was not fully embraced by the population and was harshly criticized by non-governmental organizations that largely promoted the western understanding of religious freedom. Nevertheless, this law functioned long after Tigran Sargsyan's resignation, although in a watered-down form (Hraparak 2018).

making within the Church.[259] Third, in 2013, after about five years of continuous pressure on religious minorities and JWs in particular, the authorities precipitously changed their policies regarding religious freedom, which ushered in an era of relative religious tolerance in Armenia.

For the community of JWs, this period brought important changes. First, the impressive growth that started at the beginning of the 1990s plateaued in 2011 and remained stagnant for over a decade. Only in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, did the growth resume, although structurally it was very different (see, Chapters II and V). Second, literature in Eastern Armenian became much more abundant and accessible. In 2010, the New World Translation of the Bible[260] in eastern Armenian was presented in Armenia by a member of the Governing Body, Geoffrey Jackson, during a regional convention. In addition, in 2012, WTBTS launched its official website, www.jw.org, in multiple languages, including Armenian. Although, until the COVID pandemic in 2020, smartphones and tablets were a relatively rare possession among JWs in Armenia, the website expanded the amount of accessible WTBTS literature in Armenian through desktop computers.

From the late 2000s, Armenia has hosted several preaching campaigns organized by Armenian-speaking JWs from the United States, Russia, Lebanon, and Greece who used their own funds to go to Armenia on a several-weeks-long preaching expedition. The goal of the campaigns was to proselytize in remote regions of Armenia that previously were not covered by the local preachers or were covered insufficiently. The participants, most of whom had lived in Armenia before emigrating to the U.S., were linguistically and culturally attuned to the intricacies of the local

[259] Also, he publicly claimed that the principle of separation between the Church and the state was outdated and had to be reconsidered (Lusyan 2011).

[260] The New World Translation of the Bible in English was completed in 1950. This translation failed to gain wide-spread acceptance in academic and ecclesiastical circles for various reasons, such as the anonymity of translators or inserting the name Jehovah in the New Testament where it had never been used.

culture and expectations. Expectedly, their missionary zeal was not always received positively, and conflicts occurred between the locals and the preachers.[261] Nevertheless, the preachers were often able to start new Bible studies, although it was difficult to sustain interest among local residents because when the preachers left there were no means to continue providing them with guidance and literature. Therefore, these preaching campaigns did not become a source of numerous new members of the JW community.

At the beginning of Serzh Sargsyan's presidency, JWs continued experiencing the same issues as previously, including smear campaigns in the media, the impossibility of obtaining permits for constructing KHs, tangible everyday animosity, and the imprisonment of conscientious objectors. Previously, the two significant waves of attacking JWs in the media occurred at the time of Lyova Margaryan's trial in 2001 and after JWs obtained state registration in 2004. The third wave ensued in 2011 when all newspapers, media, and nascent Internet news platforms turned their g to an alleged attack of two JW preachers on an Armenian priest, Esayi Artenyan, near the church of St. Trinity in Yerevan. According to the materials of the criminal case initiated against the perpetrators after the incident,

> On May 15th, 2011, Rev. Esayi Artenyan having noticed that the members of the Jehovah's Witnesses' sectarian organization, Andranik Makvetsian and Samvel Grigoryan, were engaging in preaching to two citizens in the yard of the church, approached them and asked them to leave. They refused and started arguing with the priest. At that moment, the priest attempted to take a picture of Andranik Makvetsian

[261] According to the account of one of the participants, during the 2017 campaign two priest of the AAC tried to attack JWs physically in the town of Goris. One JW eyewitness recalls, "when we came to Goris, the circuit overseer decided to do public ministry there for the first time. And one of the brothers was taking a video of it because we did not know what to expect. People showed a lot of interest and took our literature. Then, in about an hour, two priests wearing their black robes approached us and unexpectedly hit the circuit overseer so that he fell on the ground a few meters away […] and while he was still on the ground, they kicked him with their feet. And then they left, as they were shouting insults. The circuit overseer reported the incident to the Bethel, and they recommended that we call the police" (male JW in his late 20s, from an Armenian congregation in Glendale, California). According to the account, the police did not do much to investigate the case but were friendly and understanding.

> and Samvel Grigoryan's engaging in proselytism, but Andranik Makvetsian, having broken the law and, being committed to exercise what he thought was his right to stop the priest, grabbed the priest's cell phone, which caused substantial damage to the priest's legal interests. Rev. Esayi Artenyan tried to take the cell phone back, but Andranik Makvetsian hit the priest's right hand with a fist one time, which caused him pain.

Andranik Margaryan was found guilty and sentenced to six months in prison.[262] The severity of this sentence, as well as the bias that some judges harbored towards JWs, become clear if juxtaposed with another case of violence. In this case, JWs were the target of assault. On July 13th, 2008, during public ministry, a couple of JW preachers were invited to enter an apartment for a Bible discussion. The host, Hayk Elizbaryan, got infuriated by the teaching of JWs and declared that he had invited the preachers in order to kill them by stabbing them with a knife and throwing them out from the 11th floor (the General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses 2009). When the JWs attempted to leave, the host started physically attacking them. Having taken the preachers' phones and passports, the host kept them hostage for two hours demanding that they donate a ransom of $10,000 to Ejmiatsin and sign a renunciation of their beliefs. When he was arrested and tried on criminal charges, the judge charged Hayk Elizbaryan a fine of 150,000 drams (about $500). Although, the gravity of the second case seems higher, the sentence was incommensurably milder than in Andranik Margaryan's case.

The reactions elicited by these two incidents[263] in the media and wider Armenian society were very different as well. While the attack on JWs was largely ignored, the case with Rev. Esayi Artenyan provoked a vociferous reaction from the media. Newspapers and TV news broadcasts emphasized the deleterious influence of JWs and the threat they pose to Armenia and Armenians. The newspaper *Aravot* reported Rev. Esayi Artenyan's opinion that "[while] the whole world is

[262] Later, after he served his term in prison, he was disfellowshipped for a reason unrelated to this incident.

[263] The actual number of verbal and physical attacks on JWs, both reported and not, was significantly higher.

shouting that 'Jehovah's Witnesses' are a persecuted minority both in Armenia and in other countries. In reality, we need to be protected from them and we don't know how to do that. They can enter any house or personal space and just proselytize without fear or limits. And they ignore requests to leave" (A. Abrahamyan 2011). TV news broadcast and print media reported about JWs wanting to "slit a priest's throat"(Armenian First News Channel 2011), about "sectarians, the emos, and homosexuals seeking the annihilation of the country" (Lragir 2011), or sectarians' "continuing disruptive and nation-destroying activities in Armenia, including invading our house and openly disrespecting the owner of the house – the Armenian Apostolic Church" (Simonyan 2011).

Armenian political elites were not immune to these views on religious diversity, which was reflected in the country's legislation. For example, in 2009, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia with the support of most other representatives in the Armenian National Assembly suggested a series of amendments to the 1997 Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations that would prohibit "improper conversion" (Arm. Ոչ պատշաճ դավանափոխություն), "soul-hunting," and proselytism. Although the specific meaning of soul-hunting is very vague, it is often thrown into conversation whenever religious diversity in Armenia is discussed. The authors of the amendments defined soul-hunting as

> a proselytizing influence on citizens who harbor alternative religious or theological views or harbor no such views, during which various financial incentives are offered or given; a direct physical, psychological, or moral pressure is imposed on the proselytized; uncertainty or hatred towards other religious organizations is formed; and people are pursued (proselytized to) in apartments, workplaces, places of rest or other places, including over the phone, without their desire or request. Eranosyan et al. 2010:22.

The new law sought to seriously limit "improper proselytism" which was defined as "physical and psychological pressure" that spreads hatred and mistrust toward other religions, using offensive expressions and addressing people without their prior consent at least twice in their home

or workplace either in person or by phone (Corley 2009a). Parallel to the new bill, the National Assembly prepared and accepted, in the first reading, amendments to the Criminal Code of Armenia that implied two years of imprisonment for improper conversion and proselytism.

At the time of this discussion, most members of the National Assembly supported the amendments,[264] and those who opposed them claimed that they simply did not want to grant additional privileges to the AAC although they admitted that JWs posed a threat to Armenia. The amendments surely reflected the nature of the concerns that political elites had regarding religious diversity in the country; they depicted a preacher as a subversive agent who uses suspicious techniques to recruit new members. In addition, these revisions strongly suggest that the higher echelons of government at best had very superficial familiarity with how the religious groups operated, to say nothing of the theological minutiae of their religious teachings.[265] Despite the support of the project on behalf of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia, other political forces, and the wider Armenian population, the amendments were rejected. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe[266] criticized the document (2010) as not being in line with international standards of religious freedom. Choosing between a populist law project and relationships with European institutions, Serzh Sargsyan's administration supported the latter (for more detail, see below).

Anti-JWs attitudes were not confined to the media, verbal attacks, or legislation – various

[264] The bill was passed in the first reading by the absolute majority of legislators with 89 yeas and only 2 nays.

[265] Younger generations may have more exposure to knowledge about religious diversity in Armenia. For example, when I taught a class on religion at the American University of Armenia in 2018, I asked my students what they knew about JWs. To my surprise, they provided accurate information about the most important theological aspects of the WTBTS teaching and other idiosyncrasies, such as conscientious objection and refusal of blood transfusions. On the other hand, I have met some scholars and experts in Armenia who demonstrated a striking lack of nuanced understanding of religious diversity and appealed to the most simplistic and inaccurate descriptions of what they called "totalitarian sects" or "cults."

[266] The Venice Commission, officially known as European Commission for Democracy through Law, was established in 1990 in order to assist the countries of the former Socialist camp to reform their legislation according to democratic standards and international law.

activist groups that regarded religious diversity as a threat to national security sought to restrict religious diversity in practice. Some of them, such as the Center for Assistance for the Victims of the Destructive Sects founded by Aleksandr Amaryan in 2003, pursued the goal of educating people about the danger posed by foreign religious groups. These small organizations or, more accurately, initiatives maintained their public profile and visibility with frequent appearances on TV and by publishing in newspapers and on the Internet.[267] At the same time, their limited human and financial resources did not allow them to expand their activities. They often blamed the state for its unwillingness to support them and to restrict the activities of the "destructive sects." In an interview, Aleksandr Amaryan said,

> During the discussion in the Commission for Human Rights under the auspices of the President, it became clear that neither our society nor the state knew what religious organizations were present in the country, what the sects were, whether they were dangerous or not – this understanding was 100% absent […] And it was clear that there was a need to explain to the people of Armenia what is going on. Of all the sectarians people knew Jehovah's Witnesses a little, while there are many more of them (Sksenk' Noric 2012)

Some activist groups were larger in scale and had more human, financial, and organizational resources. For example, starting in 2007 the activists of a radically anti-western and nationalist group called One Nation Coalition (Arm. Մեկ Ազգ Դաշինք) posted thousands of flyers around Yerevan with anti-JW messages (see, Figures 7 and 8 below). On November 13th, 2012, they organized a march in downtown Yerevan against JWs and other religious minorities.[268] Just like Amaryan's organization, the leaders and rank-and-file activists (almost exclusively young and middle-aged men) argued that the Government did not do enough (Armenia TV 2012) and that the "society must stay away from these sects, must be spiritually armed, and must gather around the Armenian Apostolic Church to be the masters of national consciousness and statehood" (Ogannisyan 2014; Saruhanyan 2012)

[267] Officially, it did not have any governmental affiliation or support.

[268] These marches were repeated at least 11 times (Danielyan, Vardanyan, and Avtandilyan 2009:18)

Figure 7. Flyers spread around Armenia by the One Nation Coalition in the late 2000s

The flyers read, "Beware of Jehovah's Witnesses. Fight against the sects!" (left) and "Beware of Jehovah's Witnesses. Say 'No!' to the sects!"

Figure 8. Anti-Sect March of the One Nation Coalition in Yerevan, November 13th, 2012

The placards read "May Sects Disappear" (left) and "Beware of Jehovah's Witnesses" (right)

There were other similar groups, such as "Nationalist Organization United Hayq" (Arm. Միացյալ Հայք Ազգայնական Կազմակերպություն) that also engaged in spreading anti-JW flyers (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2010). In September 2013, the United Youth League and "Menk"" launched a campaign to collect signatures in order to pressure the government to investigate the activities of all non-traditional religious group and assess their destructive influence on the country (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2016).[269] Importantly, all these organizations had not only anti-western but also a well-pronounced pro-Russian political and ideological orientation.[270] Sometimes, the activists described religious diversity as a weapon that the west is using against Russia and Russian allies, i.e. they would put a greater emphasis on Russia rather than on Armenia (Robert Aharonyan).

Starting in 2013, the Socialist Movement of Armenia[271] followed suit and began organizing regular anti-JWs actions. The leader of the party, Robert Aharonyan recalls, "It all started one day when I was just picking up my daughter from school. I saw JWs preaching there with a bookstand. I didn't say anything – I just came closer to them and lit up the church incense that I happened to have in my pocket. They ran away immediately when they smelled it [*laughing*]." According to Aharonyan, in the mid-2010s, he recruited volunteers in different parts of the city who would impede JWs' proselytism by kicking their literature stands, verbally assaulting JWs, and insisting that the preaching activities stop. Talking about anti-JWs actions, Sevan Agadjanyan, one of these

[269] Most of these groups were short-lived and left little information about their relationships with the authorities or the sources of their funding. Sometimes, they were mentioned in the media as organizers of a particular initiative, such as collecting signatures in support of outlawing "sects" in Armenia in 2011. Yet, these organizations did not become prominent on the Armenian political stage.

[270] Unfortunately, I was unable to find any evidence about their direct connections with Russian organizations and governmental agencies.

[271] This political group is very small, politically inconsequential, and unknown to most Armenians. While they have no influence in Armenian politics, they are better known for their one-time political displays, such as attacks on JW preachers.

activists, emphasized, "I actually don't care what they believe in – who their God is, what his name is, how they want to worship him. All I care about it is that they don't preach in the streets – if they want to talk to each other about it – it is their right, but I don't want children to see it or others to be seduced by it because they don't know better." Just like in the previous period, nationalist activists showed no tolerance towards the public presence of JWs and other religious groups, while they did not object the existence of religious diversity *per se*. In response to violence and attacks, JWs usually abstained from engaging with the activists and tried to retain self-composure. They usually called the police and a coordinator from Bethel to inform them about the incident. The police did not openly take sides in the conflict but recommended that the preachers leave in order to defuse the tension. Yet sometimes, anti-JW activists had to pay between $50 and $100 in fines for disorderly public conduct (Simonyan 2015).

The overall ideological message propagated by these organizations was very similar to that enforced by the media, the AAC, and politicians, although they often claimed to have higher expertise in questions related to foreign religious groups. One of the posters by the One Nation Coalition read,

> Jehovah's Witnesses are sponsored from the unofficial capital of the USA, New York, and they only have one goal – to turn Armenians into an ignorant mob that thinks like slaves, betrays its spiritual roots, and avoids its civil duties. This is our moral obligation to remain owners of our national spiritual features, our land, our national Armenian Apostolic Church. On their floors and in their yards, all Armenians must organize a nation-wide resistance against anti-national and deleterious sectarian activities.

However, they were more efficient in making their messages accessible to all residents of Yerevan as their flyers were attached to nearly every light pole, bus stop, and building entrance. They clearly made a long-lasting impression because many of my informants remembered the anti-JW flyers, while very few recalled the anti-JWs media campaigns.

Apart from the officials, journalists, and activists, experts on religion employed by the Armenian courts professed similar views on religious diversity in Armenia. For example, an expert opinion compiled by the Chief of the Department for National Minorities and Religious Affairs of Nagorno Karabagh with very similar definitions was issued in the Nagorno Karabagh Republic on July 6th, 2009. The expert claimed that JWs

> use mainly psychological methods of persuasion and inspiration. When these methods are used, a person comes under the total influence, that is, his mentality, behavior, and personality type are transformed […] The main methods of psychological influence are manipulation, social provision and support, which keep a person dependent. A dependent person is convinced of unreal opportunities and actions, which creates irrational ideas based on hope, methods of psychological inspiration and persuasion from which new faith is formed […] JWs' actions have amounted to weakening and disrupting the defense of the country at war. (As in the ECHR 2022)

This expert opinion became one of the main reasons for rejecting the application of JWs for obtaining state registration in Nagorno Karabagh in 2009.[272] Later, in the Administrative Court, this same expert gave additional evidence that "Jehovah's Witnesses destroy families, which also concerns my relative [...] whose wife and children became members of the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation and they have now divorced since the wife wants him to become a Jehovah's Witness as well" (ECHR 2022). This expert opinion reiterates the same accusations against JWs that were circulating in the media and among the anti-sectarian activists the JWs pursue the goal of undermining Armenia's statehood and the institution of the family.

Overall, because of the continuous disparaging of religious minorities on TV, the Internet, and in school, among others, the level of societal animosity towards JWs changed insignificantly as

[272] Having exhausted all means to obtain state registration in Nagorno Karabagh by 2012, JWs applied to the ECHR. However, their case was not examined until 2022 because Nagorno Karabagh has never been recognized as a state by international organizations and, therefore, the jurisdiction of the ECHR over its territory was not clear. Eventually, the respondent in this and a number of other cases was the government of Armenia that was claimed to *de facto* control Nagorno Karabagh.

physical and verbal attacks on them continued. Plus, the incident with Rev. Esayi Artenyan, legislative initiatives, and anti-JWs activist groups are a clear indication that at the end of the 2000s, the dominant ethnoreligious ideology was accepted and shared by nearly all strata of the Armenian society. The ideas equating Armenianness and affiliation with the AAC, as well as depicting foreign religious groups and especially JWs as a threat to Armenians were expressed in a strikingly similar manner by taxi-drivers, priests, state officials, or religious experts.

However, unlike at the beginning of the 2000s, JWs were able to take advantage of their official status as a religious organization and sought redress in court for defamation when journalists used false information about the organization. For example, in November 2010, the news broadcast of the major Armenian TV Network "The First Channel" claimed that Arman Tarosyan, who had violently murdered his parents in the town of Sevan, was a member of the JW community. Gevorg Altunyan, the host of the show "Tesankyun" (Arm. Տեսանկյուն; Viewpoint)[273] at the same network, drew a grewsome picture of JWs' subversive activities,

> [Arman Tarosyan] killed his parents because his Jehovah ordered him [to do so]. At least, that's how this manifestation of Satan explained his actions. By the way, he explained it very calmly as if that's normal – as if no injustice had been done. Anyway, what happened in Sevan is a result of our society's criminal negligence and indifference. I don't know why we have become tolerant to all kinds of delinquencies trying to fit into the image of European tolerance. But we forgot or nobody ever told us that these very Jehovah's Witnesses are under restrictions in many European countries themselves […] As a result people were killed, and probably more will die.[274]

JWs demanded that the channel retract this discrediting and honor-damaging information because Arman Tarosyan had no connections with the JW community. In 2011, JWs appealed to the

[273] Undoubtedly, this analytical TV show was copied off of a similar show on Russian TV called "Odnako" (Rus. Однако; However). Both shows had the same format, an overall anti-western ideological orientation, and even hosts' demeanor and manner of speaking.

[274] The full video is available here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3oGIvX6xjs

administrative court,[275] and in 2012, the network agreed to acknowledge the false information and apologize for the defamation. On June 5th, 2012, news broadcasting retracted the false information about Arman Tarosyan's membership in the JW community. This case became a pivotal point after which JWs became noticeably less frequent a topic in the Armenian media. Although several anti-JWs media surges took place later, the *en masse* dissemination of deliberately misleading information was no longer practiced.

Armenian Jehovah's Witnesses and the European Court of Human Rights

Having ascended to the Council of Europe in 2001, Armenia came under the jurisdiction of the ECHR, which granted European institutions powerful leverage to influence Armenian domestic political and social life. The main litigation battle between Armenian JWs and the Armenian authorities took place in the ECHR. A series of ECHR verdicts in favor of JWs at the end of Serzh Sargsyan's first presidential term demonstrated the reputational, political, and economic costliness of the continuous tension with JWs which was still revolving around the amendments to the Law on Alternative Service and the imprisonment of JW conscientious objectors.

In 2003, three JW conscientious objectors filed cases against the Armenian Government for violating Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights that guaranteed the freedom of thought, belief, and religion. All three applicants had served a prison sentence for evading compulsory military service before the Law on Alternative Service was adopted only in 2004. The legal proceedings took almost ten years,[276] and only in July 2011, The Grand Chamber of ECHR ruled in favor of JWs in *Batyan v. Armenia* and awarded plaintiffs compensation of 20,000 euros. This

[275] A court specializing in administrative violations, such as public misdemeanor, taxation, and child custody, among other things.

[276] On December 12th, 2006, the Court ruled against the applicants stating that their imprisonment did not violate Article 9. In 2010, Vahan Bayatyan, the first of three Armenian applicants, decided to refer the case to the Grand Chamber of the ECHR.

verdict by ECHR had reverberations far beyond Armenia. Since 1966, the ECHR had been appealing to the precedent laid out in *Grandrath v. Germany* (no. 2299/64, Commission's report of 12 December 1966, Yearbook 10, p. 626) by the European Commission on Human Rights regarding a JW who claimed exemption from both military and civil service based on Article 9. The ruling in *Bayatyan vs Armenia* changed the legal practice regarding alternative military service in other cases regarding conscientious objection. This precedent was applied to the other two cases from Armenia, *Tsaturyan v. Armenia* and *Bukharatyan v. Armenia*.

In November 2012, the ECHR rendered a verdict on another application filed in 2006 by 19 JW conscientious objectors who refused to continue alternative service under the supervision of military (see above). In *Khachatryan v. Armenia*, the applicants complained that they were detained unjustly because they were charged for desertion which was not applicable to an unauthorized abandonment of a site of alternative service according to the Armenian legislation at the time. While the Court dismissed certain complaints of the applicants as inadmissible, including the claim for damage in an amount exceeding 20,000 euros per applicant, it admitted that most applicants' right for fair trial and reasonable detention (Article 5.1 c of the European Convention on Human Rights) was violated. The Court awarded 17 out of 19 applicants with compensation of less than 7,000 euros per person.

The reaction of the authorities to the verdicts was reserved. The Deputy Minister of Justice of Armenia, Ruben Melikian, officially admitted that "if Armenia [domestically] had corresponding procedures that allowed the members of the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' Organization to receive compensation for pretrial detention, I am sure, we would not have this verdict by the European Court" (Ruben Melikyan 2012). Somewhat boastfully he underscored that many of the original complaints of the applicants were rejected by the Court as inadmissible, which testified to the high

quality of the Armenian system of justice. In summer 2012, just a few months before the verdict on *Khachatryan v. Armenia,* the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice of Armenia publicly declared that they were negotiating with the Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses about recalling JWs' complaints to the ECHR and amending the existing Law on Alternative Service (Harutyunyan 2012).

Armenian policies regarding religious freedom during this period reflected a desire of the government to comply with the minimal requirements and standards of the Council of Europe yet simultaneously to satisfy the domestic demand for tightening the control over religious diversity. Even before the ECHR verdicts, the Armenian authorities had started to look for ways to amend the Law on Alternative Service and in 2011, they submitted proposed amendments to the Venice Commission and the OSCE for approval. However, the amendments were considered insufficient because they did not eliminate the punitive nature of alternative service and did not remove it from under military control. Simultaneously with the improvement of the legislation on alternative service, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia was trying to push through the aforementioned restrictive amendments to the law on religion. When the Venice commission harshly criticized the new religious law and demanded further improvement of the alternative service, continuous maintenance of this dual policy became impossible.

In May 2013, the National Assembly approved amendments to the Law on Alternative Service that satisfied the European institutions and JWs.[277] In October and November 2013, the imprisoned JW conscientious objectors were released from prison and their criminal records were expunged. Simultaneously, the proposed restrictive amendments to the 1997 Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations were abandoned. There were several reasons why the

[277] The supervision of conscientious objectors was removed from under military control and the period of service was reduced from 42 to 36 months.

authorities preferred to follow a path of greater religious tolerance. First, similar to Bulgaria and Romania which sought membership in the EU and therefore, were willing to rectify their discriminatory policies toward religious minorities, Armenia's difficult geopolitical and economic situation pushed the political elites to maintain close ties with western institutions and accept their political demands. This political orientation allowed Armenia to preserve close relationships with the EU when in September 2013, Serzh Sargsyan refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU which included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Instead, Armenia joined the Custom Union with Russia whose economic influence on Armenia was significantly stronger than that of Europe.[278] Having made this important geopolitical choice, the Sargsyan administration was looking for ways to appease its western partners. In October 2013, during the session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, President Sargsyan explained his choice (Sargsyan 2013),

> Unfortunately, when Armenia became a member of the Custom Union, our partners from the European Commission said that there are contradictions between the Custom Union and the Free Trade Agreement. There is a difference in rules. We suggested, "In this case, please, let's sign the Association Agreement that would imply fundamental political reforms." And we are ready. No, we are resolute to implement those reforms. Now, we are in the process [of doing it].

In other words, the further implementation of the reforms in the religious sphere launched in 2001 allowed the Armenian political elites to retain close ties with their two most important international partners, Russia and the West. During Kocharyan's presidency, the Armenian elites sympathized with the ideological model of Putin's Russia that emphasized greater autonomy from the west in domestic affairs, human rights, and cultural values. Yet, unlike Russia, Armenia's economic and geopolitical position was too weak to reject western financial and diplomatic aid. A

[278] Armenian's dependence on Russia deepened during the presidency of Robert Kocharyan who made multiple concessions to Russian companies. As a result, certain areas of the Armenian economy were controlled by the Russian state or businesses (Libaridian 2011).

loss of western support would have far-reaching repercussions for Armenian politics and the economy, compared to a softening of the uncompromised "one Nation-one Church" ideology.[279]

Second, a series of decisions from the ECHR in favor of JWs and continuous criticism from the Venice Commission clearly demonstrated to the Sargsyan administration that Kocharyan's tactics adopting legislation and impeding its implementation could no longer be employed without serious financial and reputational losses. Undoubtedly, it contributed to the decision to reconsider the policies regarding religious diversity and freedom in Armenia in 2013.

Third, originally, the Armenian military, the state, and society in general feared that provisions for alternative civil service would lead to widespread evasion of the unpopular and dangerous compulsory military service. Almost ten years of practice demonstrated that besides JWs and in rare cases Molokans and Baptists no one else applied for alternative civil service.[280] One of my informants, a young male member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, who was about to be drafted into the army said,

> I will go to the army for two years in the summer. It sucks […] Jehovah's Witnesses sort of ruined the alternative service for everyone. A lot of people do not want to apply for the alternative civil service because – first, they do not want to be associated with the Witnesses – you know how everyone knows that the Witnesses really advocated for the alternative service, so people think alternative service is only for the Witnesses. Second, people do not want the Jehovah's Witnesses to proselytize to them, so they do not want to do alternative service with them and prefer to go to the army.

The opinion that alternative civil service was introduced exclusively to accommodate JWs is

[279] Serzh Sargsyan's initiative was supported by EU leaders, and in 2017 Armenia and the EU adopted the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which served "as a critical tool for further Europeanization of [Armenia's] legal and political systems" (Aram 2019).

[280] As I discuss in Chapter V, in the 1990s and the 2000s, there were cases when young male Armenians seeking to evade military service inquired with JW elders whether it was possible to obtain proofs of their membership in the JW community.

common in Armenia.[281] For example, in 2018, when a Molokan draftee's application for alternative service was rejected, his family filed a case to the court arguing that "the Armenian representatives of the organization called 'Jehovah's Witnesses' apply for alternative service and receive permission although their application is not based on any proofs" (Sevan Administrative court, case #0297/05/18).[282] Due to this belief, various negative attributes of the JWs' image in Armenian society were, by close association, imposed onto the entire system of alternative civil service. Draftees who would like to opt out of compulsory military service have been afraid to be regarded as traitors of the nation – a label that is often attached to JWs – and prefer to serve in the military forces.

Fourth, fears that foreign sects and cults were going to proliferate and eventually "conquer" Armenia did not materialize either. In 2011, the growth that JWs demonstrated in previous years plateaued and fluctuated at the margin of 11,000 until the COVID pandemic in 2020. Other religious organizations did not demonstrate significant growth either. JW preachers became an undesirable but normal part of the Armenian urban landscape. Under these circumstances, reform of the alternative service did not look as egregious – the media reacted somewhat softly[283] to these changes compared to their criticism towards the registration of the JWs' Organization in 2004. Since 2013, JWs have not reported serious incidents regarding alternative service.[284] Unofficially, the JWs'

[281] Remarkably, many in Armenia reject the whole idea of human rights because they see them ultimately as a tool to exclusively protect JWs (Sarkissian 2008:176).

[282] Baptists also apply to the alternative service and were imprisoned for evading the military service before 2013 (Corley 2006).

[283] In general, the media found it more egregious that according to the decision of the ECHR, the Armenian government had to pay compensation to JWs, while the amendments to the Law on Alternative Service did not engender a wave of criticism.

[284] JWs' later complaints to the ECHR, such as *Adyan and Others v. Armenia*, were related to the issues that had occurred before the last JW conscientious objectors were released from prison in November 2013. This case was also adjudicated in favor of the Organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Organization has been following a non-confrontational policy too. For example, some of the male JWs who went through the alternative service said that when they faced improper treatment on behalf of their supervisors, they could not complain because Bethel did not want to intervene and was forcing them to placate the conflict "in order not to drag the attention to Jehovah's Witnesses" (male JWs in his early 20s). This suggests that JWs tacitly agreed to keep a lower public profile in order to maintain their current non-confrontational level of relationships with the government.

