

**Opposition to Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia: The Anti-Cult Context.
The Role of Anti-Cult Myths About Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Increasing
Persecution of This Denomination in the Russian Federation**

Sergey Ivanenko

Independent scholar, Moscow, Russia

ivasin53@mail.ru

ABSTRACT: Despite criticism it has received from mainline international scholars of new religious movements, anti-cultism is a dominant force in Russia. Its origins date back to the repression of groups labeled as *sekty* in the Russian Empire. In Soviet times, the State dealt directly with religious groups it regarded as dangerous, and offers of collaboration by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) were rejected. However, cooperation between the ROC and the State in the fight against “cults” was resumed in the 21st century, and focused particularly on Jehovah’s Witnesses. Myths about them were created that, although factually untrue, became powerful tools to sustain their repression.

KEYWORDS: Anti-cultism, Anti-Cult Movement, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Destructology, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, Religious Liberty in Russia.

What Is Anti-Cultism?

Anti-cultism (or anti-cult movement, or spreaders of “cultphobia”) is the general name given to associations, groups, and individual militants who advocate the idea that new religious movements and other religions, disparagingly referred to as “cults” (*sekty* in Russian: this and equivalent words such as “sectes” in French should be translated as “cults” rather than as “sects” in English, and share the same derogatory meaning of “cults”) are harmful.

Anti-cultists foster a suspicious and hostile attitude in society towards “cults,” and lobby for laws that would ban them or restrict their activity. As for the enactment of anti-cult legislation, this was only successful in France. But even in that country, this law has had few applications in practice.

Anti-Cultism Tries to Rely on Science

A common trait of anti-cultism is that it tries to justify its view that “cults” are “destructive” from the standpoint of religious studies, psychology, psychiatry, and criminology. Thus, in the USA, anti-cult psychologists developed the theory of “brainwashing,” but this has not been accepted by mainline academics. In Russia, within the new discipline of “cultology,” a set of terms has been coined, such as “totalitarian cult” and “destructive cult,” and these have become popular in the media and among law enforcement officials.

In 2018, a new discipline called “destructology” has emerged among anti-cultists in the Russian Federation. Its creators claim that destructology is an applied science that collectively examines the most dangerous, destructive entities: extremist and terrorist organizations, “psycho-cults” and “pseudo-religious cults,” “totalitarian cults” and the realm of magical services, suicidal games and fads, deadly youth subcultures, and medical dissidence. In early 2019, a Laboratory of Destructology opened in Moscow State Linguistic University (MSLU), headed by Professor Roman Anatolyevich Silantyev, who is closely associated with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Laboratory of Destructology specializes in extremist and terrorist religious organizations. Linguistic, psychological, religious, political, and sociological expert studies are carried out within the laboratory. These expert studies have repeatedly been used in courts and recognized as admissible evidence, and since 2018, the MSLU offers extension courses in the program “Basics of Destructology.” The target audience of the courses includes law enforcement officers, teachers, and civil servants (Silantyev et al. 2020).

Destructology, to use the colorful expression of one well-known theorist, is “a barren flower growing on the living tree of human knowledge” (Lenin 1969). This discipline does not have any objective scientific content. Recently, the authorities have been conducting a kind of casting among contenders for the role of the main fighter against cults in order to replace Aleksandr Leonidovich Dvorkin, who established himself in this role in the early 1990s. Professor R.A. Silantyev, as one of the founders of “destructology,” is one of the participants in this casting.

The Union of Church and State in the Fight Against Cults in the Russian Empire

The status of Orthodoxy as the state religion was enshrined in the “Statute Book of the Russian Empire” and in the “Law Code of Criminal and Correctional Penalties.” It is important to bear in mind that the history of Russia includes a long period of persecution of so-called “members of *sekty*.” In the Russian Empire, denominations not recognized by the State, called “*sekty*” (cults), were classified according to their “harmfulness” as “extremely harmful,” “harmful,” and “less harmful.” This classification was first established in 1842 by a ruling of the Special Provisional Committee for Affairs with Schismatics in Coordination with the Holy Synod.

The fight against *sekty* was carried out in Tsarist Russia in close cooperation between the State and the Russian Orthodox Church. Many Orthodox zealots perceive the union of Church and State in the sphere of opposition to “cults,” which emerged in the Russian Empire, as an ideal for State-Church relations in the modern era.

