

# When Freedom Harms: What Canada Can Learn from Norway's Stand Against Religious Shunning

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## Intro

What happens when the right to religious freedom clashes with the right to family, identity, and mental health?

In 2022, Norway stripped the Jehovah's Witnesses of their legal religious status — not because of what they believe, but because of how they treat those who leave. The decision followed public outcry over practices like shunning, the expulsion of minors, and internal judicial policies with little external oversight.

Fast forward to 2025: Norway's government has just announced it will appeal the case to the Supreme Court after a lower court ruled in favour of the Watchtower organization (<https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/staten-anker-jehovas-vitner-saken-til-hoyesterett/s/5-95-2399617>). The stakes couldn't be higher — and Canada should be paying attention. Because the harm is already happening here. Families are being split, teens are being shunned, and psychological damage is being inflicted — all under the guise of "letting religion do its thing." If we don't update our legal frameworks, we're not just enabling harm — we're ignoring it.

## A Timeline Canada Should Watch

On my blog *Totally Awake*, I've documented the broader context around Norway's case against the Jehovah's Witnesses (<https://totallyawake.org/can-truth-be-found>). The case hinges on very real practices:

- Shunning of ex-members, including family
- Disfellowshipping minors, sometimes as young as 13
- A closed internal judicial system that disciplines members in secrecy, with little recourse

These aren't just theological quirks. They have devastating social and psychological effects. The Norwegian government recognized this. Will Canada?

## Why This Should Sound the Alarm in Canada

Jehovah's Witnesses in Canada maintain charitable status, tax exemptions, and institutional protections. Yet they enforce a system where questioning doctrine can lead

to total social exile. Families are torn apart. Teenagers are expelled from their communities.

This isn't just religious practice. It's coercion. It's emotional control. And it's being subsidized by Canadian taxpayers.

## A Legal Grey Zone

The Watchtower organization has recently begun rebranding disfellowshipping as "removal" — a softer term for the same harsh consequence. This shift in vocabulary doesn't change the impact: shunning still severs family ties, isolates individuals, and punishes independent thought. But the new language helps deflect public scrutiny and soften the perception of harm.

Canada has few mechanisms to:

- Revoke religious or charitable status for coercive internal policies
- Recognize psychological abuse through enforced shunning
- Protect minors from spiritually framed punishment and social exclusion

## An Opportunity in Plain Sight: The CRA Debate

In early 2025, *Canadian Affairs* and other domestic outlets reported on a proposal before Canada's Standing Committee on Finance that would *remove "advancement of religion" as a stand-alone charitable purpose*. The recommendation was originally included in the Committee's December 2024 report, which featured over 460 proposed changes. Churches and religious leaders across Canada have since expressed alarm, warning of destabilization to the charitable sector. ([Canadian Affairs, January 2025](#))

But what if this legislative moment could be used to rethink which religious groups deserve public subsidies?

If religious groups want public money, they should also meet public standards — especially when it comes to respecting human rights. We can support freedom of belief without funding psychological abuse.

## A Canadian Action Plan Inspired by Norway

Here's what lawmakers, journalists, and citizens can do:

- Modernize CRA oversight
- Recognize shunning as psychological harm
- Strengthen protections for youth
- Support media and survivor advocacy

## Conclusion

In Canada, religious freedom is constitutionally protected — and rightly so. But no freedom is absolute. When belief becomes a shield for abuse, it's time to draw a line.

Norway has. Canada should.

## How You Can Help

- Share this post with your MP or local representative
- Send it to journalists covering religion, rights, or mental health
- Start or sign a petition urging CRA to review tax-exempt religious groups with harmful practices

## Further Reading and Sources on the Norway Case:

<https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/staten-anker-jehovas-vitner-saken-til-hoyesterett/s/5-95-2399617>

<https://totallyawake.org/can-truth-be-found>

<https://www.domstol.no/globalassets/upload/hret/avgjorelser/2022/mai-2022/hr-2022-883-a.pdf>

<https://avoidjw.org/news/court-gave-strongest-benefit-of-the-doubt/>