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Jehovah's Witnesses: Higher Education and the Squeeze Theorem

In 1848, Horace Mann, an early pioneer of public education within the United States, became famous for his progressive stance on education, namely, "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the *great equalizer of the conditions of men*, — the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (Mann 669; *emphasis added*). In other words, the most effective way to lift people out of poverty or, to make their conditions equal to those who are not impoverished, is to ensure that they obtain a fruitful education. In our modern day, the education that serves as that "great equalizer" is higher education, specifically, education that results in a bachelor's degree or higher. According to statistics referenced by the Social Security Administration, "Men with bachelor's degrees earn approximately \$900,000 more in median lifetime earnings than high school graduates. Women with bachelor's degrees earn \$630,000 more" (Tamborini et al). Now that it is established how vital higher education is, how astonishing would it be to know that the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly its leadership and the publications produced by them, promote a set of doctrinal teachings and a culture, that causes Jehovah's Witnesses to *not* pursue higher education?¹ Not

¹ At this point, it is prudent to address the terms and phrases, "the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses," "one of Jehovah's Witnesses," and "Jehovah's Witnesses". The phrase, "the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses," refers to the *collective organization* comprising individual members. "Jehovah's Witnesses" are *the* individual members of "the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses." Lastly, "one of Jehovah's Witnesses," refers to *an* individual who is a member of the "religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses."

only is that indeed astonishing but, more substantively, it is detrimental to its members, specifically to members who grow up and are raised within the religious community.

In most research papers, it is easy to write from a third-person perspective because there typically exists secondary research and there are relatively few barriers to performing primary research on the subject at hand. However, great difficulty arises when the subject of Jehovah's Witnesses is being investigated because the community does not allow its members to communicate with non-members unless the purpose is to make non-members, members. Resultantly, most of the secondary research, as it relates to Jehovah's Witnesses, is from non-academic sources and such research largely consists of anecdotal accounts of former Jehovah's Witnesses. Furthermore, if primary research were to be conducted, the results would be biased because the data would come only from former members. However, I am in a unique position because I am still currently a member of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses, and at potential risk to myself, am publicly writing about the community. Therefore, what follows is largely an account of my personal experience. The first section of this paper will describe the nature of the religious community of Jehovah's Witness and its three central doctrines. The second section will show, by analogy to The Squeeze Theorem in the field of Mathematics, how those doctrines combine to force members not to pursue higher education and the results ensuing therefrom. Finally, the third section will consist of concluding remarks and a proposed solution.

1. NATURE AND DOCTRINE

The nature of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses can be discerned by knowing its composition. There are two groups of people who compose the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses — (1) those who join voluntarily as adults and (2), those who are children of the first group. The experiences of the two groups differ. Members of the first group

make a conscious decision, although heavily influenced by their emotional state at the time of the decision, to adhere to the doctrines of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses. Members of the second group are barraged with doctrine as minors and either adhere to or get formally shunned out of the community by the remaining members, including their families. The experience of how my mother got into the religion illustrates this concept and it is a common experience for the overwhelming majority of current members.

In 1990, my mother's youngest brother was shot and killed at only thirteen years of age. Two months following his death, my mother's grandmother, who raised her until she was eight years old and with whom she shared a deep relationship, died of natural causes. My mother, wallowing in grief, got a knock on the door from two Jehovah's Witnesses, who related to her a promise, that she will be able to see her brother and grandmother again, in the flesh and on this Earth, soon. My mother believed that promise and got baptized, thereby officially becoming one of Jehovah's Witnesses, devoting the rest of her life to preaching to others about that promise *soon* to be fulfilled. Consequently, my mother, although being married to my father who was not one of Jehovah's Witnesses at that time, raised me and my brothers in the community. Unlike my mother who was persuaded as an adult, to voluntarily be a part of that religious community, my brothers and I were not. In other words, my mother joined the religion when she was at a moment in her life where she had experienced the traumatic loss of two close family members. Because the religious community offered her a tangible hope for the future, she joined. She was already an adult when she joined, she was married and in a stable economic condition. She falls into the first group of Jehovah's Witnesses. Then she gave birth to my brothers and me. So, my brothers and I are in the second group. Accordingly, from 1998 until the time of this writing, I

have been embedded within the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses.² If I tried to leave the religious community at this time, I would lose all contact and support from my parents. This is the nature of the community — it is a community of adults who joined the religion because they were in emotionally traumatic moments of their lives and the children of those adults. Those children do not have emotional traumas but, are nonetheless subjected to doctrines and teachings that they are supposed to take seriously or else face ostracism from all the other members.