Failed Attempts to Revive the Cooperation of Church and State in the Fight Against “Cults” During the Time of the USSR

The Soviet Union was dominated by Communist ideology, which included atheist propaganda and infringement of the rights of believers. Nevertheless, there were influential hierarchs in the Russian Orthodox Church who considered it necessary to resume the Church’s active participation in the fight against “cults,” and also tried to involve the State in this opposition. For example, Metropolitan Gregory of Leningrad and Novgorod (Nikolay Kirillovich Chukov, 1870–1955), a permanent member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, prepared in 1946 a report entitled “On the Question of the Fight Against the Cults” (“О МЕРАХ ПО БОРЬБЕ С СЕКТАНТСТВОМ” 1946) intended for the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Aleksy I (to the world, Sergey Vladimirovich Simanskiy, 1877–1970, Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia since February 4, 1945, who held the Moscow Patriarchal throne for more than 25 years), and the government’s Council for Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In order to appreciate the initiative of Metropolitan Gregory, it should be

considered that the Council for Affairs of Russian Orthodox Church under the Government of the USSR was closely associated with the state security agencies. Thus, the chairman of the Council in 1943–1960 was Major General Georgy Grigoryevich Karpov (1898–1967) of the People’s Commissariat for State Security of the USSR. G.G. Karpov was simultaneously chairman of the Council for Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and head of the Church Department of the State Security Agencies of the USSR until August 1947, when he was dismissed for health reasons and enlisted in the KGB reserve. Moreover, according to published correspondence (Krikova 2009–2010), Patriarch Aleksy I and G.G. Karpov formed quite a trusting relationship.

In general, the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and the Soviet State independently developed a policy in relation to religion, guided by Communist dogmas and pragmatic interests. So, initiatives of the Orthodox hierarchs in the sphere of fighting “cults” were not in demand by the authorities during the time of the USSR.

Strengthening the Cooperation Between the Russian Orthodox Church and the State in the Fight Against “Cults” in the Russian Federation

The Russian Federation is a secular State, but the real influence of the country’s largest religious organization, the Russian Orthodox Church, on state policy is a significant factor in the decision-making of state authorities, including decisions affecting religious minorities.

From the viewpoint of the Church, enshrined in the “Foundations of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,” “opposing the activity of pseudo-religious structures that pose a danger to the individual and society” is one of the areas of “cooperation between the Church and the State in the current historical period” (Sacred Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church 2000a, III.8).

The Church distinguishes between “non-Orthodox confessions” and “cults.” Non-Orthodox confessions should believe in the Holy Trinity and recognize the divinity of Jesus Christ. In that case, they are recognized in the “canonical territory” of the Russian Orthodox Church to have the right of “witnessing and religious education among groups of people traditionally belonging to them.”

That is, Catholics, for example, from the viewpoint of the Orthodox Church, have the right in Russia to preach among Poles, who traditionally belong to the Catholic Church, but do not have such a right among Russians.

An important feature of anti-cultism in modern Russia is its active support by the Russian Orthodox Church. The main target audience of anti-cultists in the Russian Federation are state authorities, law enforcement agencies, and the mass media. The anti-cult movement seeks to portray “cults” as entities that are socially dangerous and criminal by nature, and against which the State and society are obliged to fight resolutely. Anti-cultism in modern Russia is specifically striving to give “anti-cult” policy an official state stamp by including in the fight against religious minorities (“cults”) the state authorities and the law enforcement agencies as well as the judicial system.

Those denominations, in particular Jehovah's Witnesses, which do not believe in the Trinity, nor that Christ is God, are declared “harmful cults,” and the Russian Orthodox Church categorically condemns their missionary activity, as set out in “Basic Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church's Attitude Towards Non-Orthodoxy” (Sacred Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church 2000b, VI.3), a document adopted at the 2000 Council of Bishops.

The first attempts to restrict freedom of conscience in the Russian Federation were made in 1992–1993. In the first decade of the 2000s, the struggle against “cults” and the propaganda of anti-cultism became a significant focus of the Russian Orthodox Church and its lobbyists among the authorities and the mass media. Thus, in 2004, after a years-long trial that began in 1998, the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses was liquidated, and its activity was banned. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights in a lawsuit filed by Jehovah's Witnesses against Russia ruled in favor of the former, and found that Articles 6, 9 and 11 of the European Convention had been violated in the Russian court's decision to ban the activity of the Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow (European Court of Human Rights 2010).

