

An Introduction: Scapegoating the Jehovah's Witnesses to Maintain the Cohesion of National Communities

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ABSTRACT: This and the next issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* present papers from the September 3, 2020 seminar “Jehovah’s Witnesses and Their Opponents: Russia, the West, and Beyond,” which should have been held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on September 3, 2020, but was moved online because of the COVID-19 epidemic. Several papers focus on the reasons for the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Putin’s Russia. This introduction argues that René Girard’s theory of the scapegoat offers an additional explanation. In the present Russian context, the Jehovah’s Witnesses serve as the perfect scapegoat in Girardian sense.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah’s Witnesses, Opposition to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, Spiritual Security in Russia, Scapegoat Theory.

“Jehovah’s Witnesses and Their Opponents: Russia, the West, and Beyond”

The 2017 ban by the Russian Supreme Court of the Jehovah’s Witnesses on account of their being an “extremist organization” has prodded religious and human rights scholars into assessing their social and legal situation in several countries to contextualize the rationale behind the ban. Thirteen specialists participated in the seminar “Jehovah’s Witnesses and Their Opponents: Russia, the West, and Beyond” organized on September 3, 2020, by CESNUR, the New Religions Research and Information Center of Vilnius, Lithuania, and Vytautas Magnus University of Kaunas, Lithuania.

The five articles in the present issue of the *Journal of CESNUR* (which also includes an unrelated research note) focus on their plight in Russia, on their

numerous litigations, and on affiliation to the movement. Other papers of the seminar will be published in the next issue of this journal.

It appears from all the presentations that the situation of the Witnesses closely mirrors the social, cultural, and political history of the countries they live in. Their treatment at the hand of their fellow citizens and of the authorities has evolved alongside with the inner transformations of their respective societies. Currently we can see these as branching in two divergent directions, geographically and mentally: in the West, towards an almost all-encompassing tolerance of differences: in Russia, as well as in China, towards more persecutions of non-approved groups.

Historically, already in their early stage as Bible Students, the Jehovah's Witnesses have faced opposition practically in all the countries they lived in, even rabidly in the country of their birth, the USA. There, their distinctive interpretation of the Bible was held as heretical by the Christian churches, and their social behavior as unpatriotic (they were even insulted as being plain traitors), since they refuse to partake in any kind of political and military activity and in nationalistic rituals such as the salute to the flag.

For the major part of their existence, they have been a case study in social, political, and cultural "separatism" that fitted some observers' classification as sectarian, in the sociological understanding of the term "sect" that easily became for the public interchangeable with "cult." Consequently, to this day, they have always been a favorite target of the anti-cult groups and if the attacks have abated in the West, in Russia they are flaring wildly.

So far, then, in North America and in Western Europe, the group has gained widespread social acceptance (with some minor exceptions). What we could call the normalization of the social appraisal is the result of a two-fold evolution in our own Western societies. First, the ever-increasing acceptance of pluralism, whether it be ethnic, gender oriented, or religious/non-religious; and second, the parallel normalization process operated by the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves.

It is indeed fascinating to observe how such a group once unanimously disliked if not plainly persecuted has managed to fight back always thanks to peaceful means, through the courts of justice, and to win most of its cases. In America alone, they have won some one thousand cases. J. Gordon Melton and James T.

Richardson underline their extraordinary success in expanding the provisions of the Bill of Rights. As Richardson writes, they won over fifty judgements from the United States Supreme Court, and thus helped expand the Bill of Rights provisions. They helped establish greater freedom of religion, of association, of expression, plus conscientious objector rights, medical treatment rights, and rights of parents to raise children within a religion (with the custody cases).

And in Canada, likewise through the courts, the Witnesses helped establish far greater religious freedom. In Europe, they have also been instrumental in expanding religious rights through their appeal to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The Witnesses consequently have played an important, yet little acknowledged, role in expanding religious rights, and must be considered as major actors in the social and cultural liberalization of Western societies, from which therefore they can no longer be accused of separating. They truly are the micro item reflecting and at the same time acting upon the macro components of nations.

In so doing, by interacting constantly with the powers that be, the Witnesses as a religious body have completed their normalization process, and reached the upper stage of “denomination,” if not in some countries that of “church.” However, the term must only be used as a sociological category and not as synonymous with “Christian Church,” since they were born out of their founders’ adamant opposition to the formal institutionalization of faith, and since they disagree from mainline churches on the theological implication of “Christian” because they do not believe that Christ is God, although he is “the son of God.” Their rank in the typology of religious movements has been underlined by several presenters at the seminar, notably George Chryssides, J. Gordon Melton, Sergey Ivanenko, and Raffaella Di Marzio, who in her detailed analysis of how one decides to become a Witness stresses the desire of members not to selfishly remain aloof from the world (part of the definition of sectarian separatism) but on the contrary, to engage in society to allow each and every one to reach salvation. The normalization of the Witnesses can even be proved ironically by their facing today several accusations of sexual abuse like so many established religious groups, as explored at the seminar by Massimo Introvigne and Holly Folk.

