



**A NEW RESEARCH PROJECT ON JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES.  
INVESTIGATING THE GAP BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL  
PERCEPTION IN SIX COUNTRIES**

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## ***1. Why scientific research on Jehovah's Witnesses is necessary***

Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) are an understudied religious minority. They are the subject of numerous heated discussions on print and broadcast media. However, the validity and accuracy of the information provided by these channels cannot be fully verified because few studies have been conducted using a rigorous scientific method to investigate the Witnesses beliefs, motivations and attitudes, how they are portrayed by the media, and how they are perceived by the general public. This lack of knowledge has a particularly negative side effect: it prevents meaningful and informed discussions about the religiously motivated practices of JWs, including those that arouse public mistrust and provoke conflicts with political and legal authorities who do not consider them fully compliant with the principles and norms on which liberal and democratic states are based. Finding adequate solutions to these problems is crucial to include JWs in the social and legal fabric of our countries on an equal footing with other religious groups.

This research project, entitled "Motivations, attitudes, and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses. A cross-cultural and multi-country study" (JW-MAP), aims to fill this deficit of knowledge. Its objective is to provide scientifically precise data and information that will help to reduce the distance between the "internal perception", that is, JWs' self-awareness, or how they view their own beliefs, attitudes, and practices, and the "external perception", that is, how the general public understands and evaluates the beliefs, attitudes,

and practices of JW's. Without this first fundamental step, relations between JW's, public authorities and the general public are likely to remain tense. This will prevent any real progress in terms of social integration and legal recognition.

## ***2. What is the subject of the research project?***

The project, which began in 2023, considers six countries with different cultural backgrounds and socio-legal attitudes toward JW's. They are: Argentina, Canada, France, Japan, Nigeria, and United Kingdom. In each country, particular attention has been given to five policy areas (education, family, gender, health and well-being issues, participation in public life), with a focus on questions that generate tensions between JW's and a part of the country's population.

## ***3. Research methodology***

The research makes use of sociological and legal methodology. The former is used to investigate the motivations, attitudes, and practices of JW's in each country and the perception that the population of a country has of them. The latter is used to analyze the institutional and legal framework of the six countries within which JW's act, as well as the case-law of their courts. In this way, the motivations, attitudes, and practices of JW's can be understood in light of the different national contexts.

The research is based on four distinct but connected pillars of inquiry: six national reports which describe the social, political, and legal situation of JWs in each country and provide historical and demographic background information about them (1); two sociological surveys which analyze the attitude of the general public toward JWs (2) and the JWs' perspective on their religious beliefs and practices and the society in which they live (3); an analysis of the views and information presented in social media about JWs (4).

The following further explains these lines of research.

1) NATIONAL REPORTS. For each of the six countries, one or two experts were selected from among scholars with a background in history, law or sociology, and were tasked with preparing a report on their respective country. They were chosen exclusively on the basis of their scientific expertise and were provided with the same report outline to ensure comparability. The reports address the following topics: the history and demography of JWs; the areas in which their practices are considered controversial (education, health issues, child custody and family issues, participation in public life, public ministry (proselytism), attitudes towards people of different beliefs and towards those who have left the JW organization, etc.) and the state's political and legal responses; the portrayal of JWs' beliefs and practices in traditional and social media; and the impact of this portrayal on public opinion, public institutions and other religious organizations.

2) SURVEY ON THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF JWS. To assess the general public's opinions about JWS, an international polling and data company, YouGov, submitted five questions to a sample of some 2,000 people in each country. The questions related to a number of different religious groups (including JWS) and asked the respondents for their opinion of each group (favourable, neutral or unfavourable), their knowledge of the groups' beliefs and practices, and the sources of information they used. The survey also asked about perceptions of prejudice against each group, and how much religious freedom should be granted to religions and religious minorities in general.

