

Jehovah's Witnesses

Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) is regarded as the originator of the Bible Student movement of the late 19th century in the United States. Russell believed that traditional churches had abandoned the faith of the 'primitive church', and restoration of true Christianity could be achieved through a more literal reading of the Bible and a sincere devotion to following its teachings. The Bible Student movement spawned several independent student associations, including one which would later become the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses take their name from what was once believed to be the holy name of God referenced in the Hebrew Bible. In the 19th century 'Jehovah' was thought to be the pronunciation of YHWH or JHVH, an English transliteration of the divine name which appears frequently in the Old Testament. Joining this term with a passage from the prophet Isaiah, 'You are my witnesses that I am God' (43:12), the organisation would eventually be known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses are now present in 240 countries and territories, with a worldwide membership of more than 8.2 million active evangelists. In Europe, there are more than 16,000 congregations and 1.5 million active members.

Witnesses are especially known for their door-to-door evangelism and the wide distribution of the group's literature, notably *The Watchtower* magazine and *Awake!* Attendance at conventions can reach more than 15 million, and the denomination's annual Memorial attendance, observing Christ's death, nearly 20 million.

Jehovah's Witnesses are directed by its Governing Body, based in Brooklyn, New York, which establishes all doctrines and interpretations of the Bible. They prefer to use their own translation, the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*.

Since their beginnings, Jehovah's Witnesses have been repressed by several governments, notably:

- the Nazi regime in Germany and in countries under Nazi control between 1933 and 1945. They were sent to concentration camps and sentenced to death, sometimes by decapitation.
- Communist regimes between 1917 and 1989;
- the fascist regimes in Spain and Portugal until the 1970s;
- and the imperial regime of Japan and other dictatorships.

Jehovah's Witnesses are mostly imprisoned for their refusal to perform military service in countries where there is no alternative civilian service, for sharing their beliefs in the public space, and for proselytising.

Where they were victims of arrests, prison sentences and discrimination, Witnesses will actively litigate, thus helping to shape jurisprudence related to freedom of religion or belief in many countries throughout the world.

Teachings

Consistent with its origins in the teachings of Charles Taze Russell, Jehovah's Witnesses claim to recover the truths of the 'primitive church.' They place particular emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgement of those who reject his message. They believe that one day the earth will be destroyed and Paradise will be restored according to God's plan for creation.

The Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to several distinctive doctrines and practices which differ significantly from those of the majority of professing Christians. For example, they reject the orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity and refuse to observe traditionally Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, which they consider to be of pagan origins or otherwise incompatible with the Christian faith.

Witnesses are generally moderate in their lifestyle and refrain from smoking, the abuse of alcohol, and sexual relations outside of marriage. They strive to be good citizens, respectful toward authorities, and law-abiding, except in cases where the law conflicts with their conscience as Christians. They cooperate with government efforts to promote the general welfare of society.

Controversies

A number of beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses have been perceived negatively by governments and societies and led to various types of hostility.

Military service: Jehovah's Witnesses seek to remain politically neutral and conscientiously refuse to participate in military service. They refuse to kill and training on how to kill. However, they accept to perform alternative civilian service in hospitals, homes for elderly people, and other institutions serving society on the condition that it is not under the authority of the ministry of defence. They also refuse to salute national flags.

Proselytising: Discussions about the Bible on doorsteps and public distribution of their religious publications are well-known activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. They develop missionary activities in their close social environment but also publicly and from house to house. To share their faith and values with others is an essential part of their commitment. This right is recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. The right to proselytise has been recognised by the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Kokkinakis v. Greece* (1993).

Blood transfusion: Jehovah's Witnesses do not teach their members to refuse medical treatment, but they reject transfusions of another person's blood for religious reasons. They also claim that medical research currently encourages effective alternatives to blood transfusions. In the case of minors, medical doctors can ignore the opposition of the parents in the best interest of the child, with or without a court decision, according to the legislation of the country. There are no recent known cases of Jehovah's Witnesses who would have been sentenced by a court for non-assistance to a minor in such situations.

The basis for this position is a scriptural admonition to ‘abstain from blood.’ National branches of the movement have identified hospitals and medical staff that practice bloodless surgery to which their members can be referred in order to receive the healthcare corresponding to their beliefs. Jehovah’s Witnesses encourage and promote research about bloodless surgery and have been involved in the formulation of scientific, ethical, and legal documentation in this field. The European Court and domestic courts of EU member states recognise the right of adult patients to freely choose their medical treatment and not to be submitted to coercive medical treatment.

Jehovah’s Witnesses in Prison

In 2015, most Jehovah’s Witnesses were in prison for refusing to perform military service, organising religious meetings in private homes, and sharing their beliefs with others.

In **Azerbaijan**, one conscientious objector to military service was serving a one-year prison term, and two women were in pre-trial detention for more than five months for distributing religious literature and proselytising in the public space.

As of October 2015, fifty-four Jehovah’s Witnesses (forty-six men and eight women) were imprisoned in harsh conditions in **Eritrea**. They were held in detention for conscientious objection, religious meetings in private houses or for undisclosed reasons.

In **Singapore**, twenty young Jehovah’s Witnesses were still serving prison sentences of thirty-nine months in the Armed Forces Detention Barracks for their conscientious objection to military service.

As of 31st July 2015, 555 young Jehovah’s Witnesses¹ in **South Korea** were serving 18-month prison terms for conscientious objection to military service. From the Korean War period to the present, South Korea has relentlessly prosecuted young Witness men who refuse military service and has not provided an alternative to resolve the issue. During this period, South Korea has sentenced more than 18,000 Witnesses to a combined total of around 35,000 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. No provision is made for alternative service.

In **Turkmenistan**, fifteen Jehovah’s Witnesses spent some time in prison in 2015, two of them for refusing to perform military service and thirteen others for distributing religious literature in the public space, proselytising or holding religious meetings in private houses. By the end of the 2015 only one Jehovah’s Witness was still in prison: Bahram Hemdemov, sentenced to four years.

Conclusions

¹ See full list of prisoners here <http://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/south-korea/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>

Jehovah's Witnesses are not engaged politically and do not pose any security threat to society. Generally, they obey the law of the land and respect authorities. At the same time, like most religious traditions there are limits to that obedience. Jehovah's Witnesses will practice civil disobedience when laws conflict with their conscience. This has resulted in harassment, fines and imprisonment in some countries.

Authorities in countries where Jehovah's Witnesses are present would do well to review their legal framework for such groups within their borders. Non-violent dissenters have historically brought a much needed critique that can benefit the whole of society. When governments have tried to repress such dissent, out of fear or ignorance, they have often found themselves fighting against the tide of history. Whatever one might think of the doctrine or methods of Jehovah's Witnesses, respect and the freedom to practice their faith are clearly due them in accordance with international law and standards of human rights.