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## Jehovah's Witnesses and National Oaths of Allegiance

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Jehovah's Witnesses are a religious group who look to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Inc. as one of its primary legal organizations; it's their "voice".<sup>1, 2</sup> During the 1930s and 40s, Jehovah's Witnesses were at the center of a stir over refusal to salute the flag of or pledge allegiance to the United States.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Jehovah's Witness leaders frequently steer their followers not to pledge allegiance to any government other than God's Kingdom.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>

Jehovah's Witnesses take this religious position seriously. In the 1930s and 40s Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States suffered terrible persecution for refusing to pledge allegiance to the United States.<sup>7</sup> During the 1960s and 70s, Jehovah's Witnesses in the African nation of Malawi suffered horrendous persecution because "they owe allegiance only to Jehovah."<sup>8, 9</sup> U.S. courts have upheld Jehovah's Witnesses' right to refuse to pledge allegiance. Furthermore, in recent years, courts have awarded damages to members in civil cases where Witnesses sued employers and potential employers over their refusal to sign oaths of allegiance because "their religion does not permit them to take an oath in which they must swear faith or allegiance to any entity other than God."<sup>10</sup>

Despite the historical position demonstrated by members, and based on a thorough review of reference material, few realize that while Watch Tower leaders were publicly counseling followers not to take national oaths of allegiance these same leaders were pledging allegiance to the U.S. government.<sup>11</sup>

**Key words:** Jehovah's Witnesses; Watch Tower; allegiance; flag; oath

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The oath of allegiance to the United States reads:

"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation, or purpose of evasion; So help me God."<sup>12</sup>

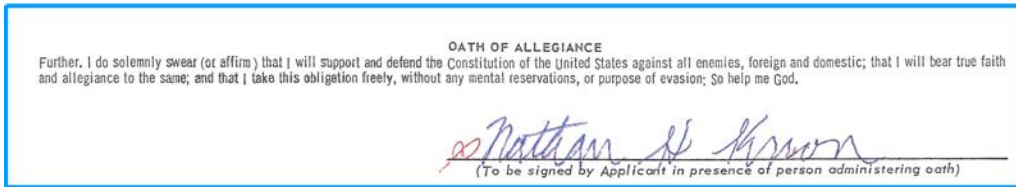
Officers of the U.S. armed forces, federal officers and appointees, naturalized aliens and—prior to the early 1970s—citizens seeking passports, all pledge this oath of national allegiance.

Oaths of allegiance to the United States have been used since the days of the American Revolution as a means to determine national allegiance, particularly during times of war. During the American Civil War between the Confederate States of America and the United States, the U.S. government rigorously used a version of the above oath to determine on which side of the conflict a person placed their loyalty.<sup>13, 14, 15</sup>

To pledge this oath is to pledge allegiance to the U.S. government.<sup>16, 17, 18, 19, 20</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses appear to recognize this is true in the case of, for instance, becoming a naturalized citizen.<sup>21</sup> In this instance Watch Tower literature speaks approvingly of taking the national oath of allegiance.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand Jehovah's Witnesses maintain "they proclaim allegiance to ... none of the nations," and "that you just won't find Jehovah's Witnesses saying a pledge of allegiance to any country."<sup>23, 24</sup>

When speaking specifically of this oath as found on passport applications, the religious literature of Jehovah's Witnesses speaks of this pledge of allegiance not as to the government or to the Constitution, but as an "[oath] of allegiance to defend the Constitution."<sup>25</sup> Although true this oath is to defend the Constitution, it is much more than that—it is an oath of allegiance *to* the constitution, *to* the government of the United States. That is, this

oath is *the* national oath of allegiance recognized by Congress, courts, schools, other nation states and nongovernment literary works as *the* pledge of allegiance to the United States. This is of particular note because Watch Tower literature seems to avoid speaking about this fundamental meaning of the national oath of allegiance, and a little known bit of information may help explain why.



