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ERITREA

Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses

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Scope of document

1. Introduction

- 1.01** This Country of Origin Information Bulletin (COI Bulletin) has been produced by Research Development and Statistics (RDS), Home Office, from information about Eritrea obtained from a wide variety of recognised sources. It does not contain any Home Office opinion or policy.
- 1.02** This COI Bulletin has been prepared for background purposes for those involved in the asylum/human rights determination process. The information it contains is not exhaustive. It concentrates on the issues most commonly raised in asylum/human rights claims made in the United Kingdom.
- 1.03** The COI Bulletin is sourced throughout. It is intended to be used by caseworkers as a signpost to the source material, which has been made available to them. The vast majority of the source material is readily available in the public domain.
- 1.04** This COI Bulletin is intended to cover major developments that have taken place in Eritrea since publication of the Eritrea Country of Origin Information Report (COI Report) in October 2005 and must be read in conjunction with that. The COI Bulletin is intended to give a brief overview of the treatment of Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea, of which there is a limited amount of publicly available information, and is not intended to be a treatise on these religions. The COI Bulletin only includes reports considered to be relevant to those involved in the asylum/human rights determination process.
- 1.05** This COI Bulletin and the accompanying source material are publicly disclosable. Where sources identified in the COI Bulletin are available in electronic form the relevant link has been included. The date that the relevant link was accessed in preparing the COI Bulletin is also included. Paper copies of the sources have been distributed to nominated officers in Asylum Caseworking Directorate and all Presenting Officer Units.

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2. PENTECOSTALISM

General

- 2.01** Paul Merritt Bassett reported: “Pentecostalism, a worldwide Protestant movement that originated in the 19th century United States, takes its name from the Christian feast of Pentecost, which celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Pentecostalism emphasizes a postconversion experience of spiritual purification and empowering for Christian witness, entry into which is signaled by utterance in unknown tongues (Glossolalia/ Speaking in Tongues)”. [12]
- 2.02** This article continued that: “Although Pentecostalism generally aligns itself with Fundamentalism and Evangelism, its distinguishing tenet reflects roots in the American Holiness movement, which believed in the postconversion experience as entire sanctification. Pentecostalism grew from occurrences of glossolalia... Working independently, [four] Holiness movement preachers...each convinced of general apostasy in American Christianity, preached and prayed for religious revival. Generally rejected by the older denominations, Pentecostals long remained isolated and were reluctant to organize. Now, however, several groups belong to the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States and to the World Council of Churches”. [12]

Description of the belief system

- 2.03** Colliers Encyclopedia reported that: “As militant fundamentalists, Pentecostal congregants adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible, holding it to be the inspired word of God and an infallible guide in matters of faith and conduct. Most Pentecostalists recognize the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the Trinity of divine persons. They believe that all men are depraved by sin and separated from God. Justification, or restoration with God, is achieved through faith in the atoning death of Christ. This salvation, available to every man, is a definite, instantaneous religious experience, of which some Pentecostal groups teach sanctification, or holiness, to be an intrinsic part. Others maintain that sanctification occurs independently of salvation and involves a second separate work of grace. Pentecostals stress premillenarianism and await the imminent return of Jesus Christ to establish and head a literal kingdom on earth in a millennial age. Although faith healing is practiced, the services of medical science are not forbidden”. [2]

Pentecostals

- 2.04** The Field Guide to the Wild World of Religion reported that: “‘Pentecostal’ comes from ‘Pentecost’, the English word for one of the annual Biblical Holy Days outlined in Leviticus 23. The word means ‘fiftieth’, as the proper day for the observance is determined by counting fifty days from a Sabbath during the earlier feast of Unleavened Bread. In Acts 2, in the New Testament, the disciples of Jesus were gathered together on this annual Holy Day in Jerusalem when they first received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ resurrection. The most noticeable feature on this occasion was that each of the disciples “spoke with other tongues” and those in the audience, who were of diverse nationalities, were surprised to hear them speak in their own native languages”. [1]

