Declared in Ink

Religion, War, and the Lukewarm Neutrality of the Watchtower

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Dedication

For Nonnie.

Introduction: The Question Nobody Answers Straight

Every religion I know of has had to answer the same question: *when is it right to kill?*

Most of them answered it. They wrote rules for who may declare a war, what makes a war just, who may not be harmed, and how a war must end. Priests blessed armies. Monks raised money for warplanes. Popes preached crusades and later brokered peace treaties. Clergy on both sides of the First World War told their young men that God was with them.

Then there is the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, the organization behind the Jehovah's Witnesses. The website used to be watchtower.org. Now it is jw.org. They say they stand apart from all of it. They say they are *neutral*. They don't vote, they don't salute, they don't serve in the military, and they don't take sides.

This book asks whether that neutrality is what it claims to be.

My answer is no. I argue three things:

1. **Almost every major religion has declared war and ended war.** That is a matter of history, and I document it.
2. **The Watchtower's "neutrality" is lukewarm.** It refuses to stand for or against the injustices of this world while living off the protections of that same world.
3. **The Watchtower declares its own war, in ink.** Through its magazines, its preaching and its teaching, it announces the coming destruction of every other religion and every government. It also wages a war of words against people who leave or question it.

I also tell you where the record cuts the other way. Jehovah's Witnesses went to Nazi camps rather than fight. They have won major court cases that protect everyone's freedom. An honest critic has to say that out loud, and I do. A case that hides its weak spots isn't a case. It's propaganda, and I'm writing against propaganda.

There is one more reason I wrote this. It's personal, and I tell that story in Chapter 7.

Chapter 1: How Religions Declare War

Christianity: the just war

For the first few centuries, many Christians refused to serve in the Roman army. Then the Empire became Christian, and the church needed an answer for soldiers and kings.

Augustine of Hippo, a bishop in North Africa in the late 300s and early 400s, gave it. War was still evil, he argued, but it could be the lesser evil if it was fought for peace. Eight hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas set out the classic test in his *Summa Theologiae*. A war is just only if three things are true: it is declared by a lawful **authority**, it has a just **cause**, and it is fought with a right **intention**. Aquinas quoted Augustine: *“We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace.”*

That is what declaring war looks like in Christian theology. It’s a checklist, and the church controlled the checklist.

The Crusades: war as a pilgrimage

In November 1095, at the Council of Clermont in France, Pope Urban II called the knights of Europe to take Jerusalem. The crowd answered with what became the Crusaders' battle cry: *"God wills it."* For roughly two centuries afterward, the church authorized, financed and blessed holy wars, and it promised spiritual rewards to the men who fought them.

The First World War: God on both sides

By 1914, the nations of Europe were mostly Christian, and every one of them claimed God. German soldiers wore belt buckles stamped *Gott mit uns*, "God with us." British churchmen called the war a crusade. The Bishop of London, Arthur Winnington-Ingram, is widely quoted as preaching that it was a great crusade to kill Germans. To be fair, some historians argue that his harshest lines were edited and exaggerated years later. Either way, chaplains of nearly every faith served in nearly every army, and they blessed the war effort on both sides of the trench.

Millions of Christians killed millions of Christians, and their clergy told each side it was holy.

Islam: the lesser jihad

Jihad means struggle. A well-known Islamic tradition says the Prophet Muhammad, coming home from battle, told his companions they were returning from the *lesser* jihad, the war, to the *greater* jihad, the struggle against

one’s own soul. Classical Islamic law developed detailed rules for armed jihad: who may fight, who may not be harmed, and in mainstream teaching, who has the authority to call a war. That authority generally belonged to the legitimate ruler, not to any individual.

Judaism: commanded and permitted war

The rabbis divided war into two kinds. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish scholar, explained the difference in his *Mishneh Torah*. A **commanded war** (*milchemet mitzvah*) includes defending against an attacker. In that kind of war, the Mishnah says, everyone goes, even a groom from his wedding. A **discretionary war** (*milchemet reshut*) is fought to expand the borders. A king could declare one only with the approval of the Sanhedrin, the high court.

Hinduism: the righteous war

The *Bhagavad Gita* opens on a battlefield. The warrior Arjuna doesn’t want to fight his own relatives. The god Krishna tells him that fighting a righteous war is his duty, his *dharma*, as a warrior. Hindu tradition calls this *dharma yuddha*, righteous war, and surrounds it with rules: fair combat, protection for people who aren’t fighting, and no deceit.