Increased support for anti-cultism by the Church and the State became particularly noticeable in 2009 and thereafter. In 2009, an important event took place in the life of the Russian Orthodox Church. On February 1, the role of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia was assumed by Kirill (to the world, Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev, born in 1946). Highly intelligent, strong-willed, very charismatic, with a gift for preaching and being a committed opponent of “cults,”

Patriarch Kirill significantly strengthened the cooperation between the Church and state authorities, using new opportunities, in particular reinforcing the position of anti-cultists. Leaders and staff members who respected the principles of freedom of conscience were decisively expelled from state agencies, and replaced with stewards of anti-cult ideas.

For example, qualified specialists and scholars were removed from the Expert Council for State Religious Expert Studies under the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, and instead the council was filled with a number of anti-cultists. On April 3, 2009, Aleksandr Leonidovich Dvorkin, known for his radical anti-cult views, became chairman of the Expert Council for State Religious Expert Studies.

In fact, since 2009, anti-cultists and their concepts have come to dominate the state structures that develop and implement state policy towards religious organizations. It can be stated that from 2009 until now, anti-cultists are the informal authors (or co-authors) of conceptual approaches to solving problems of relations between the State and religious associations. Often, anti-cult mythology motivates law enforcement agencies to initiate and investigate cases against those considered “cultists,” including Jehovah’s Witnesses, while courts are motivated to issue unjust decisions.

Anti-cultists rely on two main devices: declaring religious literature of “cultists” to be extremist materials, and liquidating religious organizations and banning their activity as extremist.

In 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation liquidated the Administrative Centre of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia and 395 registered religious communities of Jehovah’s Witnesses, banning their activities as extremist organizations. Since then, large-scale criminal prosecutions have been brought against Jehovah’s Witnesses, and they have been charged with organizing the activity of extremist organizations, although in fact they continue to worship God by participating in Christian meetings.

The only reason for the liquidation of the Administrative Centre of Jehovah’s Witnesses and the local religious organizations was the fact that Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that only their faith is true, and all other religions are false. Thus, according to the Supreme Court, Jehovah’s Witnesses claim the

superiority of their religious teachings over others, which the court regarded as a manifestation of religious extremism.

It is well known that the vast majority of religious organizations consider only their teachings to be absolutely true and all others to be false, and this also includes those who lobbied for, prepared, and issued the decision to ban the registered religious organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses with the pretext they should be regarded as extremists. It is obvious that, if there is a politically or ideologically motivated order, any religious organization can be considered extremist on the "grounds" that it claims the superiority of its religious teachings over others.

The fact that a large-scale blow was inflicted on Jehovah's Witnesses in particular is explained by the impact, on those who make decisions in the state agencies of the Russian Federation, of anti-cult myths about the special danger that Jehovah's Witnesses represent for state security.

Let us expound the three main anti-cult myths that are used to justify the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Myth 1: Jehovah's Witnesses Are a "Cult"

This myth does not correspond to reality. In fact, Jehovah's Witnesses are a denomination.

In traditional religious studies, there were three main types of religious organizations: sects, denominations, and churches (Niebuhr 1929). The concept of "sect" is derived from the Latin word *secta* (school, path, teaching, course). As a rule, a "sect" emerges as a movement in opposition to a particular religion that is dominant in society and the State. Thus, the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language*, edited by Dmitry Nikolayevich Ushakov (1873–1942), professor and correspondent of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, notes that a *sekta* is "a religious community consisting of people who have broken away from the dominant church and accepted new religious teachings" (Ushakov 1940, IV, 132).

In the vast majority of cases, a "sect," as it was defined in old religious studies, tends to be closed and isolated. This fact is reflected in the portrait of a *sekta* given in Ushakov's *Explanatory Dictionary*: "A group of people who have

separated themselves from fellowship with others and isolated themselves” (Ushakov 1940, IV, 132). A similar definition of a “sect” is given in the *Dictionary of Foreign Words*: “A sect is a religious community that has broken away from the dominant church; a closed group alienating itself from the masses” (Lekhin and Petrov 1949, 608). As mentioned earlier, in the more recent use “sect” is a neutral term in English, while “cult” performs the same derogatory function as the Russian *sekta*.