- 2.05** The article continued: “‘Pentecostal’ when applied to religious groups, teachers or customs usually implies that the participants believe that all Christians should expect to experience the same empowerment of the Holy Spirit, particularly evidenced by the gift of speaking in ‘other tongues’. This is usually conceived by such believers to be a separate event from conversion or water baptism”. [1]
- 2.06** Paul Merritt Bassett reported that: “Though Pentecostals recognize such sporadic instances of tongue – speaking and other charismatic phenomena throughout the Christian era, they stress the special importance of the Azusa Street revival, which occurred in an abandoned African Methodist Episcopal church in downtown Los Angeles from 1906 to 1909 and which launched Pentecostalism as a worldwide movement”. [12]

Worship

- 2.07** Colliers Encyclopedia stated that: “Pentecostal churches observe the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is generally by immersion. No prescribed liturgy exists for the Lord’s Supper, which is considered to be a memorial of Calvary, the bread and wine serving as symbols of Christ’s death. Pentecostal services, or meetings, are conducted quite informally. Usually, the presiding minister delivers a sermon, marked by extensive Biblical quotation. There is enthusiastic congregational participation in the form of singing, handclapping, prayer recitation, and dramatic personal testimonies of religious experiences. The use of musical instruments, such as guitars and trombones, is common. Most churches do not have an altar, but only a stand for the Bible”. [2]

General Church structure

- 2.08** The Pentecostal movement developed rapidly across the world in the early 1900s and Paul Merritt Bassett reported that: “It was inevitable that such vigorous movement would suffer controversy and division in its formative stages. Though the movement has been noted for its many submovements, only two divisions have been considered major. These involved teachings concerning sanctification and the Trinity. The sanctification controversy grew out of the Holiness theology held by most of the first Pentecostals... Having taught that sanctification was a ‘second work of grace’ prior to their Pentecostal experiences, they simply added the baptism of the Holy Spirit with glossolalia as a ‘third blessing’. In 1910 [there began a teaching of] ‘finished work’ theory, which emphasized sanctification as a progressive work following conversion with baptism in the Holy Spirit following as the second blessing”. [12]
- 2.09** Religious Tolerance expanded on a third and more serious schism: “Oneness Pentecostals believe that in the early Christian church, baptism was done in the name of Jesus Christ only, not in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In time, this group abandoned the belief in the Trinity, and accept the Oneness of God... The United Pentecostal Church and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World are the main Oneness Pentecostal denominations”. [16]
- 2.10** About Agnosticism/Atheism stated that: “Some denominations are congregational in structure; the individual congregations are self governing. Others have a connectional structure, in which regional and national organizations decide matters of doctrine and organization”. [3]

Church structure in Eritrea

- 2.11** Amnesty International reported on 7 December 2005 that: "Eritrea has a highly religious population, with some 98% of its 3.7 million people belonging to a long - established branch of a major world religion. Most Eritreans actively practice their faith... Of the other Christian denominations [than the Orthodox Church] ...about 2% are Protestants, of whom about half belong to a Lutheran church, and about half to smaller religious movements, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and at least 36 evangelical and Pentecostal churches ... All religions in Eritrea are nationally organized faiths. Some are affiliated to national bodies". [6a]
- 2.12** Human Rights Without Frontiers reported on 26 November 2003 that: "The Eritrean government has targeted the country's 12 independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches since May 2002, when all were ordered to close their churches and stop meeting for worship, even in private homes". [17]
- 2.13** Amnesty International reported on 9 March 2004 that the Hallelujah Church in Asmara was Pentecostal. [6b]
- 2.14** However, Release Eritrea stated on 17 December 2004 that: "Some of these churches [all evangelical and Pentecostal required by the Government to re-register their churches in May 2002] are historically linked with the worldwide Protestant denominations, such as the Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Baptists, Mennonites, Methodists. Others are indigenous churches, which are not linked to international Protestant denominations, including the Rhema church, the Hallelujah church, the New Covenant church, the Philadelphia church, etc." [18]
- 2.15** African Christianity stated that:
- "The Mulu Wengel (Full Gospel) church grew out of the Heavenly Sunshine Bible study, begun by a group of high school students learning English and a Mennonite doctor, though it was also decisively influenced by the teachings of the Finnish Pentecostal Mission, and has never had formal connections with any western mission. Meserete Kristos [another church] followed Mulu Wengel's lead in cultivating the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit... Both Meserete Kristos and Mulu Wengel churches practice faith healing, exorcism of demons, and glossolalia". [15]