Their gradual acceptance can even be seen in France, a country known for its ambiguous relations with religion in general, and for its feeble tolerance of non-

canonical religions in particular (its government is a financial contributor to the international anti-cult organization FECRIS). There, the Witnesses are no longer seriously deemed to be a “secte” (“cult”), except by some radical anti-cultists. Now that the country is regularly attacked by really dangerous religious fanatics, the Witnesses’ “oddity” (almost exclusively linked to their knocking on doors and their refusal of blood transfusion, as not many French people dwell upon biblical inerrancy or theological finicking in general) has somehow turned them into a reassuring quaintness, a familiar expression of the diverse fabric of French society.

Russia Reverses the Image in the Mirror

Five speakers have addressed in great detail the situation of the Witnesses in this country to try and understand why their fate has recently been radically altered after a period of relative toleration immediately after the collapse of the USSR. The ban decided by the Supreme Court in 2017 has radicalized their persecution. Even if officially they can still practice their religion individually, they can no longer exist as an organization, whose property has been confiscated, and hundreds of them are under criminal investigation. James Richardson details the different Russian cases decided by the ECHR but notes that European Court’s decisions are not respected by Moscow. When asked whether Russia should be more than just fined by the Council of Europe but plainly expelled from the organization, participants answered that this would not be wise as one can always press the case if the Russian Federation is kept inside.

Figures and specific legal cases were detailed by Willy Fautré, James Richardson and Alessandro Amicarelli, whereas Rosita Šorytė and Sergey Ivanenko addressed more specifically the roots of the problem by explaining the historical context and the Russian psyche. Rosita Šorytė throws light on the complexity of the Russian nation and what it likes to imagine as its exceptionalism within Christendom. The analysis of nationalisms as “imagined communities” by Benedict Anderson (1936–2015: Anderson 1983) finds here a forceful exemplar. Šorytė recalls how Moscow decided to portray itself as the Third Rome, once the first Rome and later its heir, the Byzantine empire, collapsed, leaving the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), inseparable from Mother Russia, to bear the torch of Christianity. The script would then also paint the Roman Catholic

Church as less purely Christian, less spiritual, than the Russian national Church. Logically, all non-ethnic minority religions are viewed as insidious threats to the national cement.

A similar narrative operates in Lithuania. In her analysis of the responses of citizens in order to account for their great hostility towards the Witnesses (without persecution in the Russian sense), Milda Ališauskienė found that this was due to the citizens, even the not religiously active citizens, regarding their identity as being first and foremost Catholic. Thus, the Witnesses, as “Protestant” and foreign, can only be perceived as threatening this identity.

For Russia, Šorytė shows that if public suspicion towards non-Orthodox groups is ancient, it is courted anew by the authorities. President Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow have cleverly updated the scenario by painting the West, in particular the United States and Western Europe, as the modern Babylon, the temple of godless materialism, thus interestingly reversing Russia's previous identity as the model materialist nation.

If we simply focus on the Jehovah's Witnesses, we see the paramount utility they represent because of their undeniable foreign origins and connections. Though their members are Russian citizens, they do not partake in the Orthodox communion, and therefore can easily be accused of being agents of the enemy. President Putin and Patriarch Kirill feel that by ostracizing them, they will be able to muster public support for their respective and common agenda, under the guise of the protection of the age-old Orthodox identity of Mother Russia. Though Russian people, more and more secularized, are not fooled by the official propaganda, they cannot yet break free while the regime remains strongly authoritarian (and also secular, with regular bickering and disagreement between the government and the Orthodox Church).

In the same line of thought, Willy Fautré explains that the criminalization and persecution of non-Orthodox minorities and of the Witnesses in particular is justified by the authorities as plain “spiritual security” that guarantees “national security.” The sudden opening of the religious market following the implosion of the USSR brought in many foreign missionaries, soon perceived as an invasion threatening national identity, but mostly as threatening the ROC that was just regaining power after decades of suppression or submission. Very soon, the ROC lobbied President Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007) and won its first legal battles

against non-traditional religions. President Putin would oblige the ROC even more by concluding an implicit pact with it.

From his position as Russian scholar, Sergey Ivanenko sees what precedes as made possible by the rising power of anti-cult groups that cleverly operate from within the official propaganda, and publicize it for their own purposes. In 2018, they invented a new so-called scientific discipline, “destructology,” meant to investigate “extremist and terrorist religious organizations.” Linguistic, psychological, religious, political, and sociological expert studies are carried out within a “laboratory of destructology.” Their prophet is currently Professor Roman Anatolyevich Silantyev who is succeeding the arch-famous anti-cultist, Aleksandr Leonidovich Dvorkin, as the key figure of the crusade against “cults” in Russia. These activists, Ivanenko argues, hammer out three major myths that sustain the persecution of the Witnesses.