As for Jehovah’s Witnesses, they first appeared as a Bible study group rather than an opposition movement within a particular denomination and have until now shown great interest in studying the Scriptures. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not shut themselves off from people, so they could not be called “a closed group alienating itself from the masses.” On the contrary, it is well known that they go to people in order to preach, to talk to people about the Bible.

Thus, there is no reason to consider Jehovah’s Witnesses a “sect” in the classical sense of this term or a “cult.” Could they be called a church?

The word “church” is derived from a Greek word meaning “house of the Lord.” By this term “church,” Greeks in the 4th and 5th centuries meant a building where holy acts are performed, a temple. As a type of religious organization, a church is a religious association of which almost anyone so desiring can become a member. In most churches, infant baptism is practiced. So, membership in a church is often determined, not by a person’s conscious choice, but by origin and traditions rooted in the family and society. As a rule, the believers belonging to a church are divided into laity and clergy. The clergy receive special education, make special vows, and are ordained.

The organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses does not have these characteristic features of churches. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not practice infant baptism but only baptize those who consciously choose their denomination. They must also meet remarkably high requirements, which include going through a Bible study course, leading a moral life, and not smoking. Jehovah’s Witnesses have no special clergy class.

Thus, the religious organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses does not have the main features of churches.

Jehovah’s Witnesses mostly have the signs of a Christian denomination (Elbakyan 2014, 239). A denomination (Latin *denominatio*: renaming,

designation, attribution of a special name) is, according to religious scholars and sociologists of religion, a natural stage in the evolution of a religious organization from a “sect” to a church. As a type of religious organization, this term was first introduced by the American theologian Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962) in 1929 in the book *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Niebuhr 1929). Protestantism represents the greatest development of denominations, and they are most widespread in the United States.

As a rule, denominations have a high degree of centralization and a hierarchical administration with a clear organizational structure, no division of believers into laity and clergy, permanent membership, monitoring of members' compliance with moral standards and the motif of their being “chosen by God” along with openness to new followers (Kobysov 2006, 282–83).

Myth 2: Jehovah's Witnesses Blindly Obey Their Leaders, and Cooperate with the U.S. in Destabilizing Russia

The second myth maintains that Jehovah's Witnesses are characterized by blind, resigned submission to the highest leadership. It is argued that, since the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses is located in the USA and under the control of the political forces of that State, Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation can be used by the USA to destabilize the situation in Russia.

This myth does not correspond to the real situation, but it is of essential importance in deciding to prosecute Jehovah's Witnesses as people potentially dangerous to the security of the Russian Federation.

First of all, it is important to understand that Jehovah's Witnesses do not support uncomplaining and thoughtless subordination to the highest leadership of their religious organization. From the viewpoint of Jehovah's Witnesses, a true Christian should not accept anything blindly, merely relying on the authority of some leader. The believers should be guided first of all by Bible principles, and in cases where the Bible does not contain a clear and definite answer to a particular question, they should listen to their Bible-trained conscience and follow its voice (ПОНИМАНИЕ ПИСАНИЯ 2019, с. 3581; “СОХРАНЯЙТЕ СЕБЯ В БОЖИЕЙ ЛЮБВИ” 2008, 14–24; “ПРАВИЛЬНО ЛИ ОБУЧЕНА ТВОЯ СОВЕСТЬ?” 2005, 12–5; “НАДЁЖНЫЙ ЛИ СОВЕТЧИК ВАША СОВЕСТЬ?” 2015, 8–12).

It is no coincidence that the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses and the talks of the leaders of the religious organization always include references to the Bible, which believers view as the most convincing arguments. The religious life of Jehovah's Witnesses also includes study of the Bible and Bible literature, and discussion of questions and real-life situations, which are designed to promote the development of a Bible-trained conscience in the believer.

The fact that Jehovah's Witnesses observe strict Christian neutrality and do not participate in politics deserves the closest attention. Neither the leadership of the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses nor ordinary believers are controlled by any political forces, and they do not participate in any political events or campaigns.

This stems from special features of the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses. All Christian movements agree with the statement that Jesus Christ, after he was resurrected, sat down at the right hand of his Father in anticipation of God giving him kingly authority. Only Jehovah's Witnesses, however, believe that in 1914 Jesus Christ already received kingly power in Heaven, and Satan and his demons were thrown out of Heaven to the Earth.