Fifth, the authorities used other, less obvious ways to subtly obstruct JWs' activities without attracting the attention of European institutions. For example, receiving permits for erecting KHs remained an issue after the amendments on alternative service. In 2013, the Architecture Committee (Arm. Ճարտարապետության կոմիտե) rejected two out of three applications for erecting KHs in Yerevan referring to "complaints and intolerance" from the public (Corley 2013). After exhausting all opportunities to solve the issue in the domestic courts, the Organization appealed to the ECHR. As of March 2023, the case has not yet been considered, and in order to accommodate the congregations, JWs have been "purchasing already-constructed public buildings and, after remodeling, turning them into Kingdom Halls, which does not require a construction permit" (the Armenian Bethel).[285]

Politicians and the Armenian clergy continued publicly professing their "anti-sectarian" views and promoting Christianity and the Armenian Church as *sine qua non* of Armenianness. For example, in 2015, the leader of the parliamentary majority in the National Assembly, Vahram Baghdasaryan, claimed that "under the disguise of democracy, big sums of money are used in the

[285] In 2013, the Organization purchased a building on Keru street in Yerevan and turned it into the Armenian branch office, *Bethel*. In 2014, the Organization purchased a piece of land in Balahovit, a small town outside of Yerevan, and started building an assembly hall and a Bible school. Both local and international volunteers participated in the construction of this complex of buildings. On May 14th, 2016, the assembly hall, as well as Bethel were dedicated in a grand opening with over 6,000 guests present, including a member of the Governing Body, David Splane (jw.org).

country in order to destroy our national values, our traditions, the strength of our family, our Church […] The sects are using money to destroy our Holy Apostolic Church" (Joint Declaration... 2015).[286] The AAC continued to enjoy practical advantages, such as full tax exemption, granted to it by the state in 2011 – a privilege that other religious groups did not have. Overall, at the level of ideology, the union between the state and the AAC promoted under Kocharyan and especially Sargsyan did not show signs of decline until the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

Overall, during the presidency of Serzh Sargsyan, the political elites continued promoting the union of the state and the Armenian Church, as well as emphasizing the fusion of Armenianness, Christianity, and affiliation with the AAC. Nevertheless, the influence of this ideological framework on practical policies remained limited. As in the previous period, despite the attempts of certain officials, priests, and activists to limit religious freedom in Armenia, religious policies were formulated and implemented according to larger state interests in the international arena. Even before 2013, when the Armenian state largely abandoned attempts to stifle religious diversity in the country, there was no unified or coordinated policy regarding unwanted religious minorities. Under Serzh Sargsyan whose presidential style was less authoritarian that that of Robert Kocharyan, JWs were able to defend their rights in court; some of their attackers were indicted; police were generally respectful to JWs when dealing with cases of intolerance.

After the Velvet Revolution in 2018, a liberally minded government came to power in Armenia. The new Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, continued the overall international course of the previous government to maintain ties with western organizations and government while cooperating with Russia in crucial areas such as security and the economy. However, Armenia's pro-

[286] Similar claims were made by many other officials, such as the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Education, and the Vice-Speaker of the National Assembly (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2014).

Russian orientation became declarative rather than practical, especially after the 44-day war with Azerbaijan in 2020 and skirmishes in 2022 when Russia did not assist Armenia despite its responsibilities as Armenia's ally. At the same time, under the new administration, Armenian domestic policies transformed more drastically – the decades-long union between the AAC and political elites was broken. During the revolution, Catholicos Garegin II offered to be a mediator between the opposing sides and called them to seek peace and agreement. Yet he unambiguously supported the unpopular incumbent government and, personally, Serzh Sargsyan.[287] Unsurprisingly, the new government conspicuously rejected the ideology of symphonic relationships between the AAC and the Armenian state, emphasizing that "the state and the Church are different bodies that are independent from one another" (Pashinyan 2022). Public manifestations of the state-Church union were also discontinued. However, policies regarding foreign religious groups did not undergo significant changes – the level of religious tolerance on behalf of state institutions remained the same. For example, the new authorities did not eliminate the tax privileges of the AAC and did not extend them over other religious organizations. The issue with obtaining permits for building KHs in Yerevan was not solved either. Structurally, the power dynamic within the Armenian religious field remained the same.

This practical continuity between the before- and after-2018 religious policies amidst a significant ideological rupture strongly suggests that the pressure experienced by JWs throughout the post-Soviet period was primarily the result of individual initiatives of state officials rather than a coordinated state policy. The ideological framework, as well as the tacit support of the elites,

[287] The Catholicos tried to mediate between the incumbent Republican Party and the opposition after the much-contested election in 2008. Then, Garegin II visited Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who was the leader of opposition, but the latter refused to grant him an audience (Ogannisyan 2014:57–58).

promoted the discriminatory measures regarding JWs, but it was an uncoordinated process.[288] Importantly, the agenda of the Armenian Church has played a far less significant role in the formulation of religious policies in Armenia that is suggested by most religious experts.

Conclusion

In many regards, the treatment of JWs on the part of the Armenian state and society was similar to that in other post-socialist Orthodox countries. Yet, the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabagh, the specific character of Armenian Christianity, and Armenia's dependence on western financial and diplomatic aid influenced the specific trajectory along which this relationship evolved.

From the dawn of Armenia's independence, the AAC has been aspiring to restore the close relationship with the state that it had in the past, claiming its role in the preservation of Armenian culture and identity. This exclusivity has not been rooted in practical monopoly as most Armenians participate in ecclesiastical practices very passively or not at all. Nevertheless, the AAC has insisted that all Armenians are its members regardless of their participation in ecclesiastical life or their attitude towards faith as long as they do not renounce the AAC. These claims are possible because the Armenian Church and the majority of the Armenian population accept the image of Armenianness as fused with Christianity, of which the AAC is an important part. As such, the dominant position of the AAC depends not on the practical adherence of the majority to its practices, services, and beliefs, but rather on the nearly ubiquitous acceptance of its importance for the preservation of Armenianness. Therefore, the real rivals of the Church are not the religious groups that attract the most followers, but those that actively and publicly destroy the taken-for-

[288] Even in Russia, where JWs were labeled as an extremist organization and outlawed altogether in 2017, the actions of state authorities, courts, and the police show few signs of coordination and resemble a series of initiatives undertaken by the members of local administrations or heads of police departments.

grantedness of the ideological union between Armenianness and the AAC. In other words, it is not JWs' recruitment practices that engender the harsh reaction of the AAC, but rather JWs' insistence that being Armenian does not automatically entail being Christian or being affiliated with the AAC. JWs' public claims against the innate Christianity of Armenians and the leading role of the AAC face vehement opposition on behalf of regular Armenians who see these claims as an infringement on their collective rights and the very ontological status of Armenianness.

Although Armenia has been religiously diverse starting from the last few years of the Soviet period, the Church sought to inhibit not the most numerous religious groups, such as Pentecostals or Baptists, but the most publicly conspicuous, such as Hare Krishna and JWs. The AAC did not have resources or skills to counter the proselytizing activities of these groups. Moreover, engaging in proselytism would be alien to the very ethos of the Armenian Church. Instead, the AAC wanted to limit the public preaching of foreign religious organizations and expected ideological support from the state. In return, the AAC offered the state the legitimation of political power. In moments when the political elites experienced a lack of legitimacy, as was the case with Levon Ter-Petrosyan after his contentious reelection for his second term or with Robert Kocharyan's presidency, the political leaders more readily met the Church's needs, as they wanted its backing. At the same time, the stability of political power provided the political elites with more space for disregarding the aspirations of the Church. This approach was rejected by the incumbent Prime-Minister Nikol Pashinyan who did not appeal to the Church at the moment when his legitimacy was challenged after Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. At the same time, Pashinyan's government did not seriously encroach on the privileges granted to the Church by the previous administrations. This shows that the AAC and religion in general remains a sensitive topic in Armenian domestic policy, although the status quo seems to be accepted by all actors of the religious field.

Although the AAC has seriously contributed to the maintenance of anti-JWs attitudes in Armenian society and lobbied for anti-JWs policies, it has always been the state that defined the degree of cooperation with the AAC and the character of religious policies. In other words, the Armenian Church has been a *directed* rather than a *directing* power. The Church mainly remained subjugated to the state, which indicates certain continuity with its status during the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods. Therefore, the widely spread belief that national Churches are the main drivers behind changes in religious policies does not accurately reflect the real balance of power. The Armenian state has been changing its stance on religious diversity not due to pressure on behalf of its national Church, but in accordance with multiple domestic and international interests. Domestically, presenting JWs as a security threat to the nation aimed at consolidating the population around the authorities against the danger of new religious groups that purportedly aimed to divide the country and to "encourage social maladies, including suicide, incest, pedophilia and homosexuality. Foreign sects help spread such ideas in Armenia."[289] The West as a different civilization with its alien values that are not transplantable to Armenian soil has been presented as a civilizational enemy that seeks to destroy Armenia, which is structurally very similar to the ideological message emphasized by the authorities in Russia. In the face of this external threat, the authorities presented themselves, the state, and the AAC, as a bastion of protection for Armenians and Armenianness in general.

Armenian religious policies often reflected the pragmatic interests of the political elite. Neither the liberal-leaning Levon Ter-Petrosyan nor Robert Kocharyan with his conservative nationalist beliefs held any personal dedication to the Church, but both readily granted it privileges in exchange for practical political support. At the same time, despite their personal and ideological

[289] These words belong to a well-known priest of the Armenian Church, Komitas Hovnanian (Grigoryan 2015).

devotion to the AAC, President Serzh Sargsyan and Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan enhanced religious freedom in Armenia because the ideological support offered by the Church was not as beneficial as retaining close ties with European institutions. To sum up, although these aspirations on behalf of the AAC remained relatively constant, the reaction of the state was contingent upon the political aspirations of the political elites and Armenia's dependence on external sources of political, economic, military, and diplomatic support. The Kocharyan administration was not consistent in the implementation of its commitments to western institutions. It clearly tried to reap financial and diplomatic benefits from this cooperation without relinquishing control over the domestic situation and compromising Armenia's traditional perspective. Serzh Sargsyan's administration could no longer continue this strategy because of the increased pressure from the ECHR, other European institutions, such as the Venice Commission, and the EU in general.

Throughout the post-Soviet period, the geopolitical position of Armenia demanded close and diversified international connections with western countries and with Russia. The amendments in the sphere of religious freedom after 2013 allowed Armenia to enhance its ties with the west despite its ties with Russia. Under Serzh Sargsyan, the improvements were so significant that many human rights-watch groups and the U.S. Department of State removed Armenia from its list of the countries of particular concern. In recent years, growing cooperation between France and Armenia in economic, political, and cultural spheres was openly presented as collaboration between two democracies. Given the immense military and political pressure on Armenia on behalf of Azerbaijan and Turkey after the 2020 war with Azerbaijan, Armenia's partnership with western countries is a geopolitical resource that greatly outweighs the possible ideological benefits of restricting religious freedom in the country. In other words, Armenia's dependence on external sources of political and economic support had far greater influence on its policies regarding JWs than pressure on behalf of

the AAC. Besides, the overall ideological leanings of the incumbent government in Armenia are discernably pro-western and pro-democratic.

In the next chapter, I explore the significant growth of the JWs community in Armenia during the first two decades of Armenia's independence. I analyze why people in Armenia choose to join the JWs' group despite the high level of animosity on behalf of the state and the general population.

CHAPTER V. JOINING AND LEAVING THE COMMUNITY OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

Like any other religious group, JWs attract people of different ages with various socio-economic and educational backgrounds and psychological types. The process of becoming a member of the JW family is usually far from linear. Sometimes, the initial excitement from the encounter with the Truth and Jehovah's servants is replaced with a much more reserved attitude. In some cases, the Bible study only takes a few months and is quickly followed by a baptism, while some people spend many years learning about the Truth and the path offered by JWs yet never make the final step to dedicate their lives to Jehovah. The confluence of a whole constellation of factors defines a trajectory of one's "religious career" (Gooren 2007; Richardson 1985) in the JW's community. And the fusion of one's life with the community never reaches the degree that would make disaffiliation impossible or unimaginable.

Mher Nahapetyan first encountered the Truth in the early 1990s when he was a young actor building his life and career amidst the political, social, and economic chaos of post-Soviet Armenia:

> The Soviet Union was an atheist state where they rejected God and religion. And we were raised with that idea. […] I grew up, became a [Soviet] pioneer, and then the Soviet Union fell apart, and we became independent. Then, there was a war. And during the war people started to pay more attention to religion. And I also started to get interested in faith because during the war people rely on God and little-by-little you get this interest. As they say, 'On the plane that is about to crash there are no atheists.' [Laughing] And then later at the end of 1990, I first heard about Jehovah's Witnesses. I had a groupmate in college, and we were pretty close. It turned out that her husband's family was already doing a Bible study with the Witnesses. Then, my sister started to study the Bible with the Witnesses, too.

Mher's account of his encounter with JWs and his later interest in and engagement with the Truth seems almost like an encyclopedic portrait of a convert: a young man coping with rapid social changes and war and developing close friendly and familial ties with members of a religious community (Corten et al. 2003:14). Like in many Armenian families, even at the Soviet time, Mher's

mother would sometimes take him to church, and believing in God was an accepted albeit tacit rule of the house. Later, he learned about Jehovah from his sister and college friends. So, when three mischievous and thuggish brothers from Mher's neighborhood became JWs and almost unfathomably quickly transformed into peaceful well-dressed preachers of God's kingdom, he interpreted it as a "miracle." Mher decided to take a first step towards the faith that he had already heard quite a bit about. He approached the "miracle" brothers and asked them to help him study the Bible. Soon after, he started to attend JWs' meetings:

> I remember that when I entered a Witnesses' meeting for the first time – back then they were held in small apartments – I felt like I was in Paradise! I felt I was the most appreciated person in the universe! And then I was counting days and nights until the next time I could go there […] And they already saw a future elder of a congregation in me, because my profession is an actor, and I have very good enunciation. Plus, my speech is very good and eloquent. My vocabulary is rich and developed. And they really needed it all. I have to say – my self-esteem and vanity were definitely through the roof then. I wanted to go up their hierarchy. […] And then, seven-eight months later, I had my first interview[290] – I still remember it was December 13th. The elders asked me if there was anything that bothered me and would prevent me from taking the interview? I said, "Nothing really is bothering me and there are no problems, but you know that I lead a group of actors. And we have been working on a series of New Year performances for children. These performances are very important for us financially." And their response was, "We can't really conduct this interview right now because you are engaging an activity that goes against our beliefs."

When Mher started to study the Bible, his initial curiosity about the JW community changed and it was no longer contingent on the original factors that pushed him towards making the first step towards the Truth. He found warmth and sincere affection in the congregation – something that he had always been missing in his experience of the Armenian church. He saw a clear trajectory for personal growth within the WTBTS organization, which, he thought, could open new horizons:

[290] Before baptism, Bible students must participate in two interviews that evaluate their understanding of the main points of the WTBTS teaching and practice. In successful cases, the candidate receives the status of "unbaptized publisher" (Arm. չմկրտված քարոզիչ) and can preach with other JWs. The second interview gives the right to get baptized and become a full-fledged member of the community.

social respect, financial security,[291] or going "outside of the country to attend international congresses, schools, or to be a volunteer." In addition, as it often happened in the 1990s when public animosity towards JWs had not yet fully developed, Mher's family did not object to his interest or participation in the JW community either. He seemed to be well-set on the trajectory towards becoming a full-fledged member of the JWs' group and potentially even an elder. However, since the new belief system could not be reconciled with his worldly commitments, Mher started having doubts and drifting away from the community:

> …at that moment [of the first interview], something broke inside of me. I was a little bit offended that they didn't understand me. There wasn't this mutual affection and warmth that I saw in the meetings – I didn't really see it in this situation. But I got offended that they didn't accept my view. But for the first time, I saw that this organization was a totalitarian sect […] Now, I don't regret that I didn't take that path. You know until today I celebrate December 13th in my head quietly. I do something special on that day – I try to celebrate my freedom and my independence.

His initial doubt and grudge over being misunderstood turned into resentment against the community. A year later, Mher stopped attending meetings and eventually terminated his affiliation with the WTBTS without ever becoming a full-fledged publisher. Mher's story is one of many, and it is interesting not only because of its insights into the reasons one becomes a JW and the mechanics of the initiation process. It also illustrates several very important aspects of religious conversion and affiliation. First, there is no one trigger or reason that can fully account for one's decision or desire to become a member of a religious group. The initial awe or interest in the Truth that is sometimes triggered by unique theological propositions cannot be sufficient a factor for one to change their life once and for all. At each subsequent step towards a membership in the JWs' group, the

[291] According to Mher, "the elders and ministerial servants received pretty good money" in the form of a regular salary. The financial well-being of the elders is undoubtedly a mistaken assumption or an intentional inaccuracy on Mher's part. Neither JW elders nor ministerial servants (a JW equivalent of a deacon) have ever been remunerated for fulfilling their duties (Eddy 1958:115).

attractiveness of the community is determined by an array of new factors. Second, Mher's story illustrates that the process of socialization in a new religious group is not irreversible (Marzouki 2013). Often, the initial excitement is replaced with indifference, and familial or professional pressure can reverse this process and result in severing ties with the community.

Literature Review

Religious conversion used to be a central focus of the scientific study of religion during the 1970-90s. Under the influence of modernization theory, religious conversion was often viewed as something at odds with the global trends of secularization (for overview, see Long and Hadden 1983). As an anomaly, it was often pathologized and was viewed as something that takes places under extraordinary circumstances, such as personal crisis, depression, or disorientation by modernity. With the return of religion as an important factor of everyday life, identity, culture, and politics, religious life and conversion were mostly "normalized" in academic discourse and are no longer addressed as a deviation or exception (Granqvist 2003). Although generalizing theories of religious conversion were largely abandoned in favor of context-oriented approaches, the question about the reasons for joining a specific religious organization remains important. In this section, I engage with literature related to the reasons for joining the JW community, for remaining a publisher, and for leaving the group. I am not going to focus much on the process of conversion but will instead prioritize the factors incentivizing people to become a JW or leave the WTBTS.[292]

Conversion itself is an elusive object of study as its observability is dubious. In the traditional approach, it is viewed as a mental process or event that changes one's self-perception, worldview, attitudes, and commitments. Ritual, bodily expressions, and "demonstration events may be

[292] The process of conversion has also been central to academic debates on religious conversion, yet it requires different data and a distinct analytical focus.

understood more appropriately as functioning to facilitate and sustain conversion" (Snow and Machalek 1984; also, see Bromley 2001; Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1979; Neitz 1987:88). This approach brings forward the "observability problem" as mental processes are not immediately available for examination and analysis (Bromley 2001). Other scholars argue that narratives of conversion do not reflect a literal report of what conversion was, because such a narrative is constructed later retrospectively attaching meanings, significations, and importance to that step (Beckford 1978a:260; Bromley 2001; Frigerio 2007; Lofland and Skonovd 1981:374–375; Yamane 2000). Some researchers maintain that we cannot say anything about religious conversion based on retrospective accounts, because the conversion account "is not something that occurred in the past and is now 'told about' in the conversion narrative. Rather the conversion narrative itself is the central element of conversion" (Stromberg 2008:3; also, see Somers 1994; Wuthnow 2001:318). In my field work and analysis, I do not take the narratives of my informants at a face value, yet I use their self-narrated biographies to uncover the underlying reasons that predetermined their attraction to the WTBTS.

The last two decades have witnessed a turn towards accounting for corporeality in conversion and viewing religious experience as "palpably present […] through tactile practices" (Belzen 1999; also, see Belzen and Hood 2006; Kravel-Tovi 2018; Pan 2009; Shanneik 2011; Swift 2012; Tavory 2010; Tavory and Winchester 2012; Winchester 2008). Directly or indirectly drawing on Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 1994), this approach regards religious experience predominantly as manifesting itself in and through the body and, therefore, views conversion as an embodiment of discursive schemas and an entrenchment of religious dispositions through religious practices.

At a grand level, academic attempts to account for religious conversion have looked at this

process from several main perspectives. The first one addresses *institutional factors*, i.e. idiosyncrasies of religious organizations at the level of ideology, practice, and administration that converts find appealing, which facilitates conversion. The second perspective puts the converts themselves under the microscope in order to identify *individual factors*, that is personal, social, and economic reasons that incentivize people to seek membership in a specific religious organization. Below, I engage with each of these traditions.

Institutional Factors and Conversion
Rational Choice and Conversion

One of the views that focuses mostly on the features of religious communities when explaining conversion is rational choice theory. This approach is predicated on the assumption that one's need for religious expression and activity arises from human nature and therefore does not change much (Iannaccone 1994; Iannaccone et al. 1998b). The proponents of this approach claim that "when people change churches or even religions, it is usually not because their preferences have changed, but because the new church or faith more effectively appeals to preferences they have always had" (Stark and Finke 2000, 86). In other words, these scholars focus primarily on the *supply* side of the religion, i.e. on how the unique features of religious organizations have different appealing power over their real and potential members.

This approach views religious converts as rational consumers who try to maximize rewards while minimizing effort (Iannaccone et al. 1998; Stark 1996, 2006; Stark and Bainbridge 1979). Therefore, conversion to new religious movements is regarded "as a function of recruits' evaluations of the social and cognitive outcomes of converting relative to non-conversion" (Gartrell and Shannon 1985:32). If a religious group offers converts benefits and rewards that outweigh possible constraints, limitations, and losses caused by affiliation with this group, they will feel strongly

incentivized to join.[293] Further developing this line of argument, various scholars claim that *strict* religious groups attract potential converts more than other groups because they screen out free-riders and thus maximize the possible rewards (Iannaccone 1994). Some scholars argue that new members can be attracted by doctrinal nuances (Corten et al. 2003; Finke and Stark 2000:115; Gooren 2013; but, see Long and Hadden 1983).[294] Other scholars that generally agree with this line of argument point out that converts can be attracted to specific religious practices, such as polygamy in the Mormon community (Bryant et al. 2014), to emphasis on moral renewal (Wilson 1977:101; Yang 1998), to the clear prospect of spiritual growth (Baran 2011:431; Kox, Meeus, and Hart 1991; for JWs, see Wilson 1977:103), to the strong millenarian aspect (Aguirre and Alston 1980:188; for JWs, see Eddy 1958; Rogerson 1972), to the quality of worship and liturgy (Basden 1999; for JWs, see Beckford 1975b), or the empirical irrefutability of the religious doctrine (Neitz 1987:80–81; for JWs, see Stark and Iannaccone 1997:143), among others. In addition to theological and spiritual incentives, communities are argued to attract new members by offering activities and lifestyles that lead to bettering health, financial well-being, and family stability (Corten et al. 2003:59; Iannaccone 1994; Krasteva-McCauley 2014; Wilson 1973:136) or escaping social marginalization (Mariz 2004).

Many scholars stress the importance of continuity between the rules and practices of a religious organization and local culture for attracting converts (Stark and Iannaccone 1997; Wilson 1977; Seeman 2013; Brusco 2011; but, see Cohn 1993). However, others argue that that local cultural idiosyncrasies are more important than the institutional features of the religious

[293] This is the major reason why *rational choice* scholars argue that the freedom and diversity of a religious market directly correlates with a number of believers and churchgoers in a given society, because different religious groups can offer different "perks" and satisfy wider spectrum of demands (Finke and Stark 1998, 2000)

[294] Generally, most scholars agree that theological nuances affect religious groups' attractiveness, but the mechanics of this influence is seen very differently. Yet there is little consensus over the specific effect of theology. Some scholars argue that theologically strict groups are more successful (Iannaccone 1994:1194–1996), while others find liberal theology more appealing to potential converts as it gives them more freedom (Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge 1993:197).

organization, because the latter only matter if the local contexts allows for their existence (Sun 2019). Many scholas criticize the individualistic approach of the rational choice theory for not taking into consideration the influence of the community and other circumstantial factors and for overlooking the individual input of the convert (Ellison 1995; Long and Hadden 1983; Ramos, Woodberry, and Ellison 2017).

During my fieldwork, I have come across many JWs who explained their membership in the WTBTS by referring to various aspects of the JW teaching that they found appealing at the time of their first encounter, such as the emphasis on the name of God, the promise of resurrection, its attitude towards traditional clergy, the emphasis on the Bible, or its millenarian aspirations. Most of my informants were able to identify quite specifically which tenets of the teaching or practice "convinced" them to accept the Truth. At first glance, this strongly resembles the rational choice explanation – the benefits of joining are logically processed and weighed against each other. However, hardships that they often have to endure as a result of conversion, such as imprisonment, social hostility, and ruptures of relationships with relatives, hardly suggest that the conversion was a result of logical weighing of *pro et contra*. Based on my observations, including Mher's account above, I agree with James Beckford who argues that "active involvement in religious groups tends to precede full awareness of their teachings, let alone intellectual assent to them" (Beckford 1985:105; also, see Neitz 1987:78–89). Besides, one's fondness for the community is often emotional rather than logical – JWs stress how they felt when they first heard the name of God or were first welcomed by a congregation. At the same time, one's emotional and psychological comfort within the JW community often serves as a significant factor incentivizing new members to join and stay in the group.

Religious authority

The pattern of religious authority in a given religious group is another institutional factor that scholars often point to when explaining the incentives for joining this group. There is little consensus among scholars regarding the influence of hierarchical or egalitarian principles of religious authority on conversion. Generally, speaking about new Protestant religious movements, scholars emphasize the egalitarian nature of power distribution in a community, which, at least in theory, is based on the principle of the "priesthood of all believers" (Bratrud 2019; Hobbs 1960; Robbins 2001; Vázquez Palacios 2008; Wills 2003). Researchers note that anti-clerical motifs and sentiments often make Protestant egalitarian groups appealing for converts, which means that potential members are attracted to a specific type of relationship rather than ideas (Corten et al. 2003:45–46). This egalitarianism can manifest itself as an equal right to interpret doctrines (Marzouki 2013:35; Vanel 2016:121–22), as "congregational intimacy" between religious authorities and believers (Aguilar et al. 1993:127), or as accountability of elders and priests for financial and administrative decisions (Mariz 2004). Some maintain that the power of a religious leader to define and interpret the rules deters people from joining these religious groups (Buckser 2003:77–78) or can even inflict schisms (Starke and Dyck 1996:160–61).

At the same time, some scholars insist that the personal qualities of priests are more important for attracting potential recruits because new religious movements are formally democratic yet never truly implement this principle in practice as pastors/elders accumulate significant amounts of exclusive sacramental power (Barker 1981:60; Krasteva-McCauley 2014), stand out as moral authority (Carroll 1992; Ingram 1981), and inspire churchgoers towards spiritual growth (Bruce et al. 2006). Scholars point at the importance of the "preaching [style] and the ideological viewpoint of a priest in charge" (Wellman 2002:195; also, see Basden 1999; Carroll 1978; Corten et al. 2003:60;

Dudley and Cummings 1983; Gray 2006; Maddox 2012; Mariz 2004; Tamney 2005) for attracting and retaining new members. Still other scholars suggest that religious authority is contingent upon context. For example, even within the same denomination, the authority dynamic can differ from congregation to congregation depending on the local culture (Freston 1998; Kao 2009; Leeman 2019; Shin and Park 1988) or on the stage of development of a religious movement (Barfoot and Sheppard 1980).

Among the scholars studying the WTBTS, the assessments of the leadership style within the community vary. Some hold that the power distribution in the JW community is egalitarian (Besier 2018; Wilson 1977). Writing about the success of JWs in Kenya, Wilson says, "without any permanent internal hierarchy and without a professional ministry which accumulates power or influence or controls finance, the egalitarian teachings of the movement" (1973:136; also, see Cooper 1974) is appealing for new converts. Also, he argues that the principal equality between the Europeans and American missionaries and local JWs is especially important in post-colonial settings (138). Other scholars characterize the WTBTS as a theocracy with a very strict hierarchical form of subordination (Beckford 1975a, 1975b; Cooper 1974:704; Côté and Richardson 2001; Holden 2002; Sturgis 2008). Penton argues that personal qualities of certain JWs' leaders, such as Charlse Russel's rationalism and Rutherford's authoritarianism, attracted potential proselytes (1985:255).

My observations in the JW community in Armenia suggest that the egalitarian principle is consciously appreciated by most members of the community. It becomes especially noticeable when JWs compare the "greedy and ignorant" priests of the Armenian Church with JW elders and emphasize the common Protestant principle of *Sola Scriptura*. Although overall, the theological hierarchy in the WTBTS is strict and indisputable, at the level of congregations, it is fairly egalitarian. Elders have a slightly elevated position and enjoy a great deal of respect, while their personal

qualities can affect the atmosphere in the congregation, but they are not the reason why people come to and stay in the Truth. Below I analyze how the priesthood-laity dynamic (Bourdieu 1991:9; also, see Weber 1993) is implemented in the JW community and how it affects the attractiveness of the Truth for converts and current members. As I show below, this power dynamic is particularly appealing to charismatic or well-educated people who seek to have a position of power in their social circles.

Communal Cohesion

Scholars often emphasize the atmosphere within a religious community as an important institutional factor facilitating conversion. Some argue that a religious group is more attractive if it maintains a strong bond between co-religionists (Aguilar et al. 1993:127; Coates 2014; Dudley and Cummings 1983; Lofland and Stark 1965; Long and Hadden 1983; Snow and Machalek 1984; Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Wright 1991:129). Lawrence Iannaccone claims that "people rarely convert, unless or until they form close personal relationships with persons who already belong" (1997:151). Lewis Rambo (1993) includes 'interaction,' i.e. the development of a relationship with the members of a religious group, into a seven-step path towards conversion. Other scholars have emphasized the appeal of charismatic and otherwise tightly-knit religious organizations "as providing a firmer anchor for identity than is generally available under conditions of late modernity" (Greil and Davidman 2007:559; Mariz 2004). Roger Dudley and Des Cummings (1983) stress the frequency with which members of a religious group come together for communal activities as a significant factor that increases the appeal of religious organizations. At the same time, some researchers strongly oppose these views and argue that closeness is only marginally relevant for incentivizing religious interest (Hoge and Carroll 1978; Hoge and Roozen 1979b, 1979a). Most scholars of JWs agree that the warmth of the community and its social connections incentivize people to come to and stay in the

Truth (Beckford 1975b:161; Cooper 1974:709; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Holden 2002).

Regardless of their age and social standing, JWs tend to greatly appreciate and rely upon the closely-knit community. Mher's case above as well as multiple examples below show that the warm welcome and incessant attention at the initial stage of joining a JWs' group significantly increases its attractiveness. At the same time, one's deeper incorporation and reliance on the group in everyday life and the reorientation of existing social networks towards the group contribute to a high degree of retention in the JW community. Drawing on the Durkheimian correlation between one's social integration and one's sense of meaning, purpose, and self-respect, I demonstrate how the networks in the JW community compensate for the lack of social integration in the larger Armenian society and provide opportunities for self-realization.

Proselytism

Public ministry is one of the central activities of JWs and a duty of all publishers. Many scholars maintain that religious groups that emphasize proselytism grow faster because public ministry results in bringing new people (Bryant et al. 2014; Earle 1992; Gerlach and Hine 1970; Rambo 1993; Sherkat and Wilson 1995a:998; Vanel 2013:145; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). John Hayward holds that "churches grow by word-of-mouth through the activities of a subset of the church, called enthusiasts [and] that church growth resembles the nature of an epidemic" (Hayward 2005, 2010, 2012). Some scholars claim that most religious organizations grow through personal networks (Freston 1994; Gooren 2013a:49; McGuire 2008:81; Neitz 1987:68–69; Rambo 1993:160; Snow and Phillips 1979; Stark 1990:206; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Others question the central role of proselytism in converting new followers. For example, Rambo (1993) does not prioritize missionary activities over personal networks in conversion practices. He argues that they are important in different contexts (Rambo 1993; also, see Gibbs 1992). Scholars of

Mormonism argue that lower rates of missionary activity among Mormons have little correlation with their success or failure (Bryant et al. 2014; Gooren 2013a; Stark 1990:210–11).[295] Some researchers contend that converts themselves are agents of their religious transformations when "there is little or no external social pressure" (Lofland and Skonovd 1981:376; also, see Richardson 1980), which downplays the significance of proselytism. Along the same lines, Greil (1977) claims that proselytism may facilitate recruitment, but it has little connection with conversion as it does not convert "from one perspective to another" (116).

