



## BOOK REVIEW

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# Crisis of Conscience

by **Raymond V. Franz**

**former member of the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses**

(Atlanta: Commentary Press, Second Edition, 1992, 411 pages)

**(NEW FOURTH edition with latest updates)** by Raymond Franz (rev. June 2002)

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This book was banned, even before it was written.

The author, Raymond Franz, had been under ban by the Watchtower Society since 1981, when he was excommunicated for eating a meal with a previously banned individual, his landlord. Five million Jehovah's Witnesses are now forbidden to speak to Franz, read his book, or even say "Hello" if they pass him on the street.

And the Watchtower does well to shield its followers from this man--if they are to remain followers. Nephew of the organization's late president Fred Franz, Raymond spent nine years as a member of its top-secret Governing Body. The inside information Franz now reveals in his book is sufficient to shake any Jehovah's Witness's faith--not in God, but in the organization claiming to be God's mouthpiece.

Can little Johnnie receive an organ transplant, or must his parents refuse? Can Mrs. Smith do as her husband wishes in bed, or must she say "NO" to him? Can Jack accept hospital work as an alternative to military service, or must he refuse and go to jail? If little Johnnie's parents, Mrs. Smith, and Jack are Jehovah's Witnesses, their answers come from Watchtower headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. And the final word rests with the Governing Body.

As a member of that elite group, Ray Franz had to share in making these decisions for Witnesses worldwide. As the

Body's votes swung this way and that--and millions of Witnesses' family life or very lives swayed in the balance--Franz became more and more conscience-stricken at what he saw happening.

One chapter details how the Governing Body decided that certain conduct between husband and wife in bed would be grounds for divorce and disfellowshipping (formal excommunication and shunning). After the edict was issued (*The Watchtower* December 1, 1972, pages 734-736) numerous marriages broke up as a result. Then, seven years later, the Governing Body changed its mind and reversed the policy.

In the same way, the Governing Body was legislating other personal matters for Jehovah's Witnesses: medical treatment, family relationships, etc. Rank-and-file JW's accepted the Governing Body's decisions as "God's law", but Ray Franz knew that each decision was a mere product of the human whims, opinions and prejudices of his peers as they tossed ideas around and put them to a vote. Franz called to mind Jesus' words to the Pharisees: "Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition...their teachings are but rules made by man." (Matthew 15:6,9 *New International Version*)

Like Quakers, Mennonites, Seventh Day Adventists and others, Jehovah's Witnesses have long refused to bear arms as soldiers. But, unlike these others, the Witnesses have also refused civilian "alternative service" work in hospitals. (Witnesses tell the judge that their decisions are the result of personal conscience, but, in reality, any Witness not following the organization's instructions would be "disassociated"--cut off from friends and family the same as if disfellowshipped.) This practice came into question in a series of Governing Body meetings in 1978.

A motion was made at each one of those meetings to allow JW's to accept civilian hospital work. In each meeting a majority of the Governing Body (Franz names them) voted in favor of the change. But the resolution never passed, because a two-thirds majority was required. So, young men among Jehovah's Witnesses continued to refuse civilian work in hospitals--and thus faced jail sentences--even though a majority of the Governing Body felt there was no objection to such work.

Another "conscience" issue for Witnesses involved political party membership cards. When the ruling element in the African country of Malawi demanded that citizens purchase "party cards", the Watchtower Society took a stand against it. In adhering to this position, Malawian Witnesses faced imprisonment, beatings and severe mistreatment at the hands of government loyalists.

Meanwhile, in Mexico Witnesses were in the habit of bribing officials to obtain cards identifying them as members of the reserves who had fulfilled a year of military service. Not having the cartilla would result in some inconvenience, but not the sort of suffering Witnesses faced in Malawi. Franz relates in detail how Watchtower headquarters gave its approval to both policies, leaving African JW's to face brutal persecution, while permitting Mexican Witnesses to buy cards 'under the table.' This caused much suffering in Africa. And it helped cause the "crisis of conscience" Raymond Franz experienced as a member of the Governing Body whose votes enforced these contradictory rulings.

The final portion of *Crisis of Conscience* is devoted to the events surrounding Ray's removal from the Body and subsequent expulsion from the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. If it were not for the modern setting and doctrinal issues peculiar to JW's, the story would sound much like any 'heresy' trial from the medieval Inquisition. Or, again, the evidence based on rumor and hearsay could have been taken from the Salem witch trials of colonial Massachusetts.

True, the Inquisition's victims were burned at the stake, and the "witches" of Salem were hanged, while Raymond Franz was merely deprived of his livelihood, publicly disgraced, and cut off from family and life-long friends. Still, one is left with the feeling that the only reason why Franz is an author today, instead of a corpse, is that the Watchtower Society can not administer capital punishment. From the standpoint of Jehovah's Witnesses, though, Franz is a dead man. **Crisis of Conscience** will be of particular interest to JW's--the few who dare read it. But it gives all of us food for thought about our personal relationship with God and our attitude toward men who claim religious authority.

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