According to the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, the "last days" began in 1914, meaning the transition period from human rule to the Millennial Reign of Jesus Christ, which will be established on the Earth after Armageddon, the decisive battle between the forces of good and evil, in which the forces of good will decisively win.

Jehovah's Witnesses firmly believe that their calling is here and now, on the Earth, to be subjects of Jesus Christ's Kingdom. It is for this reason that Jehovah's Witnesses observe strict neutrality. They do not participate in political life (which includes not voting in elections, not joining political parties, and not taking part in strikes, rallies, and demonstrations). In no country in the world do they sing the national anthem, salute the national flag, celebrate public holidays, or serve in the army.

Jehovah's Witnesses respect state authority, obey the laws of their country, and conscientiously pay taxes, as prescribed by the Bible (*Romans* 13:1–7). Where the authorities demand that they renounce their faith, stop preaching, or violate Bible commandments, Jehovah's Witnesses are guided by the Bible's principle: "We must obey God as ruler rather than men" (*Acts* 5:29; I use here, as in the

other quotes from the Bible, the Jehovah's Witnesses' own *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* 2013). Thus, the special features of the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses rule out the possibility of using followers of this religious organization to destabilize the situation in the Russian Federation in the interests of some political forces, including foreign ones.

Myth 3: Jehovah's Witnesses Refuse Medical Care. Because of Their Refusal of Blood Transfusions, They Are Responsible for the Death of Many Devotees

The religious and moral position of Jehovah's Witnesses with regard to medical care, including blood transfusions, as well as key bioethical issues, is consistent with the norms of law and traditional moral values. It is absurd to attribute to Jehovah's Witnesses, who seek the best treatment from the most qualified doctors, responsibility for the death of patients who could not be treated at the present level of medical development.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not practice "faith healing"; they seek to receive quality medical care. They believe that the Bible's requirement to "keep refraining from [...] blood" (*Acts* 15:20, 29) prohibits eating blood. In fact, the Bible repeats this command many times. For instance: "Only flesh with its life—its blood—you must not eat" (*Genesis* 9:4). "Consequently, I said to the Israelites: 'You must not eat the blood of any sort of flesh because the life of every sort of flesh is its blood. Anyone eating it will be cut off'" (*Leviticus* 17:14). At the same time, they believe that this law also prohibits blood transfusions.

In this regard, Jehovah's Witnesses refuse transfusions of blood and its four main components (red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, and plasma). At the same time, Jehovah's Witnesses do not prohibit the use of minor blood fractions. Each one of Jehovah's Witnesses has the right to decide whether or not to take immunoglobulins or serums prepared by using blood fractions. The believer decides whether they agree with the use of such methods as temporarily collecting some of their own blood during surgery and replacing it with a blood substitute (hemodilution); cleaning and immediately returning to their circulatory system their own blood from the surgical wound (reinfusion); using a heart-lung machine; and hemodialysis (from Greek, "blood" and "separation"), which is a method of extra-renal blood purification in acute and chronic kidney failure.

As a rule, Jehovah's Witnesses have on them a document in which they direct that they should not be given a blood transfusion under any circumstances. This document may state their will with regard to using minor blood fractions, procedures related to the use of their own blood, and other medical matters.

Jehovah's Witnesses pay great attention to cooperation with medical institutions and doctors who use bloodless surgery techniques (*КЛИНИЧЕСКИЕ СТРАТЕГИИ: КАК ИЗБЕЖАТЬ ПЕРЕЛИВАНИЯ КРОВИ* 2012). One of the weighty reasons why many doctors and medical centers support the development of bloodless surgery is the threat of contracting AIDS, hepatitis, and other infections, the risk of which increases with donor blood transfusions. In more than 110 countries, there is an international network of 1,700 hospital liaison committees that include ministers from the communities of Jehovah's Witnesses. Hospital liaison committees provide spiritual and practical help to hospitalized Jehovah's Witness patients, and interact with doctors, staff, and hospital lawyers.

