

SERIES: THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES

6 Sects and other religious organizations: In this series of classes we have now come to the special communities that cannot be compared with the major churches. We also call these special communities sects because they have split off from the churches. The characteristics of sects are that they are very strongly governed from above. They usually have a leader who claims to have direct access to God and forces his followers to follow his laws. Another characteristic is that sects like to deal with the topic of the Last Day.

7th Day Adventists: The first sect we are talking about is the 7th Day Adventists. The word Advent, as we learned from the 4 weeks before Christmas, means the coming of Christ. However, the Adventists do not mean the coming of Christ at his birth at Christmas, but rather his second coming. This was initially established by the founder of the Adventists around 1844. Farmers then left their crops fallow and people left their jobs and families to meet Christ. When that did not happen, they were very disappointed. However, they changed the theory so that they said that Christ had come invisibly and that he would now sanctify the church to prepare it for his final coming. Sanctifying the Sabbath was particularly important. This is why 7-day Adventists also have the Sabbath on Saturday and are not allowed to work then. One characteristic of 7-day Adventists is that they rely on visions. However, 7-day Adventists have come very close to a completely normal charismatic church, which we talked about last week. This means that they accept large parts of the church's teachings and reject other parts. However, there is heated debate within 7-day Adventists as to whether this is the right way. And so you can really speak of two groups. One that still holds very strongly to the original visions of the founders of the 7-day Adventists, and others that see themselves as a so-called normal charismatic church.

Jehovah's Witnesses:

The original founder of the community was the American textile merchant Charles Taze Russell, who initially joined the 7th Day Adventists. There he assumed that the date of Christ's return could be calculated. According to the 7th Day Adventists' calculations, Christ would return visibly in 1874. When the year 1874 passed without any special events, Russell said that Christ had already come but invisibly. From then on he announced that after a 40-year "harvest and judgment period" the "Kingdom of God" would be established in 1914. For this purpose Russell published a monthly magazine from 1879 with the title "Zion's Watchtower". From then on the society was called the "Watchtower Society". They had their headquarters in New York, where it is still located today. In 1914 the Kingdom of God did not begin; instead the First World War broke out. To explain this, Russell used the same trick as in 1874: the kingdom of the world was given to Christ in 1914, invisibly for us. When Russell died in 1916, the lawyer Joseph Franklin Rutherford emerged victorious from the succession struggles a year later. From this point on, Jehovah's Witnesses were a tightly centralized sect that was strictly governed from above. Rutherford began an aggressive campaign against the US government, which he described as a "satanic organization." Members of his organization were not allowed to do military service and thus not to take part in World War I. Rutherford himself and several others were sentenced to prison for this, but were released in 1919. In 1931, Rutherford gave the "Watchtower Watchmen" the name "Jehovah's Witnesses." However, they took the name Jehovah from Hebrew, where the consonants are not written, and to this day they still pronounce God's name incorrectly. In the Old Testament, people mostly avoided pronouncing God's name. Only the high priest was

allowed to do this once a year. Instead, God's name was simply pronounced as "Lord". What is interesting is that the New Testament gives Jesus himself this title of "Lord" or "Kyrios" in a special way. It makes it clear that Jesus is YHWH, he is the God of the Old Testament in person. For example, one of the oldest hymns in Christianity, which the Apostle Paul himself quoted in the letter to the Philippians, says: "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." (Philippians 2:10+11)

However, Jehovah's Witnesses vehemently deny precisely this identity of Jesus and God: For them, Jesus is only a creature - albeit the first and greatest creature of God. Jehovah's Witnesses repeatedly and emphatically oppose the Christian belief in the Triune God and are not afraid to claim that "Satan is the originator of the doctrine of the Trinity". If you take a closer look at how Jehovah's Witnesses justify their rejection of the belief in the Triune God, you will see that their argument ultimately boils down to the fact that this belief is unreasonable and cannot be grasped by our minds. It is therefore point blank rationalism that lies behind the polemics of Jehovah's Witnesses against the belief in the Trinity. This rationalism then also reinterprets and distorts the many passages of Holy Scripture in which Jesus himself is referred to and worshipped as God (see, for example, St. John 1:1, 18; 20:28; 1 John 5:21). The fact that the Christian confession of the Triune God is not the result of philosophical speculation, but is about spelling out what it means that the name of the living God, according to the testimony of Jesus himself, is "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (St. Matthew 28:19), and how one can paraphrase what Jesus himself confesses: "I and the Father are one" (St. John 10:30), is not perceived at all by Jehovah's Witnesses. Instead, they do not shy away from propagating historical myths that have long been refuted, according to which the doctrine of the Trinity is a later development of the Church after it was made the state church by the emperor. Ultimately, it is no different argument than that found in Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" and, interestingly, also in the Muslim polemic against the Trinity: Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims are surprisingly similar in their view of the God in whom they believe. In order to prove their theology, the Jehovah's Witnesses had to publish a different translation of the Bible. However, if you look more closely, you will see that the translation is distorted at all critical points so that it fits into the teaching system of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Basically, it must be said that the top management of the Jehovah's Witnesses decides what the Jehovah's teaching is. Only they can interpret the Scripture. And this interpretation is completely different from the Holy Scripture. There it says: We are not saved by grace alone, but through the merits that we earn through our good works - good works following the example of the Jehovah's Witnesses means working for the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Jehovah's Witnesses do not have baptism in the Christian sense because they do not baptize in the name of the triune God. Therefore, their baptism is not accepted by the Christian churches.

Bahai sect

Finally, I would also like to talk about the Bahai religion. They are not a Christian sect. They come from the Shiite part of Islam. However, they have separated themselves from it so much that, strictly speaking, they are not Islamic.

After the Islamic community split in 661 AD over the dispute over the succession of the Prophet Mohammed, the so-called "Shi'at Ali", the party of Ali, was formed as a minority group, whose leaders, called Imams, claimed to be direct descendants of Mohammed's family. The line of these Shiite leaders ended with the twelfth Imam. He is said to have been taken into a mysterious "hidden place" in 873, from which he will one day return in the "fullness of time" as the "Mahdi", i.e. the "rightly guided one", to remedy the injustice done to his ancestors. Since then, groups and sects have repeatedly emerged in Shiite Islam that pointed to the coming of the Mahdi in the end times. In 1844, the merchant Sayyid Ali Muhammad appeared in one of these sects and initially proclaimed that he was the "gateway" (in Arabic: Bab) to the coming Imam Mahdi. Soon after, however, he declared that the Mahdi himself had appeared in him. He then wrote his own holy book; in 1848, his followers proclaimed the independence of the new religion from Islam. When the Bab demanded the creation of a separate Mahdi state and his followers tried to enforce this by force, the Persian government took action against them and had the Bab publicly executed in Tabriz on July 9, 1850. The Bab had previously appointed a successor. This successor had to leave Persia together with his half-brother Mirza Husain Ali and live in exile in Baghdad, Istanbul and Edirne. During this time, Mirza Husain Ali declared that he was the promised Mahdi and that the Bab was only his forerunner. He then called himself Baha'u'llah, "Glory of God", and began to write numerous texts, most of which he wrote in what is now Israel. A core idea of the Baha'i religion is the concept of a "progressive revelation of God": In this respect, the Baha'is are similar to the Christian sects, which are constantly producing new revelations. The Baha'is have recently adopted very modern ideas, saying, for example, that people are always developing into something better. They do not recognize that God reconciles us through Christ and that we become better people through the Holy Spirit. Instead, people are supposed to become something better on their own, without God. However, the Baha'is renounce all use of violence to achieve their goals. The Baha'is are severely persecuted in Iran.