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

Bernadette Rigal-Cellard
Université Bordeaux Montaigne
brigal@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

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 *seкта*, 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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Opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia: The Cultural Roots

Rosita Šorytė

European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB), Vilnius, Lithuania

rosita_soryte@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: To understand why the Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted in Russia, the broader background of Russia's history should be considered. From the time of Peter the Great, the country has been deeply divided between an elite looking at the West, and the peasant masses, supported by some intellectuals, that resisted the Westernizing reforms and believed in an eternal Russia alternative to the Western values. The latter incarnation of the Russian ethos prevailed in the Communist Revolution. After the fall of Communism, many in Russia and the West hoped that the pro-Western forces might once again prevail. In fact, Putin came, and built a hybrid system with some (but less and less) elements coming from pre-Soviet Russia, and others (more and more) derived from Soviet Russia. In this context, any religious organization other than the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) came under severe scrutiny. The ROC itself, however, is losing momentum, and increasingly appears as a giant with feet of clay.

KEYWORDS: Anti-Western Feelings in Russia, Russian Anti-Western Propaganda, Religious Freedom in Russia, Russian Orthodox Church, Putin's Religious Policy, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

Why Russia?

Russia is very much in the news today, from the Alexei Navalny case to the support offered to President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus. We all have opinions on Russia and its main figure—Vladimir Putin. To some, Russia represents a major challenge. They would mention the occupation of Crimea, the heavy involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, the support offered to President Bashar al-Assad in Syria—and the list is longer.

Some believe that Russia is meddling in most of the Western countries' internal affairs, seeking to destabilize and sowing discontent, with the NATO and the EU as its major targets.

The most recent of several documents produced in the West, the report on Russia by the Intelligence and Security Committee of the British Parliament, dated July 21, 2020, denounced widespread Russian “promotion of disinformation and its attempts at broader political influence overseas.” Before focusing on how Russian propaganda influenced the UK 2016 Brexit referendum, the report mentioned several other examples:

- use of state-owned traditional media: open source studies have shown serious distortions in the coverage provided by Russian state-owned international broadcasters such as RT and Sputnik;
- “bots” and “trolls”: open source studies have identified significant activity on social media;
- “hack and leak”: the US has publicly avowed that Russia conducted “hack and leak” operations in relation to its presidential election in 2016, and it has been widely alleged that Russia was responsible for a similar attack on the French presidential election in 2017; and
- “real life” political interference: it has been widely reported that Kremlin-linked entities have made “soft loans” to the (then) *Front National* in France, seemingly at least in part as a reward for the party having supported Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and the GRU sponsored a failed coup in Montenegro in October 2016—an astonishingly bold move in a country just a few months from its accession to NATO (Intelligence and Security Committee of the [UK] Parliament 2020, 9).

The purposes of these massive Russian propaganda and interference campaigns were explained as follows:

- direct support of a pro-Russian narrative in relation to particular events (whilst some of the outright falsehoods which are put forward may not be widely believed, they may still succeed in casting doubt on the true account of events: when people start to say “You don’t know what to believe” or “They’re all as bad as each other,” the disinformers are winning);
- direct support of Russia’s preferred outcome in relation to an overseas election or political issue; and
- general poisoning of the political narrative in the West by fomenting political extremism and “wedge issues,” and by the “astroturfing” of Western public opinion; and general discrediting of the West (Intelligence and Security Committee of the [UK] Parliament 2020, 9–10).

Of course, the report also noted,

Russia's disinformation efforts against the West are dwarfed by those which the Russian state conducts against its own population (Intelligence and Security Committee of the [UK] Parliament 2020, 9).

There are others, however, and it appears they are more and more in the West, who regard Russia as a model country, where a traditional understanding of the family is preserved, and there is no same-sex marriage. Many would argue that Putin is an exceptional leader, a sincere believer in God, and a fierce fighter for traditional values (Verpoest 2017). This image is actively promoted by Putin himself. He proclaimed in 2013 that,

We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality (Putin 2013).

But what exactly this country—Russia—is, and why we all have such diverse opinions about it? What is this country, which bans, criminalizes, and tortures devotees of the Jehovah's Witnesses, accusing them of being an “extremist group”?