Hospital liaison committees, when contacted, provide free services. They provide scientific articles and information from authoritative, peer-reviewed medical journals on clinical strategies for treatment of patients without the use of blood transfusions. They organize consultations with qualified specialists in the field of bloodless treatments. If necessary, they help to transfer the Jehovah's Witness patient to another hospital that uses bloodless surgery techniques. They conduct presentations on bloodless surgery techniques for doctors and lawyers. They explain ethical questions to Jehovah's Witnesses and doctors who provide medical care to Jehovah's Witnesses (*КОМИТЕТЫ СВИДЕТЕЛЕЙ ИЕГОВЫ ПО СВЯЗЯМ С БОЛЬНИЦАМИ* 2012, 1–16).

Transfusion of donor blood or its main components is, from the viewpoint of Russian legislation, in the category of “medical intervention.” Article 20 of the Federal Law dated November 21, 2011, No. 323-FZ on the Fundamentals of Health Care for Citizens of the Russian Federation provides for informed voluntary consent to medical intervention and refusal of medical intervention. In the cases specified in part 9 of this article, there are grounds for medical intervention without the consent of the citizen or a parent or another legal representative, including if medical intervention is necessary in an emergency to eliminate a threat to the person's life and if his condition does not allow him to express his will. Thus, in refusing transfusions of donor blood and its main

components, Jehovah's Witnesses have every right to do so and do not violate Russian law.

Let us briefly focus on the attitude of Jehovah's Witnesses towards other important problems of bioethics. Abortion is unacceptable to Jehovah's Witnesses. If it is necessary to choose between the mother's life and the child's life during childbirth, the decision is up to the parents or other legal representatives. Each Jehovah's Witness makes a personal decision whether they agree to a transplant, and whether they are ready to be an organ donor, or whether they agree to a bone marrow transplant.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the Bible does not prohibit birth control (contraception). Jehovah's Witness couples decide for themselves what contraceptive methods they will use. However, Jehovah's Witnesses refuse contraceptive methods that are tantamount to abortion.

Artificial insemination, in which eggs and sperm are obtained from persons who are not married to each other, is comparable to adultery and unacceptable for Jehovah's Witnesses.

The use of stem cells obtained at the cost of the embryo's life is also unacceptable for Jehovah's Witnesses. Each believer makes a personal decision whether to take stem cells collected from their own blood or the blood of another person, provided that the blood components are not intentionally transfused along with the stem cells.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Bible permits moderate use of alcoholic beverages, but Bible principles rule out the use of tobacco and drugs for non-medical purposes. The only restriction with regard to food is the prohibition on eating blood as well as meat from an animal that has not been properly bled (*Acts* 15:28, 29; see *РЕЛИГИОЗНАЯ И ЭТИЧЕСКАЯ ПОЗИЦИЯ ОТНОСИТЕЛЬНО МЕДИЦИНСКОЙ ПОМОЩИ И СВЯЗАННЫХ С ЭТИМ ВОПРОСОВ* 2012, 1–16).

Jehovah's Witnesses' Determination to Continue to Preach Even in the Face of Persecution

According to the deep conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses, even the most severe persecution will not put an end to their preaching since God supports them. Thus, from 1939 to 1945, despite bans and brutal persecution (especially in

Nazi Germany), the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in the world more than doubled, from 72,000 to 156,000.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that they have been called to continue to serve Jehovah in the face of persecution. At the same time, they believe that there are certain positive aspects of persecution. People often want to learn more about Jehovah's Witnesses, so they respond more readily to their preaching. Many believers who stopped preaching in the past began associating with the religious groups and resumed preaching.

The Witnesses with whom I spoke in Russia in 2017–2020 note that the threat of persecution has occasionally caused some people to “drop out,” but the influx of new people has increased, the number of people wanting to be baptized has increased, and many of those who previously left the organization and became inactive have returned to active preaching. In the religious groups that I was able to visit, believers continue their active preaching.

Given the persistence of Jehovah's Witnesses in the face of persecution as well as their position of strict neutrality, which rules out the possibility of using followers of this religious organization to destabilize the situation in the Russian Federation in the interests of some political forces, it is advisable to return Jehovah's Witnesses to a legal status.

Among the issues that could be the subject of discussion and further settlement are the following:

- 1) conditions for registering religious communities of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation;
- 2) the possibility of registering the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia as a centralized religious organization;
- 3) prospects for returning to the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia any property that was turned over to the Russian Federation in accordance with the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation dated April 20, 2017.

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