Treatment of Pentecostals in Eritrea

- 2.16** BBC News reported on 7 December 2005 that: "The number of Eritreans persecuted for practising religions not recognised by the state is on the rise, Amnesty International (AI) says". [13]
- 2.17** IRIN News reported on 7 December 2005 that: "The Eritrean government has rejected a claim by AI that it engages in religious persecution... "We do not want to dignify this politicised report disguised in the name of defending religious freedom, but I can tell you that Eritrea is one of the very few countries in the world where there has been no religious conflict," said Ali Abdu, Eritrea's acting minister of information". [14]

- 2.18** The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported in 2005 that: “The government of Eritrea engages in particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief. It has banned public religious activities by all religious groups that are not officially recognized, closed their places of worship, inordinately delayed action on registration applications by religious groups, arrested participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings, detained members of unregistered churches and other religious activists indefinitely and without charge, mistreated or even tortured some religious detainees, and severely punished armed forces members and national service inductees for possession of religious literature, including Bibles... Although there is no state religion, the government has close ties to the Orthodox Church and is suspicious of newer groups – in particular, Protestant Evangelical, Pentecostal, and other Christian denominations not traditional to Eritrea”. [4]
- 2.19** It continued that: “Relations among the four government - recognized religious communities are generally good. In recent years, however, Protestant Evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches have faced societal and government pressure. The Orthodox Church has publicly expressed concern about the growth of denominations it views as heretical, and the loss, particularly of its younger members, to them. The government has restricted foreign faith - based humanitarian organizations, apparently fearing the destabilizing effect of proselytism by outside groups, both Christian and Muslim. Government spokespersons have cited Pentecostals, along with extremist Islamist groups, as threats to national security”. [4]
- 2.20** The United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2005 reported that: “The Government’s already poor record on freedom for minority religious groups continued to worsen during the period covered by this report. The Government harassed, arrested, and detained members of Pentecostal and other independent evangelical groups... There were also numerous reports of attempts to force recantations”. [11]

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3. JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES (JWs)

General

- 3.01** Religious Movements reported that: "The history of Jehovah's Witnesses begins in 1869, in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, when Charles Taze Russell began a Bible study which led to this separate movement. The name 'Jehovah's Witnesses' (based on Isaiah 43:10 -12) was not adopted until 1931". [7]

