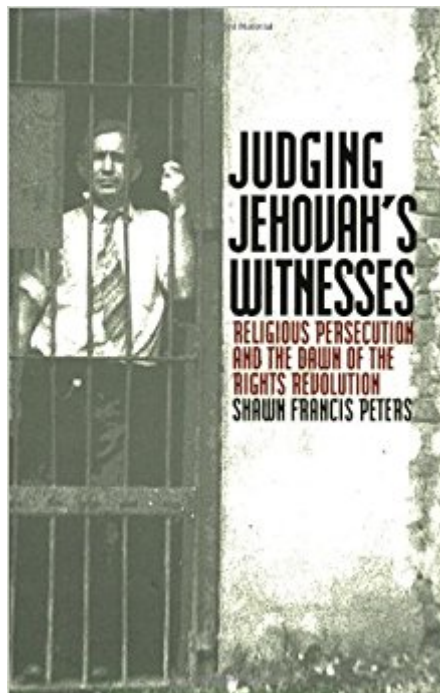




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# Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution And The Dawn Of The Rights Revolution



## Synopsis

While millions of Americans were defending liberty against the Nazis, liberty was under vicious attack at home. One of the worst outbreaks of religious persecution in U.S. history occurred during World War II when Jehovah's Witnesses were intimidated, beaten, and even imprisoned for refusing to salute the flag or serve in the armed forces. Determined to claim their First Amendment rights, Jehovah's Witnesses waged a tenacious legal campaign that led to twenty-three Supreme Court rulings between 1938 and 1946. Now Shawn Peters has written the first complete account of the personalities, events, and institutions behind those cases, showing that they were more than vindication for unpopular beliefs—they were also a turning point in the nation's constitutional commitment to individual rights. Peters begins with the story of William Gobitas, a Jehovah's Witness whose children refused to salute the flag at school. He follows this famous case to the Supreme Court, where he captures the intellectual sparring between Justices Frankfurter and Stone over individual liberties; then he describes the aftermath of the Court's ruling against Gobitas, when angry mobs savagely assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses in hundreds of communities across America. Judging Jehovah's Witnesses tells how persecution—much of it directed by members of patriotic organizations like the American Legion—touched the lives of Witnesses of all ages; why the Justice Department and state officials ignored the Witnesses' pleas for relief; and how the ACLU and liberal clergymen finally stepped forward to help them. Drawing on interviews with Witnesses and extensive research in ACLU archives, he examines the strategies that beleaguered Witnesses used to combat discrimination and goes beyond the familiar Supreme Court rulings by analyzing more obscure lower court decisions as well. By vigorously pursuing their cause, the Witnesses helped to inaugurate an era in which individual and minority rights emerged as matters of concern for the Supreme Court and foreshadowed events in the civil rights movement. Like the classics *Gideon's Trumpet* and *Simple Justice*, *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses* vividly narrates a moving human drama while reminding us of the true meaning of our Constitution and the rights it protects.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With a journalistic eye, Peters (student service coordinator, Sch. of Journalism and Mass Communications, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison) presents the convergence of nationalistic paranoia, the distrust that erupted into violence, and palpable religious bigotry against the Jehovah's Witnesses during the 1930s and 1940s. Their desire to avoid idolatry in any form--including refusing to salute the flag or serve in the armed forces--was perceived by many as treason. During the war years of the 1940s this belief marked them as cowards at best, Nazi subversives at worst, and led to persecution. Ironically, while they fought a very public battle for their Constitutional rights, in their interior organization, theirs is one of the most theologically rigid and ideologically inflexible traditions. This legal history, in the vein of Harold Berman's *Law and Revolution*, tells us as much about the intricacies of jurisprudence as it does our own shameful past. This engrossing study depends primarily on firsthand testimony, ACLU documents, and legal briefs. Light on analysis but chock-full of primary resources, this is recommended reading for American and religious historians as well as for those interested in the history of persecution.--Sandra Collins, Univ. of Pittsburgh

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A fast-paced study of a little-known episode in American religious history. Say Jehovah's Witnesses, and most Americans will conjure up pictures of door-to-door evangelists who want to give you tracts and pamphlets. But at mid-century the sectarian group was known for something else: refusing to salute the US flag. Jehovah's Witnesses insisted they were patriotic and meant no disrespect, but they could not salute it was a violation, they said, of Exodus 5, which instructs believers to have no other Gods before Me. In the tense and suspicious atmosphere of WWII, however, many Americans were troubled by the Witnesses' refusal to salute: was this a sign of some greater disloyalty? In sleepy towns like Richwood, West Virginia, and Litchfield, Illinois, anti-Witness violence became commonplace, with Witness houses of worship being looted and graffitied and Witnesses

themselves stoned like characters from the Old Testament by 1940 there were 236 such episodes. Workplace discrimination, Peters tells us, was especially pervasive: Witnesses were often fired or forced to resign. Daniel Morgan's sons, high school students in Fort Lee, New Jersey, refused to salute the flag in 1939; Morgan's boss at the Motor Vehicle Department urged Morgan to pressure his sons to capitulate, and when Morgan refused, he was fired. When he applied for a job at the Bergen County Board of Freeholders, he was told that his refusal to salute the flag disqualified [him] for a civil service position, even though he was a veteran. With the aid of the ACLU, Morgan sued, and in 1944 the state supreme court ruled in his favor. The story of *Morgan v. Civil Service Commission* highlights another theme of the book: the Witnesses' willingness to sue when their civil liberties were abridged. Peters's attempt to position this litigation as an early manifestation of the civil rights revolution is a bit strained, however. History and religion buffs will relish this tale. -- Copyright ©2000, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. -- This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

