

Research Notes

Scientology, Anti-Cultists, and the State in Russia and Hungary

On October 5–6, 2017, Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, hosted the conference Religion(s) and Power(s), organized by the the Lithuanian Society for the Study of Religions in co-operation with the Estonian Society for the Study of Religions and the Latvian Society for the Study of Religion. We publish the texts of the session “Cults, Anti-Cultists, and Power in Russia. Anti-Extremism Laws and the Case of the Church of Scientology.” To document how Russian concepts of “spiritual security” are being exported in other countries, we also include a paper on Hungary by Patricia Duval, from the seminar Religion and Civil Society in the Post-Soviet Era: Central Asia and Beyond, co-organized by CESNUR at the American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on March 19–20, 2018.

The Social Construction of “Extremism” in Russia: From the Jehovah’s Witnesses to Scientology and Beyond

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ABSTRACT: After the 2017 “liquidation” of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Russia moved to liquidate other new religious movements, including the Church of Scientology. While international criticism often focused on the Russian anti-proselytization laws of 2016, it was in fact the anti-extremism law of 2002, as amended in 2006, that became the main tool for “liquidating” unpopular minorities. In the Russian context, the local anti-cult movement led by Alexander Dvorkin and by radical sectors of the Orthodox Church, accredited itself as the custodian of the nationalist doctrine of “spiritual security,” aimed at shielding Russian from “foreign” spiritual and cultural influences.

KEYWORDS: Scientology, Scientology in Russia, Alexander Dvorkin, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Anti-Extremism Laws in Russia, Religious Liberty in Russia.

Introduction

In 2017, the Supreme Court in Russia confirmed the “liquidation” of the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist” group (Arnold 2017a). Steps were taken towards a similar “liquidation” as “extremist” of the Church of Scientology, whose churches were raided and whose leaders in St. Petersburg were arrested (information about the case of the Church of Scientology in Russia is also derived from copies of court documents in the archives of CESNUR, Torino, Italy).

“Extremism” is a broad notion in Russia. Based on anti-cult propaganda, the prosecutor in Tomsk asked a local court to ban an ISKCON Russian translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* as “extremist.” The case generated widespread protest in India, which the Russian ambassador to India tried to placate by describing those trying to ban the *Gita* as irrelevant “madmen” (Corley 2012). Although the prosecutor lost the first-degree case in 2011 and the appeal in 2012, accusations of extremism against the *Bhagavad Gita* are still heard in Russia (Corley 2012).

Banned in Russia as “extremist” were also the works of renowned Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi (1878–1960), including his famous *Risale-i Nur* (Arnold 2016a). Nursi’s books are also quoted by *some* Muslim fundamentalists, but so is the *Quran*, and most of Nursi’s followers are certainly not radical (Vahide 2005, Markham and Pirim 2011).

On July 14, 2017, the District Court of Sochi also banned as “extremist” the book *Forced to Convert* by the German rabbi Marcus Lehmann (1831–1890), on forced conversions of Jews to Christianity in Poland and Lithuania in the Middle Ages. The decision was strongly condemned by Boruch Gorin, the spokesperson for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (Arnold 2017c).

In 2016, as part of the so called Yarovaya laws, Russia introduced provisions prohibiting proselytization on behalf of religious minorities outside of religious buildings. They were condemned by most international organizations but are now systematically enforced, as shown in the following table (compiled based on Arnold 2017b and listing cases prosecuted between June 2016 and July 2017):

Religious Groupings	Cases Prosecuted
Protestant/Evangelicals (excluding Baptists)	58
Jehovah’s Witnesses	40
Baptists	26
ISKCON (Hare Krishna)	12
Muslims	9
Miscellaneous Jews/Kabbalah	3
Seventh-day Adventists	3
Unidentified Christians	2
Dissident Orthodox	2
Salvation Army	1
New Apostolic Church	1
Mormons	1
Neo-Pagan	1

Table 1: Anti-proselytization cases prosecuted between June 2016 and July 2017

However, even more dangerous for religious minorities are the anti-extremism provisions of 2002, introduced after 9/11 and amended in 2006 after the “Russian 9/11” or “the 9/11 of children,” i.e. the terrorist attack in Beslan, North Ossetia, of September 1–3, 2004, where 354 were killed, including 186 children. The law was originally intended as a weapon against radical Islamic fundamentalism. With the amendment of 2006, “extremism” can be found even without actual violence or incitement to violence (Arnold 2016b).

Four Criteria for “Extremism” in Russia

By moving from the Jehovah’s Witnesses to the second main target, Scientology, four criteria for identifying “extremism” emerged—other than violence or incitement to violence, which are admittedly absent in these cases:

1. *Exclusiveness.* According to the Russian “experts” and courts, “extremist” movements claim that they preach the only way to salvation, and that all the other religions (including Christianity as taught by the Russian Orthodox Church) are false or limited.