Scholars of the JWs' movement have diverging views on the role of proselytism in recruiting new followers. Most researchers (Baran 2011:431–32; Beckford 1975a, 1975b; Holden 2002; Stark and Iannaccone 1997:148; Stoll 1990:106; Wilson 1977:107) argue that proselytism is the main source of novices. Wilson also emphasizes that the Theocratic Ministry school (see, Chapter II) prepares tenacious and skillful preachers, which results in high rates of recruitment (1973:136; also, see Lofland and Stark 1965).[296] However, other researchers question the importance of JWs'

[295] In addition, scholars have paid attention to the quality of missionaries conducting public ministry. Many Protestant organizations that have spiritual and administrative centers in the United States, such as Mormons, JWs, Pentecostals, and Baptists among others, send missionaries around the world to spread the Good News. Some scholars claim that foreign missionaries whose proficiency in local languages and cultures is subpar have low efficiency in recruiting new members (Vanel 2013:145) and that "native agents" are more successful in spreading religious ideas than the foreign missionaries (Rambo 1993:69; Seeman 2013:64). On the other hand, cultural closeness is argued to present more grounds for a conflict and, therefore, for a failure to find converts, foreigners may be given the benefit of the doubt in cases when the locals are not (Harel 2019:767). Catherine Wanner (2007) points out that western missionaries adroitly find a way not to antagonize local culture and find common "enemies," which increase their attractiveness. Scholars of Latin American Protestantism claim that "conversion can be nurtured but not triggered by foreign missionaries" (Annis 1987:106).

[296] The brainwashing approach is a very radical form of this view that also ascribes immense power to the destructive cults in attracting and retaining members. This line of scholarship was particularly influential in the 1970s-90s and argued that people join certain new religious movements against their will and viewed religious conversion as a form of *indoctrination* (Conway and Siegelman 1982, 1995; Singer 1979) or a consequence of *psychological dysfunction* (Lalich 1996; Richmond 2004). This approach had wide support outside of academia as many anti-cult activists, both religious and secular, adopted this view in treating conversion in certain religious organizations (for example, see Chapter III; also, see Richardson 1992, 2007 and Richardson&Introvigne 2001). However, this view was criticized by various scholars who argue that the brainwashing theory is one-sided (Robbins 1984) and does not account for the influence of a social milieu upon converts (Richardson, van Der Lans, and Derks 1986); it medicalizes religious conversion and conceptualizes it as a mental health problem in order to expand the jurisdiction of the medical profession into the areas of religion (Robbins

proselytism. For example, James Penton (1985) argues that the role of public ministry in attracting new members to the JW community is insignificant. Some note that JWs' growth occurs through personal networks (Cragun and Lawson 2010:20). Evaluating JWs, David Voas (2008:120) insists that the average number of hours spent doing public ministry does not predict the number of new converts – even when the intensity of public ministry remains relatively stable, its productivity can fluctuate quite significantly (also, see Munters and Jacques 1977). According to later James Beckford, "the main purpose of the service work is not recruitment but confirmation of identity and commitment to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society" (in Voas 2008:124; also, see Munters 1977).

My field observations suggest that the latter position describes the role of JWs' public ministry more accurately, which does not mean that people do not encounter the Truth on the streets or are not recruited by skillful preachers. Yet, such out-of-network encounters are by far less numerous than cases when people accept the Truth through friends, coworkers, family members, or neighbors. Besides, there are cases of prison officers torturing JW inmates for a long time yet eventually becoming JWs themselves. In most cases, prolonged close contact with a Witness is very important. At the same time, JWs' proselytism in Armenia appears to be more successful compared to other U.S.-based religious groups, such as Mormons, primarily because JWs rarely rely on non-Armenian speakers when preaching to the Armenian population. Even international JW missionaries to Armenia are often of Armenian origin and therefore are proficient in the Armenian language, culture, and expectations, which greatly facilitates the initial dialogue with the proselytized. In addition, in contrast to some scholars who regard personal networks narrowly and limit them to friends, relatives, and maybe co-workers (Neitz 1987:68–69), I argue that they include other types of

and Anthony 1982); it ignores "volitional aspects of recruitment to new religions" (Richardson 2007).

social and emotional affection – for example, people who live in a dorm and share a similar experience of being a refugee or grieving a loss of a close loved one are more open to talk with JWs who have a similar background. These contacts rarely result in immediate conversion, but they often serve to establish a rather strong affection for the JW community. Although public ministry is not the main source of recruits, it gives pride and satisfaction to JWs and an opportunity for self-application. As I show below, many JWs adore preaching and dedicate their lives to spreading the Truth.

Individual and Social Factors

Many scholars of religious conversion have criticized views that prioritize institutional factors over the individual idiosyncrasies of the proselytes and over the context of conversion. Greil and Rudy (1984) criticize the institutional approach for "focusing on the group rather than the individual as the unit of analysis [which] implies that conversion is a one-event phenomenon" (311; also, see Bromley and Shupe 1980). Below, I review the literature on individual factors that can predetermine one's interest in the JW community.

Although contemporary studies of religious conversion often reject the idea of pre-dispositional influence, which explains one's conversion as a linear cause-effect consequence (Granqvist 2003), scholars often focus on specific triggers that can launch the mechanism of transformation. Certain socio-economic, psychological, ideological, educational, or age profiles are argued to affect one's religious interest and transformation. Yet, it is never the case that religious organizations draw new members from one social group for one specific reason (Richardson 1980; but, see Snow et al. 1980).

Demographic and Socioeconomic Factors

Since the seminal work on conversion by Lofland and Stark (1965), scholars of religion have

paid particular attention to *predisposing conditions*, i.e. preexisting features, "the conjunction of which forms a pool of potential […] converts" (864). This list includes various criteria, such as education, age, and class, among others.

Scholars have little consensus regarding the influence of education on one's predilection to be attracted to certain religious groups or religion in general. Many argue that one's level of education negatively correlates with one's susceptibility to religious ideas and religious participation (Aguilar et al. 1993; Freston 1998, 2008; Iannaccone 1994). Bader and Demaris (1996) suggest that those with lower education are attracted to traditional, conventional, and therefore understandable religious traditions (301). Yet, others argue that educated people are more prone to conversion because "they are better at learning and adjusting to new ways of thinking" (Barro, Hwang, and McCleary 2010:17) or because they are able to discern and appreciate particular ideas in a religious teaching, such as the individualism of Protestantism (Frigerio 2007).

It is often emphasized that different types of religious organizations attract people with different educational levels. For example, Moonies are argued to recruit well-educated people (Barker 1981; Beckford 1985:104), while Pentecostalism attracts people with a lower degree of education (Freston 1994, 1998; Frigerio 2007; but, see Kox, Meeus, and Hart 1991:232). Scholars of the WTBTS have different estimates of the educational level of those who join the ranks of JWs. Some researchers claim that JWs are mainly un-educated or low-educated people (Munters 1977; Wilson 1973, 1977) or only have high school education (Eddy 1958:116; Holden 2002:44–45; Penton 1985:274; Stark and Iannaccone 1997). However, describing JWs in Kenya, Wilson argues that they are 'much better educated than an average Kenyan' (Wilson 1973:142). At the same time, some scholars insist that JWs recruit from different educational strata, including people without education and with a college degree (Beckford 1975b:141–42; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980).

Socio-economic class is another criterion that is argued to correlate with one's attraction to a specific religion. Scholars have shown that certain denominations, such as Pentecostalism and Fundamentalism, attract poor people by offering economic and educational growth (Aguilar et al. 1993; van Dijk 2012; Mariz 2004; Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds 1978; but, see Koehrsen 2017) or giving hope to access "healing" practices amidst a lack of access to conventional medical assistance (Krasteva-McCauley 2014). At the same time, more charismatic, cult-like religious groups, such as the Children of God or Moonies, recruit from the middle-class and professionals (Bader and Demaris 1996; Barker 1981; Harrison 1974; Latkin et al. 1987). When describing the socioeconomic composition of the JWs, scholars show that JWs come from various economic niches, but mostly from the skilled labor market (for Britain, see Beckford 1975, 1985; for Netherlands, see Munters 1977; for Kenya, see Wilson 1973) or middle class (for Britain, see Besier 2018:213; Holden 2002; for the U.S., see Eddy 1958).[297] According to Wilson (1977), in Japan, JWs rarely attract very rich or very poor people, while all of the socio-economic strata between these two extremes are well-represented in the community. Beckford makes a similar conclusion for the social composition of British JWs (1975b:1389–140) and concludes that "the wide range of class backgrounds ensures that Witnesses of the appropriate social class can work among people of similar backgrounds. This factor is also important in helping newcomers to feel at home in congregations" (138). However, the more traditional view on JWs describes them as embracing deprivileged social strata. In Cuba, JWs are argued to attract "poor, semiliterate Cubans" (Aguirre and Alston 1980:189). Lee Cooper (1974) claims that the WTBTS appeals to black residents of the ghetto because being a JW "minimizes the hardships of living on a low income"(719). Munters argues that Dutch JWs are more deprived than

[297] The results are different because Beckford's investigation described Britain in the 1970s, while Besier's analysis pertains to contemporary Britain.

the members of the Dutch Reformed Church (Munters 1977:66–67). Besides, some scholars claim that the JWs community is particularly attractive to labor immigrants (for France, see Dericquebourg 2016; for Western Europe, see Leman 1979; Penton 1985; for Kenya, see Wilson 1973), although Paul Sturgis (2008) argues that immigration has little effect on the membership of the WTBTS (296). Some go further and insist that the correlation between one's socioeconomic characteristics and their attraction to the WTBTS is unwarranted (Beckford 1975b:150; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Leman 1979).

Many scholars of religion contend that young people are more prone to engage in religious practices (Arn 2008; Bibby 1987) than older people. Some argue that it happens because religion offers them a clear perspective on life and somewhat liberates them from their current problems (Good and Willoughby 2008; Kox et al. 1991; Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo 1999), because the group provides connections and "social capital" (Bibby 1993; Kox et al. 1991), or because young people have no ties with the larger society and have little to lose (Dawson 1999:293; Granqvist 2003).[298] However, this view does not claim that other ages are not susceptible to a surge of religious interest and to conversion (Arn 2008). Most scholars of the WTBTS agree with Beckford's estimate that JWs do not target young people in western countries (Beckford 1985:122; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980). However, analyzing JWs in the U.S., Paul Sturgis (2008) insists that "the Witnesses are younger, a larger percentage of their population is female, and they have a higher fertility rate than the general population" (295). Wilson partially confirms Sturgis' claim using African material and argues that up to 90% of JWs in Kenya are 30 years old and younger (1973:140). In post-war Japan, JWs were argued to appeal to younger people because they provided a clear framework for a nuclear

[298] It is important to note that these findings are context- and culture-specific. While in the U.S., the interest of young people towards religion is more or less consistent, in Europe it has been rapidly declining (Spilka et al. 2003).

family (Wilson 1977:102). Some researchers argue that JWs' recruitment is not age-specific (Munters 1977:61).

Scholars of the WTBTS point at another aspect that can be viewed as a predisposing condition – they note that most JW converts have been previously affiliated with mainstream Christian churches (Beckford 1975b; Cooper 1974:716; Holden 2002:45; Jindra 2006; Munters 1977). Wilson (1973:141-2) argued that individuals who are accustomed to a religious frame of reference will tend to look for religious rather than secular solutions to their problems. Therefore, people who previously had been affiliated with other religious groups are more prone to join the ranks of the WTBTS. Looking from a slightly different angle, Iannaccone (1997) claims that JWs "do best where most people are familiar with Christian culture" (142; also, see Angle and Perry 1981; Rambo 1993).

JWs in Armenia recruit people from various age groups with varying educational levels and socio-economic statuses. Literacy and one's level of education seem to have a weak correlation with one's desire to become a JW, but the specific rationale can vary for different groups. In the case of socio-economic position, JWs come from all avenues of Armenian society. Importantly, the WTBTS not only facilitates upward socio-economic mobility, but also limits employment options either through inhibiting certain occupations or through incentivizing of the prioritization of public service over having well-paid jobs. Regarding age, JWs are diverse as well, yet the majority of newcomers are middle-aged women. JWs' previous affiliation with the AAC is difficult to evaluate as it is unclear what criteria serve as a good measurer of one's affiliation (see Chapter IV).

Deprivation and Conversion

One aspect most emphasized in the conversion literature is that destitute and marginalized people form a potential pool of converts for new religious movements. Scholars argue that low

economic status and poverty incentivize people to seek membership in religious groups (Freston 1998, 2008; Mariz 2004) because these they provide food, childcare, or humanitarian aid (Garrard-Burnett 1998:121; Krasteva-McCauley 2014; Nash and Berger 1962; Wanner 2007), because the poor are alienated from the traditional economy and strive for modernization (Annis 1987:79; Cragun and Lawson 2010; Earle 1992:284; Pelkmans, Vaté, and Falge 2005), and because religious organizations are sometimes more trustworthy than the government (Stravers 1988). Some scholars show that extreme poverty pushes people to seek God's help as a last resort to solve economic issues (Aguilar et al. 1993; Iannaccone 1994:1201; McGuire 2008:80) or health problems (Krasteva-McCauley 2014; Sexton 1978). One aspect that scholars have consensus over is that damaged social and familial connections negatively affect one's economic situation, which pushes people to seek support in religious communities (Kilbourne and Richardson 1982; Seeman 2013:65; Sexton and Woods 1977; Stoll 1990; Wright and Piper 1986), which is especially true for immigrants and refugees (Brodwin 2003:87; Garrard-Burnett 1998:122–23). They argue that intra-communal connections and support can alleviate economic crisis, i.e. provide upward economic mobility (Seeman 2013:65). Yet, some scholars contend that economic deprivation is a weak or even irrelevant factor for joining a church (Bader and Demaris 1996; Roof et al. 1979; Roof and Hoge 1980) and argue that most churchgoers in America are well-off (Hoge 1979; Hoge and Roozen 1979a).

Many scholars of JWs agree that socio-economic crisis increases one's predisposition to joining the JW community (Aguirre and Alston 1980:190; Beckford 1975a; Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980:97; Penton 1985; Holden 2002). Leman (1979) emphasizes migrant workers' emotional, economic, and social deprivation as an incentive to seek membership in the WTBTS community. However, Wilson indicates that there are no material incentives to join the

JW organization (Wilson 1973:136) because the community does not provide institutional material support for its members. Beckford also insists that deprivation is a poor predictor of one's interest in the WTBTS (Beckford 1975:155; also, see Curry 1992). However, in these estimates, deprivation is regarded as a socio-economic phenomenon and is measured by a number of JWs from the poorer strata of society. I suggest viewing deprivation as insufficient embeddedness in society, which includes not only poverty, but also weak social ties, low social status, as well as a lack of respect and social interaction. This understanding of deprivation allows us to regard JWs as a refuge for the disadvantaged strata of population.

The psychological line of the dispossession arguments considers social deprivation and focuses on personal discomfort. From this perspective, damaged social and familial ties predispose one to religious conversion because the "Christian God, as typically perceived, meets all of the defining criteria of an attachment figure" (Kirkpatrick 1997:209; also, see Granqvist 2003). Besides, religious organizations attract converts with damaged social ties because "they are linked together in a band of mutually supportive, like-minded, equally devoted fellow believers, who reinforce one another in times of weakness, persecution, and doubt" (Kelley 1986:51; also, see Smith 2013). So, joining a religious organization is viewed not as a means to improve their economic position, but to obtain respect and comfort (Stoll 1990:106).

Besides, scholars point at other triggers that facilitate one's interest in religion, such as alcoholism (Garrard-Burnett 1998:123; McGuire 2008:81; Sexton 1978), homosexual guilt (Lofland and Stark 1965), a lack of direction and purpose (Hoffer 1951; Kelley 1986:153–176; Snow and Phillips 1979:433; Wanner 2007), a near death-experience or grave illness (Wuthnow 2001:318–319), or general unhappiness (Barker 1981:70). All these problems create a sense of anomie or "tension" (Lofland and Stark 1965; Richardson 1980; Snow and Phillips 1979) that is resolved through joining

a religious organization. Some scholars claim that people turn to religious organizations because they undergo an identity crisis (Brodwin 2003; Greil and Davidman 2007; Mariz 2004; Wanner 2007) or wish to increase their social status, i.e. escape "spoiled identity"[299] (Smith 2013; Verter 2003). For potential converts, religion and religious organizations seem an effective solution to these problems.

Researchers of the WTBTS support the idea that psychological constraints and feeling worthless increases the chances of one's accepting the Truth (Beckford 1975a, 1975b; Holden 2002). Holden (2002) notes that because of modernity, people feel disoriented and abandoned, which makes JWs' close-knit, warm community (also, see Alston and Aguirre 1979; Beckford 1975b) and strict, clear-cut theology (also, see Jindra 2008) attractive. Some argue that JWs are attractive for those who have had a near-death experience (Sprague 1946:140). Some scholars insist that JWs' theology and practice are attractive to immigrants as it has a positive effect on their psychological well-being (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980:93; Leman 1979) and helps them fight frustration with their socio-economic position (Dericquebourg 2016:53). On the other hand, some scholars of the WTBTS argue that JWs are not particularly attractive for people who are divorced, single, or widowed (Munters 1977). In marginal cases, researchers equate one's willingness to become a JW with mental sickness (Montague 1977).

In this chapter, I show that economic instability and psychological discomfort often facilitate one's interest in the community and the Truth. People with damaged social ties are often attracted to the JW community because it offers them some economic opportunities, but more importantly self-realization and social respect. Those who are socially deprived or are in pursuit of personal or moral improvement do not reject JWs at the time of their first encounter despite prejudice and negative

[299] Some scholars of conversion argue that "the concept of spoiled identity (Goffman 1974) lies conceivably at the basis of changes in levels of religious activity […] Spoiled identities may turn some people into religious seekers" (Gooren 2007:348; also, see Straus 1979).

stereotypes.

Additionally, other appealing elements are discovered by potential recruits later. The strictness of the WTBTS' rules, as well as their moral certainty and straightforwardness are appealing to those who look for a clear road map for self-improvement and who are dissatisfied with their social status. Although becoming a JW hardly results in an improvement of one's social standing, as JWs are widely disliked in the Armenian society, being a bearer of the Truth allows JWs to boost their self-esteem and feel supremacy over worldly people. At the same time, I show that although JWs receive co-religionists' help in times of hardship, there are few economic incentives to join or stay in the community.

Ideological Crisis

According to conversion literature, ideological shifts in society may facilitate religious conversion because religion is regarded as a safe "sacred canopy" (Berger 1967) or an alternative system of meaning (McGuire 2008:80). The ideological factor is especially favored when scholars address decolonialization or de-communization (Horton and Peel 1976; Pelkmans 2009; Wanner 2007, 2009). In this case, religion can be a shield from modernity (Berger 1967; for JWs, see Holden 2002; Penton 1985a:260), a remnant of pre-Enlightenment worldviews (Anderson 1979), or a "vehicle for inducting subjects into modernity" (Werth 2000:514; also, see Van der Veer 2014). Simultaneously, some authors argue that fundamental social, political, and economic changes, such as the collapse of the Soviet system, were rather a part of de-modernization, but they resulted in a similar attitude towards religion (Pelkmans 2009:9). When analyzing societies where older systems of meaning undergo radical transformation, scholars zero in on various aspects of the ideological changes that make people more susceptible to religious conversion. One example is transition to a free market economy from a state-controlled model, which radically transforms one's understanding

of social equality and justice (Pelkmans 2003; Pelkmans et al. 2005; Vallikivi 2009). Others focus on the resurgence of religiosity as a form of anti-colonial resistance where religion opposes the existing ideological system of the colonial state (Vallikivi 2009:68) or where defying the church of the colonial or oppressing power is viewed as a struggle for independence and dignity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008; Rambo 1993:69). Some scholars focus on how globalization and the fear of losing one's identity incentivize people to turn towards religion in pursuit of "a social and organization structure in which the life of the individual can become eternally meaningful" (Penton 1985:260). Religious conversion and joining a religious movement are argued to be highly likely when this group offers a religious ideology and "new experiences [that] support the new beliefs" (Neitz 1987:80; also, see Heirich 1977; Greil 1977; Lofland and Stark 1965).

Some researchers of JWs ascribe the success of the WTBTS to its ability to shield its followers from the disorienting power of modernity which manifests itself through a mixture of "certainties and uncertainties, liberty and discipline, rationalism and relativism and the combination of individual and collective authority" (Holden 2002:172; also, see Beckford 1975b; Penton 1985a; Jindra 2008; Munters 1977:65). Theodore Sprague (1946) holds that JWs attract people who are "hostile to what they consider excessive nationalism, [and who] feel some admiration for a group showing courage in opposing this sentiment" (124). Beckford (1975b) claims that one's dissatisfaction with the perceived state of morality in society can facilitate interest in the WTBTS. Iannaccone points out that JWs witnessed the greatest membership explosion during the Depression and immediately after WWII (1997:141; also, see Reynaud and Graffard 2001:5). Eddy (1958) argues that people who are of a rebellious nature are often attracted to the Truth.

Ideological transformations in Armenian society are a significant factor that makes JWs' message appealing and the communal life and rules attractive. First, JWs regard the Truth as a shield

from ideological and moral ambiguity of the world around them – ambiguity that is perceived as immorality and decay. Second, in today's Armenia, nationalism serves as the main ideological framework where one's rights and responsibilities stem from belonging to a certain ethnic group. Under these circumstances, the discrepancies and injustices of the current system encourage people to seek alternative socio-ideological settings that reconcile or eliminate these inconsistencies.

Gender Dynamic

Most scholars of religion note that women join religious organizations more often and in greater numbers (Bush 2010; Roof and Hoge 1980; Warner 1993). The academic literature on women's empowerment and discrimination provides radically different appraisals of the effect of membership in a Christian church on women.[300] Neither is there a consensus about the incentives that drive women to join Protestant churches. Some claim that women are more prone to convert if "their husbands' desertion disrupted their existing family and kinship links" (Roberts 1968:758; Lindhardt 2012), if they are economically deprived (Gill 1990), if they are accorded less social prestige than men (Glock and Stark 1966), or if they are unemployed housewives, i.e. have time and a need for self-realization (Wilson 1977). According to these views, a woman's joining a church is regarded as a way to create/improve her social networks and gain economic support or opportunities. Also, women are argued to be attracted by theology that explains their suffering (Chong 2006; Krasteva-McCauley 2014) or by a sense of independence and empowerment

[300] Some scholars argue that although women are often not allowed to serve as priests and deacons, they can acquire power within their congregation by speaking in tongues or proselytizing (Brodwin 2003:91–92). Most importantly, scholars emphasize the role of Protestant religious organizations in placating the negative consequences of traditional patriarchy, such as machismo and family violence (Brusco 2011; Hallum 2003; Lindhardt 2012), as well as women's low self-esteem (Abbott, Harris, and Mollen 2016; Ellison 1992). On the other hand, feminist strands of literature emphasize the patriarchal misogyny within Christian churches that encourages women's submissiveness or represses their sexuality (Sharma 2008). At the same time, other scholars argue that a woman's membership in a Protestant church does not significantly affect her perception of self-worth (Aycock and Noaker 1985). Some scholars emphasize that there is not a clear-cut repression-liberation trend in Protestant churches, so women can be discriminated against in certain aspects yet empowered in others (Pevey, Williams, and Ellison 1996; Sharma 2008).

(Lindhardt 2012) that are almost a side-product of conservative Protestant denominations.

Scholars of the WTBTS generally agree that women comprise the absolute majority of the organization regardless of the specific local context and cultural idiosyncrasies (Beckford 1975b; also, see Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Munters 1977). Some argue that women decrease their social status because they occupy a subservient position in the JW community (Eddy 1958:117; Holden 2002:173), while others point that women benefit from being a JW as it provides a more stable foundation for a family and child rearing (Cooper 1974:717).

My observations confirm that women with weak social networks are more prone to join the community. In general, the patriarchal norms accepted in the larger Armenian society and the JW community are very similar – the man is regarded as the head of the family, while women are seen as followers. Yet, unlike in the larger society where the ideal vision of gender relations often radically diverges from practice as men can be unemployed, unfaithful, or violently abusive, JWs' gender rules are equally binding for men and women and therefore are the best version of traditional gender relations. This increases the attractiveness of the JW community for women. In addition, the traditional dominance of men in the family pushes women to join the organization in cases when their husbands convert.

In addition, once in the community, women are empowered by their participation in proselytism where they can compete with men in efficiency and zeal. In the domestic sphere, female JWs are emboldened to accept more assertive and independent position vis-à-vis their "worldly" fathers or husbands as the Truth is considered to be more important and gives them moral authority to resist patriarchy. Also, women's self-esteem is often elevated as they regard themselves and are regarded by other members of their household as spiritual guards of the family. On the other hand, as shown earlier, joining the JWs' community may disrupt women's relationships with relatives.

Disengagement From Religious Organizations

Disengagement from religious organizations has been less prominent in academic literature than conversion and recruitment, although as Lily and Kong (2020) said, "leaving religion […] is one half of the conversion equation" (267). Following the rational choice approach, several scholars argue that leaving a religious organization happens when one's calculation of costs and benefits tips the scale seriously towards costs and losses. For example, one's affinity with non-affiliated family members (Bahr and Albrecht 1989; Beckford 1985:143; Wright and Piper 1986)[301] and the larger society as a whole (Galanter 1980; Harrison 1974), as well as the extremely high level of strictness on behalf of a religious group (Beckford 1985; Iannaccone 1994) are argued to increase the costs of commitment, which may incentivize religious dissent. Some scholars draw attention to the fact that most recruits leave religious communities shortly after joining (Beckford 1978b, 1985).

When analyzing religious disaffiliation, scholars also explore psychological factors and emphasize emotional attachments. They compare membership in a religious organization with marriage where exit is compared with divorce due to "unmet expectations" (Bahr and Albrecht 1989; Lewis and Bromley 1987:512; Wright 1991:132–33), one's openness to new experiences (Streib et al. 2009), or feeling unworthy of membership in this group (Krasteva-McCauley 2014:207). Some scholars of religion argue that having doubts about the theology or organizational principles (Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993; Gooren 2010:104; Streib et al. 2009) pushes members to leave the community, while others claim that disaffiliation has "little to do with belief and other cognitive matters" (Beckford 1985; also, see Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham 1988; Bahr and Albrecht 1989). Some researchers underscore "the severing of socio-emotional bond to the religious leader"

[301] Some scholars (Sherkat and Wilson 1995a) hold that members of mono-religious families are less likely to leave the religious organization because it results in a significant loss of social capital.

(Beckford 1985:155; Jacobs 1987:294) as a reason for disengaging from a religious group. Another strand of literature shows how state ideology, such as atheism (Poethig 2002), or a general trend towards secularization (Berger 1967) may incentivize people to cut their ties with a particular religion.

Literature on apostasy also addresses demographic and other individual factors. Some argue that intellect (Albrecht et al. 1988; Bahr and Albrecht 1989; Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977) or higher education (Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993; Sherkat and Wilson 1995a) directly correlate with the likelihood of leaving a religious group. However, others argue that "contrary to expectation, emerging adults that avoid college exhibit the most extensive pattern of religious decline" (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007:1667). Adolescence, or maturation, is consistently named as a significant predictor of dropping out from a religious group (Gooren 2010:107–108; Hardie, Pearce, and Denton 2016; Roof 1978; Roozen 1980). Some scholars connect apostasy among adolescents with the weakening of parental authority (Roozen 1980) or the weakening of affection between parents and their children (Sherkat and Wilson 1995b:1015). Those adolescents who grew up within a religious group are argued to leave it because "it was not chosen, therefore leaving it is an expression of human agency" (Kong and Woods 2020:268; also, see Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977:50). However, Bruce Hunsberger (1980:159) disagreed with this explanation and insisted that the view on apostasy as a rebellion against one's parents is just a speculation. Disappointment with religious teachings and restrictions, such as extramarital sex, drug use, or drinking, are often used to explain breaking away from a religious group (Regnerus and Uecker 2006:229; Thornton and Camburn 1989). Along the same lines, Wade Clark Roof (1978) argues that young adults defect because of their great involvement into secular culture.

Richardson (2011) emphasizes *deprogramming* efforts on behalf of private initiatives and

governmental organizations, a process whereby a member of a stigmatized religious group is extracted from the group by force and undergoes a resocialization process that is expected to facilitate disaffiliation (also, see Lewis and Bromley 1987; Robbins 1988; Singer 1979; Streib et al. 2009). Brinkerhoff and Burke (1980) also describe religious dissent as a "subtle process of falling out" (41) facilitated by contextual, institutional, and personal factors (Roozen 1980; Wright 1987:86–88). Some scholars argue that this defection is usually more or less spontaneous and uncontrolled (Beckford 1985:157–158), while others insists that it is a result of a well-thought-out strategy (Skonovd 1981).

Scholars of JWs offer various explanations for JWs' leaving the community. Some argue that defectors lose their commitment because of the lack of closeness in a congregation (Alston and Aguirre 1979), others emphasize disappointment with the JWs' millennial theology (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Penton 1985:219) and the inflexibility of the WTBTS (Holden 2002:VII). Several authors regard dissatisfaction with the strict authority of the elders and the Governing Body as the reason for JWs' dissent (Beckford 1975a; Penton 1985:117; Weddle 2000:359–360). Reidhead and Reidhead (2003) underscore the intellectual style of WTBTS theology and the lack of an emotional component, which results in a feeling of alienation from God and co-religionists. Holden argues that teenagers feel estranged from their parents and seek being closer to the world (Holden 2002:140–48), while Johan Leman (1979) explains a high dropout rate among second generation JWs with a lack of enthusiasm (42). Importantly, scholars draw a distinction between voluntary exit and disfellowshipment (that is excommunication) for transgressions against the community (Beckford 1975b; Holden 2002:77–80; Penton 1985:89–90), which means that often members are expelled without intending to leave.

