

Jehovah's Witnesses 'a cruel cult'

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Christian sect the Jehovah's Witnesses - with 64,000 active 'disciples' in Australia - are a cruel religion with no soul, according to Melbourne cultbuster Raphael Aron.

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His warning comes as the federal government considers tightening the definition of a charity to prevent some cults and quasi-religions keeping their tax free status. Independent senator Nick Xenophon has renewed calls for a national cult-busting agency.

Mr Aron, a psychologist, counsellor and director of Melbourne's Cult Counselling Australia, said the Jehovah's Witnesses had a policy of "shunning" members who left or wanted to leave by cutting them off from family members who remained.

"I am still waiting for a justification for someone to be able to rip away a five or six year old child from their extended family because Mum or Dad have decided to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses," he said.

Former members say shunning can involve bullying, threats, harassment and stalking to lure the 'apostate', or lapsed member, back. The religion's scripture magazine *The Watchtower* describes 'apostates' as "mentally diseased" outcasts who "seek to infect others."

Mr Aron says shunning is "draconian, cruel and callous." Religion and faith were supposed to provide support, comfort and warmth but shunning could crush self-esteem and give feelings of guilt, especially in children.

Late last year the federal government set up a body called the Australian Charities and Not For Profits Commission (ACNC) to regulate charities with tax-exemptions. It can de-register charities. A treasury spokesman said the government could soon redefine charities and boost their requirement for 'public benefit.'

"At the moment groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology are subsidised by the taxpayer," Senator Xenophon said. He said the French government's cultbusting agency Miviludes had been effective.

Victoria's current state inquiry into how churches handle child sex abuse has submissions from former Jehovah's Witnesses. One includes allegations of rape, sexual assault, blackmail and death threats. Others include allegations of paedophilia.

A spokesman for the church in Australia, Sydney solicitor Vincent Toole, dismissed the allegations and said shunning was a "myth."

Mr Aron, who has written two books on cults and has investigated them for thirty years, said the Jehovah's Witnesses were an outwardly benign group but they withheld information from potential recruits. Jehovah's Witnesses cannot celebrate Christmas, Easter or birthdays. They are not allowed to have blood transfusions, sing the national anthem or salute the national flag.

"They come to your door on a Sunday morning and you have a wonderful discussion about God but they never tell you that once entrenched in the religion you may never be able to say happy birthday to your children again."

They don't celebrate birthdays because they say there are no birthdays in the Bible, which Aron, an observant Jew, maintains is not true. "There's no Moomba in the Bible either," he says. "And no football. Does that mean we shouldn't do those things either?"

Jehovah's Witnesses believe they have God's messages to themselves, that all other religions are wrong, that the end of the world will come and only those in 'The Truth' will survive. They have predicted the end of the world five times. They also believe Satan has ruled the earth since 1914.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/jehovahs-witnesses-a-cruel-cult-20130315-2g5x3.html>