From the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century until the 1970s leaders of Jehovah’s Witnesses were pledging the national oath of allegiance to the United States government. It is paradoxical to pledge allegiance to a country and at the same time claim not to. Jehovah’s Witnesses have asserted that they refuse to pledge allegiance to national governments, yet this is precisely what Nathan Homer Knorr, president of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, did on multiple occasions on his personal passport applications.<sup>26</sup> Historical records document that other Watch Tower presidents also took the same oath of allegiance.<sup>27, 28, 29</sup>

Watch Tower literature draws a distinction between full and relative allegiance to national governments and laws.<sup>30</sup> Since in terms of allegiance the national oath carries the same weight as—if not more than—the pledge of allegiance to the U.S. government routinely offered by children in schools it leaves one to wonder what makes one offensive and the other not?<sup>31</sup>

Watch Tower leaders have asserted a strong position against pledges of allegiance to governments, referring to such pledges as a Devil inspired scheme.<sup>32</sup> Quoting Daniel P. Mannix, Watch Tower literature states, “Christians refused to . . . sacrifice to the emperor’s genius—roughly equivalent today to refusing to salute the flag or repeat the oath of allegiance. . . .”<sup>33</sup> Jehovah’s Witness leaders have applied these words to their followers, making a show of abiding by them. However, again noting that Mannix cites the oath of allegiance as a modern-day rough equivalent to sacrificing to Roman emperors—an act of worship—one cannot avoid the fact that leaders of Jehovah’s Witnesses were pledging the oath of allegiance.

Jehovah’s Witnesses have identified taking national oaths of allegiance as acts of worship, as “*religions*” and “*religious expression*.”<sup>34, 35, 36</sup> If we accept Mannix’s statement, as the Watch Tower Society apparently wants its readers to do, or if we accept the religion’s own statements, we are forced to conclude Jehovah’s Witnesses’ leaders engaged in a form of contemporary Emperor worship and/or idolatry.

The rank and file of Jehovah’s Witnesses has taken a decidedly different position than its leaders. Rather than taking the oath of allegiance to national governments, rank and file members have been willing to suffer harsh deprivation and severe persecution, including rape and murder.

“Well, all you have to do is say I give my allegiance to God and my country, and you can go back to school; you can go back down.”—Smith, 2005

Jehovah’s Witnesses are still exposed to ridicule from peers because, as instructed by their religion, they are taught by their parents to refuse to pledge the oath of allegiance or to salute the flag in school.<sup>39</sup>

It is well known that beginning in the 1930s children of Jehovah’s Witnesses were a primary focus of persecution for refusing to salute the flag and/or to pledge the oath of allegiance in schools.<sup>37, 38</sup> Today young children of

“Finley then took Kathleen into a cloakroom, where she beat the back of Kathleen’s legs with a black rubber hose. When she finished, Finley shoved Kathleen down the stairs and told her not to come back to school.”—Smith, 2005

Jehovah's Witnesses have lost employment because they understood a tenet of their religion is that it is wrong for Christians to pledge the oath of allegiance, and accordingly they refused.<sup>40, 41</sup>

“Among those who testified was Zari Wigfall, a Jehovah's Witness who said she twice lost jobs at Sacramento City College in 1994 because of the oath, first as a student tour guide and later as a theater house manager for a children's play.”—The Los Angeles Times, 2008

#### ***How He Lost His Job***

“At Valdosta, Georgia, John Priester, faithful Negro employee of the city, and one of Jehovah's witnesses, was deprived of employment, and therefore a means of livelihood, because he did not see his way clear to sign the oath of allegiance to the constitution of the state of Georgia.”—The Golden Age, 1935

Employers have been forced to pay monetary awards to Jehovah's Witnesses when these have lost employment or employment opportunity for refusing to take the oath as a central tenet taught by their religion. For example, in the early 1990s two Jehovah's Witnesses, Lanell Bessard and Tanella Bridges, successfully sued the California Community College system. They were refused employment because they objected to signing the oath of allegiance. UPI news service reported that a federal jury awarded the two women nearly \$260,000 in damages.<sup>42</sup> A central premise of their lawsuit was that the California employer conditioned employment on an oath their religion prohibited them from taking.<sup>43</sup> Yet the wording these Jehovah's Witness plaintiffs objected to is specifically found in the oath of allegiance that presidents of Watch Tower pledged without any mental reservation.

“A federal jury has awarded two Jehovah's Witnesses nearly \$260,000 because they were denied work in the state community college system, officials said Thursday. The two were dropped from job pools because they refused to sign the state loyalty oath on religious grounds.”—United Press International, BC cycle, 1995

In the small African nation of Malawi Jehovah's Witnesses experienced national expulsion, rape and murder because of their belief that they “can give their allegiance only to Jehovah God and his Kingdom.”<sup>44</sup>

The religious position taught by Watch Tower to Jehovah's Witnesses is not all it seems to be. When leaders need a passport it is acceptable for them to pledge the oath of allegiance to the United States. When young children are in school it is unacceptable for them to pledge the oath of allegiance to the United States.