3) SURVEY ON THE JWS' MOTIVATIONS, ATTITUDES, AND PRACTICES. To collect data and information about JWS' motivations, attitudes and practices, including those related to the legal and social challenges they face, an online anonymous survey was conducted using a questionnaire distributed to baptised JWS over the age of 17 in randomly selected congregations in the countries considered in the research. The questions addressed the following topics: spirituality and religious beliefs; religiosity and religious identity; religious motivations and orientations; religious upbringing; religious practice; change in religious involvement; leaving and returning to faith community; interaction with the disfellowshipped or disassociated persons; attitudes towards medical treatment, including blood transfusions; social values and trust; moral values; sense of security; perceptions of discrimination and intolerance; parenting attitudes and experiences; education and child-

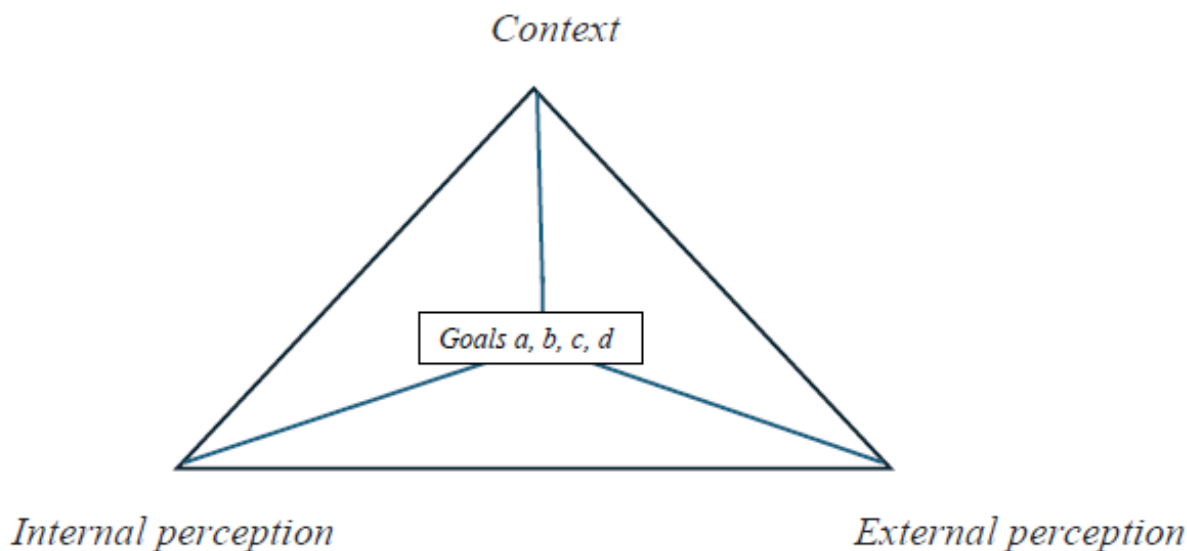
rearing; experiences of childhood; health and wellbeing; social networks and friendships; civic values and engagement. The anonymous survey, which involved about 2000 respondents in each country, has followed strict ethical protocols, including an informed consent stating the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the survey.

4) ANALYSIS OF YOUTUBE PORTRAYAL OF JWS. Social media platforms are rich sources of information generated by people with different geographical, gender-based, class-based, political, religious and cultural characteristics. These platforms generate vast amounts of data which offer researchers considerable potential to explore and understand people's perceptions, sentiments, and frameworks for interpreting social realities that transcend all kinds of boundaries, both local and global. Acknowledging the significance of social media in discerning how JWs are perceived and depicted, an analysis of YouTube videos and comments over the past five years has been carried out to assess YouTube users' attitudes towards JWs in the six countries under scrutiny in this project. The analysis made use of a mixed-method study which includes (a) qualitative, inductive reasoning methods of top content creators and (b) quantitative findings of comments pertaining to JWs. The study identifies common themes used in YouTube video content and comments about this religious group. An overview of findings from all six countries combined is provided first, followed by results organized by country.

These four research lines aim to highlight the three elements that form the focus of this study, and whose interaction constitutes its main novelty and interest: internal perception, external perception and context. As previously mentioned, internal perception refers to how JW's view their own beliefs, attitudes, and practices: the responses to the questionnaire distributed to them provide a comprehensive picture of this. External perception refers to how the general public understands and evaluates the beliefs, attitudes and practices of JW's: the survey conducted by YouGov and the analysis of YouTube materials provide useful insights into this second dimension of the research. However, the data and information collected through these surveys must be contextualized: Japan is different from France. National reports provide the socio-historical background and legal framework that are essential for correctly interpreting the sociological data. Exploring and explaining the interaction between these three components makes it possible to attain the four main goals of the research project:

- a) Testing whether there is a gap between internal and external perception, and exploring its depth in relation to each country and thematic area.
- b) Noting the misconceptions and suspicions that generate stereotypes, which may fuel this gap and make dialogue difficult between JW's and the social environment where they live.
- c) Assessing the political and legal strategies implemented in each country to reduce this gap.
- d) Developing appropriate responses to reduce the tensions and conflicts that accompany some JW's' practices.

