

Who are the Jehovah's Witnesses?

(part 1 of 3): Christians or cult members?



In 2011 it was estimated that there were more than 7.6 million Jehovah's Witnesses in over 109 thousand congregations, in more than 200 countries.^[1] As the name suggests, it is an evangelical religion. Members, of both genders and of all ages, actively go from door to door, attempting to share their version of the Bible with the public in their communities. You may have noticed them in your own community; usually small family groups, all modestly dressed. They knock on doors and ring on bells handing out literature and inviting you to ponder life's big questions, such as, How would you like to live in a world without disease and poverty? Jehovah's Witnesses should not be confused with proselytizing Mormons, pairs of young men usually dressed in black suits. In 2012 Jehovah's Witnesses spent 1.7 billion hours in such evangelistic activities and distributed over 700 million pamphlets and books.^[2]

The Jehovah's Witnesses teach non-cooperation with what they view as Satan's power on earth, and this, manifesting as refusal to salute any flag, or to assist in any war effort has led to conflict with neighbours and governments and made them very unpopular in many countries, particularly in North America and throughout Europe. In 1936 throughout the USA Jehovah's Witness children were expelled from schools and often placed in foster homes. During World War 2 Jehovah's Witnesses were heavily persecuted. Their treatment in Nazi Germany was particularly vicious and thousands died in concentration camps. The religion was banned in Canada in 1940 and Australia in 1941. Some members were jailed and others sent to work camps. Detractors of the religion have claimed that the Witnesses chose a deliberate course of martyrdom in order to prove a doctrine claiming that those who struggle to please God will be persecuted^[3].

Although they are not a closed or secretive religion many of us know very little about the Jehovah's Witnesses. They do in fact trace their origins back to 1870 Pennsylvania USA, when Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) organised a Bible study group. The group's intense lessons lead members to reject many

traditional Christian beliefs. By 1880, 30 congregations had been formed in seven American states. These groups became known as the Watch Tower, and later the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. In 1908 Russell moved its headquarters to Brooklyn, New York where it remains to this day. The group took on the name “Jehovah’s Witnesses” in 1931 whilst under the leadership of Joseph Franklin Rutherford.

Jehovah is an English translation of the name for God in Jewish Scriptures and Rutherford took this name from a passage in the Bible, Isaiah 43:10. The Jehovah’s Witness Bible, known as the New World Translation translates this passage as, “‘You are my witnesses,’ is the utterance of Jehovah, ‘even my servant whom I have chosen . . . ,’”. The Jehovah’s Witnesses have grown from humble beginnings in 19th century Pennsylvania to a 21st Century global organization supported by the multinational operations of the Watch Tower Society. The Society’s emphasis on publication and distribution of movement-related magazines, books, and pamphlets has benefited from technological innovations[4]. Despite this Jehovah’s Witnesses across the globe continue to be maligned and persecuted.

Non Christians tend to believe that Jehovah’s witnesses are a Christian religion and Jehovah’s Witnesses call themselves a Christian denomination, however many Christians around the world disagree. Some so vehemently, that in several countries the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses has been initiated by government policy. The Canadian organisation Religious Tolerance receives so many emails objecting to the use of term Christian when referring to a Jehovah’s Witness, that their web site issues a warning. “Please don’t send us abusive emails...This is not an official Jehovah’s Witness website.” What is it about this group, denomination, sect or cult that angers people?

In their own words, Jehovah’s Witnesses see themselves as a worldwide brotherhood that transcends national boundaries and national and ethnic loyalties. They believe that since Christ proclaimed that his kingdom was not part of the world and refused to accept a temporal crown, they too must keep separate from the world and refrain from political involvement.[5]

A very brief overview of the Jehovah’s Witnesses faith appears to paint a picture of a group that holds similar beliefs as Islam. They believe in One God and are categorically opposed to the idea of a Trinity. Homosexuality is a serious sin, gender roles are very clearly defined, they avoid celebrations originating from pagan beliefs, and they oppose allegiance to any form of government not based on God’s laws. Is that Islam? Because from this perspective it definitely isn’t Christianity as it is normally understood.

