

DIE ZEUGEN JEHOVAS

ENGLISCH

Jehovah's Witnesses

BRIEF INFORMATION

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INFOS**

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Jehovah's Witnesses

This leaflet provides information on the religious community of 'Jehovah's Witnesses'. To make the most of this information, you should know the role that religion plays in Germany: over two thirds of the people in Germany are members of a religious community. Most of them – around half of the population – belong to one of two main Christian churches: the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. In addition, 5 % of the population are Muslims, most of them came to Germany as migrants.

Freedom of religion means: many small communities

In Germany there is freedom of religion. All religions are free to promote their ideas and to practise their faiths, provided that they comply with the national laws. This means that, alongside the major religions, there are also many smaller groups. Some of them also try to recruit members from among migrants and asylum seekers. Some of these groups openly give information about their faith and their way of living. Nevertheless, for people from other countries and cultures, their beliefs are often difficult to understand. However, some religious groups live in conflict with other people. Or there is conflict within the group. Such groups do not communicate openly about themselves. They conceal things to make it easier to recruit new members. Jehovah's Witnesses, too, are seen differently by outsiders than they present themselves.

Where do I meet Jehovah's Witnesses?

The world headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses is in New York. The organisation is led by the "Governing Body". Internationally, the community is organised tightly. The German headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses is near Frankfurt am Main. The group includes professional missionaries. Moreover, all Jehovah's Witnesses are

obliged to promote their community among other people. Twice a week or more, they take part in training to prepare for their work as missionaries. In towns or cities, they stand in pedestrian zones and offer their magazines and books. Others go from house to house in pairs, and knock on doors. They want to talk about the Bible, and invite people to their meetings. They also visit asylum seekers in their accommodation facilities. Often, they have literature in the migrants' own language. Their most important magazine is "Watchtower", which appears in 274 languages and has a circulation of 59 million copies. They have members who are not from Germany, and some of them were themselves migrants. These Jehovah's Witnesses are particularly active among those who speak their native language. In larger cities in Germany, there are meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses in other languages than German.

There are 165,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany who actively recruit for their community. In Germany, the places where Jehovah's Witnesses meet are called 'Königreichssaal' (Kingdom Hall). The main religious ceremony takes place there on Sundays. Groups meet on weekdays to read the Bible and to be instructed in the teachings of the Watchtower Society. There are annual conferences where attendance is compulsory.

What do Jehovah's Witnesses believe?

The Watchtower Society was founded in the United States of America in 1881. From 1931, their followers referred to themselves as 'Jehova's Witnesses'. For them, 'Jehovah' is the one true name of God. They claim that their faith is based solely on the Bible, the holy book of Christians. They are convinced that their organisation is the only 'channel' through which Jehovah speaks to people. For this reason, the leadership demands absolute obedience from members. In their opinion, all other religions, including all Christian churches, do not serve God but the devil (Satan). The state is also considered to be an enemy of Jehovah. However, Jehovah's Witnesses do not exercise any political power. They do not participate in

elections and members do not hold political office. They do not use weapons and do not perform military service.

All religious and national holidays are rejected, including birthday or Christmas parties. Jehovah's Witnesses do not go to birthday parties at school or to Christmas parties at the office. Family life is rigidly ordered. Women must obey their husbands, and children have a strict upbringing. Jehovah's Witnesses are not permitted to marry 'nonbelievers', only other Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Armageddon

Jehovah's Witnesses expect that the world will soon end in a huge battle between Jehovah and the nonbelievers. Their ideas about life after death differ greatly from the ideas in Christianity and Islam. In their opinion, there are just three options: anyone who is not a true Jehovah's Witness will be killed. Almost all Jehovah's Witnesses will live forever on earth, without adversity, illness or death. Earth will belong to them. 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses will rule in heaven with Jesus Christ.

The fear of Armageddon and the hope of an eternal and happy life motivates Jehovah's Witnesses to invest a great deal of time and work for their community. They hope to be among the few who saved at the end of the world. However, this will only happen if they spend a lot of time and energy on missionary work. The Watchtower Society has repeatedly predicted the end of the world; last time, it should have happened in 1975. But all predictions were wrong. After being wrong again and again in the past, Jehovah's Witnesses today do not specify the date of Armageddon any more, but they still expect that the end of the world will come very soon.

What do Christians need to know about Jehovah's Witnesses?

For Christians, it is important to know that Jehovah's Witnesses have a different understanding of the Bible than the Christian churches. They have their own translation of the Bible, called the 'New World Translation'. Many parts of the text have been changed to reflect the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses. For members, however, it is not the Bible itself that represents the highest authority, but the "Watchtower" magazine and what it says about the teachings of the Bible and about any other questions. It is not permitted to doubt or criticise the contents of the magazine. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that God became man in the form of Jesus Christ. They reject the Holy Trinity. They worship only Jehovah as God; Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are secondary.

Jehovah's Witnesses baptise adults and teenagers, but not children. Baptism by another church is not recognized as valid. Holy Communion (Eucharist) is only performed once a year. Nobody takes any bread and wine then. This is reserved for the 144,000 who will rule in heaven with Jesus Christ.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Bible forbids many things that other Christians consider to be allowed. Blood transfusions are also strictly prohibited. Occasionally, Jehovah's Witnesses die because they refuse a blood transfusion after an accident, for example.

What problems are connected to Jehovah's Witnesses?

- The community is strictly organised from the top down. The leadership must be obeyed. There is no democracy, no participation by members in the decisions of the leadership, and no elections. As a result, the leaders have enormous power, which is misused again and again.
- The life of a Jehovah's Witness is determined by strict rules. The community is vigilant that these rules are

obeyed. Those who fail to do so, face the risk of exclusion. Some people welcome such rigid order. However, it means that there is a deep fear among Jehovah's Witnesses that they might do something wrong.

- For members, there is great pressure to obey the rules and to invest a lot of energy for the community and for missionary work.
- In their view, a Jehovah's Witness who leaves the community has betrayed Jehovah. This applies especially to former Jehovah's Witnesses who have been excluded. The community says that contact with these people should be kept to an absolute minimum.
- Many former members have formed organisations that give critical information about Jehovah's Witnesses. You can find their information on the Internet. Books about their experiences are available in different languages (for example German and English).
- Jehovah's Witnesses consider anyone who is not a member of their community to be a nonbeliever. They want to do missionary work, but otherwise try to keep contact with people to a minimum. At work and at school, they maintain a distance from others. For children and teenagers, this can be a cause of great distress.

What should I do?

Organisations with experience of Jehovah's Witnesses recommend against making contact with them or becoming a member. When encountering missionaries from Jehovah's Witnesses, it is best to politely but firmly refuse to talk to them. Engaging in a discussion is generally useless.

You should know that Jehovah's Witnesses are permitted to promote their ideas in public areas, as are all other religious communities. However, they may not promote their ideas without permission on the premises

of asylum seeker facilities or residential homes. Unless invited, they may not enter private rooms or apartments. They may not talk to children to promote their ideas without the parents' permission. If something like this happens, do not argue with the missionaries. Do not react aggressively. Please inform the people who are responsible for the building or the premises. They can then forbid the missionaries from being in the building or on the premises.

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