The first and most central doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses is that the world, in the form we currently know it, where human governments rule over us, will soon come to an end, and be replaced by an invisible government ruled by God. In other words, they believe that the current conditions under which we live, are temporary. Additionally, in the new world to come, only current Jehovah's Witnesses and those whom God will resurrect, who submit to God's rulership, will live forever under God's rule in a peaceful world, characterized by paradisaic conditions. In that world, no one will die, there will be no deadly natural disasters or sickness, and everyone will joyfully serve God for eternity. What is crucial about this belief is that they think that this will happen soon. And by soon, they mean, that it is likely to come within their lifetime.

Jehovah's Witnesses are constantly reminded about this promise from God at least three times each week.³ As a rather extreme, but all too often, common example of what soon means to many within the community, my mother told me in 2009, when I was in the fifth grade, that there is a high likelihood that the end of the world would come prior to me being able to graduate from

² This paper will be published in June 2023. Therefore, I am writing with 25 years of experience within this religious community. I have held positions of leadership within the community and 25 years is more than enough time to gain a firm grasp of its doctrine and culture.

³ On either a Saturday or Sunday, every Jehovah's Witness attends a meeting that lasts for one hour and 45 minutes. On one day during the midweek (Monday -Friday), every Jehovah's Witness attends another meeting that lasts for at least one hour and 45 minutes. The third meeting is typically on a Saturday or Sunday, which is not as formal as the others, but it is where they engage in an activity called "preaching," where the doctrine of the end of the world coming soon is prominently reinforced, because in that activity, they tell members of the public about that teaching. "Preaching" will be discussed later.

high school in 2016. Overall, this central teaching that the end of the world is coming soon permeates and justifies every other doctrine that is held and taught by Jehovah's Witnesses. This doctrine that we are living in the last days of this world is known well enough by outsiders that Pernilla Liedgren, an Associate Professor at Dalarna University in Falun, Sweden, describes the doctrine as such in her study about Jehovah's Witness children in Swedish schools (Liedgren 32). On its own merits, this doctrine is powerful enough to cause many Jehovah's Witnesses not to pursue higher education because only futility would result from the pursuit if the world were to end before one could benefit from such an education. However, that doctrine is only one of three. Because Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the end of the world is imminent and that, consequently, this world is temporary, they also believe that they are socially, politically, and culturally, separate from this world.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that they are "no part of this world." By "no part of this world," they do not mean that they are physically separate from the world, but rather, they believe that they are politically neutral, socially and culturally separate and that they are temporary residents. Politically neutral means that they do not actively participate in the political and civic institutions of society. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses do not engage in protests, they do not vote in elections, they do not contribute to political campaigns, they do not enlist in any branches of the military, nor do they hold jobs in any positions that would cause them to participate in such activities. Being socially and culturally separate means that Jehovah's Witnesses do not actively pursue relationships with individuals who are not Jehovah's Witnesses and they do not participate in the cultural traditions and trends of the day. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate holidays, they do not celebrate birthdays, they dress conservatively, and they limit their contact to members of the religious community, even to the