Other groups that are persecuted in Russia include Scientology (Falikov 2018; Introvigne 2018; Zoccatelli 2018) and the Muslim followers of the Turkish mystic Said Nursi (1877–1960) (Kravchenko 2018). But there are more who are about to fall out of the good graces of the government, without having committed any other crime than just not being part of the Russian Orthodox Church, or being perceived as not supportive of the Putin regime. The Roman Catholic Church continues a precarious existence (Rozanskij 2020). And certainly, we do not expect members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to be allowed to freely practice their faith in Russia—or in Crimea (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Crimean Field Mission 2015)—, particularly after it severed its ties with the Russian Orthodox Church in 2018.

To understand what this country is, we cannot apply our non-Russian way of thinking. Russians like to say that one would never be able to understand Russia with the mind, Russia can be understood through the heart only.

The Third Rome

In many ways, Russia is a deeply spiritual country. Nonetheless, this declarative statement should be compared with a reality that is much harsher and less spiritual. The reason why the Russian reality may be difficult to understand is not because Russia is somehow “more spiritual,” in comparison with the Western world. It is because, since ancient times, Russia was closed into itself. This situation persisted through the centuries, and in particular in the Soviet era. Different regimes developed and perpetuated an entire system of belief that Russia is divine, and the West is evil, the West being more recently identified with the United States and their allies.



Figure 1. Ivan the Terrible (played by Nikolay Konstantinovich Cherkasov, 1903–1966) proclaims his faith in the Third Rome in Eisenstein’s movie.

After Constantinople (now Istanbul), called by the Eastern Orthodox “the second Rome,” fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the Russians proclaimed that Moscow had become “the third Rome,” the only remaining center of true Christianity (Poe 2001). At the end of the first part of the film *Ivan the Terrible* by Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), which was released in Soviet theaters in 1944,

i.e. during World War II, which Russians call the Great Patriotic War, Czar Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584) pronounces these words, which may be apocryphal but capture a continuing claim in Russian history: “Two Romes fell, but Moscow, the third Rome, will go on, and there will not be a fourth Rome!” (Eisenstein 1944).

More than five centuries later, we still hear that Russia is the only remaining holder of real values, while the Western world is possessed by exclusively materialistic ideas, and worships only one god—money.

The Cat and the Mice: Peter the Great

Russia is an entire world in its own, with a specific worldview and mentality. This is rooted in Russian history. Russian nationalists are painfully aware that, for centuries, Russia was still underdeveloped and primitive, while the Western world had developed a higher culture and civilization. To open Russia to the world, the first and greatest efforts were undertaken by the most famous Tsar of the Russian Empire, Peter the Great (1682–1725), who ruled at the end of 17th century and the beginning of the 18th. He had the ambition to transform medieval Russia into a major European power, at the image of France and other flourishing European countries. He deployed all possible efforts for a rapprochement between Russia and the West. He moved the capital from Moscow to Saint Petersburg (closer to the West), built the city with the help of Western architects, and led what some have called a “cultural revolution,” aimed at modernizing Russia based on the Western models of the early Enlightenment (Miliukov 1963; Cracraft 2006). The effect of Peter’s reforms is still felt in Russia today (Riasanovsky 1985).

Unfortunately, Peter imposed most of his reforms with violence and brutality. Consequently, his reformist effort was met with resistance (Anisimov 1993). This crucial passage in Russian history resulted in a deeply divided country. The elite—the aristocracy, the upper level classes of society, and the intelligentsia—quite eagerly accepted and adopted Western values and ways of living. The working class, and the peasants and the serfs—sometimes collectively called mujiks by Western observers—, kept their older values and lifestyles (Kahan 1966). With time, these deep-rooted divisions between the cities and the

countryside, and between the rich and the educated and the poor, became even deeper.

An immensely popular, although repeatedly banned, *lubok* (popular print) of the 18th century, *The Mice Are Burying the Cat*, depicts the peasants of the different Russian regions as mice, and Peter the Great as the cat. The meaning was that during his lifetime, Peter terrorized the peasants with his Westernizing reforms but in the end the old, eternal Russia will prevail. and the peasants will have the last laugh (Alaniz 2010, 23).