2. *“Breaking Families.”* The Russian interpretation is that “extremist” groups “break families,” because if only one spouse joins, or leaves, the movement, divorce is the outcome in most of cases. True or false information about divorces of celebrities, such as Tom Cruise (a Scientologist) is also mentioned as evidence.

3. *Mistreating Ex-Members.* It is argued that “extremist” groups “violate the dignity” of former members, by suggesting that members avoid any contact with them, even when they are close relatives.

4. *Economic Crimes.* Finally, it is claimed that under the guise of religion “extremist” movements commit economic crimes, including systematic tax evasion.

The main problem is not that the accusations are false. It is that they *can be applied to almost any religion*:

1. Most religions proclaim that they offer the only path to salvation. This is obvious for Islam but was reiterated by Catholicism in the Vatican declaration *Dominus Iesus* of 2000 (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000), although it is perhaps less emphasized by the present Pope. And it would not be difficult to collect statements by dignitaries of the Russian Orthodox Church claiming that all other religions are false, and some are in fact directly controlled by the Devil.

Critics insist that Scientologists emphasize that theirs is the unique “technology” capable of saving the planet. While this is true, Scientology clearly teaches that one can become a Scientologist and maintain his or her previous religion, although there may be theological problems in reconciling different beliefs. As it has been observed, from a strictly religious point of view Scientology is one of the *less* exclusivist movements in the world (Neusner 2003, 221–236).

2. When only one spouse changes his or her religion, divorce is frequent—in all religions. This can be documented through the case of India, where family law allows for automatic divorce in case of conversion of one spouse to a different religion, and tens of thousands of applications for “conversion divorce” are filed every year (see e.g. Garg 1998).

3. Until a few years ago, the Catholic Church regarded those excommunicated as “vitandi,” a Latin word meaning “persons to be avoided” (Testo and Turchi 1936). Many religions have policies of forbidding any communication between members and “apostate” ex-members, including groups we normally regard as nice and peaceful such as the Amish (Wiser 2014). And for some Islamic schools, political parties, and governments, the “apostate” who has left Islam may be punished with the death penalty (Pew Research Center 2013).

4. Almost all religions have been accused, in one country or another, of greediness and tax evasion, a perpetual argument used in anti-religious propaganda by atheists.

Some such accusations are demonstrably false. Galina Shurinova, executive director of the Church of Scientology in St Petersburg, was arrested and accused inter alia of selling courses and books without having properly registered Scientology as an organization. In fact, Shurinova had repeatedly tried to incorporate the Church, but registration was denied, despite a 2015 decision by the European Court of Human Rights condemning this refusal (European Court of Human Rights 2015: Shurinova herself was a petitioner in that case).

The Context: “Spiritual Security”

The use of the category of “extremism” in Russia may seem irrational. But it is important to understand how it has been socially and politically constructed, and by whom. Russia’s main anti-cult organization, the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre, has worked for more than twenty years to promote the notion. Its leader, Alexander Dvorkin, became the president of the Justice Ministry’s Expert Council for Conducting State Religious Studies Expert Analysis, a key actor in the cases for banning groups and books as “extremist” (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

Although Dvorkin's extreme methods and his cavalier attacks against (inter alia) the Mormons, the Baha'is, Hinduism, and Islam have often embarrassed the government and the Russian Orthodox Church, he has also been used by circles promoting "spiritual security" as part of the Russian concept of national security. In the *Russian National Security Concept* (2000), we read that "Russian Federation's national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia's peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries" ("National Security Concept of the Russian Federation" 2000, IV).

Ironically, Russian judges sat in the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–1946, where Nazi leaders were accused of having persecuted Jews and members of religious minorities based, inter alia, on a concept of German "spiritual health" to be preserved and protected against "foreign" spiritual influences (Gonen 2000, 31).

The Russian approach is also being exported to "friendly" countries, such as the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Belarus, Serbia, and Hungary (EIFRF 2017). Dvorkin is the vice-president of the European anti-cult federation FECRIS. As economic support to FECRIS by other countries is drying out, Russian hegemony on European anti-cultism is a concrete possibility. It is also paradoxical, because most European anti-cult organizations are deeply secular, while Dvorkin represents a radical faction of the Russian Orthodox Church (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

Conclusion

Doctrines of "spiritual security" have no place in the European Union and are also incompatible with international conventions on human rights and religious liberty that Russia has executed and ratified. Religions should be able to compete freely and to proselyte, without undue state restrictions. Non-traditional religions cannot be discriminated because they do not fit within the boundaries of a nationalist/traditionalist ideology.

At the same time, I believe that a dialogue should be promoted, reassuring nations that went through the tragic experience of Communism, that nobody wants to impose to them a secular model dismissing traditional identities or religions as irrelevant. Creative solutions exist, guaranteeing both the recognition that certain religions are uniquely part of the history of their countries and the liberty mandated by the international convention for the religious minorities.

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