If we look a little deeper into the belief system of the JW’s we find that despite initial appearances they have very little in common with Islam except perhaps that they are both religions that expect a major commitment from their members. An examination of the reasoning behind their beliefs reveals a flawed understanding of concepts well known to Muslims. Their beliefs also include a great deal of information about the End Times or the End of Days.

They have stated on several occasions that the end of the world as we know it was at hand, however these dates have come and gone almost unnoticed.

In part 2 we will take a deeper look at Jehovah's Witness end times theories and dates, we will then compare this with what the Bible and Islam say about the end of days. We will also take an insightful look at those beliefs that appear to agree with Islam and discover concepts that are unacceptable to both mainstream Christians and Muslims.

Footnotes:

[1] (http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm)

[2] (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/witness.htm>)

[3] Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, *Visions of Glory*, 1978, chapter 6.

[4] <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Jehovahs-Witnesses/Historical-Development.html>

[5] Gene Owens; Nieman Reports, Fall 1997.

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/witnesses/beliefs/beliefs.shtml>)

(part 2 of 3): The End of Days

The Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) are a global religion with members in more than 200 countries. It is a Christian denomination, but many mainstream Christians object vehemently to JW beliefs. According to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, "*Jehovah's Witnesses have a pseudo-Christian religion. That means that it pretends to be Christianity, but in reality is not. Their teachings and practices are not in conformity with Scripture*".^[1]

In part 1 we learned a little bit about the history of the JW religion and discovered that they were a relatively new religion, being formed in 1870. We briefly mentioned their beliefs and their obsession with End of Days theories and now in part 2 we will dig a little deeper into the many end of days predictions that have not eventuated.

The study of the End of Days, more correctly called eschatology, is central to JW's belief. Its origin seems to stem from the beliefs espoused by Nelson Horatio Barbour, an influential Adventist writer and publisher, best known for his association with, and later opposition to, Charles Taze Russell. The following is an abbreviated explanation of JW's original eschatological beliefs as explained on their web site.

"The Second Adventists affiliated with Nelson H. Barbour expected a visible and dramatic return of Christ in 1873, and later in 1874. They agreed with other Adventist groups that the "time of the end" (also called the "last days") had started in 1799. Soon after the 1874 disappointment, Barbour accepted the idea that Christ had actually returned to the earth in 1874, but invisibly. 1874 was considered the end of 6,000 years of human history and the beginning of

judgment by Christ. Charles Taze Russell and the group that later was known as Bible Students accepted these views from Barbour.”^[2]

“Armageddon would occur in 1914. From 1925–1933, the Watchtower Society radically changed their beliefs after the failure of expectations for Armageddon in 1914, 1915, 1918, 1920, and 1925. In 1925, the Watchtower explained a major change that Christ had now been enthroned as King in heaven in the year 1914 instead of 1878. By 1933, it was clearly taught that Christ had returned invisibly in 1914 and the “last days” had also begun then.”^[3]

These views differ radically from what the JW’s espouse today and strangely enough they seem to have no problem with major and significant changes to their belief system. 1914 is probably the most significant date in JW eschatology. It was Russell’s first predicated date of Armageddon^[4], but when that failed to occur it was amended to “that people alive in 1914 would still be alive at the time of Armageddon”; however by 1975 these people were now senior citizens.

“During the 1960s and early 1970s, many Witnesses were stimulated by articles in their literature and further encouraged by speakers at their assemblies prior to 1975, to believe that Armageddon and Christ’s thousand-year millennial reign would begin by 1975. Although the views of Armageddon and Christ’s millennium beginning in 1975 were never fully or explicitly supported by the Watch Tower Society, many in the organizations’ writing department, as well as several leading Witnesses, Elders, and presiding overseers in the organization, heavily suggested that Christ’s millennial reign over earth would begin by 1975.”