I agree with Bahr and Albrecht (1989) that JWs rarely leave the community for a single

reason. There are three main reasons of dissent that I was able to indicate in the observed cases. The first is related to a sense of dissatisfaction with the activities, administrative structure, and style of communication in the community. Ex-JWs call the community "hypocritical," 'boring,' and 'meaningless.' Teenagers who grew up in the Truth tend to belong to this group. The second reason for disaffiliation is related to the influence of worldly social connections, such as family, work, and friends, among others, that made staying in the community impossible. Those at the early stage of their affiliation with the community tend to leave for this reason. The third reason is related to JWs' strict traditional gender rules, which disallows teenagers with non-traditional sexual orientation to stay in the community.

Summary of Literature Review

The review of conversion and disaffiliation scholarship shows that people join and leave religious organizations for a plethora of reasons. One factor, such as the emphasis on traditional gender relations, can attract newcomers and simultaneously drive away current members. However, there are several important points emphasized in the field of conversion studies. First, religious conversion includes both active and passive elements, i.e. personal investment of the converted as well as external influence (Gooren 2007; Rambo 1993; Richardson 1985). Second, a crisis is not the sole driver behind religious conversion and affiliation (Gooren 2007, 2010; Kox et al. 1991). Third, unlike claims of believers and some researchers (Kox et al. 1991; Lofland and Stark 1965), conversion does not imply a clear-cut objective and subjective break in one's life that separates before and after. Fourth, religious conversion and retention must be viewed as analytically different (Wright 2007) as they are often driven by different motives and influenced by different sets of factors. At the beginning, a potential convert has little understanding of a religious doctrine and practices in order to fully consider them (Gibbs 1992:278–79), yet later, they impact one's desire to

stay or leave the community. As Mariz (2004) argues, this approach allows us to separate proselyte's rational considerations from "collateral effects." Fifth, as Freil and Rudy (1984) hold, when analyzing affiliation with and disaffiliation from a religious group we should avoid "the implicit assumption that all members of a given group have all undergone the same essential transformation process and can therefore be regarded as a single unit" (311). In other words, while institutional factors undoubtedly matter, focusing on individual conversion trajectories allows for a nuanced understanding of conversion processes. Sixth, conversion is not a unidirectional process, and any models of conversion that describe steps or conditions (Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Richardson and Stewart 1977) cannot be viewed as a fixed order of stages or as a list of necessary conditions required to complete the process of conversion (Greil and Rudy 1984). According to Paloutzian et al. (1999), "this stage model is not universal, unidirectional, nor invariant, and there is feedback and dialectic between the stages (better thought of as 'phases' or 'facets')" (1072). Certain steps or conditions can be missing, while the process of conversion and affiliation can be replaced with de-conversion and disaffiliation. In addition, because of the "observability problem," I am going to talk about affiliation with the JW community in a broad sense as one's commitment to faith and feelings about God are difficult to verify.

Finally, in my analysis of conversion and affiliation, as well as disaffiliation, I will follow Henri Gooren's concept of "conversion career", which he defines as "the member's passage, within his or her social and cultural context, through levels, types and phases of church participation" (2007:349).[302] This approach distinguishes personal, social, institutional, cultural, and contingency factors that affect one's level of religious activity (351).

[302] Gooren's term is different from that of Richardson, which is regarded as "the sequential trying out of new beliefs and identities in an effort to resolve felt difficulties"(Richardson 1980:49; Richardson and Stewart 1977)

Becoming and Remaining a Jehovah's Witness in Armenia

As the JW community in Armenia is relatively young, there are few second-generation members who grew up and socialized in the community. In addition, WTBTS theology does not emphasize having many children as a goal; on the contrary, a couple may choose to remain childless. Therefore, scholarly views that JWs grow due to high fertility rate (Cooper 1974) or "their superior ability to retain their children" (Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973:273) do not explain the impressive growth of the Armenian JW community in the 1990-2000s. JWs in Armenia are very diverse with regard to their socio-economic position, education level, and professional occupation of its members. The diversity of practices and resources offered by the community and a wide range of theological foci and messages can offer something to people with different socio-economic backgrounds and with various needs and aspirations.

Jehovah's Witnesses' Accounts of Conversion

> When I heard the name "Jehovah," I immediately realized that it was the Truth. Because from an early age, I knew about God, but it was the first time that I found out that God had a name and that it was Jehovah. It felt as if I had been waiting to be introduced to the Truth. I immediately understood that it was the Truth. Hayk

For Jehovah's Witnesses, the name of God always looms large as the epitome and symbol of everything they stand for. Reminiscing about the time when they first encountered the Truth, most of them recall the strongest impression that the discovery of Jehovah's name left on them. They see learning about the name of God as a "pivotal and deeply transformational moment" (Tigran) in their relationship with the Divine, people, self, and the whole universe. The name turns God from an abstraction into something real and personal:

> In the [Armenian] church God was very distant, He was not real as a personality, but Jehovah's Witnesses showed me a different way. When I started to study with them, the first chapter of their book said, "You will find a friend for yourself." I was studying in Russian, and I thought, "'friend' is such a short word, yet it means so much." So, my entire life I was looking for God, but I didn't know who He was. Now, I knew that He

was a friend, my friend, a real friend. Angela

A strong emphasis on the name Jehovah in the Watchtower literature, public ministry, and personal conversations between JWs often signifies the line separating *us* from *them*, true Christianity from false religions, those who recognize God and those who still need to be evangelized. Often, Armenian JWs measure their missionary success by how well-known the name of God is to the general public in Armenia and in the entire world. JWs frequently told me, "now that we have the Bible and our literature available in so many languages, soon we will bring the name of God to every corner of the world, and everything will be ready for Armageddon."[303] At the same time, doubts about the teaching of the WTBTS or a crisis of faith sometimes take the form of questioning the personality of God and the reality of His name. One of the ex-members of the community said, "I can't even pray anymore – I just don't know how to – who is God? I don't even know His name. How can I? So, I haven't prayed in a very long time. And it is killing me." Despite JWs' multiple claims, learning the name of God by itself does not seem to be a discovery that is powerful enough to create a strong impression capable of changing one's attitude towards the Truth. The striking uniformity of these accounts suggests that most long-time members of the JW community may retrospectively amplify the significance of Jehovah's name due to internalizing the great emphasis placed on the name of God in public talks, WTBTS literature, and public ministry.

Besides the near-cathartic effect of the name of God, JWs often explain their initial interest in the Truth by means of other factors. For example, they ascribe great importance to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, which demands that theological exegesis closely follow the Bible. As Areg, a male JW in his 40s recalls, "it really attracted me because [JWs] would answer all my questions based on the Bible. I was really surprised at first and I thought, 'How can you remember all these things?'

[303] Male JW, 35 years old, Armenian congregation.

That was truly impressive. Like, they were neutral and sincere." The thrust of JWs' Bible-focused approach stems from several factors. As demonstrated in Chapter IV, the salience of being Christian for Armenian personal and national identity is extremely high. Therefore, the Bible, churches, crosses, and other Christian places, objects, and symbols are highly venerated. It is common for Armenian families to have a Bible at home, yet even those who consistently go to church do not read the Bible or read it "ritualistically" (Antonyan 2011:319), that is focusing primarily on the fact of reading rather than emphasizing the content and systematic learning. While the importance of the Bible is acknowledged by most Armenians, its value is more symbolic and abstract rather than practical. In other words, its significance is only loosely related to being a source of Divine revelation or a life guidance for Christians. It is valued as a sacred object rather than a source of knowledge. Therefore, the average Armenian is not well-versed in the content of the Bible yet has a reverent attitude towards it and, importantly, accepts its authority.[304]

It is this respect for the Scripture that sometimes creates a sense of awe and reverence when people first encounter JWs' proselytism with its multiple references to biblical verses. According to WTBTS literature, one of the most important and, perhaps, most difficult issues to tackle during proselytism is to establish the authority of the Bible. Even in the newest interactive Bible course "Enjoy Life Forever," the first three lessons are titled "How Can the Bible Help You?," "The Bible Gives Hope," and "Can You Trust the Bible?" These lessons emphasize the Bible's applicability and significance in today's world. Yet in Armenia, there is little need to hold this discussion because it is

[304] For example, on May 14th, 2022, in the church of the Powerful Holy Mother of God (Զորավոր Ս. Աստվածածին եկեղեցի) in the center of Yerevan, I observed a Remembrance Day of Movses T'at'evats'i, Catholicos of the AAC in the 17th century. On that occasion, a 13th-century gospel was brought into the church from the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts. After the liturgy, the gospel remained in the church for five more hours to "be venerated by the believers" (Social Network 2022). During the worship, hundreds of people one by one would approach the stand with the gospel to bow to it, kiss it, and pray near it. Although excerpts from this gospel had been read during the liturgy, it was clear that the value of the book as a physical object of veneration was incommensurably higher than its content.

extremely rare to meet a person who would claim that the Bible has no currency in contemporary life.[305] In the situation, when Armenians who harbor reverence towards the Bible encounter JWs adroitly using biblical verses to substantiate their claims, the impression is often very strong. As a result, one may want to agree to study the Bible with JWs in order to turn the abstract respect for the Bible into more tangible knowledge. Such encounters can be consequential for one's worldview and self-perception as they show a discrepancy between one's declared respect for the Bible or even one's being a Christian and one's competence in biblical material. The desire to eliminate this inconsistency can serve as a powerful incentive to follow JWs:

> … It's true that during my entire life [my family] had thought that we were Christian. We thought we were truly close to God, but from [the first] conversation with the Witnesses we understood that it was not really true. I had always prayed to Jesus knowing that he was God. So, you can say that I didn't really know anything about the Truth [laughing]… And when I sat down to talk with that woman, we spoke until 1 o'clock in the morning. And we were giving her questions non-stop in turns – my mother, my sister, and me. And from listening to her, after receiving all the answers based on the Bible, we asked her to come again in order to continue to learn more about the Bible. Gena

Such encounters sometimes radically problematize the notion of the innate Christianity of Armenians that automatically equates being Armenian with being Christian. As I mentioned in Chapter IV, the unique character of Armenian Christianity does not require external confirmation or enhancement in the form of catechism, evangelization, or even baptism. For most Armenians, being Christian automatically stems from their being Armenian and belonging to the Armenian nation. In cases, when JWs are able to problematize this understanding of Christianness, they are likely to engender an urge to learn and master Christianity teachings, doctrines, and rules of conduct.

[305] Simultaneously, JWs who have experience preaching in the U.S. and Russia say that, in those countries, meeting people who refute the Bible's importance is much more common.

External Accounts of Becoming a Jehovah's Witness

Informed by the overall suspicion and distrust towards JWs, as well a lack of any real information about them, folk theories provide completely different explanations for JWs' success in Armenia based on an amalgam of tropes and stereotypes. According to the most popular explanation based on the widespread lore about all foreign sects, JWs pay money to new recruits to lure them into the organization. In another redaction of this story that is equally widespread, JWs receive payments from the U.S. for each recruit. Of course, this view automatically invalidates JWs' activities and success as ingenuine and corrupt. Yet other people accuse JWs of dirty financial tricks and of pumping money out of their followers by using hypnosis and brainwashing techniques. In 2014-15, the Armenian media closely followed the story of Lyova Khachatryan, whose son and daughter-in-law had become JWs (Budaghyan 2015; Davtyan 2014, 2015b, 2015a). In his public appearances and interviews, Lyova insisted that his son and daughter-in-law pressured him to sell his house and give them the money because it is "their program" (Davtyan 2014) to dispossess non-JW family members of their property. Lyova's view on JWs as fraudulent people who seek to appropriate the property of their family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers is very common in Armenia.[306] Another belief that is related to JWs' moral behavior is much more comical but also not uncommon – "people say, JWs gather in one room, turn off the light, and then have [sexual] relationships with each other at random." I personally have heard this story almost verbatim many times. Interestingly, Armenians often use this very "story" to describe different religious and ethnic groups in Armenia – Molokans, Baptists, Mormons, and Pentecostals.

Regardless of the specific details, these stories depict JWs as a financially powerful foreign

[306] The belief that the converts may be driven by the desire to get their hands on the property of their relatives may be informed by similar practices in the Armenian communities under Islamic rule. In the Ottoman Empire, Armenian converts to Islam had the upper hand in property disputes with their Christian family members (Semerdjian 2016).

organization that is controlled by "the enemies of the Armenian people" (Robert Aharonyan) who allocate huge sums of money seeking to destroy the local culture and identity.[307] Armenian political activists and self-proclaimed experts on religion and history connect the success of the new religious movements, including JWs, with the U.S. Government or CIA who use religion as a "tool to colonize the world and keep it under control" (Michael).[308] Although these stories are not rooted in reality, they are widely spread in all the strata of Armenian society – I hear the same accusations voiced by taxi drivers and by scholars at academic conferences. Once, I introduced myself and my project to a political scientist and a former advisor to the Armenian government, and he asked me a very typical question, "How much do JWs get for their ministry?" And when I told him that JWs preach voluntarily with no payment, his face expressed skepticism about the veracity of my knowledge and my professionalism.[309] Besides financial shenanigans, JWs are accused of using techniques of hypnotizing, brainwashing, or "zombifying" potential recruits. This explanation is often used to account for the radical change in behavior, preferences, attitudes, and social circles of newly converted JWs.

Usually, Armenians blame JWs for attracting new members using dishonest or even dangerous techniques, yet sometimes the hammer of people's anger falls on the recruits themselves. They are accused of pursuing disingenuous goals using their putative membership in the WTBTS organization to pursue their agenda. One of these dishonest goals is a desire to emigrate to western

[307] Such accusations are common for Protestant organizations throughout the world (for example, see Earle 1992:384)

[308] Michael was recommended to me by one of the anti-JW activists as an expert on religion in Armenia. Michael did not disclose his institutional affiliation and immediately dove into an intricate narrative about the conspiracy plotted against Armenia and its people. Every time I disagreed with him and provided facts from my fieldwork, he would smirk at me and even wink as if saying, "Come on, you and I both know the truth!"

[309] As I showed in Chapter IV, Armenian political elites are not immune to these views on religious diversity, which is reflected in the country's legislation.

countries by seeking asylum as a member of a persecuted religious organization.[310] The other is related to avoiding compulsory military service. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, in Armenia, there has been a wide-spread fear that the growth of pacifist religious groups, such as JWs, will result in a rise in the number of conscientious objectors because young males will genuinely or opportunistically join them to claim exemption from military service. These claims are not groundless as current JWs recall cases when prospective conscripts wanted to obtain a document proving their membership in the JW community for these purposes. In the 1990s and 2000s in Armenia, there were attempts to use the WTBTS and its reputation in order to achieve certain goals, yet clearly, if there were occasional success stories, they can be attributed to the inability of the WTBTS and migration services to screen out all similar cases.

"He Will Wipe Out Every Tear From Their Eyes" (Revelation 21:4)

In the 1980-90s, the process of the transformation of social ties and relations as well as involuntary resettlement destroyed systems of personal connections and support that were crucial for the Armenian society even during the relatively stable Soviet time. The crisis that broke out after the fall of the Soviet state coupled with devastations caused by the disastrous earthquake in Armenia in 1988, the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabagh, famine during the economic blockade,

[310] In 1989, the U.S. Government the *Lautenberg Program* for the former Soviet Union. At first, it was designed to facilitate the resettlement of Jews from the USSR to the U.S., but later it was expanded to embrace other religious minorities, including JWs. The Program allowed members of religious minorities to apply for U.S. permanent residency if they had close relatives lawfully residing in the United States. A representative of the Department of Public Information from the Armenian WTBTS Branch confirmed that in the past "certain individuals tried to provide [the U.S.] migration services with false information" about their membership in the JW community in order to ensure their eligibility for the program, but "these migration services know Witnesses very well and therefore they can easily discern a true Witness from a false one." Such false applications were submitted both in Armenia and in the United States. In an interview, a JW eyewitness said that in the U.S. "there were many court cases going on at the same time, and we saw many Armenians who claimed that they were Jehovah's Witnesses back in Armenia, but we knew they were lying." Naturally, these stories became known to the applicants' relatives, friends, and neighbors back in Armenia and therefore, this spurious rationale was projected onto the followers of all non-traditional religious groups in Armenia, including JWs. After being discontinued in 2011, on March 30th, 2022, the Lautenberg Program was relaunched again, and I know of several cases when JWs decided to participate and submitted their applications.

and the extremely high level of unemployment and poverty were overwhelming (Human Development Report Armenia 1996). These events created several categories of people whose social networks were seriously damaged or destroyed all together. In general, social networks that facilitate mutual help are well-developed and preserved in Armenia. In everyday life, one relies on the various systems of social connections, such as family, co-workers, and neighbors. These social ties provide employment opportunities, access to resources, mutual help in times of need, and importantly psychological support and social respect.

People of all ages whose social networks in the wider Armenian society have been undermined or have never been fully formed rely on the dense web of social bonding provided by the JW community. It provides many opportunities for its members to gather and spend time together outside of worship activities.[311] At the onset of my fieldwork, I conjectured that practical aid from the community, both institutionalized and that given by individuals, would be a very important incentive for remaining with the community. My observations showed that although practical support from the congregation cannot be ignored, it alone cannot be a sufficient reason to become or remain a JW. First, JWs do not organize routine distributions of humanitarian aid or other charitable events that are common in other religious organizations in Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries (Krasteva-McCauley 2014:205; Wanner 2007, 2009:171). This means that one's

[311] The differences between the congregations are most visible at the level of non-worship activities. As I mentioned earlier, every congregation is split into small informal groups, whose members develop truly close ties. Yet, some congregations can rise above this inner division. For example, twice a year, JWs from different congregations get together and go outside of Yerevan for an all-day picnic. While the Russian congregations do not seem as interested in joining these outings, most members of the English congregation participate in the event. There are several reasons for the English congregation to be more close-knit. First, the congregation is smaller and includes about 70 people, which facilitates closer contact between its members. Second, many members have been transplanted to Armenia from other places, such as the U.S., Cuba, or Lebanon, and they are minimally embedded into the larger Armenian society, which incentivizes them to spend more time with their co-religionists. Third, most elders are U.S-born and -raised, and they fill the congregational life with some elements of American culture, such as engaging in small talk or inviting each other to grab a bite after meetings, which facilitates tighter relations between the members of the congregation.

membership in the JW community does not entail automatic eligibility for any regular material benefits or aid.[312] Second, many JWs who often belong to deprived strata of Armenian society (e.g. elderly women) are provided for financially as their relatives take care of their everyday needs, such as buying clothes, grocery shopping, or visits to a doctor, so that they need no practical assistance from their co-religionists. While their practical needs are satisfied, their general social isolation makes them dependent on the community for social communication and self-realization. Nevertheless, I do not discard the importance of practical aid on behalf of the community as a strong incentive to remain a JW.

There are several categories of the Armenian population for whom being a member of the JW community compensates for their weak integration into the Armenian society. The first group comprises people like Olga, that is those whose familial and social ties have weakened or failed to form in the first place. The second group includes refugees from Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabagh who came to Armenia in the 1980-90s fleeing the ethnic conflict and violence. They rarely had any possessions or financial means and oftentimes they spoke only Russian and knew almost no Armenian. And the third group consists of those who experienced the trauma of losing a close loved one, such as a spouse or a child, and who found the existing cultural and societal tools of coping with the loss insufficient. Bellow I address each of these categories in greater detail.

Lonely Hearts Club

Olga and I are sitting quietly around a table in her kitchen, and as a music connoisseur she is playing songs and melodies on YouTube. She scrolls down the list of her favorite videos and says, "I

[312] It is difficult to count on the assistance of the WTBTS. First, although the Disaster Relief Committees provide very tangible help to JWs at the time of serious catastrophes, such as famine, war, or natural disasters, the lower scale help is not institutionalized. Elders and regular members often intervene when one of the brothers or sisters needs help. There is a strong expectation that members of the congregation will step in when help is needed. When the community fails to deliver, some JWs get upset because "nobody even called or came to visit when [they were] sick" (a female member of the Armenian congregation in her 70s). Despite these flukes, JWs usually tend to those in trouble very attentively.

really like this one." What she is playing is not a song, but a narration by a male voice over very calm and lyrical music:[313]

> One evening, a son invited his mother to a restaurant. His mother was already old and weak, so while she was eating, she was dropping food on her dress. Other restaurant visitors were watching her with disdain, but the son was paying no attention to the looks while tending to his mother. When they finished their dinner, the man walked his mother to the bathroom, wiped off her dress, and combed her hair. The entire restaurant was silently following him. The man paid the bill and started to take his mother towards the exit. At this moment, an older man asked him: 'Don't you think you left something?' 'No, nothing' – said the son. 'Well, – said the older man, – you left an example for all sons and a hope for all mothers.' Everyone in the restaurant was silent, and tears were rolling down the cheeks of one older woman.

Ever since her father passed away about 20 years ago and her son left the country with his wife and child a few years later, Olga has felt abandoned and forgotten. She often complains about her son's paying little attention to her life and health. Although she is not very well-off, she is able to pay all her bills, buy food, and even save up some money to send to her son. Her other relatives rarely come to visit or invite her over, and many of her friends either passed away or left the country for Russia or the U.S. Afflicted with health issues and despair, she often summons death which she views as a desired end to her emotional and physical anguish. She channels all her unshared human warmth and energy into serving Jehovah and his community with its regular meetings, public ministry, and informal gatherings with co-religionists. Almost every day, her JW sisters and brothers come over for tea or sometimes for a glass of wine; everyday, her friends from different congregations call her to inquire how she is feeling or to ask practical question related to medicine; from the early morning, she is bombarded with phone messages and pictures, in which her coreligionists wish her a good day and/or say they love her; she dedicates several days a week to public ministry with brothers and sisters from different congregations. Although she retains a good

[313] To access the video, visit: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/tQvbZ6CPt6c

rapport with the neighbors and some older friends, her social network is primarily oriented towards JWs. She feels their love and support, but it is equally important that she feels needed by and indispensable to her community. Besides, with JWs Olga does not only quench her thirst for friendship and face-to-face communication but receives real support and help at times when she has to interact with the cumbersome Armenian bureaucracy or the system of public health.[314] Although she is mostly secure financially, she relies on the practical aid provided by the elders and other members of the wider JW community.[315]

As Olga's case illustrates very well, people whose social and familial networks are damaged find comfort, much-needed human communication, respect, and a sense of social security in the community of JWs.[316] These people come from various socio-economic and educational backgrounds; for some, being cut off from other social networks is a new situation, while others have never been well-integrated into society. For example, Ararat was born and raised in Armenia but went to college in Ukraine and later worked in other parts of the Soviet Union. Having spent about ten years outside the country, he returned to Armenia in the early 1990s. Most of his former

[314] In Armenia, social connections play an immense role in navigating these systems. Back in the Soviet time, they were essential for obtaining most essential goods, employment, and medical help. Naturally, briberies were another common path.

[315] The elders of the Russian congregation have been taking her to doctor's appointments and keep track of her medical history to the point that oftentimes she must call an elder to inquire what procedure she had or what diagnosis was made.

[316] Opponents of JWs in Armenia, such as social and political activists, journalists, or priests of the AAC, often complain that JWs prey on socially vulnerable people. One of the ex-JWs told me, 'Jehovah's Witnesses are working a lot in parks to do public ministry. And they are noticing young single mothers with kids who come to a park for a walk every day. And if they see a woman with a kid for a couple of weeks, they conclude that she is probably divorced because she is always alone. Maybe she has a need for support and maybe she will accept the words about God, so she will be open to preaching. So, they work with divorced women' (former JW in his 50s). This opinion is largely supported by the Armenian media, "people join the cults because today people are abandoned. They face a sad reality, they cannot provide for the family or even feed themselves, nobody needs them, and they are welcome nowhere. Plus, as a result of many decades of [Soviet] atheism, they do not even believe in God" (Movsisyan 2002). Although these views accurately capture the characteristics of the JWs' social base, they are anti-JW in their nature as they ascribe a malicious intent to JWs' actions.

social ties were severed because of the drastic changes in the socio-political and economic landscape of post-Soviet Armenia. The relationship with his family was far from harmonious as well:

> My parents forced me to come back [to Armenia] – my mom would call me and blame me for abandoning them, for being a bad son who is far away while his father is dying. When I came back, she was telling me that I was good for nothing, that I was cursed. She even took me to the church against my will to cleanse the curse. I was boiling inside – I was truly mentally sick. My mom was criticizing and stifling me, and she was setting my father against me. I was going crazy. I really don't know how I survived that. I saw only one way out – to kill myself. Then my mom tried to get me married. It didn't work. Then she says, 'One of my colleagues is a believer. She is very good. I invited her to our house, so you could talk to her.' I was like – OK. But I was thinking, 'I will destroy that believer with my questions,' and I had a lot of questions. So, she came, and I started to bombard her with my questions. You know, I give her a question, and she opens a passage in the Bible and says, 'Read.' I give her another question – she opens another passage. My eyes got wide opened! And she was so patient with me, too – I was really intense with my questions, but she always answered with patience. I was shocked! I had a person who I could talk to, finally. So, I am telling her, 'I want to study the Bible, but only with you! Either with you, or with no one.' […] If I hadn't met her then, I don't think I would be alive today.

When Ararat returned to Armenia, his childhood friends had left the country or were conscripted into the army because of the ongoing war in Karabagh. Amidst the economic and military crisis, building a life from zero and acquiring new and stable social connections in Armenia was extremely difficult. His family did not provide a safety net either as his relationships with his parents were very strained. For him, the Bible lessons with JWs became a space that provided stable relationships with other humans and gave him a sense of security and stability. Eventually, the Bible lessons helped him mend his relationship with his parents. And the congregation became a source of "spiritual and moral support" when his father and mother got seriously sick:

> [People from the congregation] were constantly coming, supporting us. Someone would always be in our apartment. They would bring food and, I don't know, jam. They would force me to eat – I was skinny, because I didn't eat for days sometimes. You know, during the Jesus' Death Memorial, they brought the emblems[317] for my mother-in-law,

[317] Bread and wine that symbolize Jesus' flesh and blood.

who was really sick. We never felt alone – the support was colossal.

These last two quotes show how the psychological comfort that JWs provide, as well as the affectionate attention and patience[318] attract those who otherwise have no social support. Importantly, this support can manifest itself in various forms and serves both to prompt initial attraction to the community and as a later booster of one's commitment to the Truth. Although individual JWs often have limited means to support their co-religionists, they often mobilize their material and psychological resources in order to show up for members of the congregation who are in need.[319] Of course, the mode and intensity of support provided by JWs changes as one becomes more involved in the community, but apart from cases of disfellowshipment, it never dissipates.

In addition, the JW community gives refuge to those whose social networks have never fully formed because of mental or behavioral idiosyncrasies. Members of one congregation are mostly aware of the social and material needs of these brothers and sisters and assist them in various ways. Gennady, a male member of the Russian congregation in his mid-40s, does not immediately stand out in the congregation, but avoids direct eye contact when talking to others, he seems socially awkward, yet he earnestly seeks communication and human company. Once, when I was invited to join a group of JWs to visit the local Bethel, Gennady was invited too. When he was walking far ahead of us, an elderly sister said to me as if apologizing for Gennady's presence, "I don't exactly

[318] During the meetings, JWs almost never stage sketches that teach how to act in conflict or tense situations. Nevertheless, cultivating patience in general and the ability to keep a cool head during public ministry is highly valued in the community. Narek, a long-time member of the Russian congregation told me, "You can't even imagine how quick-tempered and explosive I was when I just started to study the Bible. But I am much more reserved now." Although Narek is still quick-tempered, he clearly regards patience as a virtue. In multiple online videos with conflicts between JWs and anti-JWs activists on the streets of Yerevan, the former always remain calm and never react to provocations. For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltw5_QX1wj0&list=PLxNpkcXjRXszat1QP903k-EMYkRjIdfzl&index=4

[319] With tears in his eyes, Ararat remembers how one of the brothers met him at the airport when Ararat brought his mother from Russia after a very serious surgery, "I didn't even know at the time that he only had money to come to the airport but had no money to go back. I didn't ask him to come, he just decided to do it. You can't imagine how happy I was to see him [sobbing]. You can't imagine what relief I felt when I hugged him."

know why he is like that. I don't think he has parents or a wife – he is so lonely. That's why I invited him to come with us. I do public service with him once a week. It makes him happy."

In other cases, brothers or sisters take a person like Gennady under patronage: they teach them social skills, assist them in their spiritual growth through the Bible studies, and help them navigate the bureaucratic system or look for a job. Interestingly, the spiritual progress of these protégés and their full membership in the community, i.e. baptism, is not always required for developing these mentor-mentee relationships. For example, Narek, one of the JWs from the Russian congregation took Dina, a woman in her early 50s, and her brother Movses under his patronage and has been helping them not only with their spiritual growth and mastery of the Truth but also with navigating the difficulties of the social world. Apart from lacking social skills and having unique behavioral features that already make them maladapted for independent functioning in society, Dina and Movses are refugees from Azerbaijan who came to Armenia in the 1990s. Unable to establish themselves in the harsh economic and social reality of post-Soviet Armenia, they have been subsisting on a small government pension and living in a dormitory for refugees for the past 30 years.[320] Their mastering the intricacies of the Truth has been far from speedy. They had been studying the Bible for 15 years[321] when Movses got baptized in 2022, while no one in the congregation expects that Dina will ever get fully ready for a baptism. Yet, despite the delays in the Bible study and, therefore, Dina and Movses' unclear status in the community, Narek and a few other brothers and sisters from the congregation continue providing Dina and Movses with the

[320] They live in poverty in a tiny room of 120 sq feet that has no heating system or permanent stove (they use a propane tank with a top burner). The building has one common toilet on the floor and no shower room.

[321] At some point, in a private conversation, the elders even recommended to Narek that the Bible study with Dina and Movses be discontinued as "it was lacking prospects."

much-needed support and mentorship.[322]

At the more institutionalized level, the congregation supports its destitute members in situations that, in Armenia, traditionally require the involvement of family members or close friends. For example, when 65-year-old Nina's husband passed away, his children from a previous marriage threw her out of the apartment that she shared with her late husband. Originally from Russia, Nina had no relatives or friends outside of the JW community. After her husband's death, she lived with one of the JW sisters for several years. When Nina unexpectedly died of a heart attack, the city authorities were going to bury her as a homeless person because no family members claimed her body. The elders of the Russian congregation, together with lawyers, were able to reclaim Nina's body and organize a proper funeral. In general, in cases of medical emergency, especially when the question of blood transfusion is involved, the JWs' organization provides necessary assistance and support.