Buddhism: even the peaceful faith

Buddhism has a reputation as the religion of peace, and much of its teaching earns it. History is more

complicated. In his book *Zen at War*, Brian Victoria, himself a Zen priest, documented how Japan's Zen establishment supported the imperial war machine from the late 1800s through World War II, down to raising money for fighter planes. Several Zen sects later issued public apologies. In modern Myanmar, the monk U Wirathu led an anti-Muslim movement, and *Time* put him on its cover as "the face of Buddhist terror." In Sri Lanka, monks pushed the government toward a harder line during the civil war.

Sikhism: when all other means have failed

The tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, wrote a letter called the *Zafarnama* to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb around 1705. It contains Sikhism's best-known teaching on war: when every other means has failed, it is righteous to draw the sword.

What this chapter shows

Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism all built a doctrine for *declaring* war. They differ in the details, but they share one idea: war is a terrible thing that the faithful may still be called to do, under rules that religious authority writes.

Chapter 2: How Religions End War

If religions declare wars, they also end them. This part of the story rarely gets told.

The Peace of God and the Truce of God. In 975, church leaders at Le Puy in France declared that anyone who attacked clergy, pilgrims, merchants, women or peasants would be excommunicated. Later the church added the *Truce of God*, which banned fighting on certain days of the week and during holy seasons. At the same Council of Clermont where the First Crusade was launched, in 1095, a weekly truce was proclaimed for all of Christendom. The same church declared war and limited war at the same meeting.

The Pact of al-Hudaybiyah. In 628, the Prophet Muhammad and the leaders of Mecca agreed to a ten-year truce. In Islamic law, a truce of this kind is called a *hudna*.

The Peace of Westphalia. The Thirty Years' War, fought largely between Catholic and Protestant powers, killed millions across central Europe. It ended on

October 24, 1648, with treaties signed at Münster and Osnabrück. The treaties confirmed the principle that a ruler's religion would be the religion of his land, gave Calvinists legal standing alongside Catholics and Lutherans, and are widely seen as closing Europe's age of religious wars.

Mozambique, 1992. A civil war killed hundreds of thousands of people in Mozambique. It ended with a peace agreement signed in Rome on October 4, 1992. The mediators included the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay movement, and a Mozambican archbishop.

Argentina and Chile, 1984. In 1978 Argentina and Chile nearly went to war over islands in the Beagle Channel. The Vatican mediated, and the two countries signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship in Vatican City in 1984.

Religions have a power that governments respect: they can call a war holy, and they can call it over. Most of the world's faiths have used both powers.

Chapter 3: The Ones Who Refused

Accuracy matters here. It is **not** true that every religion except the Watchtower preaches war.

The **Quakers** wrote to King Charles II in 1660 that they utterly denied all outward wars “for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever.” The **Mennonites**, the **Amish**, and the **Church of the Brethren** are known with the Quakers as the historic peace churches. During World War II, these churches worked with the U.S. government to create Civilian Public Service, so that their young men could fight forest fires and work in hospitals instead of carrying rifles. **Jainism** makes *ahimsa*, non-harm, the standard for every action, down to insects.

These groups are *pacifists*. They reject war as such, now and forever.

Jehovah’s Witnesses also refused, and they paid an enormous price.

In Nazi Germany, Witnesses refused to give the Hitler salute, to vote, or to serve in the army. According to the

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, at least 3,000 were sent to concentration camps, where they wore a **purple triangle**. An estimated 1,000 German Witnesses and 400 from other countries died in the camps and prisons. At least 273 were sentenced to death by military courts for refusing military service and executed. In the United States, according to the Watchtower's own figures, more than 4,300 Witnesses went to federal prison during World War II for refusing military service. In Malawi, between 1964 and 1994, Witnesses were beaten, raped, driven from their homes and killed for refusing to buy a political party card.

I don't take any of that away from them. These were real people who died rather than kill.

So why do I call their neutrality lukewarm?

Their own teaching says they are not pacifists.

Chapter 4: Neutral or Lukewarm?

> *“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” — Revelation 3:15–16 (KJV)*

“Not pacifists”

The Watchtower doesn’t claim that war is wrong. It claims that war is wrong *for now*, for humans, until God fights his own.