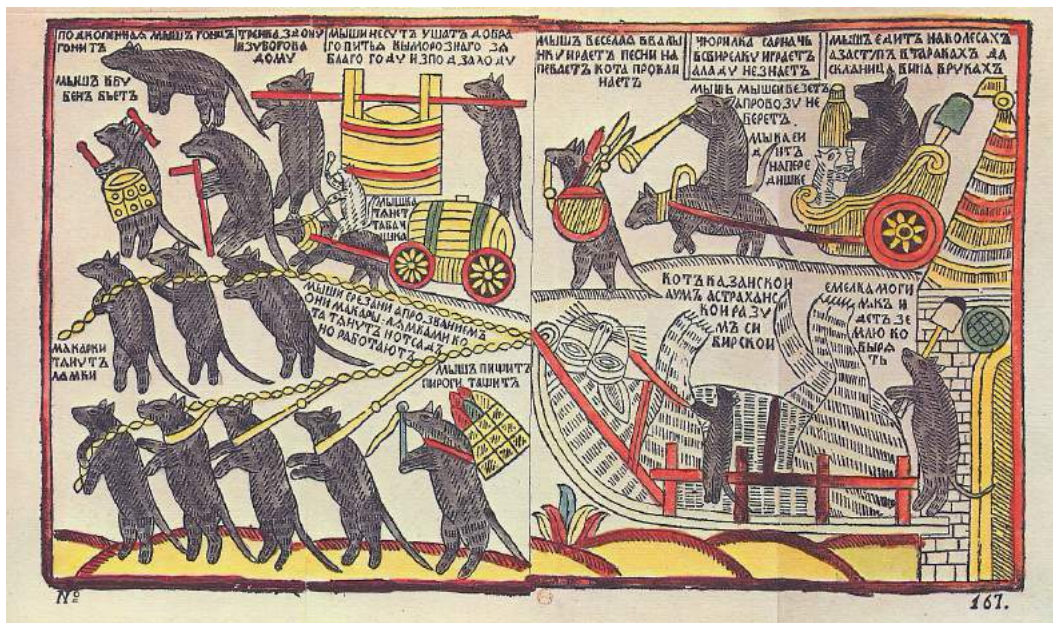


Figure 2. *The Mice Are Burying the Cat*, print, circa 1760.

The Revolution and Soviet Russia

Eventually, these divisions and complete cut-off between two parts of society created the conditions for the Russian Revolution of 1917. Extreme poverty, rampant injustice, total neglect and ignorance of the living conditions of the lower levels of society by the elite, played a consolidating role, and helped to mobilize the peasants and the working class to revolt and to take power, although the top-down role of a small but determined Communist intellectual elite was also crucial (McMeekin 2017).

During the so-called Proletarian Revolution, and the bloody Civil War that followed, the country was destroyed. The Russian Civil War was fought between

the “Whites” (i.e. the richer, more Westernized population) and the “Reds” (i.e. the “proletarians” and mujiks). An important aspect to remember is that this war was not only about power and control, but also about values (Lazarski 1992). And here lies an essential point, which is important even today, and might help to understand certain trends in Russia.

After the victory of the Reds, everything—and I underline, *everything*—that had been accepted by the rich, educated and powerful, which at the same time meant the Westernized part of the Russian society, was declared obsolete and harmful to a new Russian (or, rather, Soviet) society. The aristocrats, the rich, the intelligentsia, and the clergy became “enemies of the people.” It is especially important to remember that the Russian Orthodox Church was an integral part of the “old” power, closely connected with the Emperor, and part of the repressive apparatus of Imperial Russia. By building a “new” society, the Soviets banned the Russian Orthodox Church from the social life of the new Soviet state. Most of the churches were destroyed, and the priests were killed or sent to Gulags (Pospelovsky 1987–88).

Atheism became the new religion; the Church and God had been replaced by a new God—the Communist Party and its leaders (Powell 1975). The personality cult of the Soviet leaders reached grotesque excesses under Iosif Stalin (1878–1953), but was always part of the regime.

The hatred of the rich and the educated, which represented in the minds of the new Soviets the Western values, thus the enemy, was further amplified because of the support offered by the USA, Great Britain, France, and Japan to the White Army fighting against the Reds in the Russian Civil War (Carley 1989). It clearly put “us” against “them.”