exclusion of relatives if they are not members of the religious community. Again, this doctrine is sufficiently known by outsiders that Liedgren states, “Jehovah’s Witnesses consider themselves to be *in the world but not a part of the world.*” Collectively, this doctrine causes Jehovah’s Witnesses to be suspicious of anything that is outside the tight borders of the religious community. Hence, the doctrine of the world ending soon and the doctrine of being no part of the world, culminate in the third and final central doctrine of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that God commanded them to preach to the world, that the end of the world is coming soon.⁴ Liedgren confirms this in her study where she states, “Believing that they are the sole organisation on earth that teaches ‘the truth’, Jehovah’s Witnesses perceive themselves as having a duty to spread the message throughout the world. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that the practice of the early church was to go from house to house.” This is one of the most important activities that Jehovah’s Witnesses engage in because they believe that they are saving lives, at least if not the lives of others, they believe that they are preserving their own. This activity is considered paramount, and accordingly, organize and plan their entire lives around it. Members are required to keep track of how much time they spend preaching to others and must report it to their local elders monthly.⁵ The purpose of keeping track of their time spent preaching is to reinforce the idea that they are engaged in sacred,

⁴ Jehovah’s Witnesses do not “preach” in the way that is common among most mainstream Churches of Christianity. Preaching, to Jehovah’s Witnesses, is not a term reserved for a pastor or a “preacher” giving a speech or sermon to a group of people. Rather, Jehovah’s Witnesses see preaching as an obligation bestowed upon them by God to directly reach out to individuals, typically at their homes, to educate them about the Bible. Specifically, their goal is to present their doctrine in a way that causes individuals to become Jehovah’s Witnesses.

⁵ Elders are men who “take the lead” in congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not explicitly claim to have a leadership structure. However, as an insider, I can attest to the fact that they do have a leadership structure. Publishers are at the bottom, then ministerial servants, then elders, then circuit overseers, then the Service Department, then the Branch Committee, then the Governing Body, then Jesus, and then finally, God (whom the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim, is Jehovah).

lifesaving, work. Therefore, they need to ensure that they are spending as much time in their lives trying to get people to become Jehovah's Witnesses.

Thus far, we have shown that the nature of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses is one that is characterized by two groups — (1) adults who join voluntarily and see the religious community as a mechanism to cope with their traumas, and (2), children of those adults. Three central doctrines are taught to, imposed on, and held by, its members. Specifically, they are, (1) the end of the world is coming soon, (2) Jehovah's Witnesses are no part of the world, and (3) their most important obligation is to spend as much of their time preaching to people and influencing them to become members of the religious community. At this point, a salient observation must be expressed. There does not exist an explicit doctrine that requires the members of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses to not pursue higher education. However, when the nature of the community along with its three central doctrines are considered in the aggregate, then the issue of Jehovah's Witnesses not pursuing higher education emerges.

2. THE SQUEEZE THEOREM AND FORCED CHOICE

As an insider of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses and specifically a member of the group comprising children who were born and raised in the community, I have found that the leadership is careful not to state radical beliefs explicitly. The reason for that practice is so that the leadership can be free from liability if someone were to have a negative experience after relying on a radical belief in their decision-making process. However, it turns out that radical beliefs do not need to be stated explicitly to be acted upon and believed explicitly when such radical beliefs are implied from broader doctrines that are explicitly stated to be true.

Drawing from the field of Mathematics, a theorem known as The Squeeze Theorem illustrates the veracity of such a claim.

In the context of Mathematics, a theorem is a statement or proposition that is not self-evidently true but is indeed true, because it has or can be proved with other known truths. The Squeeze Theorem is one example of a theorem because it has been proved. It is relevant to this discussion because it establishes the logical basis for understanding how Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly the children of the adults who are born and raised within the community, are forced by adherence to the three central doctrines along with continual exhortation by its leadership of such doctrines, to not pursue higher education. The Squeeze Theorem, in its essence, states that the unknown limit of a function, g , at a certain point, is equal to the known limits of two functions, f , and h , at that point, when the function g , lies between f and h (Mastin). In other words, the Squeeze Theorem establishes as true, the claim that you can know the value of something that is impossible to know directly if everything that surrounds that unknown value, is known with certainty. If "unknown limit of a function" or "unknown value," is replaced with "not pursuing higher education," and "known limits of two functions," is replaced with "the three central doctrines," then the Squeeze Theorem becomes a perfect analog. That theorem elucidates the process by which the central doctrines and the exhortation by the leadership within the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses, force its members to not pursue higher education.