The methodology underlying the entire research project could be represented graphically as follows.



#### ***4. The organizational structure of the research project***

The research team consists of more than a dozen scholars, selected solely on the basis of their scientific expertise by the project coordinator, Silvio Ferrari. The team is assisted by an International Advisory Board consisting of three distinguished researchers: Eileen Barker, Enzo Pace and David Voas.

The research team includes:

- ✚ Eight national rapporteurs (France and Japan have two each), who are responsible for preparing national reports on the six countries covered by the project

- ✚ Three thematic experts, who provide expert assistance in discipline-specific areas related to the project. They cover the areas of family and education, spiritual wellbeing, and medical issues
- ✚ Two scholars of journalism and social media, who examined posts and comments published on YouTube
- ✚ A sociologist, who prepared the questionnaire distributed to JWs.

Financial support for the research project comes from the Laura and Lorenz Reibling Family Foundation (<https://reiblingfoundation.org/>), an organization that funds research, publications and exhibitions in the fields of education, human rights, religious freedom, the Holocaust, genocide and medical research. When needed, the research consultant for the Foundation was available to provide support for the administrative and cultural aspects of the project.

The part of the research project involving the distribution of a questionnaire to JWs could only be carried out with the cooperation of the Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, which provided a list of the existing congregations in the six countries. The sociologist in charge of this part of the project then randomly selected the congregations to be involved in the research from this list. The Congregation also provided translations of the questionnaire into French, Japanese, Spanish and Nigerian Pidgin. The Congregation's involvement in these aspects of the research was overseen by the project coordinator and adhered to the criteria typically applied to guarantee the impartiality of scientific research involving participation by

the organization being studied (a common procedure for research on religious organizations).

### ***5. Expected deliverables***

The research findings will be presented and discussed in three books to be published by a renowned academic publisher. The first book will provide an overview of the overall results of the research, while the subsequent two books will offer more detailed analyses of specific countries and themes.

Some materials, such as the text of the questionnaire and the questions from the YouGov survey, will be made available on a dedicated website.

### ***6. First results***

Although the results of the research will not be available until 2026, it has already been possible to provide an illustrative indication of the wealth of data being produced.

According to the YouGov survey, JWs are the religious group viewed most unfavourably by citizens in the countries covered by the research. When asked about JWs, 41% of the population responded "unfavourable" to the question "Do you have a favourable or unfavourable opinion of each of the following religious groups in your country?". The same response was given by 30% of the population for Mormons and Muslims, 16% for Jews, 13% for Catholics, and 12% for Buddhists.

France is the country with the highest percentage of "unfavourable" responses: 51% of the population chose this option. France is followed by the United Kingdom (45%), Japan (44%) and Canada (43%), which have very similar percentages. Argentina (34%) and Nigeria (18%) are the countries with the least unfavourable attitudes towards JWs. The latter is the only country where favourable responses (42%) outnumber unfavourable ones. These data illustrate the impact of different cultural traditions and highlight the significance of adopting a contextual approach when considering the public perception of JWs and their practices.

The percentage of people who respond unfavourably increases with age: ranging from 33% of people aged 18–24 to 48% of people aged over 55.

Among people who profess a religion, this percentage increases as religious practice decreases, ranging from 29% of those who stated "I practise my religion" to 46% of those who responded "I belong to a religion but do not practice".

These data would require extensive analysis and discussion, which is not possible here. We will simply point out that they were obtained from the responses to a single question in the survey conducted by YouGov. It is therefore easy to imagine how extensive the wealth of data and information will be once the results of this research are published. It is my hope that they will contribute to a real change of conversation in the ongoing debate about the place of JWs in our society.