In the landmark *Barnette v West Virginia State Board of Education*, Jehovah's Witness leaders offered an alternate pledge for children of Jehovah's Witness. This alternate pledge reads:

“I have pledged my unqualified allegiance and devotion to Jehovah, the Almighty God, and to His Kingdom, for which Jesus commands all Christians to pray. I respect the flag of the United States and acknowledge it as a symbol of freedom and justice to all. I pledge allegiance and obedience to all the laws of the United States that are consistent with God's law, as set forth in the Bible.”<sup>45</sup>

Conspicuous by its absence from this alternate language is the same oath of allegiance Watch Tower leaders were at the time and thereafter pledging themselves without reservation. Compared to the above alternate pledge, the recognized oath of allegiance to the United States is concise and has the prestige of recognition by the U.S. Congress, the judiciary, mainstream publications, school authorities and the general public. In fact, the national oath of allegiance was recognized long before the simple pledges offered in schoolrooms by children. If the national oath of allegiance is acceptable for Watch Tower's leadership there is then something amiss as to why Watch Tower leadership did not assert it to members as acceptable.

At the very least, there is something inconsistent about an organization whose presidents and highest officials willingly and readily pledge allegiance to the United States yet watch children of their members suffer untold

pressure and persecution, and adults suffer unemployment for refusing to do the same thing as though the act were contrary to tenets of the faith. Additionally, it creates moral, ethical, social and legal dilemmas to observe members of this religion prevail in civil lawsuits for monetary awards where the primary claim is utterly contradicted by actions of the same religion's leaders.

Literature produced by Watch Tower has a great deal to say on the subject of pledging allegiance to governments. These presentations can be interpreted many different ways. But how the general population of Jehovah's Witnesses digests and understands these presentations up to now is clear: regardless of consequences it is wrong for a member to pledge allegiance to any country. Yet this is exactly what Jehovah's Witnesses' highest level members were doing.

This behavior by officials of Jehovah's Witnesses calls for an evaluation of why the religion's general membership took a course so different than its leaders. It may also require recalibration of how the religion is viewed historically in respect to pledges of national allegiance. Who knows, Jehovah's Witness parents may decide it is now okay to have little Suzy or Johnny pledge the national oath of allegiance after all, and adult Jehovah's Witnesses may have to rethink whether they can sign loyalty oaths for employment just like their leaders did to gain passports. Certainly courts and defendants will have reason to question the legitimacy and sincerity of lawsuits premised on the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses prohibiting loyalty oaths pledging allegiance to governments. If the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses prohibits pledging the oath of allegiance to the United States then presidents of the Watch Tower have all violated their own religion.

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<sup>1</sup> "“In Pleasant Places” with Jehovah's Organization,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1963 2/15: 118-9

<sup>2</sup> “Meet the Students of Gilead's Forty-eighth Class!,” *Awake!*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1970 5/8: 26

<sup>3</sup> Smith S, Patriotism, Pledging Allegiance, and Public Schools: Lessons from Washington County in the 1940s, *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXIV, No. 1, Spring 2005: 49-69

<sup>4</sup> “Worship—Clean and Unclean” In *Qualified to be Ministers*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1954: 282

<sup>5</sup> “The Cadence of Jackboots,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1980 2/15: 30

<sup>6</sup> “Finding Racial Harmony in Troubled South Africa,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1989 7/1: 11, “As an organization, Jehovah's Witnesses are truly nonracial and nonpolitical. They give allegiance to one government, God's Kingdom.”

<sup>7</sup> Smith, C, “The Persecution of West Virginia Jehovah's Witnesses and the Expansion of Legal Protection for Religious Liberty,” *Journal of Church & State*, Summer 2001, Vol. 43 Issue 3, pp 547-549

<sup>8</sup> “Jehovah's Witnesses Fleeing For Their Lives,” *New York Times*, 1972 10/22: E7

<sup>9</sup> “Shocking Religious Persecution in Malawi,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1968 2/1: 73

<sup>10</sup> *Bessard et. al. v. California Community Colleges et. al.*, 867 F. Supp. 1454, 1457 (E.D. Cal. 1994)

<sup>11</sup> “Elementary Education—Getting Ready to Live,” *Golden Age*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1932 8/31: 745

<sup>12</sup> 22 C.F.R. 51.23(O) (January 1, 1966); Passport Application Form DSP-11 7-64

<sup>13</sup> Journal of the House of Representatives, December 2, 1861 at 418, 500 and 822

<sup>14</sup> Davis J, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, New York, D. Appleton and Co., 1881: 285

<sup>15</sup> THE AMERICAN ANNUAL CYCLOPÆDIA AND REGISTER OF IMPORTANT EVENTS OF THE YEAR 1863, VOLUME III, s.v. Congress, United States, p. 236, s.v. Maryland, p. 611

