

The Jehovah's Witnesses

The Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) are probably the most well-known non-mainline religious community in Germany. They are considered the embodiment of a "sect". In 2002 there were around 6 million "Witnesses" worldwide. The organisation is experiencing significant growth in Eastern Europe and Latin America

As with political or other religious organisations it is necessary to distinguish between the ideological leadership and the "simple" adherents. The former includes the Watchtower Society (WTS), and since 1971 a "Governing Body". This merits some critical remarks. The members and sympathisers call themselves "Jehovah's Witnesses" (cf. Is 43.10), and are usually humanly credible and committed. However, they receive such biased training from the WTS that the boundaries between "training" and manipulation become blurred.

History

The movement began with Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916). As a young man Russell had got to know various Churches and absorbed various beliefs, including the belief that the date of the end of the world could be calculated, an important belief for the Jehovah's Witnesses as they later became. Russell and his friends first of all expected the end of the world and the visible Second Coming of Christ to occur in 1872/73. When this date passed, they then hoped that 1874 would be the year. When Christ's Second Coming again did not come to pass, Russell formed his own Bible study circle. From 1879 onward he published his own newspaper, the Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence, which later became the Watchtower. Reading circles emerged whose members were referred to as "serious Bible students". Russell wanted to influence all the confessions, and did not seek to form a new denomination or even a "sect". He invested his not inconsiderable fortune in the Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society, a publishing house and missionary society that he himself founded, and that has since become today's Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania. One key element of the message of the new movement was the prophecy that the Kingdom of God on Earth would begin in 1914, in the form of a great kingdom of peace. When this prophecy too failed to materialise, thousands turned away in disappointment. Russell died in 1916.

In 1917 Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942) became Russell's successor. He makes the movement into what we today understand the Jehovah's Witnesses to be. He squeezes the associations that are only loosely linked to each other into a tightly run organisation, into the "theocratic organisation" of the "Jehovah's Witnesses". Rutherford eliminates the democratic structures. The freely elected leaders are replaced by appointed assembly leaders (so-called "service committees"). A network of mutual monitoring emerges. Committed laypersons and interested Bible students become trained Watchtower sales staff. Rutherford perfects the familiar door-to-door method. He is responsible for the monthly reports on witnessing activity, the annual congresses and the system of Kingdom Halls (the assembly rooms of the JWs) that we are familiar with today.

The Governing Body in Brooklyn sees itself as "Jehovah's channel of revelation and communication". Its instructions and Bible interpretation must be followed precisely. It has developed the Jehovah's Witness organisation into a "propaganda machine".

Following Rutherford's death in 1942, Nathan Homer Knorr (1905–1977) became President of the WTS. He is the first major organiser under whose leadership the Society achieves rapid growth. In the period from 1939 to 1948 alone the number of preachers or active "Witnesses" rises fivefold to 230,532. They were active in almost 100 countries.

In 1971/72 Knorr installs the office of elder. The elders are officials who have distinguished themselves through special commitment to the Jehovah's Witnesses. The President demands

strict discipline. In 1977 Frederic William Franz (1893–1992) became Knorr's successor at the age of 84; from 1992–2003 Milton G. Henschel was President; it is not yet known who will be the next incumbent.

The doctrine

The teachings are based on the interpretation of Holy Scripture approved by the Watchtower Society. The Bible is considered verbal inspiration. Each and every point in the Bible is of equal status to all the others. Jehovah's Witnesses often use Biblical quotes to argue their points in a context completely different to that of Holy Scripture. This tendentious approach is reinforced by the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses use their own "New World Translation" of the Bible. Many terms and concepts used by the Witnesses have found their way into this translation. One of the most serious adulterations in this translation is the fact that at 237 points the (supposed) name of God "Jehovah" is inserted into the New Testament, even though this word does not appear in the original text.

The Jehovah's Witnesses assume that God has written down his salvific plan in the Bible in a concealed form. It is therefore logically necessary, they argue, to "correctly" interpret the Bible and the figures it contains.

The Watchtower Society and the Jehovah's Witnesses do not entertain any ecumenical thoughts. In other words, they consider themselves the only true Christians. Other Churches or world religions are radically rejected and branded forms of "false religion". For the Witnesses, faith means first and foremost absorbing and disseminating "growing knowledge", i.e. having at their disposal a stock of Biblical knowledge that can be called up.

Special problems

Blood transfusions, even where they can save lives and are an urgent medical requirement, are rejected on the grounds of Acts 15.29, as well as points in the Old Testament. One could counter this by arguing that the quotation in question is not referring to blood transfusions, or by quoting Matthew 12.7: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice".

Everyday life

The life of a Jehovah's Witness is strictly regulated by the directives of the WTS, even though not all prohibitions are expressly mentioned in the publications. Jehovah's Witnesses know precisely what is allowed, and what displeases Jehovah (or the WTS). Normally, for instance, they are not supposed to associate with people who are not Jehovah's Witnesses. Reading books that call into question their beliefs, and most certainly reading literature by former members of the organisation, is considered reprehensible. For a long time, membership of sports clubs was frowned upon.

Many feasts (Christmas, birthdays, carnival etc.) are rejected as "heathen". Political parties, trade unions etc. are seen in a critical light. Until recently, Jehovah's Witnesses were forbidden from performing not only military, but also non-military national service. The situation is similar with respect to participation in elections. For many decades Jehovah's Witnesses did not take part in elections. Although the organisation has been showing to the outside world a willingness to compromise on this point, it is assumed that it will inwardly retain its critical attitude toward the state.

The organisation

Jehovah's Witnesses engage in vigorous missionary activity. There is barely any locality in Germany where they are not active in this respect. On special occasions, "special campaigns" are announced. In Germany it is to be assumed that there are currently around 160,000 active Witnesses; this figure has fallen slightly in recent years. Given that the Jehovah's Witnesses

nevertheless accept new members (baptisms), it is to be assumed that many people leave the organisation every year.

The head office for Germany is located in Selters in the Taunus region. Here, more than 12 million books and over 100 million magazines are produced every year. Most of the materials produced are sent abroad.

The two magazines published by the Jehovah's Witnesses have an enormous circulation: The Watchtower 28 million, and Awake! 34 million, and both are published in numerous languages. Recently both magazines have been revamped, making them much more "modern" and "attractive".

Assessment

The Jehovah's Witnesses possess impressive qualities of personal commitment, tirelessness, and an often credible manner. Yet this is only one side of the coin. Behind this façade, this community rapidly proves to be a restrictive organisation that expects blind obedience from its members, and has no scope for critical enquiry, objections or reservations. The Watchtower Society has created a closed ideological system that assigns each individual their place. And more than that: Survival when the end of the world comes is promised only to those of its own adherents who have proved their worth through continuous participation in evangelising activities on behalf of the JWs. The fact that the organisation thus anticipates God's Last Judgement seems particularly worthy of criticism. Yet for many people who yearn for guidance, security and belonging, this is precisely what makes the Jehovah's Witnesses so appealing.

Advice

Christians are often at a loss when faced unexpectedly by Jehovah's Witnesses on their doorstep. The following advice may be helpful:

- It is not very advisable to engage in contentious disputes with Jehovah's Witnesses. Laypersons are usually no match for the Witnesses, who are trained to deal with these encounters.
- State clearly that you do not wish to receive any further visits, otherwise the Witnesses will continue attempting to pay you repeat calls.
- Make clear to your visitors that you feel comfortable and well-served within your Church community (hopefully!), and see no need to join any other community.
- If you have any further queries, please contact your local parish office.

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