The October 2022 study edition of *The Watchtower* explains it plainly. Ancient Israel fought wars because God decided when and why. Today, the magazine says, God doesn’t authorize humans to go to war. But God *will* destroy his enemies in a future war, Armageddon. Even the Center on Conscience & War, which helps conscientious objectors, notes that Jehovah’s Witnesses are not pacifists.

Their position, then, is not that killing is wrong. It is that killing is God's to declare, and God has declared it for later. Chapter 5 shows where that leads.

Neutral toward injustice

Neutrality sounds clean. In practice, it means refusing to take a side when one side is wrong.

The Witnesses don't vote. They don't protest. They don't speak as an organization against genocide, apartheid, or the bombing of civilians. Jesus' half-brother James wrote that whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin (James 4:17). The Laodicean church in Revelation wasn't condemned for doing evil. It was condemned for being comfortable.

Neutral, but not separate

A truly neutral group would ask nothing of the world it refuses to support. The Watchtower asks a great deal of it.

- **Courts.** Jehovah's Witnesses are among the most active religious litigants in history. They have won cases at the U.S. Supreme Court and the European Court of Human Rights. In *Bayatyan v. Armenia* in 2011, the European Court recognized the right to conscientious objection. Those victories protect everyone, and I give them full credit. But a group that calls every government part of Satan's world still sues those governments for protection and wins.

- **The United Nations.** Watchtower teaching identifies the UN as the “scarlet-colored wild beast” of Revelation. Yet from 1992 until October 2001, the Watchtower Society’s New York corporation was registered as a non-governmental organization associated with the UN Department of Public Information. To be associated, an organization had to support the principles of the UN Charter. *The Guardian* exposed the link on October 8, 2001. The Society asked to end the association, and the UN removed it the next day. The Watchtower says it signed up only to use the UN library. The UN said the requirements applied from the start.
- **Malawi and Mexico.** Raymond Franz, a former member of the Governing Body, the Witnesses’ top leadership, described a double standard in his 1983 book *Crisis of Conscience*. In Malawi, Witnesses were told to refuse a cheap party card even if it cost them their lives. In Mexico, according to Franz, Witnesses were allowed to pay officials for a certificate showing military service completed. This account comes mainly from Franz and the letters he reproduced; the Watchtower has not publicly confirmed it.
- **Changing the rules.** For decades, Witnesses went to prison rather than accept civilian alternative service. In 1996 the Watchtower changed its position and made alternative service a matter of personal conscience. Men had already served their prison terms under the old rule.

That is lukewarm: too cold to fight injustice, but warm enough to take the world’s protection when it helps.

Chapter 5: War Declared in Ink

Here is the center of my argument. The Watchtower says it takes no part in war. Its publications announce one.

Armageddon

Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that Armageddon is a war God will soon wage against the rest of the world. In September 2019, *The Watchtower* described it as the destruction of what remains of Satan’s world, including its political, military and commercial systems. The Witnesses call this good news.

Babylon the Great

The Watchtower teaches that “Babylon the Great” in Revelation is the world empire of false religion, which includes every other church, mosque, temple and synagogue. In its reading, the political powers, led by the United Nations, will turn on false religion and destroy it. That attack begins what the Witnesses call the great tribulation.

In fairness, Watchtower literature says this means destroying religious *institutions*, not killing every religious person, and that it is God's act rather than the Witnesses'. Still, consider what is being preached. Millions of Witnesses go door to door and announce that every religion but theirs is about to be destroyed, and that governments will do it. That isn't neutrality. That is a declaration of war, with the date left open.

Theocratic warfare

The Watchtower uses the word *war* about itself. A May 1, 1957 *Watchtower* article titled "Use Theocratic War Strategy" says God's servants today are engaged in a spiritual, *theocratic warfare* against wicked spirit forces and false teachings.

The Rutherford years

Joseph Franklin Rutherford led the organization from 1917 to 1942, and he did not speak softly. In 1918 he called the clergy who backed the war the most reprehensible men on earth. In the late 1930s, Witnesses marched in public carrying placards that read **"Religion Is a Snare and a Racket."** Sound cars and portable phonographs played Rutherford's recorded talks attacking the Catholic Church on street corners and at people's front doors. In 1940 a writer in the *Saturday Evening Post* accused the movement of making hatred a religion.

To be accurate: in 1918 Rutherford and seven associates were convicted under the Espionage Act for anti-war writing in *The Finished Mystery*. An appeals court overturned the convictions in 1919, finding they had not received a fair trial. Those writings opposed war. My charge isn't that the Watchtower wanted nations to fight. It's that it built its own war of words, aimed at every faith but its own.