The JWs' comforting presence, talks, and support are attractive for those who are grieving the loss of a close relative or friend. First, the promise of and emphasis on resurrection can be extremely soothing and encouraging. Nadezhda, a female JW from the Russian congregation in her 70s, recalls, "I started to read a brochure they [JWs] left. And I was reading about resurrection, and I was shocked. It said, 'God promises that all sinners and righteous people will resurrect.' And I read it ten times out loud. If people overheard me, they would think that I lost my mind because of my son's death." In addition, mourning is usually a private experience in Armenia. Often, it includes almost daily visits to the grave of the deceased and spending time in solitude. A common coping

[322] JWs often regard staying within the internal networks as a guarantee of security. For example, Anush, a young female from the Russian congregation, left her 'worldly' employer and started to work for a co-religionist. Although her salary remained the same, she could "synch the working hours with the schedule of the [congregational] meetings and public service." Importantly, she could "be herself" at the new workplace.

mechanism that mourners are offered is to get distracted or to move on, while people around may avoid talking about the deceased person and try to cheer the mourner up. An encounter with JWs in this situation can be transformative because they talk about death directly and acknowledge its devastating effect. At the same time, they emphasize the hope for future resurrection. Nadezhda remembers that she was "shivering when waiting for" the JWs to come back after their initial visit.[323] She longed for their company and their answers so much that she "forgot to offer them coffee when they came." She continues,

> when I told them that I had read their booklet, they got very enthusiastic. I said, "Do I understand it correctly – if God promises [the resurrection] of the dead, then it will happen, right?' And I immediately agreed to study the Bible. Then, they said it was unprecedented. And later, when brothers and sisters would go to talk to someone who was grieving, they would always invite me because I could feel the pain. It was important for those people.

While mainstream Armenian culture provides few tools to cope with grief and takes a somewhat passive stance towards talking about death, JWs address the topic of death directly and willingly. The faith in resurrection is one of the core beliefs that most JWs sincerely accept. Their brochures and booklets often focus on hope for resurrection. When proselytizing, JWs do not shy away from talking about a deceased person, which provides those who are grieving with emotional support and an opportunity to express their pain unrestrainedly. At the time when Nadezhda was mourning her son's death, she had friends and family, but she felt lonely as "nobody could understand why [she] was in pain all the time. So, when Witnesses knocked on my door and started talking to me, I felt so relieved. I said, 'Girls, please, come to me - you are very great.'" JWs' unwillingness to follow the cultural scripts that prescribe distracting a mourning person from his or her pain grabbed Nadezhda's attention, and she agreed to start a Bible study right away although she

[323] Both Nadezhda and the JW preachers were living in the same dormitory for refugees from Azerbaijan.

knew literally nothing about JWs except for the promise of resurrection. At the same time, it is not the pure idea of resurrection that Nadezhda found appealing – after all, all Christian denominations believe in resurrection. JWs turn their belief into a practical "guide" that directs them when they are talking to a mourning person. According to this guide, death is an unfortunate side-effect of the Original Sin and this world's corruption, but it is temporary, so one should remember the deceased, talk about them, miss them, continue loving them, or imagine a reunion with them. Not ignoring death but actively engaging with it rendered JWs' preaching very powerful for Nadezhda. In addition, at later stages of her involvement into the JW community, she continued working through her trauma by helping others cope with their grief.

Moral Improvement Through Shifting Away From Existing Social Ties

As I demonstrated in Chapter II, JWs almost never isolate themselves from worldly people and never completely cut ties with the rest of the society. Nevertheless, their inner social networks can be quite autonomous from other social circles. This is attractive not only for those whose social connections are damaged as in the cases above, but also for those who intentionally seek to withdraw from the existing social milieu. JWs are proud of famous athletes, actors, and pop-singers who are in the Truth, but they also like evoking examples of people with (semi)-criminal, military, or paramilitary backgrounds who renounced their former lifestyle and relationships to dedicate their lives to Jehovah.[324] Indeed, there are a number of members of the JW community who used to be heavily involved in shady dealings back in the 1990-2000s. Arvin, a male JW in his 70s from an Armenian congregation, does not hide his dark past but even brags about having been able to leave it behind and join Jehovah's family:

[324] One common example that JWs from various congregations brought up is the bodyguard of the first President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who gave up his career and profession and became a JW.

> I was in a really bad group: guns, fights, money, a lot of immorality. Everyone was afraid of us – even the police would not intervene. At any moment, they would tell us to go and deal with someone. And we did. Everyone knew me, and at any moment I could go to prison or get killed. But then I got really tired of that life. I wanted to get out, but you know how hard it is to leave a group like that. Once when I was already studying the Bible, they found out, and we all got together in a private room of a restaurant. And they started to push me to renounce the Bible and God – they started to strangle me demanding that I promise to stop studying the Bible. Thank God, one of them said, 'come on! What's the big deal?! He can study the Bible if he wants, nothing is wrong with that!' They left me alone. Then I started to get away from them little by little. I moved to another part of town, and then I cut off my ties with all my so-called friends.

Arvin's family did not welcome his choice to turn to God and become a JW either. Under these circumstances, the congregation replaced social and familial ties, so that since his baptism about 20 years ago, Arvin has been spending time with JWs preaching, doing Bible studies, and visiting congregational meetings. He drifted away from his family as his wife and son, who "don't accept the true faith." He had fights with his brothers who insisted that he participate in the family business instead of "preaching and embarrassing" them. Now, most of his family members live abroad, and even when they come to Armenia, Arvin still prefers the company of his co-religionists.

Seeking moral improvement and a new life outside of the social circles that facilitate the continuation of the old lifestyle is what actually brings people like Arvin into the community. The satisfaction received from shifting away from the immoral lifestyle serves as a source of self-respect and satisfaction, although it entails the worsening of one's social and economic standing. For example, Hayk who was involved in shady deals with gas supplies in the very early 1990s recalls his first "clean" job,

> I had everything – gas, restaurants, and friends. But I knew that it was wrong. One day I made an effort, and I gave up. It was difficult to find a job. I already knew that not all jobs are right and can bring you real joy. I was happier that I was living an honest life that I was not deceiving. One day, one of the brothers and I worked as construction workers, and I made $10 that day. I was so happy to get this money, although before I wouldn't even consider it money. As the Bible says – make your living with sweat – I felt it on myself, and I was so happy. This $10 meant more to me than a lot of money

before and I didn't used to feel this happiness and satisfaction.

People in this group, mostly men older than 50, do not all have a criminal past. Some of them had a career as military personnel during and after the war in Nagorno Karabagh or as guards in the penitentiary system. The Armenian Apostolic Church is often a first step on this path (Ara, Arvin, Sako). Yet, due to the anti-clerical sentiment (Ararat, Sako) or due to the insufficient involvement of priests in helping them progress on the path of spiritual improvement (Ara, Arvin), they turned to the communal support and attention offered by JWs.[325] Now, their self-understanding is heavily based upon the contrast between their former and today's selves. "I would never hit a person today – we all are God's children," – says Arvin. Sako, a former prison guard, says:

> One of the former inmates came to my store and started to swear and use bad words. So, I said, 'Please, don't use those words near me.' And the guy was shocked and was like, "Are you the same Sako I used to know?" And he took off his hat, and there were places on his skull that were bent inward – I hit him with a metal stick in prison. I said, 'No I started to study the Bible so I'm a different person now.' And the guy said, 'You received a human image and became a person – now I can talk to you.'

One's association with the aforementioned groups is not the only reason to seek moral renewal, to desire to shift away from existing social networks, and to tie one's life with the JW community. As is common in Protestant religious organizations, young adolescents often seek to escape the volatility of the social world around them and claim a high social status. When talking to me, teenage JW boys often emphasize their moral superiority over their worldly peers because, at a young age, they "already know what the purpose of life is" (male teenager, English congregation). They emphasize the clarity with which they see their future and the comfort this clarity gives them.

[325] A general gap between people and priests is a common grievance against the clergy of the Armenian Church common in the Armenian society. One of my informants said, "I never had particular trust and respect toward priests, because I never understood them. And I always felt that they are closer to rich people than to regular people. And it was not attractive that they were not accessible to me. Neither did I bad-mouth them because I thought they were God's people so I shouldn't criticize them. For example, my uncle was pretty well-off, and I felt like priests were more accessible to him. If there was an event, my uncle could bring a priest – so priests were closer to richer people. If you can pay, they are closer to you" (Hayk).

While in the mainstream society, young men are expected and often provoked by their peers to be very assertive and persistent towards the opposite sex, in the JW community, they do not feel the urge to follow these machismo expectations and are even directly discouraged from engaging them.[326] Quite the opposite, JW peers control the intensions and appropriateness of brothers' contacts with the sisters. A chance to eschew the traditional Armenian cultural model of communication is very appealing for many young men:

> I grew up in the Truth, but I didn't really care much… But when I started hanging out with the young JWs, it made a huge difference. First, with the worldly friends, and I have a lot, all you can talk about is girls and cars. It is that shallow! There is no spiritual dimension – nobody is even capable of thinking about anything else. With Witnesses it is very different. You can do a lot of things with [young] brothers and sisters, but you feel like a person. Hov

In addition to receiving spiritual satisfaction, young people are attracted to the dense network of connections offered by the community. These connections provide opportunities for personal and economic growth, as well as for "self-esteem and vanity" as in case with Mher, whose story opened this chapter. Based on my talks with young JWs, feeling appreciated, praised, and invaluable for the implementation of Jehovah's plan boosts young people's self-esteem and enhances their attachment to the community, especially if worldly life is far from smooth.

Of course, joining the JW community with its distinct culture, expectations, and social ties often causes ruptures between relatives and friends. On the other hand, this autonomy allows one to shift away from existing networks and ensure that one's progress towards desired moral or lifestyle improvements is not interrupted. In addition, the interwoven social networks within the community allow for the effective socialization of neophytes as they can find a group that better fits their interests and preferences.

[326] Cooper (1974) argues that this aspect is very attractive for residents of black ghettos in the U.S. as it "removes the need for a sexually exploitative male role" (719).

Ideological Crisis

As a millenarian sect, JWs have always witnessed an upsurge of interest towards their organization during times of hardship and profound social transformation. During the Second World War and the immediate post-war years, the world membership of the WTBTS was growing unprecedentedly quickly – the number of publishers between 1945 and 1950 grew by 158% (Stark and Iannaccone 1997:139). The growth slowed in the early 1960s, only to accelerate again during the years preceding 1975 when the JWs were prophesying the imminent Armageddon. In the 1990s, the growth of the JWs in the U.S. and western Europe stagnated, but after September 11, 2001, it resumed again. The statistics show a clear correlation between the growth of the WTBTS and the level of turbulence in a given society. During the 1990-2000s in Armenia, when all areas of social life underwent radical transformation, JWs demonstrated remarkable growth.

Ideological transformation in Armenian society during that period was a significant factor that made JWs' message appealing and the communal life and rules attractive. First, Witnesses regard the Truth as a shield from the ideological and moral decay and ambiguity of the world around them, "see what all those perverts in Sodom and Gomorrah did to kids? When archeologists found the remnants, they wondered how God had not destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah sooner. Why did God allow this? Everything around us [is] just like Sodom and can't last long" (Ararat). Second, in post-Soviet Armenia, nationalism as a main ideological framework where one's rights and responsibilities stem from belonging to a certain ethnic group often failed to account for economic and social inequality, as well as the injustices of the war in Nagorno Karabagh. Under these circumstances, the WTBTS ideology and practice provided an alternative to the discrepancies and injustices of the current nationalist system and offered ways to reconcile or eliminate these inconsistencies.

Lamentations about the deterioration of morality in society are common among the older

generations of JWs who constitute up to half of all congregations. The list of things considered immoral is literally endless and includes provocative clothing, signs of affection in public, divorces, a woman's disobedience to a man, a lack of general honesty and trust, identification as LGBTQ,[327] and even contemporary art. Usually, these grievances include a comparison between now and the past and resemble a conflict between generations. JWs' strict and straightforward code of rules and expectations regulates various aspects of personal and social life and usually avoids vagueness; it is very gender specific as it prescribes men and women different roles and types of behavior. Actually, these conservative rules of everyday conduct are very close to the cultural and social conventions appreciated by older generations of Armenians regardless of their religious affiliation. Once when we were walking back from a meeting, Olga pointed at a passerby and exclaimed, 'what is wrong with Armenian men?! Who told them that beards look good?! Boys used to be clean-shaven, and it was a norm. Beards used to be unacceptable in Armenia. Now they look like Neanderthals. I don't like to look at them. Did you see a single bearded [in a mocking voice] man in the congregation?'[328] Although Olga herself does not always obey the JWs' rules of dress code,[329] the general principles cherished by the community are closer to her understanding of the moral norm. However, this appreciation for the rigid code of behavior does not seem to be an attempt to eschew the ambiguity of modernity but is rather a result of a natural affinity for the familiar. In other words, people of Olga's generation do not turn to JWs looking for answers for the big questions – they look for a

[327] The vast majority of Armenians have a radically negative view of people who are LGBTQ. Unlike JWs, who non-violently condemn and disdain homosexuality, Armenians often resort to violence when they suspect that someone is gay. In recent years, there have been numerous cases of brutal violence against LGBTQ in Armenia.

[328] Olga's observation is correct – it is rare to find an older Armenian man with a beard as it used to be regarded as a sign of backwardness. It is much more common for the younger generation of Armenian males to have a beard. Among JWs it is a rarity, but on a few occasions, I saw male JWs sporting beards in different congregations, but it is generally an exception.

[329] For example, she sometimes wears a pants suit to meetings, while women are expected to wear a dress or a skirt when in a Kingdom Hall or during public ministry.

confirmation of their pre-existing beliefs and preferences; they look for a world that functions according to familiar principles from the past.

Besides, the WTBTS promises a restoration of morality in the New World that will be established after Armageddon. As I mentioned above, for most JWs, it is not a fictitious or hypothetical future – they find true comfort in their expectations of a new order without injustice or vice. The idea of the New World with its economic equality and prosperity stands in stark contrast with today's economic crisis, "every time I go to the store the same things are getting more and more expensive. The cookies I always buy were 590 drams two months ago, now they are 790. [Store and business owners] just can't help taking advantage of each other and people. Money is all they care about. We won't have it in the new world, we will have everything there" (female JW, in her 60s, Russian congregation). The economic crisis is viewed as an extension of the overall decay of this world where people take "advantage of each other." Older people couple it with nostalgia for bygone times, when people seemed nicer and cared for each other more. As a result, the moral refuge offered by the community and the promise of a much better society in the future incentivizes those of the older generation to stay in the community. Yet, it does not seem to serve as an initial impetus to seek membership in the JWs' organization.

Simultaneously, many 'seekers' who have "questions about the meaning of life" (Hakob) or want to account for injustice in the world (Hrach) turn to the JW community because JWs provide answers with "clarity" (Sako) and straightforwardness. Many seekers start in other religious organizations:

> … I was looking for all these answers not when I was as young as you are now, but much older. I was going because of my circumstances. I began with Krishnaits [the ISKCON]. I had their book 'Bhagavad Gita.' I read the mantras. But I also wanted to read the Bible and learn. From them, I went to Adventists – I even got baptized there.

> But I didn't understand what baptism was. They said to obey the Sabbath and I did. They said to learn and obey the rules of the teaching by Ellen White – a woman. I had no clue that women have no right to do that. But I was studying. Then, I went to Baptists and was listening. When our presbyter died, there was discord in the congregation. The congregation started to fall apart […] When I started reading: "What Does the Bible Actually Teach?" [a JW brochure for Bible studies] I immediately understood the way of the JWs and their requirements. And I knew it would be very-very difficult [to be a JW]. Hrach

In general, brochures, booklets, and books by the WTBTS presuppose that there is no place for ambiguity in the Bible or human life. Hrach started his quest to account for the chain of tragic events that had happened in his life: he and his family fled Azerbaijan at the end of the 1980s and came to Armenia with almost no possessions. Later, his son passed away. Wanting to account for these calamities, he attended multiple religious organizations, but he could not find what he looked for until he met JWs. In Hrach's words, it was the lack of "clarity and strictness" that he disliked in the other religious groups that he had attended. Unlike Nadezhda who was grieving the death of her son and who was attracted by JWs' promise of resurrection and their warm, supportive company, Hrach looked for clear explanations of the calamities that befell him. Having found that in the JW community, he also discovered clear guidelines for self-transformation and self-improvement that he yearned for.[330] Yet despite his long involvement in the community, Hrach and his wife, as well as many other JWs that I met during my fieldwork, have little understanding of the intricacies of the WTBTS teaching – they are attached either to a limited cluster of ideas or, frequently, to specific people in the community that they particularly trust (I address these cases below).

Apart from conservative values as well as unambiguous and clear answers to pressing

[330] Hrach said that he was not satisfied with the Society for Krishna Consciousness, because they were "too lenient and not pushy enough." Other JWs point out that the Armenian Church does not incentivize one's self-improvement, "In the church, I never saw them tell us that with our lifestyle, our behavior, our conduct we should think about what God expects from us; that our lifestyle should correspond to God's criteria. We thought that our life is fine as long as every day we asked God for forgiveness, God accepts it, and everything is fine. We thought God had no other demands. [With JWs] I learned what was wrong with my lifestyle" (Tigran).

questions, the WTBTS teaching offers an alternative worldview that stands in stark opposition to the main ideological framework of contemporary Armenian society, namely nationalism. In today's Armenia, Armenianness serves as a tool of legitimization and the highest measure of one's worth. It is presented as the only legitimate lens, through which one can see the world, and the only possible way to achieve justice and prosperity that Soviet colonial rule, Marxism, internationalism, liberalism, or any other socio-political and/or ideological system failed or would fail to deliver. When this ideological framework exposes its inconsistencies, people start to look for alternative explanations and get attracted to groups that openly refute these ideologies. In the JW community, I met multiple men with military backgrounds, whose disappointment with the existing military, economic, and political situation prompted them to seek God in general and made them more receptive to JWs' supra-national message in particular. For example, Arvin, a dedicated JW, was overfilled with patriotic feelings and love for the Fatherland when he was a young soldier in the Soviet army:

> [In 1990], on TV we saw that Azerbaijanis were bombing Karabagh. We saw that it was close to our homes, our city. It created a sense of patriotism in us. We understood that we had to be there. So, this spirit of love for the Fatherland pushed us to leave our military base in Russia and go to Karabagh where we joined a guerilla unit. And I started going to the front line. So, I served from 1990 till 1998. At first, it was because of my patriotism. When I saw a lot of injustice, my patriotism started to weaken. Our commanders did not value patriotism. They would look at us with disdain and say, 'we don't care for your love for Fatherland and your desire to defend your parents – there are others like you.'
> In 1996, I got into college. The law guaranteed me 40 days off to take my exams. My commander gave me an official permit to leave. So, we [Arvin and his fiancé] decided to get married. But later, they considered my permit to leave illegal and arrested me just four days after my wedding. They started a criminal case and sentenced me to two years of prison. After that, I understood my patriotism and love for my Fatherland were "rewarded" with pure injustice. I spent three months in prison. Then, they sent me to the front line and for two years I didn't see a single face from my family. And I had just gotten married. Injustice – terrible injustice. […] I didn't have any connection with the church. I am a realist. I knew that everything must have a creator. If the dawn comes at the right time – it can't be accidental. I was thinking, 'God, if you exist, why do you let me, a sinless person, suffer? I have a family. I don't do bad things. You see that I do

> right things for the right reasons. I came here on my own will, I fought, I was wounded.' Everything is for my Fatherland. And now my Fatherland instead of thanking me slaps me in the face.

Many JW veterans express a similar disappointment with the war and its outcomes. They feel that their exploits and sacrifices were not appreciated by the commanders, state, and society in general – for them, patriotism that was valued at the level of declarations turned out to be a tool for exploitation and injustice. Some veterans remember that "during the war, there were all kinds of political shenanigans and dishonesty, [which] often happened during the battles" (Areg), while others emphasize that "the only thing they [commanders and politicians] cared about was the nation. They were constantly saying: 'you have to be Armenian (Arm. պիտի մեր ազգի լինես). You have to kill the Turks" (Karen, the Russian congregations). These participants of the war could no longer perceive the conflict in Nagorno Karabagh through the declared ideological prism where innocent Armenians were defending their land from the Azerbaijanis' encroachments. They came to regard themselves not as "Armenians freeing certain territories," but as executors of the will of "people above [politicians] who give commands what to do. For example, there were cases when Armenians would free a certain territory. But when the battle was over, someone from above [political elites] would order them to return those areas" (Areg). JWs' ideas about the meaninglessness of military service and the corruption of this world are particularly compelling for those who have these doubts.[331] Areg says:

> Now when they ask me, 'Why do Jehovah's Witnesses not fight? Why don't you go to war?' I always answer, 'But who starts the wars? Do soldiers start? The wars are started and finished from above. And if they do it, why do we have to go and fight?! During my Bible study, I understood that this system belongs to Satan and is controlled by Satan.

[331] For example, the official website of the WTBTS defines the government as "the authoritative direction and restraint exercised over the actions of men in communities, societies, and states […] The Bible pictures world governments as 'beasts' and says that they get their authority from the Dragon, Satan the Devil." https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1200001748 (Accessed July 1st, 2022).

> For example, I see that among Turks,[332] there are a lot of good people who don't want the war. They suffered from the war just like us, Armenians. Areg

Several aspects of Areg's attitude undermine the ideology of nationalism. First, contrary to the grass-roots nationalist discourse, he does not view Armenians as a homogeneous entity that fights against a common enemy. For him, Armenianness and its opposition to Azerbaijan no longer account for the realities of the war, the political crisis, and the world as a whole. Second, he regards common Armenians as closer to common "Turks" than to the Armenian political elites. The perceived abnormality and injustice of the world makes one receptive to the idea that "the war was actually Satan's work" and that

> the whole system is unjust. [In the army, you see] priests and boys of rich parents who are above you simply because their parents have money. And I am not to say that it is only in Armenia – in America or Russia, it is the same. All the worldly governments are unjust. So, having seen all that, you start asking questions and understand that the answers from the Witnesses explain it the best. That is why I accepted the Truth. Karen

All of my informants who first embraced the nationalist agenda and then got disappointed in it, turned to religion as an alternative frame of reference, and the Armenian Church was often the first step. Yet, because the AAC generally promotes all the principles of Armenian nationalist ideology, they did not find the desired alternative and became dissatisfied with the AAC. At the same time, JWs' millenarian views fit very well into the existing socio-political context because the overall socio-economic and political crisis and a lack of morality, including the treacherous attitude of political elites towards regular people are described as a clear sign of the last days. Their tenacity and virtuoso use of biblical verses[333] allowed JWs to create strong initial interest in those who

[332] In everyday speech, Armenians often refer to Azerbaijanis as Turks.

[333] Talking about the war in Karabagh, a male JW in his 40s noticed, "I studied the Bible and I saw that there is absolutely no way to justify the war. Just these wars are a political tool, but it is not a means to achieve justice. It is for someone's interests. I saw that the Bible said the truth."

became disappointed with the existing nationalist ideology.[334]

Armenian nationalism as a framework for social and political life in today's Armenia creates potential "ideological disappointments" not only among war veterans, but also among those whose social and symbolic capital was accumulated during the Soviet period but devalued by the nationalist ideology of post-Soviet Armenia. The Russian-speaking population of Armenia acutely feels the difference between the high position that they occupied in the Soviet socio-political hierarchy and the new social reality where Russian lacks its former power. As a colonial language and the *lingua franca* of the region during the Soviet period, Russian served as a source of social, economic, and symbolic capital,

> Before [in the Soviet time], I had a high position back then. And they would always ask me to write documents in Russian if we had to send something to Moscow. Because they didn't want to look stupid. They all knew that my Russian was good – well, at least better than their Russian. And then after independence, they turned 180 degrees. They said, 'Since you can't write in Armenian, you should leave." Can you imagine how offended I was! They didn't need me anymore because I couldn't write in Armenian. Female JW in her 70s, the Russian congregation.

Many people like Olga who lost their jobs and a place in the social hierarchy disapprove of the new values introduced and reenforced by the Armenian-centric ideology in post-Soviet Armenia. At the same time, their Russian proficiency is appreciated and esteemed in the JW community. The Russian congregation offers meetings and Bible studies in Russian and generally attaches value to one's ability to speak Russian, which restores a sense of linguistic and social normalcy. Importantly, the members of the Russian congregation proselytize to the Russian-speaking population.[335] This

[334] Sometimes, however, nationalist sentiments become a common ground for a dialogue between JWs and those who opposes them. For instance, one of the veterans of the Nagorno Karabagh war who later became a JW in the Russian congregation told me that he returned to Karabagh to proselytize in 2004. As the JWs' organization and activities were forbidden there, he and his co-religionists were arrested. He recalls, 'the policemen were very rude and aggressive, but when I told them that I had also fought in the war, their attitude changed – they let us go, shook my hand, and even took a few magazines to read' (male JW, Russian congregation).

[335] Those Russian-speaking JWs who can speak Armenian as well occasionally switch to Armenian during public

engenders a sense of importance and irreplaceability because every congregation has its linguistic niche in public ministry – without Russian-speaking JWs a significant portion of the Armenian population and tourists would not have a chance to learn about the Good News.[336] Although in today's Armenia, Russian is no longer stigmatized, many Russian speakers who lived in Armenia in the 1990s still writhe when remembering the hatred attached to the "language of colonizers" back at the time. The JW community revalidates the importance of Russian as a valuable cultural tool and restores the social respect associated with it.[337]

Personal Charisma

Once, I was invited to join JW youth at a picnic at the outskirt of Yerevan. While everyone was preoccupied with making barbecue, singing songs, telling jokes, and making selfies, there was a man who distinctly stood out from this crowd. His name was Arshak – he was about 70 years old and was accompanied by his teenage grandson. Arshak was moving from one small group to another initiating conversations about the Bible, Jehovah, and the Truth. All the conversations were inquisitive – Arshak would offer a puzzling question that nobody could answer and then he would

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ministry, but in general their target audience is Russian-speaking people. Even the land-line phone database that JWs use to make proselytizing calls in an assigned district is sorted according to the language of the phone owner. So, Russian-speaking JWs call the phone numbers that are known to belong to Russian-speaking owners. The same is true for all other congregations.

[336] According to the 2011 Census, Russians are the third largest ethnic group in Armenia, and regarding the number of native speakers, Russian is the third most-spoken language after Armenian and Yezidian. The results of 2011 Census are available here https://armstat.am/file/doc/99486258.pdf (Accessed July 3rd, 2022)

[337] The JW community creates an immersive experience for other languages as well, which creates incentives to join or stay in the community. The English congregation grew manyfold between 2017 and 2022. From the very beginning it has attracted younger Armenians who attached a high value to speaking English and were clearly attracted to the English-speaking social milieu of the congregation. For them, weekly meetings were not only a somewhat tedious obligation, but also a chance to improve their English and to enact elements of western culture that are otherwise virtually unavailable in Armenia. Here, teenagers greet me with "Hey dude, what's up?" giving me a type of handshake common for an American schoolyard. They openly express their great affinity for English, "I do not speak Russian. My Russian is very bad, but my English is better than my English teacher's English. I grew up speaking it" (a male teenager, English congregation). They enjoy being surrounded by foreigners, being able to communicate with them easily, and being different in this respect from their peers. This atmosphere provides an incentive for young, second-generation JWs to stay in the community.

try to guide everyone towards the correct answer. During one of these conversations, I mentioned that I was not a JW, which visibly disturbed him. Having approached me, he exclaimed, "But at least, are you assured that the JWs are the only true religion?!"

Me: I don't know. I have not decided yet.
Arshak: [emphatically] No, deciding is different.
Me: But how can I blindly accept it without being sure?
Arshak: Look, to accept or reject something without proofs is called fanaticism. The Bible Ephesians 4:5 says, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Pay attention! In the world, Satan created about 50,000 versions of Christianity! How can we know which one is true? The Bible says, there should be one faith... Do you wanna know which one is True? It is written in the Bible.
Me: well, I have been studying…
Arshak: [interrupting me] no, no, no! You can't know through studying. Do you know why you can't know?
Me: Please tell me.
Arshak: Open the Bible. Read 2 Peter 1:20-21.
Me: "For you know this first, that no prophecy of Scripture springs from any private interpretation..."
Arshak: [interrupting me] See! It is no one's "private interpretation." And do you know what the Russian Synod translation of the Bible says? "No one can understand any prophecy in the Scripture on their own." You yourself cannot understand it on your own. Do you know why? Now, open Daniel 12:4 […] I know it all as I myself am a lawyer. I never accept anything unless it is proven. I did karate, and I was a spy – I control the situation very well. I need one second – and I already know the situation.

This conversation continued for about an hour; Arshak was interrupting me, asking me to read certain biblical verses, telling me I was wrong even when I was not saying anything substantial, and driving the conversation towards themes and questions that interested him. In the case of Arshak, it was clear that he came to the picnic in order to engage in discussions that would pose and solve certain puzzles or tricky questions.[338] There are JWs who, like Arshak, insert themselves into and take control over a conversation in any social situation quite assertively and adroitly. Using the ability to juggle the biblical verses that underscore their point, they appear to be invincible Bible gurus who happen to know the answers to all questions, which inspires awe in a lot of people

[338] See a short transcript of one of the conversations in Appendix I.

because of their reverence for the Bible and their general lack of a detailed understanding of what it represents. Preaching to their co-religionists or non-JWs is central for their social life. Regardless of their immediate surroundings, they are always involved in public ministry and take great joy in it.

Although preaching constitutes the core of their communal activities, JWs differ significantly with regard to their attitude and appreciation for public ministry. Even JWs who wholly dedicate themselves to preaching often admit that at the beginning they were utterly terrified of knocking on doors and talking to strangers on the streets. Only with time, it becomes a routine activity for all members of the community, although for some the anxiety of talking to strangers never goes away. One thing is clear – at first, most people do not find public ministry attractive, so it is not what brings them into the JW community in the first place. Yet, the WTBTS theology and the principles of power distribution in the community create congenial conditions for charismatic people to use public ministry and Bible studies for self-realization and implementation of their charismatic tendencies.

Although all current JWs participate in public ministry, most of them are not extraverted or charismatic enough to bring a lot of new people to the community.[339] They engage in ministry with literature carts, talking to people about God, and giving away magazines. They are genuinely happy when someone from their circle evinces interest in a Bible study or when they happen to give out a particularly large number of printed materials. Yet, they do not prioritize seeking new students – their goals are more modest. Some of them are not very articulate to convince people to study the

[339] Although some JWs adore preaching, many are much more timid. One of my male informants from the Armenian congregation admitted that "preaching has always been difficult. To approach an unknown person is hard. Consciously, you know what you're doing, but you understand that it is a question of life and death. Of course, it is not like you dreamt about it all your life to go from door to door. And you speak overcoming your fear. It can be shameful. Sometimes, I felt ashamed when I saw my friends or acquaintances. I would lower my voice so that they wouldn't hear what I was saying. I have gone through all of it" (Hayk).