Description of the belief system

- 3.02** Religious Movements stated that: "Although JWs beliefs come from the Protestant and Adventist tradition, they do hold many beliefs that set themselves apart. The following are some key beliefs that make them different:- Jehovah God, The Bible, Christ, The Trinity, Christ's death, the Second Coming, Disfellowshipping, Marking, Associates, The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Satan - the Devil, Man, Salvation, Heaven, Hell, The Great Crowd, Kingdom of God, Holidays and Jehovah's Witnesses". Details of these can be found in the sources for Religious Movements, Towerwatch Ministries and the Reverend Canon Burrell's leaflet. [7] [8] [10]
- 3.03** Religious Movements stated that: "JWs consider blood transfusions to be 'eating blood'. Because of this interpretation, many people have chosen to die rather than receive one. Also, criticism has risen against parents who refuse transfusions for their children." [7] (p7)
- 3.04** And continued: "JWs believe that 'they owed allegiance to no person, flags, or nation; they owed allegiance only to Jehovah', they do not vote, salute the flag, or participate in military duty. Men have been jailed for refusing to be drafted. Children have been expelled for not pledging allegiance to the flag". [7] (p7)
- 3.05** Meeting Jehovah's Witnesses reported that: "JWs proclaim the sovereignty of God. The fact that they refer to him as Jehovah God gives us an indication that an Old Testament view of him is paramount. This God of theirs is distant, austere, and anyone who attends the assemblies of the Witnesses cannot fail to notice that there is very little sense of fellowship or communion with God, and He does not seem to be known to the JWs as a living Presence. They spend very little time in actual prayer to God and do not in practice encourage an intimate relationship, either on a congregational or a personal basis. God may be acknowledged as Creator and as law-giver, but an onlooker is bound to suspect that the whole of their attention is concentrated not on God at all, but on the New World Society to which they belong, and on the future which they believe lies in store for them. The Society itself is their god and, although they would hotly dispute this, it is to the Society that their lives are dedicated". [9] (p27)
- 3.06** Other practices are the refusal to salute a nation's flag, serve in a nation's military, vote, receive a blood transfusion, and the prohibition of smoking. [7] (pps 4-5)

Jehovah's Witnesses

- 3.07** The Reverend Canon Burrell's report [used by the Mission and Public Affairs Department of the Church of England, Archbishop's Council to explain what Jehovah's Witnesses believe] stated that: "The aim of the movement is to make JWs. The methods are a carefully planned and well rehearsed programme of six steps designed to lead people from the point of initial contact to full and unquestioning commitment to the movement. The steps, in order, are Initial contact, back call, home group, Kingdom Hall, door-to-door work and baptism. [Details of these can be found in the source document]. [10]

Worship

- 3.08** The five meetings they should attend each week are:-
Public Talk: usually Sunday, when an Elder (or rarely a Ministerial Servant) will talk about a specific topic. [7]

Watchtower Study: a lesson based on a study article in the current Watchtower, usually following the public talk. [7]

Theocratic Ministry School: speakers practice giving talks and witnessing. [7]

Service Meeting: usually after the Theocratic Ministry School. It includes training for various ministry activities. Sometimes, elders will address specific issues and concerns of the congregation. [7]

Book Study: a portion of a Watchtower publication is studied in depth. [7]

- 3.09** The Reverend Canon Burrell's report stated: "From the movement's president to its rawest recruit, each Witness is required to play an active part in this programme of outreach. A person is not recognised as a JW unless he or she is engaged in this activity. Witnesses are expected to give an average of ten hours a month to knocking on people's doors and many give much more. In addition, members distribute the movement's literature and conduct study groups in contacts' homes. Within each JW congregation, there is a carefully worked - out programme designed to provide a very practical training which equips members for these tasks". [10]

General Church structure

- 3.10** The Reverend Canon Burrell's leaflet stated that:

"The movement is controlled by the Watch Tower Society through a tight hierarchical structure. At the top there is a powerful triumvirate of the president, the vice - president, and the secretary - treasurer. Of almost equal authority, are another fourteen members (four of whom are fellow - directors of the first three) who, with the triumvirate, make up the sect's governing body. This governing body is identified with 'the faithful and wise servant' of Matthew 24.45 and is claimed to be the body to whom Jehovah has given the sole authority of interpreting the scriptures. It makes all the important decisions and formulates the movement's policy on every issue that arises. The countries in which JWs work are arranged in branches. The branch committee of each is directly responsible to the governing body for the territory it covers. Regular inspection of the branch's work is undertaken by zone overseers, and occasionally by

higher officials. More locally, there are three levels in the structure. A number of congregations form a circuit and several circuits make up a district. District

overseers, circuit overseers, and congregation elders form links between the governing body and the local congregation. Leadership within the local congregation is shared, the various tasks of the elders moving from one to another year by year". [10]