Chapter 6: Slander, Lies, and Theft: The Charges

These are hard words, so this chapter separates three things: what the Watchtower printed, what courts and governments found, and what critics allege.

Lies: the end that didn’t come

The Watchtower has repeatedly said or strongly implied that the end was at hand, and it was wrong each time.

- **1914 and 1918.** Charles Taze Russell taught that the “time of trouble” would end by 1914. Rutherford expected the heavenly reward of the faithful in 1918.
- **1925.** Rutherford’s 1920 booklet *Millions Now Living Will Never Die* said 1925 could confidently be expected to bring back Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the faithful prophets. They didn’t come. Years later, a 1984 *Watchtower* recalled Rutherford admitting he had made a fool of himself, though in blunter words.
- **1975.** In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Watchtower publications pointed to 1975. Many

Witnesses sold homes and put off careers. On March 15, 1980, *The Watchtower* admitted that statements had been published that made the end in 1975 sound more like a probability than a possibility.

- **“This generation.”** The teaching that the generation alive in 1914 would see the end has been redefined several times as that generation died out.

You can call a failed prophecy a mistake. Deuteronomy 18:22 has a stricter test: when a prophet speaks in the Lord’s name and the thing doesn’t happen, the Lord didn’t speak it.

Lying as strategy

The same 1957 *Watchtower* article, “Use Theocratic War Strategy,” tells the story of a Witness woman who denied to a Communist officer that she was the person he was looking for. The magazine said she wasn’t lying but using theocratic war strategy. It taught that in spiritual warfare it is proper to mislead the enemy by hiding the truth. The Witnesses’ Bible encyclopedia, *Insight on the Scriptures*, says it is proper to hide the truth from God’s enemies.

In fairness, the same 1957 article says a Christian under oath in court must tell the truth if he speaks at all, and that this strategy is never used against fellow believers. But the organization decides who counts as an enemy. Critics, myself included, think that line is drawn wherever it suits the organization.

Slander: what they call those who leave

The July 15, 2011 *Watchtower* called apostates — people who leave and speak against the organization — "mentally diseased." The phrase came from the Watchtower's older translation of 1 Timothy 6:4, and the 2013 revision of their Bible changed the wording. But the article had already been printed in millions of copies.

Think about what it means to call critics mentally ill. It doesn't answer them. It discredits them before they speak. I take this one personally, and Chapter 7 explains why.

Then there is shunning. For decades, people who were *disfellowshipped* were cut off. Family members wouldn't speak to them, and sometimes parents wouldn't speak to their own children. In 2024 the Watchtower softened the rules. Members may now briefly greet a person who has been removed, and the term "disfellowshipped" was replaced with "removed from the congregation." Critics call the change cosmetic. Removed members are still shut out of the community they grew up in.

Theft: the allegations, and the findings

No court has found the Watchtower guilty of theft. I want to be clear about that. Here is what is on record.

- **The property question (allegation).** In 2014 the Watchtower ended its Kingdom Hall loan program and asked congregations for pledged monthly

donations instead. It also asked congregations to send surplus funds beyond a reserve to the branch office. In the United Kingdom, local congregation charities have been dissolved and their money transferred to the Kingdom Hall Trust. Critics say Kingdom Halls built with local members' money and labor have been sold, with the proceeds flowing to the central organization. Members voted on these transfers, and they appear lawful. Critics call them a property grab; I call it a question every member deserves a straight answer to.

- **Candace Conti (court finding of negligence).** In 2012 a California jury awarded Candace Conti $28 million after finding the Watchtower and a local congregation negligent over a man who abused her as a child. On appeal, the punitive damages were thrown out and the Watchtower's share was reduced to about $2.8 million. The case later settled on private terms.
- **Australia's Royal Commission (government finding).** In 2015, Australia's Royal Commission into child sexual abuse found that the Witnesses' Australian files covered 1,006 alleged abusers since 1950, and that the organization had reported none of them to police. The Commission said it did not consider the organization one that responds adequately to child sexual abuse, and it pointed to the "two-witness rule" for proving wrongdoing.
- **The UK Charity Commission (government finding).** After a nine-year inquiry, the Commission reported in 2023 that the trustees of Watch Tower Britain had not been as straightforward or

transparent as they should have been, and that the organization's legal challenges had substantially constrained the inquiry.