Bible seriously. Some of them are too introverted to seriously pursue having students. Still others are not systematic in their mastery of the doctrine, and although they know the JWs' teaching relatively well and they are extraverted, they do not have the ability to convey these ideas eloquently and persuasively to others or to answer multiple questions about the minute details of WTBTS theology.

Yet, there is a second group of JWs who, like Arshak, possess personal charisma, charm, eloquence, and knowledge and who use public ministry to fulfill their ambitions. That is not to say that they maliciously take advantage of the JW community to pursue their agenda. Rather their personal qualities resonate with the goals of the WTBTS and its structure, which makes being a JW preacher particularly attractive for them. At the same time, many potential converts positively and enthusiastically respond to the charisma of such people, which serves as a strong impetus to start participating in Bible study and eventually join the organization, as well as stay committed to the Truth. In other words, certain people receive an opportunity to express and perform their charismatic inclinations, while others are attracted to having a powerful and wise mentor who helps them with spiritual advancement.

The JW community indirectly facilitates this cooperation and mutual dependency because of the power dynamic within the WTBTS. The power distribution within the WTBTS is designed to emphasize equal access to WTBTS teaching all members of the congregation. Although the Bible is declared the sources of all knowledge about Jehovah, its correct interpretation is viewed as contingent upon directions given by Jesus to his followers on earth by means of the "faithful and discreet slave" (WTBTS 2022b:225–28). It is the Governing Body of JWs located in Warwick, NY, U.S.A that serves as the "faithful and discreet slave" that is as the exclusive connection between

Jesus and his flock on earth (see, Chapter I).[340] Apart from the members of the Governing Body, everyone else in the WTBTS principally has equal access to the Truth.

The elders do not produce exclusive religious knowledge, although they are presented and perceived as the most experienced and resourceful. Nothing the elders know or can do is principally unachievable by other members, which renders their position qualitatively different from that of a traditional priest (Weber 1993:195). At the same time, some elders accumulate a significant amount of respect among their congregants, so that a congregation comes to be closely associate with its leaders. This was more widely spread in the 1990s, but until today, some old-time JWs refer to congregations not by their official name, but by the "head" elder, which shows the close association of the congregants with their elder. For example, the Russian congregation called "Russkoe Arabkir" is sometimes commonly referred to as "Misha's congregation." Yet, this affection and respect do not imply that the elders' power is comparable to that of priests.

Although they hold no exclusive religious power, the JW elders have significant administrative power and autonomy at the level of their congregation. In non-theological aspects, the elders hold some degree of independence. In addition, the elders form disciplinary committees that have the power to disfellowship (excommunicate) a member of their congregation. Their power, however, has limits. As a young female JW from the Russian congregation remarked, "One of the elders tried to involve me into the [communal] activities, and he would talk to me a lot before the beginning of the meetings or right after them. But I refused. I understand that he is an elder, but

[340] The Slave is believed to guide JWs in non-theological aspects of life, too. For example, an elder of the English congregation described the Slave's role as follows, "right before the pandemic, when we didn't know anything, the Governing Body already knew what was going to happen, because Jesus guided them in order to protect God's people. No government, including the U.S. government, had yet imposed a quarantine. But the Governing Body canceled the graduation ceremony in the Gilead School a month before these strict measures were imposed. Because the Slave knows what's best for God's people" (an elder, English congregation).

I don't care – there are no priests here, we are all equals, so he can't really push me towards having a friendlier relationship if I don't want it." In addition to administrative power, the elders have a significant impact on the overall atmosphere in the congregation. Usually, they meet the congregants in the hall, ask about their lives, and in general, set the tone for the meeting. Yet some congregations are noticeably colder and less cohesive, which is obvious not only for the members of these congregations, but for the larger JW community as well. As I mentioned in Chapter II, the Russian congregation has a tangibly lower level of solidarity and warmth compared to other congregations. One of the female members complained to me,

> "Our congregation is very disunited. Nobody cares. They all know I have health issues, but nobody calls to ask me, "hey, how are you doing?" [JW] sisters visit me, but they all are from the Armenian congregation. Even our elders – they rarely call. They remember about me when they need my help with the literature and with other issues. But they don't even call to ask me about how I am doing. Something is wrong with them. I think they are the reason why nobody in our congregation cares about each other.

As this quote shows, the elders do not only enjoy communal respect, but are also held accountable for the overall dynamic within their congregation. Even failures on behalf of rank-and-file members are ascribed to the "ineptitude" of the elders.

Nevertheless, the theological power hierarchy renders all JWs independent from the elders and other co-religionists in their access to the Truth provided by the "faithful and discreet slave" via literature, videos, and meetings. Through experience and training some JWs become well-versed in the Bible to polemicize with other co-religionists, as well as with amateurs who know little to nothing about the content of Scripture. Like Arshak, they learn how to direct the conversation to familiar terrain and then, appealing to their knowledge of the Bible, they come out victorious from almost every discussion on biblical themes. Although there is theological equality within the community, these charismatic JWs regard themselves as indispensable for worldly amateurs and even

their co-religionists in understanding the universe and God's plan. This gives them a position of dominance and superiority that they openly yearn for. It is safe to say that their self-understanding hinges on the respect and even reverence that they receive when preaching to non-JWs and co-religionists. They channel their zeal into never ceasing public ministry that often results in many Bible studies and converts. None of the charismatic JWs that I met were elders although some of them had served as elders in the past. In other words, their influence and others' respect towards them did not depend on their position within the congregation, which is a result of the egalitarian power structure within the WTBTS that allows regular publishers to be relatively independent from the control of the elders.

Narek is one of the JWs who belongs to this cohort. Born and raised in Soviet Azerbaijan,[341] at a young age, he was promised a career in the Communist Party. He recalls, "they [the Communists] had really big plans for me. They offered me to go to a party school. Usually, people would bribe someone to get into the party school, but in my case, they offered me a promotion. But, you know, I already saw that they were fake, so I told them, 'I don't really want to be a part of it.'" After he moved to Armenia and was imprisoned because he "was framed for doing a good deed," Narek felt betrayed and deeply disappointed with the "principles, on which this world is built." After a family breakdown and some financial difficulties, he met JWs at the beginning of the 2000s and after his baptism, he quickly became one of the most fervent preachers.[342]

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[341] Narek is bilingual in Armenian and Russian, but he always prefers to speak Russian as he grew up speaking it and received Russian education.

[342] He admits that accepting the Truth was not easy and it was long process, "I was asking many questions trying to find errors and inconsistencies in what they [JWs] were saying. But then I saw it was the Truth […] Then for a long time I was trying to push back the start of public ministry. I was saying, 'Maybe next week, maybe next week.' But then one of our sisters really pushed me and I was able to convince one person to start Bible study on the very first day. I was super happy and excited." Although charismatic people like Arshak and Narek go through similar stages of accepting the Truth as other JWs, they eventually exceed others in fervor and dedication.

His original attraction to the JW theology and community stemmed from his personal familial issues coupled with his dissatisfaction with the Soviet system, as well as with post-Soviet nationalism. Yet, unlike Mher who quit before he became a full-fledged member, Narek went up the WTBTS hierarchy and served as an elder in one of the congregations for some time. Now, almost 20 years after joining the community, Narek is a regular publisher who is relentless in his preaching activity. In his 70s, he dedicates most of his time to public ministry, Bible studies, and family worship sessions. Although he tries to attend all of the meetings in the Kingdom Hall, he is visibly indifferent towards communal life – he almost always comes late to the meetings and leaves immediately after the final prayer. His interests are almost exclusively connected to public ministry where he sets the tone and controls the interaction.[343]

In the last five years, Narek has formed a group of close followers who accepted his leadership. They come from different congregations and gather several times a week for family worship sessions and Bible studies if they have students. They come from rather different backgrounds. Yulia is in her 40s and she came to the Truth around the same time as Narek. Like Narek, she dedicates a significant portion of her time to public ministry. Now that her children are grown up, she is temporarily unemployed, and her non-JW husband is working in Russia, Yulia has a lot of free time that she dedicates to proselytism. Antonina is a long-time JW and, like Narek, has leadership qualities. In this group, she has the highest self-esteem. In every story, she emphasizes how she exceeds other people in beauty, intelligence, cooking, and understanding the Bible, among many others. Yet, her sense of excelling over others is rarely directed at the members of this group. Ara and Arvin are the same age as Narek, but they are not nearly as assertive and dominating as him

[343] During the meetings, Narek and another charismatic man Artashes like giving answers that underscore their particular insights and mastery of the Bible, while, as I said in Chapter II, most JWs simply reiterate the content of the discussed passage.

and usually follow his lead. Movses and Dina, the brother and sister pair of refugees from Azerbaijan whom I mentioned earlier, have been a part of the group, as well. For them, Narek became a replacement for their deceased parents, and they literally admire and revere him. When Narek invited me to start a Bible study with the group, I started to participate in family worships and eventually started a Bible study under his tutelage.

Narek's leadership manifests itself at various levels. At the organizational level, he appoints who will pray before and after a meeting, assigns the turns during a discussion, or chooses a reader to quote a passage from Scripture. During a discussion, he can be generous with praise and commendations when one gives the answer that he expects, remembers a relevant passage from the Bible, or just reads with good enunciation. At the level of authority, he has little tolerance for challenges to his dominant position in the group – when someone is trying to speak simultaneously with him, he either silently ignores them or directly asks them to stop talking. When I tried to draw his attention to inconsistencies in his explanations, he never admitted that he could be wrong or had a gap in his knowledge. When cornered, he would say, "it is good that you pay attention to these things, but you do not understand, because you need to learn the Bible more. I can't really explain because it is like giving information about physics or chemistry to a 6-year-old – will they be able to understand? No! So, it is the same with you." Also, he indirectly claims to have special insights into Scripture and the WTBTS teaching as he decides how the passages should be interpreted and what ideas must be emphasized. In the group, he has the power to say, "No, you are wrong" if the expressed idea or opinion go against his understanding even in moments that are not theologically crucial. He usually asks the members of the group to find "keywords" and invites us to penetrate the deeper meaning of a text,

Antonina reads: God grants (Rus. "дарит") us eternal life through Jesus Christ.
Narek: So, in this line, what is the keyword? The wording that the Slave chose is very interesting.
Movses: [with hesitation] Eternal?
Narek: Yes, it is important, but here it is not central. So, what's the keyword?
Antonina: Granting…
Narek: Yes, granting. But why is it the keyword?
Movses: Because if He didn't grant us eternal life, we wouldn't have it.
Narek: Yes, correct, it is clear, but this very word – granting. A grant, a gift. Does it oblige us to do anything, if it is a gift? And it is a good gift, right?
Antonina: Of course, it is…
Movses: [parallel to Antonina] If he gives, we must accept it and appreciate it.
Narek: Good, now we have found the key idea – if it is a gift, we should appreciate it. If you appreciate, you will change your life accordingly. The Slave chooses these words intentionally.

Having come up with a certain interpretation of the passage, he skillfully directs the group towards his understanding, imposes his vision on them, and at length pontificates about the insights he found in the text. He often praises the Slave for a particularly astute choice of words that "uncover the meaning" of the discussed text. In addition, he always emphasizes that all members of the group "are equal disciples of Christ, so there are no teachers here. Some know more, some know a little less." Narek openly defers to Jesus and the faithful Slave's authority[344] in terms of the overall interpretation of the teaching, so in Weberian terms he is not a true "virtuoso" as he does not make innovations in ritual or theology. Yet, he indirectly claims an intermediary position between the Slave and other Witnesses as he can discern the true intentions of the Slave hidden from the others. He often invents non-theological "facts," such as that there are no Pentecostals in Africa and Russia or that most Christians reject the Old Testament as "writings only for the Jews" when he needs to strengthen his message. These statements are usually accepted by amateur listeners and co-

[344] His deferral to the Slave has limits. When I asked him, "Do you know that brother Russell (the founder of the WTBTS – A.T.) was really interested in uncovering the hidden meaning of the Egyptian pyramids and tried to connect them with the biblical message?" He said, "I don't care what he was doing, I don't really care about him. I just know that this is the Truth [pointing at the Watch Tower magazine]."

religionists as truthful.[345]

At the micro level, he compels his students to accept and follow his understanding of a passage, which always elevates him above them. For example, his superiority and spiritual leadership manifest themselves in a belief that his prayer can be particularly powerful. Once, I met Yulia before a meeting, and she anxiously told me that she had found a potential Bible study, so she needed to make a call to finalize the arrangement. She wanted Narek to pray before the call because she believed Narek's prayer would definitely "make it work out." After everyone gathered, Narek asked Ara to lead us in prayer to Yulia's visible disappointment. JWs like Narek are aware of the high esteem in which they are held by their co-religionists and worldly people because of their expertise. Sometimes, they directly acknowledge this sense of superiority:

> Once I asked a biology professor, "What matter does the universe consist of?" And he was completely shocked and did not know how to answer. And I said "Well, there is live and non-live matter in the universe." He asked me, "What's your education?" and I said, "I am a welder of the 6th category. I am happy I can talk to you about these questions without having to explain the basics. But you can't answer these questions because you don't know the Truth." Artashes
> If only you could see the expression on their faces – their eyes got so wide when I told them that reading the Bible means to talk to Jehovah, to God. Narek

Just like Narek, in directing the conversation Artashes enjoys the power dynamic between him, a welder, and the biology professor. And as Artashes' quote shows, it is not only face-to-face

[345] Whenever I attempted to point out his errors, he fervently defended his position even when I provided proof. Although I had quite a few disputes with him, not once did he admit that he was wrong. For example, in order to emphasize the success of JWs in reaching out to the most remote parts of the planet, Narek claimed that there have not been and could not have been Black Pentecostals. When I told him that one of the founders of Pentecostalism, William J. Seymour was African-American, he looked at the picture and said, "I do not think so. He does not really look Black to me. Plus, I am sure there were no others." In general, my expertise and knowledge as a scholar are immediately dismissed by most JWs because it is not based on the Bible and the Truth. In some cases, when they cannot trump my arguments, they claim that Satan is trying to confuse me by instilling me with these doubts. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Narek sent me a video made for the Russian TV, which claimed that the west was responsible for the war, while Russia only defended itself. When I asked him not to send me such propaganda videos, he impatiently replied, "Look, my dear, when you say, 'No more messages like that' what does it mean? We all have different tastes and preferences… Satan is trying to set you against me because you finally decided to study the Bible, which is very easy to understand from a spiritual point of view." As I mentioned in Chapter II, many JWs of the Soviet generation openly support Vladimir Putin and his domestic and international policies.

interactions with the proselytized that yield this joy, but also sharing these accounts with co-religionists. "Bragging" ranges from reporting the number of preaching hours that amounts to "the norm for an auxiliary pioneer, while having so many problems" (Antonina) to persuading a professor to take the Bible study seriously by cleverly quoting Scripture (Narek, Artashes). Being in the Truth and being engaged in public ministry can become a tool that boosts one's self-esteem and gains respect of co-religionists and outsiders,

> It is so important to have a good instructor when you are studying the Bible. For example, when I started, my tutor was already an experienced Witness. She had been baptized in 1997. Yes, overall, she was good, but she lacked the depth of knowledge; she didn't dig deep enough. And then I met Narek! Wow, it was a like day and night! Maybe she knew all those things, but she did not use that knowledge in practice. And that's why for a few years at the beginning, I was trying to think myself, but when I was answering in the meetings, I had to learn information by heart. And now with Narek, I can answer any question in my own words, even without looking it up in the journal beforehand. So, during the last few years, I have grown spiritually very much. Well, even the circuit overseer praised me – it means something, right?! He said, "You are like Jacob, when he was struggling with God.' Antonina

These words were uttered in Narek's presence to his visible gratification. Within the group, the respect paid to him is significant.[346] While preaching to worldly amateurs, he compels them to yield to his authority. As an average person in Armenia knows little about the Bible's content and history, Narek's Bible proficiency, coupled with occasional manipulations of facts puts him in a superior position. For example, in the Yerevan Roma community, where he and other members of the group proselytize several times a week, Narek uses the Roma people's overall deferral to the authority of the Bible, his knowledge of biblical passages, and his charismatic qualities to compel the members of the community to agree to start a Bible study. If occasionally someone starts to argue with him, he can exclaim, "Don't start arguing. Don't tell me fairytales. By now, you must already know who you are talking to! Please be careful." This approach to establishing his authority as a

[346] For example, Yulia even calls him "dad" (Rus. "батя").

Bible expert yields impressive results as Narek and other members of the group have been conducting Bible studies with multiple students in the Roma community.[347]

Although I do not have the exact numbers, I believe these charismatic and tenacious preachers are responsible for the lion's share of novices who get into the community not through personal networks. They attract potential converts with their ability to appeal to different biblical passages, with their assertiveness, their overall intellect, and their charisma. At the same time, within the JW community, they may use their charisma to obtain unofficial disciples for whom they serve as a main link to the congregation and as a main incentive to stay in the Truth. They themselves are attracted by the appeal of the position of a "Bible expert" that they hold among their unofficial followers and in the larger society.

This way of relating to "worldly" people is used not only by strong-willed JWs like Narek[348] but is generally specific to the members of the WTBTS. Regular publishers see themselves either as spiritually and intellectually superior to non-JWs or as "rescuers" who provide the only possible path towards salvation. For example, during one of my first visits, a middle-aged woman from the Russian congregation tried to persuade me that the Truth is the only path towards salvation,

> We know more about Jehovah than any of these people who constantly shout, "We are the first Christian nation!" All they can do is light candles and bow in the church. They

[347] Despite the high number of Bible studies, it is rare that the members of the Roma community start to attend regular meetings in a Kingdom Hall or make real changes in their lifestyle in accordance with the newly learned information. There have been few baptisms of Roma people despite multiple Bible studies. At the same time, the syncretism of religious beliefs within the community and the overall devotion to Christianity make Roma receptive to JWs' preaching. They readily accept JWs' offers to start a Bible study and are generally very happy when JWs come to knock on their doors.

[348] There are other types of charismatic preachers within the JW community whose style differs from that of Narek, Arshak, or Artashes. Although they are less unyielding in their communication style, they are equally resolute in their pursuit of potential Bible students and in their overall dedication to the Truth. Usually, they have a wider range of secular knowledge as they follow the news and even academic discussions. At the same time, they do not exaggerate the extent of their competence and can admit a lack of understanding or a gap in their knowledge, which is almost unimaginable in Narek or Gevorg's cases. Yet, in their complete dedication to the Truth, commitment to finding new converts, and their insistence on commencing or continuing a Bible study, they are very similar.

> put a cross on the dome of the church and wear crosses around their necks, but they don't even know that it has nothing to do with Jesus – he was crucified on a stake! They would know that if they read the Bible.

This obvious hierarchy between JWs and non-JWs manifests itself at other moments as well. For example, at the time of prayer if a male JW is present, he has to say grace. Several times, during the prayer I was the only male, and the prayer was recited by female JWs because I was a worldly person, which lowered my status despite my being a male. Generally, JWs regard themselves as possessing special knowledge that qualitatively sets them apart from the world – they interact with the world through the priesthood-laity framework that renders worldly people "dispossessed of *religious capital*" (Bourdieu 1991:9; also, see Troeltsch 1931; Weber 1993).

Overall, the power structure within the WTBTS renders all JWs within one congregation as relatively equal with regard to access to the Truth. This provides greater independence for certain rank-and-file members who long to realize their charismatic proclivities. Unlike in the traditional church where the position of lay members is qualitatively different from that of the priest, JWs can act relatively independently from the elders and other members of the congregation. Moreover, most of their activities are related not to a KH but to doing public ministry, which further increases their independence since it is practiced without supervision. Their mastery of Scripture is well above the average level in Armenia, which places them in an advantageous position in almost any interaction with "worldly" people and most other co-religionists. Coupled with their assertiveness, charisma, and leadership qualities, this position gives them a sense of spiritual superiority which they openly covet. For them, the community becomes a source of personal realization and self-esteem, as well as unofficial "disciples" who highly respect them and unequivocally accept their authority. This aspect attracts them to the community and boosts their commitment to the community. The unofficial followers also benefit from this cooperation as they find strong mentorship and leadership

that help them advance spiritually and receive guidance in everyday life. This sense of greater security from having a strong leader undoubtedly strengthens many JWs' dedication to the Truth.

Women in the Community of Jehovah's Witnesses

As in many other churches, women comprise a majority of the JWs across the congregations (about 75%). In fact, in the 1990s, when the Armenian JW community was rapidly expanding, some congregations had no male members and therefore, no elders. Over time, the male-female ratio became less imbalanced, but until today, in some parts of Armenia (for example, in Dilijan), there are congregations with one elder who was sent there from Yerevan. Below I address several reasons why women are attracted to the JW community and why they stay committed to the Truth.

Often, women in Armenia have feeble and easily damageable social ties for several reasons. First, many females' involvement in social networks is limited primarily to their families because there is a somewhat strict code of rules that regulates women's social connections. A male member of the family may even forbid a woman to work or meet with friends in order to limit the amount of uncontrolled social interactions she has with other people.[349] Sometimes, the main sponsors of social connections for women are their male partners and other male members of the family. Therefore, women are generally more exposed to the risk of losing vitally important social connections, and in the case of divorce or the death of a partner or child, women frequently remain without support.[350]

Abandoned and vulnerable, women are more open and receptive to JWs' preaching. For

[349] Just ago, it was still expected 20 years ago, it was still expected that a young man interested in courting a girl would ask for permission from her brother and even boys living in the same building as her. Also, it was not uncommon for a boyfriend to forbid his girlfriend to go out, visit her friends, and even go to family celebrations. Although the younger generation of Armenians has a more liberal attitude towards gender relationships, many current members of the JW community grew up in an atmosphere of strict control on behalf of their family and social milieu in general.

[350] The continuous war in Nagorny Karabagh, malnutrition, alcoholism, and smoking, as well as the overall poor living conditions in Armenia made male life expectancy about seven years shorter than that of women (World Health Organization 2022). Additionally, a lack of economic opportunities forced many men to leave Armenia in search of employment. These factors significantly increase chance Armenian women's chances of ending up without a male consort.

example, Elena from the Russian congregation, is one of the few JWs who encountered random preachers on the street and agreed to start a Bible study with them right away. At the moment of the encounter, she had just lost her husband and experienced an acute lack of support from her family members and the priests of the Armenian Church who "only wanted money for every part of the funeral rite."[351] She originally came from Russia when she got married, and her husband was the primary source of all her social and familial connections in Armenia. With his death many ties were cut off. Although Elena has been living with her son's family, she feels lonely and resented by the family members. Gayane from an Armenian congregation has an extremely jealous husband who controls her every step and requires reports about her whereabouts, money expenditures, and social interactions. Not allowed to work, she is permitted to leave the house for only a few hours a day to run necessary errands. After her marriage, Gayane's social world was limited to her husband's extended family that lived in a very close proximity – her "every step was watched" and contacts with people outside were discouraged. When she first met JWs on the street, she was not "really attracted to the words about the Truth" but longed for the simple human interaction they provided – she just liked "talking to them." Eventually, she started to secretly attend meetings although her husband forbade her to communicate with JWs or continue the Bible study because she "was a disgrace for him, family, and friends." It is not uncommon that husbands subject their wives to physical violence in order to stop their "disgraceful behavior" (Nara, a female JW in her 50s, Armenian congregation). For about 20 years, Gayane was hiding her involvement in the community – she would take her kids "for a walk" when she wanted to attend a meeting, she would go

[351] She refers to the traditional payments collected by the priests for rendering services, such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, among others.

"shopping for groceries" when she was doing public ministry with other JWs.[352] Once, when after 15 years of hiding, Gayane openly refused to go to a relative's birthday party, her husband became furious and verbally abusive. She left the house and lived with her sister in faith for a week. When Gayane's husband asked her to come back home, she insisted that she would come back if she could go to the congregational meetings. In both Elena, Nara,[353] and Gayane's cases, regular meetings in the KH, weekly public service, or even just an opportunity to chat with someone on the phone make up for their lack of social support and human interaction.

Apart from emotional support, women get much-needed practical aid as well. A traditional Armenian household is patriarchal, which makes the husband the head of the family. Social connections in this system of social organization are centered on the household and are mostly controlled and maintained by the male. Even in the urban environment, as Gayane's case shows, women's social ties may be completely family-centered. This makes women's social capital very fragile and losing kinship connections puts women in a more precarious position. As a result, single women are at higher risk of being unemployed, which was especially true in the 1990s (Matossian 1995) and the 2000s (Demographic and Health Survey 2012) when most women did not work. Amidst the inability of the state to provide essential services for the population, social connections and a system of mutual support are essential for one's survival.

Simultaneously, the JW community can limit women's employment options. First, there is a range of jobs, such as working for the government or selling cigarettes and holiday decorations, that

[352] In the "dense" social space of Yerevan where the chances to run into a friend, acquaintance, or a colleague are very high, Gayane was able to keep her public ministry a secret from her husband because he and his family are repatriates from Iran, so their ties with the larger Armenian society are also weak. Therefore, there were not many people who could report her "disgraceful" activities to her husband.

[353] Nara's family are refugees from Azerbaijan, and in the 1990s, their embeddedness into the Armenian society was weak.

are forbidden for JWs. Second, communal life including public ministry (especially when women serve as pioneers) requires a lot of free time and a somewhat flexible schedule. Third, some JWs choose to leave their jobs in order to serve as a pioneer, which results in downward social mobility, which is not uncommon for JWs' communities in other countries (Penton 1985:258) Finally, in some cases, employers who harbor anti-JWs sentiments fire female JWs. For example, Zemfira Voskanyan was fired from a position of financial controller for a regional police division in 2003 because of her membership in the JW community (Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Armenia 2003) (for more details, see Chapter IV).

The principles that regulate gender relations are another factor making the JW community attractive for women in Armenia. At an abstract, declarative level, there are lots of similarities between the mainstream Armenian and JWs' gender expectations, where men are the heads of families, congregations, and any group in general and where women are expected to follow men's lead. At the same time, in the larger Armenian society, this often results in unrestricted dominance of men in the domestic sphere, so much so that in cases of male infidelity, emotional abuse, or physical violence, neither family members nor neighbors nor police are willing to intervene on behalf of women. In other words, there are few actual mechanisms that put a check on male power in the domestic sphere.

Although JW men are regarded as superior to women, their conduct remains under strict control on behalf of the community. For example, the WTBTS literature, elders, and the congregation as a whole reprimand and reject any sexual impropriety or domestic violence. Although in the larger Armenian society, male infidelity in marriage is more excusable than female unfaithfulness, JWs' literature and practice treat extramarital affairs harshly regardless of the transgressor's gender. A JW who committed adultery can receive a reproof, which entails losing the

privilege to participate in meetings ranging from a few months to a year. In cases when they do not repent, they can be disfellowshipped. It is difficult to evaluate the number of such cases in Armenia. I have seen a male JW restored as a full-fledged member of congregation after a year-long period when he could not participate in the meetings as he had divorced his wife and married another woman. In another case, a young JW male who grew up in the Truth was disfellowshipped for refusing to stop his premarital relationships with a worldly young woman. I know about cases when female JWs were disfellowshipped for casual sexual relationships with worldly men. In addition, the WTBTS theology infuses conforming to the gender expectations with a sense of spiritual mission. Talking to a female JW, Ararat noticed, "A woman doesn't have to get married, but the question is what her motivation is. If she is simply fleeing the complications that come with marriage – it is not right. She can say, 'Do I want to wash his socks?' Many of our sisters used to say that before they got married. But then, they married and now they do the socks, and they love it! Because they have matured spiritually." Washing socks as well as many other chores receive a spiritual tinge and are seen as a sign of piety and closeness to God.

Naturally, potential or new converts are very unlikely to be aware of these minutiae and find them attractive because JWs talk about these cases with great reluctance. Nevertheless, the first visit of a proselyte into a Kingdom Hall can draw a very appealing picture of the gender dynamic. First, there is a noticeable absence of explicit advances on the part of men, which is very conspicuous in Armenian society. Chapter II shows how this aspect has a liberating effect on young women in gender-mixed groups of JWs. Second, the JW community offers greater equality between men and women regarding everyday chores. After every meeting, several men and women (sometimes exclusively men) clean the Kingdom Hall. They sweep the floor, clean the toilet, and dust all the surfaces. In fact, Kingdom Halls were the only places in Armenia where I ever saw a man holding a

vacuum cleaner or dusting cloth as cleaning is usually the province of a woman.[354] Outside of the Kingdom Hall, however, men return to the common pattern of staying away from household chores.

While both wider Armenian society and the JWs have a similar set of rules regarding gender relations, the latter offer more mechanisms for fair implementation of these expectations in practice, which provides more physical and emotional safety for women. In order to observe these nuances, a potential proselyte must visit a KH several times, which usually does not happen until a few months after the start of a Bible study. Yet these subtleties become an important incentive to remain committed to the Truth once a female convert becomes fully incorporated into the community. In addition, despite the emphasis put by WTBTS teaching on women's lower theological status, in several aspects being a JW increases women's sense of self-worth. First, theologically, women are represented as "created with the ability to reflect God's qualities. Although Adam and Eve had their own unique emotional and physical makeup, they both received the same commission and enjoyed the same rights before their Maker" (WTBTS 2002b). This formula equalizes all humans and makes them equally close to and loved by God.

Second, despite their subjugated position within the community, female JWs have an elevated sense of self-worth in relationships with their partners, family members, friends, and the whole society. For example, Inna's belonging to the Truth empowered her and gave the moral authority to resist her husband's control,

> he was never against me studying the Bible when the sisters were coming to our house. Then, I started to go to the meetings, and he really hated it. He would say, 'Why do you

[354] Once, a French JW couple who were serving as special pioneers in Burundi and who came to Armenia for a short period of time were amazed when they saw male JWs cleaning the Kingdom Hall. They even made a short video in order to show it later to their Burundian brothers to prove that men could also participate in what Burundians consider a women's job.

> need to go there? I am not against you studying at home but going there is too much. Choose – me or them!' He wanted to frighten me [laughing]. And I said, 'If I have to choose between you and Jehovah, I will surely choose Jehovah. I will never stop going to the meetings.' The Truth is more important than anything.