Leading up to 1975 JW’s sold their homes, quit their jobs, rashly spent their savings, or accumulated thousands of dollars in debt. However 1975 passed uneventfully. After this non event many people left the JW’s and it took, according to their own sources, up until 1979 before numbers started to recover and increase again. Witnesses officially maintained that Armageddon would arrive while the generation that saw 1914 remained alive. By 1995, due to the rapidly dwindling population of members alive in 1914, the JW’s were forced to officially drop one of their most distinguishing features.

Today Witnesses contend that 1914 is an important year, marking the start of the "last days." But they no longer assign any timeline to the conclusion of the "last days," preferring to say now that any generation that has lived since 1914 could be the one to see Armageddon. Armageddon is understood to include the destruction of all earthly governments by God, and after Armageddon, God will extend his heavenly kingdom to include earth.^[5]

JW’s believe the dead will gradually be resurrected to a "day of judgment" lasting for a thousand years and that this judgment will be based on their actions after resurrection, not on past deeds. At the end of the thousand years a

final test will take place when Satan is brought back to mislead perfect mankind and the end result will be a fully tested, glorified human race.^[6]

How does this interpretation of the “last days” compare with Islam? The most important and obvious difference is that Islam does not predict a date on which the last days will begin nor does it predict a date for the Day of Resurrection, only God knows when it will occur.

People ask you concerning the hour, say, ‘the knowledge of it is with God only’. (Quran 33:63)

Verily, the Hour is coming and My Will is to keep it hidden that every person may be rewarded for that which he strives. (Quran 20:15)

"None in the heavens and the earth knows the unseen except God, nor can they perceive when they shall be resurrected."(Quran 27:65)

Another glaring difference is the concept of the Last Day, while Christians and pseudo Christians believe in a final battle between good and evil, known as Armageddon, there is no such thing in Islam. Islam teaches that this present world was created with a definite beginning and will have a definite end marked by eschatological events. These events include the return of Jesus. Historical time will come to an end and will be followed by a resurrection for all of humankind and a final judgement.

In part 3 we will discuss other beliefs that appear to be similar to Islam but have no basic concept acceptable to Muslims. We will also take a brief look at why some of these beliefs have led a number of Christian denominations to reject the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim to be a Christian group.

Footnotes:

^[1] (http://www.opc.org/qa.html?question_id=176)

^[2] (<http://www.watchtowerinformationsservice.org/doctrine-changes/jehovahs-witnesses/#8p1>)

^[3] Ibid.

^[4] The final battle between good and evil advocated by most Christian denominations.

^[5] The Watchtower, various editions, including May 2005, May 2006 and August 2006.

^[6] Ibid.

(part 3 of 3): A Flawed Basic Concept

Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW’s) are a Christian denomination with many beliefs that stand out from mainstream Christianity. They are known for their potent evangelism, their preoccupation with the end of days and their unique

translation of the Bible called the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. In this conclusion to our study of the little understood religion known as the Jehovah's Witnesses we will take a look at some beliefs that seem to be the same as Islam.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus is not God. This is a statement that infuriates most Christians and has led many to declare the Jehovah's witnesses to be pseudo Christians. Muslims, as we know declare categorically that Jesus is not God, therefore just reading this one little statement may lead a Muslim to say, "Oh this is just the same as us". But is it? Let us dig a little further into their belief about the role of Jesus.

JW's condemn the Trinity as pagan idolatry and accordingly deny Jesus' divinity. However they believe that although Jesus is God's begotten son he is inferior to God. Thus the similarity to Islam ends abruptly. God says in one of the greatest verses of Quran that He begets not!