What's taken in these cases isn't money. It's childhoods, family relationships, and the truth.

Chapter 7: Why This Is Personal

I am not writing as a scholar sitting safely outside the story.

My name is Jared Edward Harden. I'm a composer, a writer, a photographer, a licensed welder, and a truck driver. I'm a member of Local 1607. I earned a student pilot certificate. I've worked on film sets. I wasn't a man who sat still.

Today I'm on disability. I live with **autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and schizophrenia**. I'm on medical suspension from trucking. My care runs through a six-month disability maintenance plan in special-needs programs rather than a Full Service Partnership (FSP), the county's intensive mental-health program.

I believe racism played a part in pushing me into early retirement. I watched the same treatment happen to my grandmother's generation, educated people who were set aside anyway. I also believe the people and systems around me helped make my mental illness worse than it

had to be. That is my experience, and I am telling it as mine.

So when I read a magazine that calls the people who leave “mentally diseased,” I don’t read it as theology. I read it as the oldest trick there is: when you can’t answer a person, call them sick.

I want to say something to anyone else reading this with a diagnosis: **a diagnosis is not a verdict on whether you are telling the truth.** Autism didn’t make me wrong. Schizophrenia doesn’t cancel what I saw. ADHD didn’t stop me from writing this book. A diagnosis describes a mind. It doesn’t erase a witness.

I wrote about that fight, and about taking back the language institutions used against me, in my memoir *Gravely Disabled: A Memoir*.

Chapter 8: What the Watchtower Says Back

A fair book lets the other side speak. Here is the Witnesses' case, as they make it.

- **On war:** Witnesses point out that in World War II, none of their members was responsible for a single wartime death. They went to camps and prisons instead, and hundreds were executed rather than pick up a weapon. No mainstream denomination has a record like that.
- **On the UN:** The Watchtower says it registered with the UN Department of Public Information only to use its library, and that it withdrew when it learned the requirements had changed.
- **On 1975:** In 1980 the Watchtower publicly expressed regret that hopeful statements had overshadowed cautious ones.
- **On theocratic war strategy:** The same article requires truthfulness under oath and forbids deceiving fellow believers.
- **On Norway:** Norway cut off the Witnesses' state funding in 2021 and revoked their registration in 2022 over shunning. On April 29, 2026, Norway's

Supreme Court ruled those decisions invalid and found that members can leave the faith freely. According to jw.org, the state was ordered to pay about 11.86 million Norwegian kroner in legal costs. This is a real victory for the Witnesses, and I won't pretend otherwise.

- **On safeguarding:** Watch Tower Britain says the Charity Commission's 2023 report confirmed it has had a child safeguarding policy since 2011 and that its trustees cooperated.
- **On shunning:** The Watchtower presents its 2024 changes as more compassion toward people who have been removed.
- **On Japan:** In 2022 Japan's government issued guidelines on child abuse linked to religion. Twenty Witnesses, together with the Japan branch, are now suing the government, arguing that the guidelines stigmatize children of minority faiths. United Nations human rights experts have also raised concerns about the guidelines.

Weigh these points honestly. Some are strong. The Nazi-era record is the strongest moral fact on either side of this debate.

Conclusion: Hot, Cold, or Lukewarm

Here is what I found.

Most of the world's religions declared war, wrote rules for it, blessed it, and later helped end it. That is a hard history, but it is an honest one: they took a side and lived with the blood on it.

A small number of faiths, the Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, Brethren and Jains, refused war altogether. That is hot. That is a stand.

Jehovah's Witnesses claim to stand above both. But they are not pacifists. They preach a war God will fight soon, in which every government falls and every other religion is destroyed, and they publish that message in hundreds of languages at every door. They call those who leave mentally diseased. They predicted endings that never came. They've been found negligent in court and inadequate by a royal commission in how they handled child abuse. And they rely on courts, constitutions and, for nine years, a UN registration from the same "world" they say is under Satan's control.

That isn’t neutral. It’s lukewarm, and lukewarm is a side too.

Read the sources. Check my work. Then decide for yourself.

— Jared Edward Harden, Bellflower, California

About the Author

Jared Edward Harden is a composer, author and photographer from Bellflower, California. He publishes under the Musicallessness and Nedrahej imprints through Jared's Online Projects Inc. He writes a daily compositional journal of violin scores and is publishing the Bible chapter by chapter at musicallessness.com.

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