Feeling the support of the community and Watch Tower theology, Inna felt empowered and was able to fend off her husband's ultimatum. In other situations, being a member of Jehovah's flock and knowing the Bible elevate a woman's position within the family because of her knowledge of the Bible. For example, Antonina comes from a religious family, but everyone besides her is a Molokan.[355] In the family, where everyone is respecting the Bible, her knowledge of the Scripture instils her with a certain sense of superiority even in situations when she argues for a more accurate enactment of the disbalanced gender roles,

> "We [Antonina and her cousin's family] sat down to have dinner and I told my cousin to pray. He said, 'Can't you pray?' and I told him, 'Listen, the Bible says it very clearly that you as a man must pray.' If I was the only Christian at the table, I would pray. But in that situation, I told him to pray, and he prayed. [saying to me] If we eat together, I pray because I am a Christian and you're not baptized."

The ability to appeal to the Bible empowers Antonina and other female JWs because they know the Bible much better than most people. Although she insists that her cousin implements the gender roles that emphasize her subjugated position, Antonina acts from the powerful position of a knowledge bearer. Albeit sometimes only in her own eyes, this position automatically elevates Antonina above other family members regardless of their gender, as well as above all non-Christian men and women, which is the majority of the society. For example, Arusik (female JW in her 30s, English congregation) uses her knowledge acquired in the meetings and through Watch Tower literature to establish herself at her workplace:

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[355] The *Molokans* are a Russian religious group formed in the 18th century in South Central Russia and exiled to what today is Armenia and Azerbaijan from the Russian provinces of the Russian Empire in the 19th century. They preserved their separate cultural and ethnic identity and commitment to their religious beliefs and practices (Haytian 2007).

> I never come and say, 'Hello, my name is Arusik, and I am a Jehovah's Witness.' It comes up eventually when I refuse to celebrate birthdays and other holidays. And you know, they are usually pretty accepting, because I explain them that celebrating Christmas[356] on January 6th is silly as it contradicts the Bible. Jesus was born sometime in October[357] or so. And I tell them that all these other festivals are pagan. And they usually say, 'Hm, we never thought about it." And they leave me alone and respect my choice.

Besides knowledge of the Bible, female JWs gain a sense of self-worth from dedicating their time and energy to public ministry. It gives them social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1989) within the community and the family. First, the number of hours spent doing public ministry is a source of personal pride that is validated in the community and family. It boosts women's self-esteem and elevates them above their co-religionists if they are particularly active and zealous as preachers. During conversations, women occasionally boast about the fact that they are auxiliary or full-time pioneers, that is they are engaged in public ministry for at least 70 hours a month. As a female JW from the Russian congregation "boasted" to me before a meeting, "I am not employed now, but at least I am doing over 70 hours of preaching every month." Importantly, this criterion equalizes men and women and allows female JWs to excel men and prove their worth.[358] Besides, during public ministry, male JWs often openly admire their sisters in faith for being ardent and adroit preachers, and it empowers women to resist their somewhat inferior theological status. Olga noted how one of the brothers with whom she preaches once a week commended her preaching skills,

> You know, I never approach people and start asking them about Jehovah or Jesus right away. I start talking about the weather, kids, or something else. I need to understand whether this person needs a brochure or a booklet. Otherwise, it will go to waste. It

[356] The Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates Christmas on January 6th.

[357] Arusik refers to the idea taught by the WTBTS that Jesus must have been born in early fall. For example, see https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/when-was-jesus-born/

[358] On the contrary, if one is not very active in proselytism, it may sometimes be taken as a sign of spiritual inferiority or immaturity. Irina, a long-time JW, said about her daughter's public ministry, "My daughter has been in the Truth for a long time, but she does not like preaching. And, you know, it is not good. If you want to serve to Jehovah, you want to talk about him to everyone! She is shying away from it. And that has to change."

> always works well, because I establish a connection first and then, when I offer a brochure, people gladly accept it. When I am giving them a brochure, I always add, "This is a gift to you from Jehovah." And Lyonya [Olga's male preaching companion] always says, "You shouldn't say it's a gift. It's incorrect" And I say, "No, the Bible is Jehovah's gift to humans, and our brochures are based on the Bible, so they are also a gift from Jehovah." And he knows that my approach is better, because he just comes to people and gives them his tracts and booklets, but naturally people reject them. So, he praises my approach but criticizes me at the same time. I definitely know better because people are more open with me.

In this context, Olga takes pride in being a more skillful preacher because she knows or senses how to approach people, and she also uses it to subvert her lower theological status and counter her male co-religionist's criticism.

In cases when other family members are not in the Truth but accept her faith, a JW woman may be viewed as a spiritual leader of the family. Narek told a story about his female co-religionist whose husband did not want to embrace the Truth although his wife was already serving as a pioneer. When Narek confronted him as to why he did not become a JW, the husband answered, "It is a huge responsibility to be in the Truth, and it requires a lot of time and energy. While my wife is serving as a pioneer, I am working and supporting her spiritual work. You can say that I am also participating in her service then. So, I am also helping her take care of the spiritual well-being of our family"[359] (Narek). So a woman can occupy a position of power that is traditionally allocated to male members of the family in Armenian culture.

At the same time, the JW community does not create a particularly strong bond between females. As in the wider Armenian society, they sometimes badmouth each other behind their backs, criticizing those women whose children misbehave during the meetings or ridiculing each other for speaking too loudly or being an attention monger. Being an elder's wife does not result in any

[359] Many JWs regardless of their gender say that their relatives often view them as spiritual authority, so "they come to us and ask for advice when they have family issues since they want to know what the Bible recommends" (Gena).

additional respect or preferential treatment either. Nevertheless, female JWs receive support in situations when their social networks are weak or damaged. The human warmth and attention that they receive at the time of the first encounter and especially during the first visit to a Kingdom Hall serve as a powerful impetus to begin participating in Bible study.

Armenian men are less susceptible to WTBTS theology and practice for several reasons. First, their social networks are generally richer and stronger that those of women, and therefore it is more difficult for men to re-orient their attention to the JW community. Second, the Armenian nationalist and patriarchal ideologies depict men as protectors of the nation and Fatherland. Therefore, in cases of joining an alien religious group they are more likely to perceive themselves and be viewed by others as traitors, which erects an additional emotional and psychological barrier on their path towards mastering the Truth. In addition, Armenian men are more exposed to various social vices, such as smoking or excessive drinking, which are unacceptable in the JW community. Having to quit these habits and adhere to communal expectations often stops men from becoming JWs.

Parting Ways With the Truth[360]

Just as their preaching skills and goals vary, the level of commitment among JWs differs, too. People leave the fold regardless of how long they have been in the Truth or how community-centered their social networks are. As in Mher's case, many of those who start to study the Bible never become full-fledged JWs. Others, on the other hand, grow up as dedicated servants of Jehovah in JWs' families and know little about the world outside of weekly meetings, public

[360] In this sub-section, I do not pursue a goal of verifying the claims of ex-JWs. Apart from a few instances, I am not proving or disproving the veracity of their allegations simply because I do not have means to establish the truth. Nevertheless, I analyze ex-members' experience and personal perspectives as their decision to leave the community was informed by these considerations and accusations.

ministry, hanging out with fellow co-religionists, and reading the WTBTS literature. Yet, they may radically change their attitude and leave the community, too. In this sub-section, I analyze possible reasons that cause people to terminate their association with JWs in Armenia.

Many of those who start a Bible study with JWs abandon the path towards becoming a JW at an early stage. They stop short of joining the community because they are unable to reconcile the requirements of the WTBTS with their personal, familial, or communal lifestyle. Mher decided not to become a JW because it required that he leave his job and change his profession. One of the male ex-JWs who also left at the young age said that while he liked certain aspects of JW routine, such as clean and somewhat fashionable dress style, talking to people during the door-to-door proselytism, and reading the literature, he had hard time following other directions,

> You know, [JWs] are against masturbation. And can you imagine that you can't do it as a teenager?! There was a topic about it in the literature. I remember that at that time, I already had my eyes open about JWs. Since we all were guys there, I said, "I am sorry, but I don't want to wind up in a hospital psychiatric hospital because of this abstinence. I am doing it and I can't imagine that I wouldn't." Of course, they tried to explain why I was wrong, but in the looks that they were giving me, I saw that they supported my rebellion – because they [other boys] also thought about it. But they couldn't talk about it – there was no space to talk about these things. There are sanctions for these types of rebellion. Now I can say that the main reason for rejecting JWs was the absence of free will and freedom of opinion there.

As I show below, strict regulations of sexual conduct within the community can become a strong discouraging factor for a prospective or experienced JW. There are other institutional factors, such as JWs' "mocking (Arm. ծաղրել) national Armenian traditions and history" (Mher) and having to talk to people during public service, that serve as a barrier on one's path towards becoming a JW. One's nationalist feelings and close association between Christian symbols and being Armenian trigger negative reaction towards JWs' claims that Jesus was not crucified on a cross and that the symbol of the cross is meaningless and even offensive to God. Many current JWs recall that it was

extremely difficult to agree that icons and crosses, some of which were heirlooms connecting them to deceased relatives, were unacceptable to Jehovah (Hrach). They felt as if they were "rejecting my family and [themselves]" (Nadezhda).

Besides these institutional factors, the most common reason to discontinue one's advancement in the JWs' career is family pressure. Current JWs mention that many of those who start a Bible study "do not endure the family pressure and drop" (Arvin). One of the best examples of these pressure is a Roma community in the suburb of Yerevan. The absolute majority of them consider themselves Christian albeit without clear denominational affiliation. They occasionally attend services the Russian Orthodox church, the Armenian Apostolic church, as well as a number of Protestant churches in Yerevan. The Roma showed a great deal of enthusiasm and acceptance of JWs' preaching, when JWs started to proselytize among them in 2017-2018. The proselytizers were able to persuade many members of the Roma community to start a Bible study. Several Roma families even started to regularly attend JWs' meetings in the Russian congregation before the COVID pandemic. However, certain characteristics of the Roma communal lifestyle impeded a full embracing of the Truth. First, the Roma in Armenia are very mobile; they come to Armenia and stay for a few months or years, but then they go to Russia, Moldova, or European countries. This inconsistency and reliance on relatives and communal networks when adjusting at a new place force the Roma to prioritize the communal ties over new religion. Second, the literacy level among Romanis is uneven, and it is not uncommon that reading and moreover discussing complex ideas from the Scripture is a difficult exercise. This often impedes their progress in studying the Bible, although JWs are ready to help them improve their reading skills.

In addition, the larger Roma community is not immune to anti-JW sentiment and often rejects JWs as a harmful sect. For example, those Roma who agree to start a Bible study insist that a

Russian Orthodox translation of Scriptures be used instead of the New World Translation done by the WTBTS, because they regard the latter one is incorrect or somehow deficient.[361] However, since the Roma community is relatively small, soon all its members personally met the JW preachers, and the charm and a warm attitude[362] of the latter changed the overall attitude towards the Truth. One of the female JWs who has preached in the Roma community for a few years told me, "They [the Roma] trust us a lot more than they trust their own kin. I have been studying the Bible with this woman, who later went to Russia. So, she would contact me from there and ask for favors. She would send me money, so that I would give it to her mother here. She didn't trust the other Roma, but she trusted me" (Yulia). A few times, I also heard Roma saying that "you should always expect that someone here [in the Roma community] is going to screw you over" (a female Roma in her 60s). The reliability of JWs is undoubtedly one of the factors that attracts Roma people to the Truth. Yet overall, socially tight communal space of the Romani community allows little deviation from inner hierarchies, traditions, and celebrations. Therefore, the drastic lifestyle changes usually entailed by joining the JW community have little chance of being accepted by other Romani.[363] In addition, a Roma woman would not be able to engage in public ministry without the supervision of a male

[361] This demand is common among many beginning students of the Bible in Armenia, who prefer to use more traditional translations of the Bible, such as "Ararat" translation in Armenian and the Synod translation in Russian. Usually, JWs concede to these demands at the beginning, but they try to show that the New World translation is better as it has no archaic words that are no longer understandable to readers. For example, once, when Sergey, a young Roma father of three, agreed to start a Bible study, he demanded that the Russian Synod translation be used, the JW preacher told him, "Well, you're not going to understand many words there. For example, open 1 Corinthians 6:9 and read '…nor adulterers, nor malachias, nor abusers of themselves with mankind' What does the word 'malachia' mean here?" When Sergey was unable to answer, the preacher offered a New World translation, namely "…adulterers, *men who submit to homosexual acts*, men who practice homosexuality," which is easier to understand. Nevertheless, Sergey insisted that the Russian translation be used.

[362] JWs are always very respectful of the Roma traditions, which is a rare experience for a generally stigmatized Roma people. For example, JWs often learn a few phrases in the Romani language to show their interest and underscore their esteem for the Roma culture and traditions.

[363] Some scholars argue that JWs are not very successful among Roma because foreign JW preachers do not understand the intricacies of the Roma lifestyle or because of Roma's deep poverty (Krasteva-McCauley 2014:146–48). However, I argue that it is because of the tight social space that allows no deviations from the communal lifestyle.

chaperone and would not be able to abstain from participating in communal festivals that are prohibited for JWs. Similarly, Armenians whose familial connections are very strong and whose families do not compromise their strict anti-JWs stance are likely to leave the community even after baptism. JWs who choose to leave the community for the sake of preserving the family are usually the only members of the household who accepted the Truth. Being in an absolute minority, they are more likely to yield to pressure applied by relatives. In addition, the families that do not reject their JW members are more likely to force them to abandon the Truth.

Social milieu in general may have a similar effect on one' s dedication to continue a Bible study. A young man, whose mother became a JW over twenty years ago, but was not accepted by her husband, recalls his experience with the Truth,

> I liked going to the meetings with mom. It wasn't very strict, and I could skip a meeting if I didn't feel like going. I studied the Bible with Witnesses. But my father was always saying that I am not a real man if I am following my mother instead of him and that I am not going to grow up a real man […] My friends didn't like it. I didn't even try to preach to them, but they started to mock me, and I started to notice that they didn't want hang out with me as much as before. I hated it.

Eventually he stopped attending the meetings with his mother and stopped any association with the JW community. While he explained this step by having no free time and having other interests, undoubtedly peer pressure made his affiliation with JWs difficult and unpleasant and incentivized him to leave the community.

Pre-existing suspicion towards JWs and the assumption that they teach falsehood is widely spread in the Armenian society. As in the case above, even when one has an initial interest in a Bible study, one may request to use a translation of the Bible that one trusts more. In situations when these doubts are not assuaged and overcome, one cannot continue one's progress towards becoming a JW. In extreme cases, people initiate a Bible study with subversive intentions. For example, Anahit,

a current female member of an Armenian congregation recalls her attitude towards JWs and the Truth at the onset of her "career" in the community,

> I met the JWs back in 1993 and I started to learn the Bible for the entirely wrong reason. I was so nationalistic and I, you can say, hated Jehovah's Witnesses. So, I really wanted to work against them. But I knew nothing about the Bible or Christianity, so I couldn't really argue with them – they were much better educated. So, I started to learn the Bible with them in order to get to the same level, so that I would be able to counter their preaching. I wanted to dedicate myself to countering their proselytism.

In some cases, when pre-existing animosity towards JWs is insurmountable, one often stops Bible study despite having an interest in learning about God.

One of the common categories of ex-JWs is adolescents who grew up in the Truth and whose social ties with the secular world were mostly truncated. The JWs in Armenia are a relatively new community, and the number of second- and third-generation members is not very high. In this already small cohort, the dropout rate is significant, although I do not have the exact statistics. Regardless of their parents' commitment, these adolescents leave the community and often cut off ties with the family and congregation. Nora Petrosyan, a famous transgender woman and LGBTQ right activist in Armenia, grew up in a JW family; all her relatives were in the Truth, and her father was an elder in one of the Armenian congregations. From an early age, she took an active part in communal life. Her parents were very committed to the Truth and tried to limit Nora's secular involvement as much as possible,[364]

> [my parents] didn't allow me to communicate with my schoolmates or neighbor kids. They also discouraged me from spending too much time doing school homework apparently because 'in the New World, education was going to be unnecessary.' Often, I didn't do my homework at all because we had to go to a meeting, or preach, or do a family worship […] they didn't let me celebrate birthdays at school either even though I really wanted to.

[364] The limits on children's involvement into non-JW culture may differ significantly from family to family. While some parents consistently control their children's social ties and participation in unwanted types of activities, others allow greater freedom and let their children play music in a band or get involved in sports groups.

Many ex-JWs who left the community as adolescents confirm that their parents' dedication to Jehovah was very strong – everyone in the family was assured that the Truth is the only right way to live and build relationships with each other and with God. Parents' commitment often resulted in trying to ensure equal devotion to Jehovah in their children. Vladik, whose parents became JWs when he was a child, recalls his relationship with the Truth at the early stage, "My parents were really dedicated, and I remember how, when I was a kid, my father always made me go to the meetings. When I wouldn't feel well and I didn't feel like going, my dad would say, 'So, is that how you love Jehovah?!' So, I would cry but we would go anyway. So, he put this psychological pressure on me." Ex-members of the JW community often bring up psychological and physical pressure on their parents' part, which ranged from forced attendance at meetings to being locked in the house for weeks at a time after deciding to disassociate from JWs. Recalling their experience in the community, they openly resent their parents' coercion to participate in the activities related to the WTBTS, such as meetings or public ministry. They regard leaving the community as a vindication of past injustices inflicted by their parents and as an "expression of human agency" (Kong and Woods 2020:268). Sometimes, the whole experience of being a JW is rejected as something alien and imposed, "I am not a former Jehovah's Witness – I don't consider myself a Witness, because I had been taken there against my will by my parents" (Nora Petrosyan). At the same time, none of my informants expressed bitterness towards their former co-religionists in general as they had a very good rapport with the members of their congregation and were "loved and adored by everyone" (Nora Petrosyan).

Furthermore, none of my informants mentioned that they left the community because they stopped believing in God. They knew that they were committing a sin, for which the punishment is death after Armageddon. Yet, they were "ready to pay this price for being able to live the desired life

for just a few days" (Nora Petrosyan). However, while their faith in God was reportedly strong, their trust in the WTBTS's ability to guide was shaken. One of my ex-JW informants recalled,

> Once [when I was a still in the community], I found a verse that compared Jesus and God. And I couldn't understand it. For a week, I prayed a lot so that Jehovah would help me understand it. And it didn't work. So, I approached one of the elders and said, "I have a question, can we talk after the meeting?" So, later, I came to this elder and asked him about that verse. He apparently didn't know how to answer and said, "What do you think it is?" I said that I couldn't find the answer and did the research, and he said, "You should continue doing the research. Tonight, my wife and I will pray so that you could find the answer." It was bullshit! I just needed better guidance. My belief in the organization was already shaken.

After dissociating from the JWs, some ex-members may continue to believe in God, while others admit that they lost their faith in God altogether. Yet, they reject the idea that the WTBTS is the means through which God communicates his will. Although former JWs usually show little antagonism towards fellow co-religionists, they regard the elders as inept, "unjust, and hypocritical," (male ex-JW) because the latter show a lack of leadership qualities as in the quote above or because they engage in activities that they themselves profess to be forbidden and sinful.[365] As I mentioned above, elders are regarded as administrative and moral rather than theological leaders, and when their moral qualities are challenged, their authority wanes as well. In the situation illustrated by the quote above, the informant perceived the reaction of the elder as a sly attempt to avoid admitting a lack of knowledge. The informant regarded this behavior as disingenuous and deceitful. In other words, the informant was upset not by the fact that the elder did not know the answer, but by the fact that the elder tried to hide it. Besides, the elders can be considered duplicitous because they "use books and instructions that are only for elders, so they don't say everything [to the flock]" (female

[365] According to ex- and some current JWs, the list of sins that JW elders commit is long and includes smoking cigarettes, swearing, having forbidden sexual relationships, lying, engaging in financial shenanigans, and using drugs. I have heard many complaints about the elders on behalf of both former and current JWs. These grievances never concern elders' knowledgeability but target their leadership skills or moral/personal qualities.

ex-JW in her 40s). The absolute majority of JWs do not share these views on the institution of elders. Current members who harbor a contemptuous attitude toward elders sometimes explain these "vices" as a normal consequence of human imperfection that will be eliminated in the New World (Olga).

Some JWs break away from the community because of the WTBTS's strict regulations on sexual conduct, relationships, and building a family. As I mentioned, JWs accept sexual relationships only between a man and a woman, and even a heterosexual union is possible exclusively in marriage. Pre-marital intimacy of any kind, even as innocuous as being one on one with a person of the opposite sex, is discouraged. This naturally narrows down adolescents' options to explore relationships and their sexuality. According to WTBTS literature, the only purpose of dating is "to help a young man and woman determine if they want to get married to each other" (WTBTS 2022a). In addition, just as in other strict religious organizations that zealously guard the boundary with outsiders (Beckford 1985; McConnell 2020), JWs strongly discourage dating and especially marrying non-believers (WTBTS 2020a).[366] This limits the pool of potential marital partners for JWs who are committed to creating a family and sometimes facilitates their drifting away from the community. Hasmik, a female ex-JW in her 40s, said,

> I always felt that some of the things that we [JWs] were doing were a waste of time – preaching has very little effect, for example. And I always wanted to get married, but I sort of felt discouraged – it's almost like they didn't want me to get married, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to spend that much time doing public ministry. And then I met my current husband who wasn't a Witness and at first, I was trying to persuade him to start studying the Bible, but he didn't want to. I was afraid to tell the elders.

Hasmik never told the elders or anyone in the congregation about her relationship with this

[366] Although casual dating or marrying a non-believer do not result in disfellowshipment, they can lead to losing certain privileges in the congregation, such as being able to serve as an elder, a ministerial servant, or a pioneer. Such members "wouldn't be considered exemplary anymore" (an elder). At the same time, if a JW engages in sexual relationship with a worldly person outside of marriage, they may be disfellowshipped. I know about several cases of such excommunication.

non-JW man, and the burden of secrecy pushed her towards "slowly stopping going to the meetings." For Hasmik this was not the only reason that triggered her dissociation from the community as she had doubts about JWs' methods and purposes before. Yet, it clearly served as a catalyst for her gradual detachment. When JWs who decide to leave the community choose the path of gradual disassociation, it does not necessarily entail disfellowshipment. In this case, publishers become inactive, i.e. they do not report public ministry hours and may never attend the meetings, but as long as they are not known to engage in condemnable practices, they are not formally excommunicated, which allows them to retain social connections with their JW family members and former co-religionists.

Simultaneously, those JWs whose gender or sexual identity deviated from the strict heterosexual and traditional expectations and rules prescribed by the WTBTS have few options: to suppress their sexuality, to lead a double life, to leave the community, or to be disfellowshipped. Several ex-JWs told me that they had had close friends and confidants in their congregations who would "go to gay night clubs" or "had a gay partner in the city," but they continued their affiliation with the WTBTS and allegedly even occupied certain positions in the congregational hierarchy.

Those who are officially disfellowshipped undergo shunning on behalf of their families and former co-religionists, which is seen as "a matter of loyalty to God and his Word" (WTBTS 2014b:207). It is rare to hear current JWs' talk about their former co-religionists at a KH meeting or during any other group activity. Yet, in private conversations they furtively allude to those who were "kicked out for being sexually immoral" (Antonina) or who "didn't understand it was just a phase and their doubts and desires were going to go away" (Arusik). As well as with other aspects of JWs' lifestyle, there is little uniformity regarding how scrupulously members of the community follow the rule that prescribes that they discontinue any association with those who were excommunicated.

Some obey the rule to the letter and avoid any contact with the apostates, while others maintain their contact. Right after disfellowshipment, ex-JWs may find shelter in the houses of those JWs who are willing to break the rules,

> When I ran away from my parent's house, I had difficulties, financially and otherwise. I had to sleep outside. I had a friend whose parents were also JWs, but they were somewhat liberal [Arm. ազատամիտ]. They found out about my situation and let me stay in their house for a month until I found a job and an apartment […] Then, other Witnesses saw me coming to their house and ratted them out to the elders. (Former JW, about 20 years old, Armenian congregation)

Current JWs usually take it very hard when a member of their congregation is disfellowshipped. They regard it as a personal tragedy as well as a loss for Jehovah's family. In cases when the disfellowshipped grew up in a community, this pain is all the more acute. If following excommunication, a former JW repents and decides to come back to the community, he or she can demonstrate their remorse by regularly attending (but not participating in) the meetings and correct their lifestyle. As a result, they may be reinstated as full-fledged members. In two cases of such restoration that I observed, the congregation goes ecstatic – people cry, exchange hugs, and even applaud, which happens extremely rarely in KHs.

Overall, leaving the path of being a JW has several common causes. First, strong familial, communal, or professional ties may apply enough pressure on the converted to make him or her dissociate from the JW community. Second, strict patriarchal and traditional rules of conduct push out those who cannot comply as there is no space for deviation within their social networks. The strict scripts for behavior limit the amount of help that JWs can offer to those who are in doubt or in pain,[367] which pushes the latter away. In addition, the disengagement from the JW community is usually not a consequence of a crisis of faith with Jehovah, but a result of doubts in the WTBTS's

[367] Usually, the help is limited to suggestions to re-read relevant passages from the Bible or "be more active in the Truth" (Vladik), which often includes more public service or helping those in need.

ability to guide believers, to be God's mouthpiece on earth, and to prevent injustice. Later, that doubt can translate into drifting away from religion in general.

Conclusion

The WTBTS has several institutional idiosyncrasies that affect its attractiveness for potential converts and current members. One of them is the power dynamic within the organization. The priesthood-laity dynamic, in which the former accumulates exclusive "sacred knowledge" (Bourdieu 1991:9; also, see Weber 1993) and the latter is dispossessed of religious capital, is implemented in the JW community with great clarity, but not between elders and rank-and-file members. JWs regard themselves as bearers of exclusive understanding of the Bible, Christianity, and the world in general; this knowledge is principally inaccessible to those outside of the Truth. In other words, the priest-laity dynamic is applied to JWs' relationships with the external world, where the latter is deprived of the knowledge and means for salvation that are possessed by JWs. In the 1940s, when defending their rights for conscientious objection, JWs claimed that they all were "ministers of religion" (Tietz 1954:130). And it was not a trick invented by JW lawyers. Most JWs indeed regard themselves as bearers of the true and exclusive understanding of the world and God's plan, and this proposition becomes a logical foundation upon which JWs often build their sense of superiority vis-à-vis non JWs. It is a powerful factor that continuously boosts JWs' commitment to the WTBTS. In addition, the egalitarian principle of the distribution of theological power at the level of congregation allows dedicated, charismatic preachers to realize their leadership qualities and even create a small circle of "disciples." This position of Bible expert that they enjoy among their followers in the community as well as proselytes sustains their dedication to the Truth.

Another factor that increases the attractiveness of WTBTS teaching and practices is the alternative ideological framework that counters the dominant nationalist ideology and has higher

explanatory power in certain socio-political and cultural contexts. Several categories of the population, namely people with a military background and Russian-speaking people, start to regard the nationalist ideology as erroneous and unjust because its postulates do not conform to their perception of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic reality. Moreover, Armenianness, as the ultimate value and source of symbolic capital, has never been just a language of political contestation or a tool of political struggle in Armenia, but, to a great degree, has determined one's life chances and social position because it serves as the main source of legitimacy. The JWs' focus on this world's corruption and on the injustice of the nationalist framework resonates with these people's disappointment. In addition, the WTBTS offers the practical implementation of an alternative lifestyle where ethnic culture is celebrated, yet ethnicity is rejected as a focus of unity and identity and as such does not define one's life chances and social standing.

This alternative ideological and practical reality of the JW community attracts those who in Goffman's terms have "spoiled identity" (Goffman 1974), i.e. those whose lifestyle, behavior, or moral character are in conflict with social norms and expectations. This category includes those with semi-criminal and (para-) military backgrounds. In pursuit of eliminating this discrepancy, some of them become religious seekers, who are attracted by the JW teaching and practices because the community is relatively disconnected from the social networks of the larger society, its moral rules and demands are very similar to those accepted by the larger society, and importantly, it offers and even demands moral and behavioral improvement.

The JWs community in Armenia is relatively new – although the first JWs came here in the 1970s, real growth did not start until the 1990s. As a result, there are very few second- and third-generation Witnesses to contribute to the growth of the community. In addition, as the WTBTS does not focus on having children and in certain cases encourages childlessness when a person or a

couple want to dedicate their lives to serving Jehovah as special pioneers or workers of Bethel, even second generation JWs do not usually have many children. Given the relatively high dropout rate among adolescent JWs, community growth cannot be explained by natural demographic growth, a high fertility rate, or JWs' "superior ability to retain their children" (Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973:273).

JWs in Armenia are very diverse, yet there are several tendencies that can be discerned. Regarding education, JWs can be attractive for people both with unfinished school education, as in the case of the Roma community, and with university-level education. Although in many cases JW parents discourage their children from going to college, it is not uncommon for a young, second-generation JW to obtain a college degree. Importantly, one's level of education does not affect one's standing in the community. JWs' socio-economic status is also very diverse – most people are manual and service industry workers and middle-rank clerks, but there are also teachers, artists, senior managers, and doctors. Their level of well-being may vary significantly – in the same congregation a poor refugee from Azerbaijan living in a small, dilapidated room in a dorm can sit next to an upper-middle class doctor who has several apartments and cars and who regularly travels abroad for vacation. Nevertheless, most JWs belong to the mid-working class or lower-middle class range. Regarding age, JWs are most successful among women who are 40 and older. The number of children, teenagers, and young adults varies from congregation to congregation. The Russian congregations are perceptibly older than the Armenian and English congregations. Even after the influx of Russian-speaking immigrants to Armenia due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the demographics of the Russian congregations have not changed very much. The English congregation also stands out demographically, but there, the number of young members is significantly higher than at average in the community. Finally, previous religious affiliation is difficult

to measure because even though most Armenians declare their loyalty to the AAC, this loyalty does not translate into attendance of church services. Plus, my observation strongly suggests that apart from a few cases, Armenian JWs rarely had strong connections with the national church before conversion.

Women join and stay in the JW community for several reasons. First, women often find themselves in a vulnerable position because their social ties are more fragile than those of men. The JW community becomes a source of social capital that is vital for normal functioning in Armenian society. Second, mastering the Truth and participating in public ministry instills in them a special sense of mission and self-worth, which would be unattainable for many of them in wider Armenian society. In many cases, the Truth boosts the development of their agency in relationships with their husbands and other members of the family, which gives them moral authority to resist the negative influence of the rigid patriarchal family system in Armenia. In general women play a significant role in community growth – most of my informants say that they were recruited by women, which is not surprising given the gender ratio in the community. In most cases, women get interested in the Truth first and then bring in their family members, other relatives, and friends.

