

# Christian fundamentalism

BRIEF INFORMATION

KURZ-**INFOS**

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# Christian fundamentalism

This leaflet provides information about an extreme school of thought in Christianity known as 'Christian fundamentalism'. In Germany, this school of thought is represented by only a small minority of Christians. 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 belong to a religious community. Most of them – around half of the population – are members of one of two main Christian churches: the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. In addition, 5 % of the population are Muslims, almost all of them came to Germany as migrants in the last two generations. Less than 1 % of the people are Christian fundamentalists. Many of them are members of independent congregations that do not belong to a larger church. Many of these congregations promote themselves and their beliefs among refugees and asylum seekers.

## Freedom of religion means: competition between many groups

In Germany there is freedom of religion. All religious communities 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, including many Christian communities. Some of these communities openly give information about their faith and their way of living. Some are closely related to the main churches, as well as to each other. Nevertheless, their beliefs are often difficult to understand for people from other countries and cultures. However, some Christian groups are in conflict with society and other Christians. Why? The reasons include:

- They do not agree with the values that apply in German society. For example, they are opposed to equal rights for women. Or they deny their members the freedom to leave their community.

- They are in conflict with the main churches and among themselves about the true understanding of the Christian faith. For example, they argue that the main churches have a false understanding of the Bible, the holy scripture of Christians. Some say that they themselves are the only true Christians.

Such groups do not always communicate openly about themselves. They conceal any conflict with others in order to win over people more easily.

### **What is Christian fundamentalism?**

Christian fundamentalism is based on the belief that the Bible, the holy scripture of Christians, provides absolutely truthful literal answers to all questions of morality, science and politics. Fundamentalists say that the Bible should be used to find the right politics for their country, as well as the right national laws, rules for family life, the proper approach to science, and so on. The majority of Christians do not share this understanding of the Bible. For them, the Bible is the foundation of their faith. It is not a textbook with answers to all questions about the world.

Christian fundamentalism is considered to be a political movement, because fundamentalists try to shape the state and society according to what they consider to be Biblical rules and the will of God. They also want a different approach to science. For example, almost all fundamentalists reject the natural sciences, above all the idea of evolution. Many also claim that climate change caused by humans does not exist. Some fundamentalists do not allow their children to attend state schools. They believe that the teaching in these schools is immoral, and that their own religious beliefs are not respected there.

The struggle of fundamentalists against the state and against science does not play an important role in Germany, because they are a small minority. They rarely act in an aggressive manner. Rather, they cut themselves off from the people in their surroundings, who they consider to be unbelievers. The situation is different in the United States of America. There, Christian fundamentalism plays an important role in politics.

## Where does the word 'fundamentalism' come from?

From 1910 to 1915, a series of essays were published in the United States of America with the title "The Fundamentals – A Testimony to the Truth". The essays were written by conservative Protestants who feared the collapse of their religion. At the time, they were read by many million people. This gave rise to the word 'fundamentalism'. So, if the origins are considered, Christian fundamentalism is actually a 'Protestant fundamentalism'. In this leaflet, we nevertheless use the general term 'Christian fundamentalism'.

## Fundamentalism: a difficult word

When trying to understand Christian fundamentalism, three difficulties one encounters:

- The term 'fundamentalist' is used not only for extreme Protestants, but also for Hindus, Muslims and Jews. In contrast, extreme Catholic and Orthodox Christians, who also exist, are rarely referred to as fundamentalists. This can be confusing. That is why this leaflet explicitly provides information about the Christian fundamentalism that has its origins in the United States of America.
- Sometimes, the way in which the words 'fundamentalism', 'fanaticism' and 'terrorism' are used can give the impression that they are all closely related. This is not correct. Although Christian fundamentalists are often fanatical on a personal level, almost all of them reject the use of violence. They do not carry out terrorist attacks.
- While Christian fundamentalists share some beliefs, they do not have a shared organisation. They are not a church, but a movement. Moreover, they do not have spiritual leaders who are recognised by all fundamentalists. That is why some groups are very radical, and others less so. Among Protestant Christians,

moderate beliefs and fundamentalist beliefs are often overlapping. Despite their extreme views, many fundamentalists live in German society without attracting any attention.

In Germany and internationally, movements with Christian fundamentalist tendencies include the Brethren (Darbyists). They go back to English Bible teacher John Nelson Darby. Within this group, it is mainly the 'Exclusive Brethren' that are viewed as fundamentalist. Christian fundamentalist beliefs are also represented in the Conference for Church Planting (KfG). However, KfG is only a loose organisation, and its various congregations are independent.

### **Is the Bible just a book of rules?**

Christian fundamentalism emerged more than 100 years ago in the United States of America, where many people believed that reason and science would make religion redundant. A great many Christians resisted this idea. Some resisted by teaching that only the Bible determines what is reasonable and what is proper science. A fundamentalist position paper from 1978, the so-called Chicago Declaration, says that the Bible "is without error or fault in all its teaching". This not only applies to what the Bible says about God and Jesus Christ. It also applies to what the Bible says about "God's acts in creation, about the events of world history". So, the Bible is viewed as an absolutely true book of teachings and rules.

For Christians who are not fundamentalists, the Bible is not a book of teachings and rules. The Bible describes what God did and still does. Above all, it tells the story of Jesus Christ. It is a misuse of the Bible to view it as a book of teachings and rules, and to use it against science. Christians have the freedom to make decisions on matters of politics, law and morality according to their own conscience and reasoning. As regards science, Christians are free to study the world. For Christians, only God is infallible. No human knowledge is infallible, even if it refers to the Bible. This is why many Christians keep to

the traditions of their church. They trust that these traditions interpret the Bible correctly. They do not want to decide on the politics of their country on their own, and they do not want to dispute the findings of science.

### **What problems are connected to fundamentalism in Germany?**

- In Germany, some fundamentalist Christians live in isolation from the majority of people, even the majority of other Christians.
- Fundamentalists are not interested in communicating with people who have different beliefs. They are interested in segregating themselves. As a result, their communities are often unable to meet other people and talk to other people.
- When they want to meet other people, it is often with the intention of promoting their own beliefs.
- There is conflict in many fundamentalist communities because they try to use the Bible to answer questions for which the Bible has no answers.
- Some Christians advocate a rigid way of living that, in their opinion, follows Biblical rules. They should keep this in mind, however: it is not God's will that Christians live unfree lives. It is God's will that they support understanding and peace.

### **What should I do?**

You should know that all religions are permitted to promote their ideas in public. Most religions also promote their ideas on the Internet. But religious groups 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.

If you are not interested in talking to them, politely and firmly refuse to meet them again. If you are interested in a group or if you are interested in the Christian faith, ask whether this group has good relations with other people, or whether the group is isolated, or whether the group is in conflict with other people. You should ask other Christians and not only the group itself. You can approach the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church anywhere in Germany. For example, you can search on the Internet using the words 'Flüchtlingshilfe' (refugee aid) and 'evangelisch' (Protestant) or 'katholisch' (Catholic), along with the name of the town or city where you are staying. You will then find tips where you can get more information about religious groups in this town or city.

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