<sup>16</sup> 22 C.F.R. 51.23(O) (January 1, 1966)

<sup>17</sup> *United States v. Kawakita*, 108 F.Supp. 627, 630-631 (1952)

<sup>18</sup> Reese T Lieutenant Colonel, An Officers Oath, *Military Law Review*, 1964 July: 40-41

<sup>19</sup> Roosevelt T, Rules Governing the Granting and Issuing of Passports in the United States, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Supplement: Official Documents, (Jul., 1907), pp. 317-320

<sup>20</sup> Gaillard H, *THE AMERICAN PASSPORT*, Government Printing Office, 1898: 61

<sup>21</sup> “Proving Yourself a Loyal Subject of Christ the King,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1964 4/1: 199

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- <sup>22</sup> “Allegiance and Citizenship,” *Informant*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., Special July 1938: 4, “Is it wrong to take the oath of allegiance to this country? Taking the oath of allegiance means that one renounces his obligations of citizenship to the country of which he had been a subject, and assumes the obligations of a citizen of this country. Allegiance to a country is not incompatible with Christianity. Paul was a citizen of the Roman empire and claimed his rights as such. He therefore recognized his obligations as a citizen. Naturalborn citizens owe the duties of citizenship, and no Christian is required to renounce such citizenship. We see no reason why one desiring to assume citizenship in this country should not take the oath of allegiance.”
- <sup>23</sup> Cole M, *JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES*, Vantage Press, 1955: 129
- <sup>24</sup> “The Cadence of Jackboots,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1980 2/15:30
- <sup>25</sup> “Are You a Loyal Christian?,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1964 9/15: 551
- <sup>26</sup> Application for United States passport #B1494270 issued to Nathan Homer Knorr on May 21, 1971, at the New York Passport Agency (approved May 19, 1971)
- <sup>27</sup> Application for United States passport by Charles Taze Russell issued March 7, 1910, (Passport Application Number 21454)
- <sup>28</sup> Application for United States passport by Joseph Franklyn Rutherford issued April 1, 1922, (Passport Application Number 136794)
- <sup>29</sup> Application for United States passport #733078 issued to Milton George Henschel approved September 22, 1952
- <sup>30</sup> “Are You a Loyal Christian?,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1964 9/15: 551
- <sup>31</sup> *Tolman et. al.. v Underhill et. al..*, 229 P.2d 447, 451, Cal.App. 3 Dist. (1951) “...pledge to support the Constitutions of this state and of the United States... is the highest loyalty that can be demonstrated by any citizen....”
- <sup>32</sup> “Doom Of Religion,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1939 6/15: 187
- <sup>33</sup> “Are They Guilty of ‘Hindering Malawi’s Development’?,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1972 12/8: 20
- <sup>34</sup> “Elementary Education—Getting Ready to Live,” *Golden Age*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1932, 8/31: 745
- <sup>35</sup> “‘Be Courageous and Strong!’,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 2003 3/1: 9
- <sup>36</sup> Chu J, God’s things and Caesar’s: Jehovah’s Witnesses and political neutrality, *Journal of Genocide Research* (2004), 6(3), September, 323
- <sup>37</sup> White T, *A People For His Name—A History of Jehovah’s Witnesses and An Evaluation*, Vantage Press, 1967: 321-2
- <sup>38</sup> Smith S, Patriotism, Pledging Allegiance, and Public Schools: Lessons from Washington County in the 1940s, *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Spring 2005: 60-1
- <sup>39</sup> “Flag Salute, Anthems and Voting,” *School and Jehovah’s Witnesses*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1983: 15
- <sup>40</sup> “How He Lost His Job,” *The Golden Age*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1935 11/20: 114
- <sup>41</sup> Richard C. Paddock , *The Los Angeles Times*, “Teacher Fired For Refusing To Sign Loyalty Oath”, May 2, 2008
- <sup>42</sup> “Damages awarded in Calif. oath dispute,” United Press International, BC cycle, December 14, 1995 available in LexisNexis® Academic.
- <sup>43</sup> *Bessard et. al. v. California Community Colleges et. al.*, 867 F. Supp. 1454, 1456, 66 (E.D. Cal. 1994)
- <sup>44</sup> “Shocking Religious Persecution in Malawi,” *The Watchtower*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1968 2/1: 73
- <sup>45</sup> Appellate Brief at 8, *Barnette et. al. v. West Virginia State Board of Education*, 1943 WL 71856 (U.S.)