Say (O Muhammad): "He is God, (the) One. The Self-Sufficient Master. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him." (Quran 112)

In addition to this flawed basic understanding of the nature of God, the JW's also believe other outrageous (to Muslims) claims. They claim Jesus' life, or what the JW's call his sacrifice, became the "ransom" price to redeem mankind from sin and death. God, they say, created all in Heaven and on Earth through Christ, the "master worker," God's servant.^[1] In their own literature the JW's refer to Jesus as "His (God's) first spirit creation, the master craftsman, the prehuman Jesus"^[2]. They go on to say that after Jesus' resurrection by God, he was "exalted" to a level higher than an angel. The refutation of this is found in God's own words in the Quran.

"He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. How can He have children when He has no wife? He created all things and He is the All-Knower of everything. Such is God, your Lord! None has the right to be worshipped but He, the Creator of all things." (Quran 6:101-102)

The idea that Jesus was the ransom to save our souls or forgive our sins is a concept completely at loggerheads with Islamic belief.

"O people of the Scripture! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, nor say of God anything but the truth. The Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, was a Messenger of God and His Word ('Be!' – and he was), which He bestowed on Mary and a soul created by Him; so believe in God and His Messengers. Say not, 'Trinity!' Cease; it is better for you! For God is One God, far removed is He from every imperfection, Far Exalted is He above having a son. To

**Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And God is All Sufficient as a Disposer of affairs.”
(Quran 4:171)**

The belief that original sin caused humans to inherit death and sin is also far from the teachings of Islam. Islam teaches us that human beings are born without sin and are naturally inclined to worship God alone (without any intermediaries). To retain this state of sinlessness humankind needs to follow God’s commandments and strive to live a righteous life. If one falls into sin, all that is required is sincere repentance. When a person repents, God wipes out the sin as if it was never committed.

The Jehovah’s witnesses teach that no soul remains after death and that Jesus will return to resurrect the dead, restoring both soul and body. Those judged righteous will be given everlasting life on earth (which will become a paradise). Those judged unrighteous will not be tormented, but will die and cease to exist. What exactly does Islam say about this?

According to Islam, life continues in the grave after the body is buried. The soul of a faithful person, is easily removed from the body, clothed in a heavenly and sweet smelling garment and taken through the seven heavens. The soul is ultimately returned to the grave, and a gate to Paradise is opened for the person, and its breezes come to him, and he smells its fragrance. He is given the glad tidings of Paradise and he longs for the Hour to begin. The soul of the unbelieving person, on the other hand, is removed from its body with a great deal of struggle but ultimately also returns to the body. The person is tormented in the grave until the Hour begins.

**“And the weighing on that day (Day of Resurrection) will be the true weighing. So as for those whose scale (of good deeds) will be heavy, they will be the successful by entering Paradise. And as for those whose scale will be light, they are those who will lose their ownelves by entering Hell.”
(Quran 7:8-9)**

To their credit the JW’s avoid behaviours that God dislikes, including celebration of birthdays and holidays originating from false religions. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not celebrate their own birthdays, because it is considered a glorification of the individual rather than the Creator. These statements certainly resonate with Islamic belief. However because the JW basic concept of the Oneness of God is flawed their moral behaviour and values mean very little. God tells us clearly about the greatest losers on the Day of Judgement.

“Shall We tell you the greatest losers in respect of (their) deeds? (They are) those whose efforts have been wasted in this life while they thought that they were acquiring good by their deeds. They are those who deny the proofs, evidence, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc. of their

Lord and the Meeting with Him (in the Hereafter). So their works are in vain, and on the Day of Resurrection, We shall assign no weight for them.” (Quran 18: 103-105)

Thus we find that even if at first glance the Jehovah’s Witnesses seem to have a belief system that resonates with Islamic beliefs, this is far from the truth. Careful consideration reveals defects and mistakes in their basic theories. It appears that the Jehovah’s witnesses have very little in common with either Islam or Christianity. Their theories of Heaven and Hell, the Oneness of God, the Trinity and creation of the Universe are not acceptable to Muslims and it appears they are also not acceptable to most Christian denominations.

Footnotes:

[1](<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2001/06/What-Jehovahs-Witnesses-Believe.aspx>)

[2] (http://www.watchtower.org/e/ti/article_05.htm)