The first myth is that of the submission of groups such as the Witnesses to the authorities of their country of birth, the USA, which allegedly manipulate them to destabilize the Russian Federation, in the sheer continuation of the Cold War. For example, Dvorkin stated that at the end of the world the Witnesses would eliminate all Russians and seize power. The second myth is that of the separatism of the Witnesses as a *sekta*, in the sense of “cult,” without any religious grounding, whereas because of their normalization, as explained above, the Witnesses are clearly a denomination. The third myth is that they refuse medical care altogether and, because of their refusal of blood transfusion, are responsible for many deaths. Ivanenko replies that the Witnesses do have recourse to medicine, and the refusal of blood transfusion in itself has not led to death.

The Wider Myth: Scapegoating the Jehovah's Witnesses

If we now move to the wider picture of the function of Jehovah's Witnesses on the global stage, we can see them as accomplishing a service of high mythical significance. While Ivanenko uses the term “myth” in the sense of false allegations, here I use it as meaning an explanation of the mysterious working of the world. The saga of the Witnesses throughout their history, and specifically now in countries like Russia, is but one variation of the scapegoat myth. The first known mention of the scapegoat is in *Leviticus* 16:5–10: Aaron was to cast the

lots of sins and transgressions of the people upon two goats, present one goat to the Lord as a sin offering, and send the other into the wilderness.

René Girard (1923–2015) built his theory of violence and the sacred upon the scapegoat ritual: an individual or a group is judged responsible for all the ailments that befall the community, be they illnesses, bad harvests, insecurity. Collective hostility to the scapegoat can run the gamut of all degrees of violence, from simple accusation to murder. Girard found that the scapegoat mechanism is at the origin not only of culture but of humanity itself. When a given society is faced with major problems that threaten its existence, or are felt to threaten it, the response might be internal violence that can literally destroy it altogether, because reciprocal violence is infinite (Girard 1982).

It is much better if violence can be directed against a specific individual, denounced as responsible for the state of the affairs. This individual is not, as in *Leviticus*, led outside the community, charged with collective sins, and expelled, but is put to death. It is this collective murder that binds the group members together, relieved as they are of their own violence. Later, the group, convinced that the scapegoat victim was indeed guilty of all the ailments, and thankful that her death cleansed the community, may turn the victim into a hero or a god. This liberating violence becomes gradually ritualized and repeated, out of which religions and culture are born.

Girard names this phenomenon “*unanimité violente*” (violent unanimity) of all against one (Girard 1972, 124), and it is both the most primitive and the simplest manner to produce unity and law. In *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Girard explains that today sacrificial mechanisms are undergoing a process of disintegration. Efforts to reverse the process can only occur at the expense of knowledge. As was dramatically demonstrated in the 20th century, there will always be attempts to stifle knowledge through violence to try and close the community upon itself.

It is this enterprise that characterizes, I think, all totalitarian movements, all the virulent ideologies that succeeded and fought one another in the course of the 20th century, always founded on a sort of monstrous rationalization, finally inefficient, of victimizing mechanisms. Whole categories of people are distinguished from the rest of mankind and destined for annihilation, the Jews, the aristocrats, the bourgeois, the believers of this or that religion, those who do not think correctly. The creation of the perfect city, the access to terrestrial paradise are always presented to us as subordinated to the prior

elimination, or the forced conversion of guilty categories.... The true scapegoats are those that we are unable to recognize as such (Girard 1978, 196–97, my translation).

It seems to me that in the countries where they are severely persecuted, Jehovah's Witnesses do serve as the ideal scapegoat victim. We know that the implosion of the USSR confronted the new authorities with the age-old conundrum: how could they keep the country together, at a time when so many different factions could break loose? They resorted to a well-tested strategy: short of another good war, since the one in Afghanistan that had been raging on for ten years was now lost, they needed to find a domestic common enemy to cement national reconciliation, and make the enemy bear the brunt of collective complaints.

The Witnesses, perhaps even more obviously than other minority religions, are today denounced as pursuing the destruction of the nation, and found guilty of the ailments of the new Russian society. Since they are already viewed as deviant from orthodox Christian theology and from the social norm, it is easy to direct collective ire against them, as they are also highly visible and easy to identify. Furthermore, they are extremely peaceful and pacifist, the epitome of the meek victim, the meek lamb/goat. Plus, since they do not partake in political activities and do not vote, they will not benefit from the support of a political party that might defend them.

As for the activities of human rights defense groups and of the European Court of Human Rights, in the eyes of the Kremlin and the ROC by protecting the Jehovah's Witnesses, they only confirm their subversive nature as the Trojan horses of the decadent but still very powerful West. By banning the Jehovah's Witnesses, literally like the goat of *Leviticus*, by confiscating their properties, and putting many of them behind bars, the nation rids itself of the sins it does not want to acknowledge as the result of its own doing.

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