Given that the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses is split into two groups, the leadership must be careful when imposing doctrine that will be equally absorbed by all members of the community. A material minority of the members of the group of Jehovah's Witnesses who voluntarily joined as adults obtained higher education prior to formally joining the religious community. Therefore, if the leadership were to explicitly state that all members were not

allowed to pursue higher education, then that would cause rifts between those who came into the religion with higher education and those who did not. Consequently, the official and explicit teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses regarding the pursuit of higher education is that the pursuit of higher education is a personal decision, albeit thoroughly discouraged. This is confirmed by Liedgren who writes, "Witnesses tend to disapprove of higher education." In addition, George Chryssides of York St. John University in York England states in the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, that, unlike other Christian religions, "Jehovah's Witnesses do not place the same value on academia, and indeed discourage their members from entering higher education." It is evident from those academic sources, that outsiders hold the official view purported by the leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses. However, through a brief explication of published material from the leadership of the religious community, and two experiences of former members of the community, it will be shown how the Squeeze Theorem applies, thereby proving that not only is higher education discouraged, but members are forced not to pursue it.

In the first section, it was mentioned that the second central doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses is that they are no part of the world. That doctrine is not questioned by the members and is upheld as divine truth. Additionally, it was stated that being no part of the world included remaining socially and culturally separate from the world. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that mere interaction with people who are not Jehovah's Witnesses outside of their preaching activities brings members to spiritual harm. Spiritual harm means that a member loses their relationship with God or strays away from the religious community of Jehovah. Therefore, a Jehovah's Witness would not deliberately attend an educational institution where they would be in constant communication with non-Jehovah's Witnesses. That is the message that Anthony Morris III, a member of the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses, conveyed to the entire community in January of 2015. He mentioned that "If we are in continual association

with those who do not believe the same, it can erode our thinking and convictions” (Morris).⁶ He also mentions that “Higher education often instills a sense of superiority and self-reliance that is in direct opposition to the Christian personality” (Morris). These two quotes reinforce the central doctrine that Jehovah’s Witnesses are to be no part of the world. Therefore, the message is clear that pursuing higher education is not the choice to make if you want to be no part of the world. So, this is just one video that shows how the religious community does not need to explicitly tell its members not to pursue higher education. However, there is another source from the leadership of the religious community that illustrates how the central doctrine is used to force members to decide not to pursue higher education.

The first and third central doctrines of the religious community of Jehovah’s Witnesses — the end of the world is coming soon, and the command to preach — combine to create an effect, such that a member would not decide to pursue higher education. Mark Sanderson is a member of the Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses. He gave a talk to the entire community of Jehovah’s Witnesses through a video published on the community’s website titled, “Young People — Choose a Path That Leads to Peace!” He begins the talk by describing his own personal experience with not pursuing higher education. He mentions that he rejected scholarships and grants because he wanted to be a “regular pioneer” (Sanderson).⁷ The item of interest in this talk is that he is targeting his message to members of the group in the religious community comprising children of adults who joined voluntarily. These members never had the option to obtain education prior to joining the community because they were forced into it from birth. He is telling these members that the best life that they can live during the end of this

⁶ As of February 22, 2023, Anthony Morris III is no longer a member of the Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Governing Body is the highest-ranking group of members within the religion, directly underneath Jesus.

⁷ A regular pioneer is a Jehovah’s Witness who spends a minimum of 50 hours each month preaching. However, at the time the talk was recorded, a regular pioneer needed to devote a minimum of 70 hours each month to the preaching activity.

world is to engage in “full-time service” (Sanderson).⁸ The need to engage in full-time service derives from the command to preach and the command to preach derives from the end of the world coming soon. Therefore, a member cannot pursue higher education while simultaneously believing that they need to spend most of their time preaching to others that the end of this world is coming soon.