First, let me state I'm neither a legal scholar nor a Jehovah's Witness. I just like to read different books about different subjects. This book is a great read, very interesting background about the witnesses and the U.S. legal system. I couldn't seem to stop reading and "had" to finish this book. Peter's style, although noticeable in the beginning, disappears after about 30 pages and the book becomes totally captivating. To me, this indicates a Very well written book. I would easily recommend *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses* to friends.

Powerful history of a dark and disturbing, yet little remembered, incident of religious intolerance in America's not-too-distant past. Author Shawn Francis Peters recounts the persecution of a small, harmless, almost universally disliked group of Christians during the 1930's and 40's, when hyperpatriotism and war hysteria caused average Americans to persecute Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country. The Witnesses suffered savage physical abuse, incarceration, loss of employment, homes and businesses, and expulsion from schools due to their unpopular religious beliefs and actions. This is a scholarly, yet highly readable account of the persecution and the groundbreaking reaction of the Witnesses as they and their allies, chiefly the ACLU, battled the injustices heaped upon them by fighting back in the courts, with many of their cases reaching the Supreme Court. Not a Witness, Peters brings an unbiased eye to the subject. While not necessarily agreeing with their doctrines or aggressive proselytizing activities, the author has nothing but admiration for the courage and fortitude of the Witnesses throughout their ordeals, and for the

tenacity with which they fought for justice through an often hostile legal system. The book contains hundreds of citations from an impressive array of sources, including the Witnesses' own publications, interviews of individuals who suffered from the persecution, court documents, information from ACLU archives, newspapers, magazines, and legal journals. Peters notes that while fighting primarily to obtain relief for themselves from persecution, the Witnesses forced the Supreme Court to focus on basic human rights as guaranteed by the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, thus benefitting future civil rights movements, and indeed, all Americans. This is a splendid book, a must-read for anyone interested in law, Constitutional history, the Supreme Court, religious freedom in America, and civil rights movements.

I believe the author did an excellent job of writing about Jehovah's Witnesses and perceiving them as the human beings they are. It is most challenging for an author to fairly and justfully write an historical account of a group of people who could be categorized as one of the most hated religions on the face of the earth. Jehovah's Witnesses are the first to recognize this in quoting scriptures such as John 15:19 and many others. (Jehovah's Witnesses are still suffering horrendous and brutal persecution in many countries around the world.) There is not so much neutrality in Peters' writing as to not express fellow feeling for a people suffering horrific physical and psychological brutality. At the same time there is not so much favor or bias towards Jehovah's Witnesses so as to cover over their human foibles. The story is an important one to tell well and without prejudice. Peters has achieved this. This is a courageous story of faith and the fight for the freedoms of religion and speech, securing these for all Americans through decisions of the Supreme Court. This paved the way for the Civil Rights Era to come soon after. This is also enlightening historical research. History doesn't change but how we interpret it can change. There are a few good lessons emphasized in this story. A couple are, "Do not judge lest ye be judged." (not directly quoted in the book) and any time we dehumanize another group of people (societally speaking) danger follows and any time we dehumanize another group of people, we are dehumanizing ourselves. I encourage my students to study a group of people with whom they have negative issues. I encourage them to find how the group perceives themselves and how they interpret the world around them without outsiders' interpretations and judgement (to develop an ethnography). In doing so with the goals of developing tolerance for differences, for the student to learn more about themselves and how they think by finding out how others view them, to find what is human by seeking human universals and to also overcome the fears of the unknown. Although this book was not written by one of Jehovah's Witnesses, I do believe there are enough facts and interviews with Jehovah's Witnesses that it

could be used for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of a group of people little understood by the world at large. Not only might you re-think Jehovah's Witnesses but you just might re-think how you think.

I have heard that a good majority of our rights to Free speech, Assembly and Religion were forged in the courts, most notably the Supreme Court, by Jehovah's Witnesses. I am usually skeptical of non-witness biographies, a habit of caution no matter who the person(s) being written about, it does capture the remarkable integrity of Witnesses I have known in the past 40 years and those now, though the majority these days are not as assertive, such assertiveness was not unheard of regarding even the groups that persecuted them. What amazes me is the phenomenon that "Rights for all persons" were and still in many ways today not for "All Persons" and when we take the rights and freedoms away from the people across the street we have taken the first steps to have those liberties away from ourselves! Anyone familiar with the history of the 1st. Century Christians especially the four Gospels and the book, "Acts of the Apostles" and today's Jehovah's Witnesses will realize that both are the others counterpart. Maybe Jesus was right with what he stated regarding his true followers especially recorded at Matthew 24:14?

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