3.11 The Religious Movement's Homepage Project report stated that: "The headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses is located in Brooklyn, New York and is called Bethel, meaning 'House of God'. A governing body consisting of 18 men meet there weekly to discuss many sorts of issues. There are also 5 committees – the Service Committee, the Writing Committee, Publishing Committee, Teaching Committee and the Chairman's Committee – which aid the governing body in decision making. Below the committees are the district and circuit overseers who accompany Witnesses to home meetings and visit congregations twice a year. Congregations meet five times a week in Kingdom Halls. Elders, or overseers, lead the congregations voluntarily. Members are considered to be either Publishers or Pioneers". [7] (p4)

3.12 The report continues: "Across the globe, 100 branch offices participate in printing and mailing literature for the Jehovah's Witnesses. This includes Bibles, many different pamphlets, and two magazines which are published semi-monthly entitled Watch Tower and Awake! Aside from the money earned from selling publications, the Watch Tower and Bible Tract Society finances itself through self - imposed tithes". [7] (p4)

Treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea

3.13 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported in 2005 that: "Jehovah's Witnesses were the first religious group to experience the Eritrean government's harsh policies. Negative official and popular views about Jehovah's Witnesses developed as a result of their refusal to take part in the 1993 independence referendum or to serve obligatory tours of military service, for which the Eritrean government has provided no alternate service. Jehovah's Witnesses experience official harassment, including prolonged detention for refusing military service. The President has ordered that Jehovah's Witnesses be dismissed from government jobs, as well as denied a range of important government services, including business licenses, national identity cards, marriage licenses, passports, and exit permits. Some Jehovah's Witnesses who have refused to serve in the military have been imprisoned without trial for a decade; others cannot graduate from secondary school, as the curriculum includes a mandatory military training component". [4]

3.14 The same report continued: "In 2002, the government imposed a registration requirement on religious groups... Jehovah's Witnesses were not among the groups offered the opportunity to register". [4]

3.15 The United States Department of State International Religious Freedom report 2005 similarly said: "Jehovah's Witnesses have been singled out for particularly harsh treatment. According to credible sources, a total of 22 Jehovah's Witnesses are being held without charges or trial, at least 9 of who are being detained for allegedly failing to perform national military service. At the end of

the period covered by this report, eight Jehovah's Witnesses, most of who had been arrested in June 2004, remained detained at the Mai Sewa facility". [11]

- 3.16** It continued that: "Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed in harsh conditions for varying periods, at least three for more than 10 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service; however, the maximum legal penalty for refusing to perform national service is 3 years. Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any Jehovah's Witnesses are in detention without charge, although they acknowledge that some of them and a number of Muslims were jailed for evading national service". [11]
- 3.17** And further said: "Of the approximately 40 Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly arrested in January 2004 while praying in a private home in Asmara, 3 who ranged in age from 55 to 94 were released in September, 2004. Nearly all of the remainder were reportedly released during the reporting period". [11]
- 3.18** It added: "A presidential decree declaring that Jehovah's Witnesses had 'forsaken their nationality' by refusing to vote or perform required military service continued to result in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of the group, especially former civil servants and merchants". [11]
- 3.19** Amnesty International reported on 7 December 2005 that:
- "[It] has received disturbing reports of increasing violations in Eritrea of the right to freedom of religion, belief and conscience. While Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to severe persecution for the past decade on account of their religious beliefs, this report focuses on widespread detentions and other human rights violations of members of evangelical Christian churches in the past three years, intensifying in 2005". It details 44 incidents of religious persecution documented over the past three years. [6a]

Glossary

- 3.20** The World Christian Encyclopedia (2nd edition), published 2001, tabulated the organized churches and denominations in Eritrea. [5]
- 3.21** A glossary of terms used by Jehovah's Witnesses can be found in the Religious Movements source. [7]

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Annex A: List of source material

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