After reviewing two sources directly from the leadership of the religious community of Jehovah’s Witnesses, it is now apparent how the decision to not pursue higher education is forced upon its members by means of The Squeeze Theorem. The three central doctrines, assumed to be true and explicitly taught to its members, encompass the personal decision to pursue higher education. It has been established that higher education would not allow a member to be no part of the world. It has been established that pursuing higher education would cause a member to not devote enough time to preaching. It has been established that pursuing higher education would cause a member to not believe that the end of the world is coming soon because they would have to devote a minimum of four years of their life to benefit from it. On that account, the answer to the question of pursuing higher education is a resounding no, after considering the three central doctrines and the exhortations from the highest-ranking members of the community. Accordingly, the Squeeze Theorem necessitates that a member must not pursue higher education even though such teaching or choice would never be explicitly stated.

Although it has thus been argued on logical grounds that members are forced to not pursue higher education, the lived experiences of many Jehovah’s Witnesses confirm that fact and provide a window into the harm caused by that forced choice. In the *NPR* article, “Lack of Education Leads to Lost Dreams and Low Income for Many Jehovah’s Witnesses,” author Luke Vander Ploeg relates the experience of Zachary Linderer. Zachary Linderer grew up as a

⁸ Full-time service is a broad category that includes construction labor, working full-time at the headquarters of the religion, or traveling to areas of the country or world where Jehovah’s Witnesses do not have a large presence to preach.

Jehovah's Witness. By the time he was approaching his high school graduation, Linderer wanted to go to college and study the sciences. However, Ploeg quotes Linderer as saying, "My dad told me that he knew people who were into science and it dragged them right out of the organization, right out of the truth." Linderer ended up dropping out of high school prior to graduation because he knew that he was not going to get the support of his parents to attend college. Ploeg also relates the account of Amber McGee. McGee was homeschooled and received a poor education because her mother never finished high school. McGee was able to graduate high school, but at 34 years of age, she has not lived a year where she has earned over \$14,000.⁹ These experiences undoubtedly highlight the harmful effects of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses forcing their members not to pursue higher education.

As indicated earlier, it is virtually impossible to conduct primary research within the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses. However, there does exist demographic data about Jehovah's Witnesses that verifies the claims made heretofore regarding Jehovah's Witnesses and higher education. As was mentioned at the outset, higher education serves as the modern-day incarnation of the "great equalizer." Therefore, it should be to no surprise that those who do not possess higher education fall within the lowest economic strata. According to the *Pew Research Center* and their 2015 "Religious Landscape Study", 63% of all Jehovah's Witnesses have a High School diploma or less. 25% of all Jehovah's Witnesses have some college (Pew Research Center). That means that 88% of all Jehovah's Witnesses do not have a bachelor's degree. What else can explain that number other than the fact that the central doctrines of Jehovah's Witnesses force members not to pursue higher education? This lack of higher education is also reflected in the income distribution of Jehovah's Witnesses. 48% of all Jehovah's Witnesses earn less than \$30,000 per year. 25% earn between \$30,000 and \$49,999. 22% of Jehovah's Witnesses earn between \$50,000 and \$99,999 (Pew Research Center). This means

⁹ As of February 19, 2017

that 95% of Jehovah's Witnesses earn less than \$100,000 per year. These statistics lend great credence to the central claim.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The United States was founded on the idea of religious freedom to such and was so important that the First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof (sic)..." (The Constitution of the United States). If the First Amendment were considered in isolation, a case could be made to proscribe Congress from prohibiting the free exercise of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses. However, the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States says that the Constitution was established to "promote the general Welfare" of the People of the United States (The Constitution of the United States). Therefore, should a religion that inhibits the general Welfare of its members be allowed to freely exercise? I do not think so. A religion should not be able to force its members either directly or indirectly to not pursue higher education. Higher education is necessary to lift individuals out of poverty and to secure a life characterized by thriving, not mere survival. Therefore, I believe that the government should require that all religions encourage their members to obtain a higher education. Our civilization depends on adaptation and innovation and such feats can only be accomplished through higher education.

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