Regarding public ministry, the statistics confirm my fieldwork findings that the number of hours spent on public ministry has little to no correlation with the number of baptisms. In 1999, Armenian JWs spent cumulatively a little less than one and a half million hours doing public service to produce 543 baptisms, while in 2015, almost three and a half million hours resulted only in 260 baptisms. Even considering the delayed effect of public ministry (Bible studies and preparing for baptism take time), the numbers show that the intensity of proselytism have little correlation with the growth of the community.

CHAPTER VI CONCLUSION

One of the goals of this research was to explore the complexity of the JW community in Armenia and the diversity of beliefs, practices, and attitudes among its members. On the one hand, being a JW requires a high degree of dedication to meetings, preaching, reading WTBTS literature, and being wary of the corrupting influence of the world at all times. Yet, the followers of the WTBTS are embedded in the wider Armenian society and more often than not retain strong ties with their non-JW family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Navigating intolerance and, at times, open hostility, JWs continue preaching in the streets of Armenian towns, conducting door-to-door public ministry, and spreading the Good News via phone calls, smartphone messages, and letters. This public conspicuousness became one of the reasons for intolerance towards this religious group. In the conclusion, I contextualize the reasons for joining the community in order to account for the dynamic of JWs' growth in post-Soviet Armenia. Then, I account for the volatile trajectory of the relationships between the Armenian state and society, on the one hand, and JWs, on the other. Finally, I discuss the precariousness of the existing status quo in the sphere of religious freedom in Armenia.

Growth and Decline in the Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Armenia

In general, the correlation between intolerance towards JWs in Armenian society and the growth of the community is insignificant. In the 2000s, the JW community was growing at a high rate despite growing antagonism towards this religious group on the part of the state, the media, anti-JW activists, and society as whole. The growth was even higher than is suggested by official WTBTS statistics if we consider the mortality rate and the high level of emigration among JWs to the U.S., Russia, and the EU. In many cases, JWs' stark opposition to the dominant socio-political ideology attracted those who were disappointed with ideological changes of post-Soviet Armenia.

In 2010, the growth plateaued and during most of the post-Kocharyan period from 2010 to 2020, the number of members leaving the community was higher than the number of newcomers. Despite the liberalization of religious policies in Armenia in 2013 and the improvement of the treatment of JWs on the part of police and state institutions, the membership of the JW community was slowly declining and dropped to 10,590 publishers in 2020 (see, the 2020 Service Year Report). In 2021, their impressive growth resumed, so that over the span of one year, the JW community recuperated the losses of the previous decade. However, this success was short-lived as in 2022, the number of active publishers declined again.

Existing WTBTS statistics suggest that the decline during the 2010s was not related to increased rates of defection or emigration of JWs from Armenia as the local Bethel insists. The decline in membership correlated with the decline in the number of baptisms. For example, in 2020, JWs in Armenia registered the lowest number of baptisms since statistics first became available in 1998. While usually, the yearly number of baptisms fluctuated at the margin of 500, in 2020, it was as low as 189. In the same year, JWs registered the lowest number of active publishers since 2010. This analysis suggests that the rate of losing members because of disaffiliation, disfellowshipment, and emigration remained stable, while recruitment was unable to compensate for the loss.

There are several contextual factors that increased the attractiveness of JWs' message and practices in post-Soviet Armenia despite the relatively high level of antagonism towards this religious group. The first factor is the overall fusion of Christianness and Armenianness in Armenian society, as well as respect towards the Bible although it is venerated as a religious object rather than as a source of religious knowledge. In this regard, Armenian society provides fertile soil for JW evangelism because preachers do not need to establish the authority of Christianity and its sacred sources. Therefore, initial contact with potential converts is more likely to be successful compared to

societies where Christianity does not loom as large, and the veneration of the Bible is not as widely spread. Some non-JW Armenians find the ways in which JWs skillfully wield biblical verses fascinating. Under this impression, some people decide to abandon the traditional Armenian understanding of the Bible as a physical object of veneration and use Scripture as a source of religious knowledge. Although the number of these people is relatively small, their choice offers a paradigmatic shift in understanding Christianity in Armenia.

Second, although until 2018, the state ideological framework emphasized the role of the Armenian Church in the preservation of Armenianness, anti-clerical sentiment in Armenian society has been quite strong throughout the post-Soviet period (Antonyan 2011; Kharatyan 2007; Mikaelyan 2014). In fact, in their criticism of the AAC, people often connect the growth of these "deleterious sects" with the inability of Armenian clergy to offer a commensurable response to the proselytism of alien religious groups. A trope about "bad priests" common in Armenian society coupled with clergy's enforcement of Armenian nationalism pushed religious seekers and those who were dissatisfied with the dominant ideology of Armenian nationalism to embrace alternative religious messages and practices. My analysis demonstrates that in certain cases, Armenians' dissatisfaction with the AAC promoted a positive image of JWs and, therefore, facilitated the acceptance of WTBTS teachings and practices. As a result, some partially or totally abandoned the views and practices typical for Armenian Christianity that they had followed before. However, the anti-clerical sentiment has been becoming stronger in wider Armenian society, while the growth rate of the JWs showed the opposite dynamic. Therefore, anti-clericalism only partially accounts for Armenians' continuous interest in the JWs' organization but does not explain the stagnation in the growth of the JW community in Armenia during the 2010s.

One of factors that contributed to the stagnation was the overall decline of the level of

organized religious participation in post-Soviet Armenia. After an upsurge of religious interest and practice from the late 1980s through the early 1990s, participation in all types of religious organizations, messages, and activities was on the ebb (Antonyan 2011; Charles 2009). The most important contextual factor is related to the socio-economic and socio-political situation in Armenia which has been quite volatile. Dramatic post-Soviet transformations seriously disrupted social cohesion and damaged social networks that have been vitally important for the functioning of Armenian society. JWs offered a stable system of social connections, something that the Armenian Church did not provide because it lacked organized parish life. The JW community also served as a source of meaning, purpose, self-respect, and opportunities for self-realization. Certain categories of the Armenian population, such as older single women and refugees from Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh), were affected more than others. Disadvantaged and marginalized in wider Armenian society, they found support and respect in the JW community. Not only did Russian-speaking people lose employment opportunities, but they also lost social standing and respect that they used to enjoy during the Soviet period. These categories of the Armenian population found the JW community particularly attractive because the Russian congregations offered an environment where Russian could be spoken freely without derision or hostility. On the contrary, the JW community revalidated the importance of Russian as a valuable cultural tool and restored the social respect associated with it.

By the end of the 2000s, the socio-economic situation in Armenia stabilized and, although the Armenian society is still afflicted with deprivation as one in four Armenians lives below the poverty line, Armenia's social structure has not been undergoing rapid and drastic changes. This negatively affected the appeal of the JW community because, unlike in the 1990s and the 2000s, JW preachers or meetings rarely served as the only source of social capital as it was in Olga and

Nadezhda's cases (see, Chapter V). Thus, deprivation understood more widely as one's insufficient embeddedness or involvement in society, which entails low social status and economic opportunities, as well as a lack of respect and social interaction provides a sound explanation for the dynamic of membership growth in the WTBTS in Armenia during the post-Soviet period. These periods of upheaval and instability which disturbed the cohesion of Armenian society increased the appeal of the JW teachings, practices, and, most importantly, their close-knit community. At the same time, relative stability had a negative effect on the overall attractiveness of the JW community.

During the COVID pandemic in 2020-2021, the social cohesion of Armenian society was disrupted again, albeit for a short period of time. During this period, JW meetings became more accessible because they were held via Zoom, while publishers could engage in public ministry remotely. In addition to these quick adjustments that increased the accessibility of meetings and preserved a certain degree of communal life, the JW community provided its many members with psychological support at a time of social isolation and great uncertainty. According to elders, many inactive publishers evinced interest in participating in meetings and returned to public ministry (see, Chapter II). Although the number of new baptisms remained very low (181, according to the 2021 Service Year Report by the WTBTS), the number of active publishers increased by almost 700 people. In the midst of the COVID pandemic, the appeal of WTBTS millennial ideology increased because, at the time of the world-wide health crisis, it provided an unambiguous theological explanation for the catastrophe that was unfolding before people's eyes. In addition, as JWs disappeared from public space during the COVID pandemic, their public inconspicuousness decreased the level of intolerance and violence towards them in Armenian society because face-to-face interaction in public ministry was put on hold. Following the lifting of COVID-related restrictions, the membership of the JW community started to slowly decrease. This factor

additionally testifies to the high importance of the compensatory function of the JW community – those whose social ties are damaged or insufficient for one reason or another find a source of social capital in the JW community. During the pandemic, social ties became more frail, which incentivized inactive JWs and some newcomers to actively participate in communal life.

The war between Azerbaijan and Armenia for control over Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh) in Fall 2020 that ended in the military defeat of Armenia and a loss of significant territory that had been controlled by the Armenian army since the ceasefire of 1994 sparked an existential crisis for many Armenians. Coupled with the COVID pandemic, the psychological insecurity and anxiety caused by the military defeat also increased the attractiveness of JWs' alternative worldviews, ideologies, and explanations, such as JWs' millenarian message about Satan's rule on earth and impeding Armageddon.

Jehovah's Witnesses, the Armenian State, and Society

Now, I turn to the overall character of the mistreatment of JWs in post-Soviet Armenia. In general, state policies regarding religious diversity were quite inconsistent during the first two decades of Armenia's independence. In the 1990s, aspirations for liberalization that followed the collapse of the Soviet system and pressure from the west in the 2000s promoted religious freedom, while the logic of ethno-centric ideology with its emphasis on unity between ethnic and religious demanded that religious liberties be restricted. At the same time, there was no information about new religious groups in Armenia. State officials, activists, Armenian clergy, and regular people had little to no understanding of who JWs were, what teaching they professed, what practices they engaged in, or how their organization functioned internally. Initially, negative attitudes towards them were informed by several factors. First, the ethnoreligious ideology prescribed that all Armenians be affiliated with the AAC, and, therefore, joining other religious groups was presented as harmful and

extremely undesirable. Therefore, all new religious groups were automatically viewed in a negative light. Second, pre-existing negative stereotypes regarding ethnic and religious minorities were extrapolated to the new religious groups. Third, the media further strengthened this mindset. Under these circumstances, the majority of Armenians were very receptive to the idea of restricting the activities of foreign religious groups, and many urged the government and the AAC to adopt strict "anti-sect" policies.

Although Ter-Petrosyan's government introduced several legal acts that widened the privileges of the AAC and restricted the freedom of other religious groups, in the 1990s, the Armenian state was not interested in and not capable of regulating the religious sphere. In addition, the ethnoreligious ideology did not yet serve as a dominant framework, although several key officials, such as Vazgen Sargsyan, tried to suppress religious diversity and support the AAC as an ideological ally of the state because of their personal convictions. Overall, in the 1990s, the Armenian state did not yet have a discernable stance on religious diversity let alone a well-formulated religious policy.

During Kocharyan's presidency, the ethnoreligious ideology became the primary ideological framework of the Armenian state and society. The demands of cultural, religious, and political unity and, therefore, calls to combat all manifestations of diversity were voiced by political elites and were readily accepted by most ordinary Armenians. JWs and their conspicuous public presence tangibly disrupted this dominant ideological framework, which became a major reason for the growing intolerance towards them. By the early 2000s, JWs were already largely viewed as the most dangerous religious group in Armenia. They were consistently portrayed as a force that sought to destroy Armenia from within, while Azerbaijan, Turkey, and, in some pro-Russian narratives, the U.S. tried to undermine the country from outside. In this context, a strong leader like Robert

Kocharyan seemed like the only power able to deliver Armenia from its enemies, despite a deep corruption of his government, a belief shared by most Armenians in the 2000s.

This antagonism towards JWs quickly turned into a self-perpetuating cycle of animosity requiring little external organization, support, or rationale. This resentment was harbored by many police officers, judges, military personnel, and high officials who used the power of their offices to stop the spread of what they thought was a threat to the country and nation. Yet, although the general stance of the state towards JWs was negative, there was no well-articulated policy regarding this religious group.

The acts of mistreatment of JWs, such as court cases against JWs, military raids against JWs during the conventions, illegal termination of employment, or demands to renounce one's membership in the JW community, were uncoordinated. As such, they did not amount to well-articulated policies but were often private initiatives of state officials. The lack of an articulated stance towards religious diversity was noticeable during the early 1990s. Then, military commissariats did not have a common instruction on how to treat conscientious objectors. Raids against JWs and other religious groups were also unsystematic as they were perpetrated by individual officials and/or semi-official organizations. During Kocharyan's tenure, anti-JWs measures also lacked coordination. For example, in some regions of Armenia, local officials demanded that JW employees of state agencies be fired, while these demands were completely absent in other parts of the country. At the same time, when dismissed JWs sought redress in courts, judges often ruled in their favor.

This negative attitude was also shared by most Armenians regardless of their class, educational background, their actual participation in AAC practices, or their political preferences because JWs were thought to erode family values, undermine national security, and challenge one of the fundamental principles of Armenian national identity, namely the innate Christianness of all

Armenians. They were perceived as traitors of "the collective" and "the national" who turned away from their large, national "family." In other words, JWs with their aggressive proselytism and Protestant rules, such as sola Scriptura and insistence that Christianity must be acquired and mastered, were alien to the very ethos of Christianity in Armenia. For the absolute majority of Armenians, the only undeniable source of legitimacy in Armenian Christianity is belonging to the Armenian community by birth. As such, being Christian is understood as an innate quality of all Armenians regardless of their specific beliefs or participation in any practices. While the official ideological framework depicts the AAC as an indivisible part of Armenianness, the Armenians assign only an auxiliary role to the Armenian Church because being Christian does not require any additional confirmations other than being born Armenian. In other words, Armenian Christianity is self-sufficient and does not require evangelization or catechization. Furthermore, being Christian is one of the cornerstones of Armenian national ideology and identity. In this cultural context, JWs publicly and very conspicuously undermine the principle of the innate Christianity of all Armenians and claim that only they possess the exclusive knowledge necessary to sustain one's Christianness. JWs put themselves in a superior position comparable to that of priests vis-à-vis laity in traditional Christian Churches, such as Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches, where the exclusive knowledge and power of clergy is indispensable for maintaining one's Christianness. JWs' claims to possess exclusive knowledge about how to be Christian create a power dynamic vehemently rejected by Armenians as alien to Armenian culture. In the Armenian context, all Christians are rather equal in status as the Church does not maintain explicit hierarchy in people's access to religious knowledge. As a result, most Armenians perceive the JWs' presence as an existential threat to the Armenian nation, family, and state. At the same time, the degree of perceived danger posed by JWs and, therefore, the level of intolerance towards them has been fluctuating during the post-Soviet

period. As they are the members of Armenian society, many Armenian state officials have harbored the same views and, therefore, have often engaged in anti-JWs actions, seeking to limit the harmful influence of the sect on Armenian society. In other words, amidst the relative consensus about the negative influence of JWs, the state did not have to elaborate and coordinate special policies – many state officials realized their personal attitudes in practice in an unprompted fashion without any directive from above.

The role of the AAC in promoting intolerance towards JWs and promoting state policies restricting religious freedom was not nearly as significant as it is often presented in academic literature (e.g. see Chryssides 2021; Knox 2019) for two major reasons. The analysis of Orthodox-majority Eastern European countries and the Armenian case demonstrate that although a national Church increases the likelihood of restrictions on religious freedom, the actual legal framework and specific policies regarding religious minorities are introduced and adjusted according to the interests of the state, not the Church. In the post-Soviet period, all Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries demanded that the state grant them preferential treatment and limit religious freedom. Nevertheless, the state chose to implement those requests only if they largely corresponded with the political and ideological interests of the state as was the case of post-2014 Russia, Belarus, and unrecognized quasi-states, such as Transnistria and South Ossetia. In the case of Armenia, the appeals of the AAC to further limit religious freedom during Sargsyan's presidency were rejected despite the AAC's close symbolic and practical alliance with the government (see, Chapter IV). For the Armenian political elites, compliance with the rules imposed by European institutions was far more important and beneficial than appeasing the Armenian Church. This strongly indicates that a national Church is a *directed* rather than a *directing* power when it comes to the formulation of religious policies.

The contingence of Armenia's relationship with the EU on the implementation of certain democratic reforms by the Armenian government has been more significant for formulating and implementing religious policies during the post-Soviet period than the pressure of the AAC or other external influences. Armenia's accession to the Council of Europe in 2001 increased the influence of European institutions and extended the jurisdiction of the ECHR over Armenia, although this impact was not immediate and depended on the domestic situation and the international orientation of the Armenian government. During the presidency of Robert Kocharyan, Armenia implemented some of its assumed responsibilities – JWs were finally granted state registration in 2004, and the National Assembly passed the Law on Alternative Service accommodating conscientious objectors, most of whom were JWs. Nevertheless, the Kocharyan administration was very inconsistent in the implementation of these reforms. The Law on Alternative Service fell short of European standards, and JW conscientious objectors were continuously imprisoned with harsher sentences than before, which clearly indicates that the law was adopted at the EU's behest, while the government did not intend to fully implement it in practice. Although registered, JWs continued experiencing issues with obtaining building permits, importing literature, and occasional biased treatment in courts. In addition, the state tried to strengthen the position of the AAC as its ally through further elevating its status as the national Church and granting it more privileges, such as tax breaks. In other words, Kocharyan's government implemented the reforms in order to reap financial and political benefits from its close association with the west. Simultaneously, it used various avenues to stall actual changes and preserve the *status quo ante*.

During Sargsyan's presidency, Armenia could no longer keep a foot in both camps using the technique of "smoke and mirrors." It is not impossible that the stalemate would have continued indefinitely if JWs had not engaged in litigation with the Armenian government through the ECHR.

The resulting pressure of European institutions, such as the Venice Commission and the ECHR, forced the Armenian government to acquiesce to the demands of the WTBTS. In other words, without an active force, such as the WTBTS, that was willing and able to take advantage of the available opportunities, the religious field in Armenia might not have undergone such serious transformation and liberalization.

Most importantly, Sargsyan's government used the liberalization of the religious sphere as a strategy for appeasing the west, while strengthening economic ties with Russia, the EU's rival in the region. When Armenia joined the economic Custom Union with Russia in 2013, Sargsyan's government openly offered to implement political reforms, including religious liberalization as compensation for joining the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union in 2013 instead of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU. The state relinquished its control over the religious field in Armenia as a necessary concession necessary for more important goals. From this perspective, the demands on the part of the EU and Armenia's deep interest in and even dependence on cooperation with the West made the reforms for religious liberalization in Armenia possible. Of course, it is important to note that Serzh Sargsyan's presidency was overall less oppressive than that of Robert Kocharyan.

This is especially apparent if compared with the situation in Azerbaijan, Armenia's neighbor and main military adversary. Like Armenia, Azerbaijan joined the Council of Europe in 2001 and also assumed the responsibility to adopt a law on alternative military service by January 2003. However, its reliance on and integration into western institutions has been significantly lower because of its more robust fuel-exporting economy and its overall anti-western stance supported by a powerful oligarchic dynasty. Politically, it has been developing a close alliance with Turkey, which is the only other member of the Council of Europe that has never adopted mechanisms recognizing

and accommodating conscientious objection. Turkey' leading role in its alliance with Azerbaijan undoubtedly further incentivized Azerbaijan to reject the right to conscientious objection as well. As a result, even though the right to opt for alternative service is enshrined in the Constitution of Azerbaijan, mechanisms for its implementation have never been created. Although JWs in Azerbaijan[368] have had the same support on behalf of the WTBTS headquarters in the U.S. and equal access to the ECHR, they were unable to force Azerbaijani authorities to make concessions on this issue.

The effect of conditionality is contingent upon several factors. When the EU can no longer use conditionality to compel governments to comply with its regulations, some of the reforms can be halted or even be reversed. New Eastern European members of the EU, such as Bulgaria and Romania, seriously slowed down the implementation of reforms after their accession to the EU (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017; Chiva 2009; Tanasoiu 2012). In these cases, the conditionality of membership lost its potency. In other cases, a country can be denied access to European institutions or refuse to be under their jurisdiction, as it was in the case of post-2014 Russia. In this case, religious freedom may be one of the first spheres to deteriorate.

The limits of conditionality are also determined by the local cultural context. Although the religious component of national identity is very important in Armenia, by early 2013, JWs and other religious minorities had become an undesirable but normal part of the Armenian urban landscape. The fear that young men would become JWs *en masse* in order to evade military service which was common in the 1990s and 2000s never materialized. In addition, in 2013, the threat of a new full-scale war with Azerbaijan was not acute. According to the most exaggerated estimates made by some

[368] According to the 2022 Service year report, there were 1674 JWs in Azerbaijan.

anti-cult activists, the number of "sectarians" of all kinds in Armenia was still less than 10% of the entire population (Amaryan 2018). The confluence of these factors made mild religious liberalization acceptable to the Armenian political elites and tolerable for the population at large, which was nearly unimaginable just a decade earlier. As I demonstrated in Chapter IV, the reaction of Armenian society to the government's concessions in the religious sphere in 2013 was very reserved although intolerance towards JWs at the grass-root level remained relatively high. Yet while religion could be sacrificed for the sake of maintaining closer relationships with the EU, the reforms in other domains, such as domestic violence and intolerance towards the LGBTQ community, were generally rejected by Armenian society, even when they were adopted by the government. For example, in 2017, the Armenian government was able to push through a law on domestic violence. During the debates, even the members of the ruling Republican Party were against the law as it was viewed as "interference in family affairs [that] run counter to Armenian traditional values and undermine the fabric of Armenian society" (Janbazian 2017). Although the adoption of this law was also motivated by the factor of conditionality and financial incentives, the general rejection of its provisions by conservative Armenian society somewhat invalidated the positive effect of the law. According to multiple international reports, "in practice, law enforcement bodies lack awareness and training on protection mechanisms envisaged by the law, such as protection orders, and do not adequately use them" (Human Rights Watch 2019). Armenians view family as an essential unit of Armenian society and, as such, it is of paramount importance for the survival of Armenianness. In the 2000s, JWs were perceived as a grave threat to the Armenian family as well, yet eventually religious diversity stopped being unequivocally associated with danger to family and nation after Kocharyan's presidency. New western-style regulations of domestic violence and enforced tolerance towards LGBTQ underwent the process of securitization and became the new existential concern for the

majority of Armenians.

Therefore, the efficacy of the conditionality of association with the West is contingent not only upon the domestic and international interests of a government, but also on the specific cultural attitudes that assign different values to various social phenomena. In Armenia, the individual rights promoted in and by the West are viewed as of lesser importance, while cultural and national preservation and traditional family values are considered incomparably more important. Even with the impact of conditionality, Armenian society demonstrates significantly less flexibility in reforming the latter sphere.

Precariousness of Religious Freedom in Armenia

The overall trend towards religious liberalization in Armenia since the mid-2000s is a unique trend in the post-Soviet region, except for the Baltic countries. Even in Ukraine which has been implementing more flexible religious policies during most of the post-Soviet period, religion has been increasingly politicized at the backdrop of the political and military conflict with Russia. During the past several years, Armenia's reliance on western aid significantly increased because Russia has been taking advantage of Armenia's precarious economic and military positions and openly refused to defend Armenia despite its status as an ally. As long as Armenia continues its close cooperation with the EU and the U.S., the likelihood of the deterioration of religious policies is low. Inspired by this stability, Armenian JWs have been consistently working towards turning Armenia into a regional center of the JW community, which was inconceivable before 2013. In the Summer of 2023, several international conventions are planned to take place in Armenia in order to accommodate JWs from Russia. Also, the local Bethel organizes schools for pioneers and elders from throughout the region.

Nevertheless, relative religious tolerance is not deeply entrenched in Armenian society, which makes it potentially reversible. The relatively high level of quotidian intolerance towards JWs

can be used by populist political actors, such as Robert Kocharyan, who may try to reverse the policy of religious tolerance in Armenia if they come to power. As I demonstrated in Chapter II, many Armenians readily support Kocharyan's promises to eliminate "harmful sects" from Armenia's social landscape during the 2021 election campaign. If a populist government comes to power in Armenia, the overall geopolitical orientation of Armenia may swing back towards Russia (for a similar opinion, see Giorgi 2021). In this case, the positive effect of conditionality may come to naught especially if a new government decides to completely align itself with the Russian government and to emulate Russian policies regarding JWs.

While there are NGOs and activist groups that promote the rights of LGBTQ and gender equality, as well as fight against domestic violence, very little is done in order to ensure that religious diversity is not perceived as an alien element in the Armenian socio-cultural context. Attempts on the part of populist politicians to re-politicize religious diversity may lead to the eventual re-securitization of this issue. As a result, religious minorities will be increasingly presented and perceived as a security threat to Armenia and Armenian society. Under these circumstances, religious freedom in Armenia will remain volatile and somewhat dependent on external factors, which will make the future of various religious groups in Armenia rather precarious.

APPENDICES

Appendix I. Arshak's Conversation with JW Youth at a Picnic

Having approached the main group, Arshak said loudly, "While we're waiting for barbecue to be ready, let's discuss this verse from Luke 1:29." While everyone stopped speaking, some people remained preoccupied with the things they were doing before. He asked a young girl to read the verse about angel Gabriel appearing to Mary with the Good News. The girl read the verse, "But she [Virgine Mary] was deeply disturbed at the saying and began to reason out what sort of greeting this might be."

Arshak: [looking at everyone, in a voice as if asking a riddle] Tell me, why should Mary believe [Gabriel]? She started to "reason out" which means she did not believe. She reasoned out…

Everyone was looking at him in silence as they clearly did not know how to respond.

Arshak: [continues] Ok, why did Jesus defeat Satan? What was his secret?

Young woman: Because of his faith. He was faithful.

Arshak: And why did he stay faithful? What was the source of his faith?

The woman did not have an answer. A young man in his early 20s saw the girl's confusion and joined the conversation, "What was the question?"

Arshak: "Why was Jesus strong?"

Young man: Because he first descended from the sky [pointing his finger up].

Arshak: [shaking his head, with a strong dismissive voice] That is not the reason!

Young woman: [with doubt] Love…

Arshak: [interrupting the girl] Ok, love and faith, but why did he retain love and faith? Alright, open Matthew 4:1-3.

Young man: [reads the verses] Then Jesus was led by the spirit up into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. After he had fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, he felt hungry."

Arshak: What was he doing for 40 days and nights?

Young man: He was hungry… He was fasting!

Arshak: Aha, and what does "fasting" mean?

Young man: [hesitatively] He wasn't eating anything?

Arshak: [instructively, in a patronizing way] "To fast" means "to reason" – if you reason out for 40 days and 40 nights you will defeat Satan. Same with Mary, she reasoned out and defeated the doubt. If you love God, you will reason and will come to faith and right conclusions.

Appendix II. Places of Worship of Various religious Groups in Armenia

The Cathedral of Sub Sarkis, entrance to the center of Yerevan

The Russian Orthodox Church next to the highway connecting Yerevan and the international airport

A Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, the city of Dilijan

A Baptist Church, the center of Yerevan

A Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, Yerevan, Zeytun district

The Church Jesus Christ of the Latter-Days Saints, the center of Yerevan

Appendix III. List Of Informants

Name/Alias	Age/Gender	Congregation	Basic Information
Aleks	40s/M	Russian	An elder in one of the Russian congregations. Higher education.
Angela	50s/F	Armenian	A JW from Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh).
Aghavni	60s/F	Armenian	
Ani	30s/F	Russian	A teacher. Higher education.
Anna	70s/F	Russian	Anna grew up in Baku. Never mastered Armenian
Antonina	70s/F	Russian	Dedicated JW, a pioneer. Higher Education.
Anush	30s/F	Russian	She grew up in the Truth and spent a significant part of her childhood and adolescence in Russia. High school education.
Ara	30s/M	Armenian	
Ararat	50s/M	Russian	A member of the JW community since the early 1990s. Higher education.
Areg	40s/M	Armenian	He was imprisoned for evading military service in Karabagh.
Armine	60s/F	Russian	
Arshak	70s/M	Armenian	A zealous preacher.
Artashes	70s/M	Russian	
Arusik	30s/ F	English	
Arvin	70s/M	Armenian	He used to be a member of a semi-criminal group.
Dina	50s/F	Russian	Refugee from Azerbaijan. Not baptized.
Elena	70s/F	Russian	Originally from Russia. She speaks some Armenian.
Gamlet	50s/M	Armenian	a 50-year-old JW from the Armenian Congregation.
Garik	40s/M	Armenian	

Name/Alias	Age/Gender	Congregation	Basic Information
Gayane	50s/F	Armenian	
Gena	40s/M	Armenian	A member of the JW community since the early 1990s. He was imprisoned for evading military service in the 1990s.
Grigor	30s/M	Armenian	
Hakob	40s/M	Armenian	He was baptized at the age of 24.
Hasmik	40s/F	Ex-JWs	
Hayk	40s/M	Armenian	A member of the JW community since the early 1990s. He was imprisoned for evading military service.
Hov	30s/M	Armenian	
Hrach	70s/M	Russian	Refugee from Baku. Never mastered Armenian.
Inna	70s/F	Armenian	
Karen	40s/M	Russian	
Khachik	30s/M	Armenian	Higher education.
Lilit	60s/F	Armenian	
Lyuba	60s/F	Armenian	A member of the JW community since the early 1990s. Professor at a university. Higher education.
Michael	50s/M	Non-JW	Anti-JW activist, self-proclaimed expert on new religious organizations.
Mina	30s/F	English	
Movses	50s/M	Russian	
Nadezhda	70s/F	Armenian	Nadezhda grew up in Azerbaijan but moved to Armenia at the end of the 1980s.
Nara	60s/F	Armenian	
Nona	80s/F	Non-JW	

Name/Alias	Age/Gender	Congregation	Basic Information
Narek	70s/M	Russian	He grew up in Azerbaijan but moved to Armenia in the early 1980s. Vocational school education.
Nora Petrosyan	20s/F	Ex-JW	
Nune	50s/F	Armenian	
Oganes	40s/M	Armenian	Samvel got baptized in the mid-1990s at the age of 17.
Olga	70s/F	Russian	Dedicated JW since the early 2000s. Higher education.
Robert Aharonyan	70s/M	Non-JW	A leader of the Socialist Party of Armenia. A leader of one of the anti-JW groups. Higher education
Sako	50s/M	Armenian	A JW from Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh). Sako used to work in prison and persecuted JWs.
Sarah	30s/F	English	Started as a member of an Armenian congregation but, later, moved to the English congregation.
Sevan Agadjanyan	30s/M	Non-JW	
Tigran	40s/M	Armenian	He encountered the Truth while serving a prison sentence.
Shushan	40s/F	English	
Ara	70s/M	Armenian	
Vladik	20s/M	Ex-JWs	
Vazgen	50s/M	Armenian	
Yulia	40s/F	Russian	A pioneer. Her husband is not a JW. High school education.

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