Another decisive historical factor was World War II. This war was fought with unspeakable sacrifices by Russian and Soviet peoples. The war was won by the Soviet State, but in order to justify the unjustifiable human cost, Stalin and its regime built an entire narrative on the Great Patriotic War about how good the Soviets and Russians were, and how they had to fight not only against the Nazis but at the same time against the evil plans of the Western world, led by the Americans (Tumarkin 2003). This was followed by the last passage in our history—the Cold War, which required, again, from the Russians substantial economic and social sacrifices, demanded in the name of “resisting the dangers coming from the Evil West.”

These and other episodes of history perpetuated a fear and hatred of the Western world, which had a longstanding impact on Soviet mentality, and persists even today. Putin's Russia is a kind of hybrid, with some, but less and less, elements coming from pre-Soviet Russia, and more and more elements derived from Soviet Russia.

The Early 1990s: A Time of Hopes

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia underwent another major transformation. What had been a part of the Soviet Union became, once again, a Russian state. This raised the hopes of those, including the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, who during the Soviet time had suffered severe persecutions, deportations, executions, and property confiscations. These people were eager to be rehabilitated, and wanted their true stories to be told and acknowledged. They were seeking their right place in the society, and called for justice to be restored. For most of them, even more important was that the unity of all Russians be restored.

Some expected a rebirth of the old Russia shaped by the reforms of Peter the Great, which would become again part of the Western world. This position was often found among the highly educated and liberal elites. They were seeking democracy, freedom of speech and assembly, religious liberty. They perceived Westerners as their friends and allies. Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the new Russia and the West substantially improved. The world was expecting a new Russia to emerge, embracing democracy, respecting human rights and the rule of law (Ellison 2006). Most treaties and agreements between Russia and the West were signed in these years. To encourage Russia to pursue this path of rapprochement, it was accepted into the exclusive club of G8.

At the same time, there were many in Russia who had sincerely believed in the “proletarian values” and the Soviet system. Those who were strongly attached to the Soviet past, and who were so proud of their victory in the Great Patriotic War, were deeply traumatized by losing the “grandeur” of the Soviet Union, the comfort of thinking that everything was perfect, and that Russia was always right. For these people, it was extremely traumatic to realize that the “glory” of the Soviet Union was based on lies, torture, and repression. For them, the dissolution

of the Soviet Union was perceived as a deeply humiliating defeat. They were reluctant to accept the emerging new Russia, and its opening to the West, which for so many years was perceived as a fierce enemy. They perceived the universal values of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, as foreign and unnecessary. A considerable part of the Russian society kept a strong resentment towards the new political system, the opening of Russia to the world, and the efforts to adopt Western values (Langdon and Tismaneanu 2020, 35–53).

Enter Putin

When it seemed highly likely that these two irreconcilable parts of the Russian society would clash against one another, Putin came. Putin himself, being part and parcel of the Soviet system, understood these deeply divisive contradictions of the country, and the threats they represented for the unity of Russia (Belton 2020). As a first step, he sought reconciliation between the two factions of society. An answer to the historical fact that Soviets committed crimes against their own people was found in the theory that Russians might have been on both sides of the trench, but those who really were instigating killings were—foreigners of all kinds. The simple logic was: all Russians—White or Red—were (and are) “good,” all problems came from the “foreigners.”



Figure 3. From *Admiral* (2008).

There is a significant scene in the 2008 Russian movie *Admiral*, directed by Andrei Kravchuk. The film is a biography of Alexander Kolchak (1874–1920), the main leader of the White Army in the Civil War. After one of Kolchak’s last battles, Orthodox priests come to bury the dead. One priest asks another whether they should also bury the atheist Reds, rather than the Christian Whites only. The answer is that they should all be buried together. White or Red, they are all sons of Mother Russia. Later in the movie, Kolchak is executed by the Reds, who are almost reluctant to perform something they believe is needed for the sake of the Revolution. And they make sure that Kolchak understands that he dies because he has been betrayed by his Western allies (Kravchuk 2008).

Besides a Russian national reconciliation, and a reconciliation with the past, Putin had other major ambitions—to make Russia a superpower again. Unfortunately, being himself a product of the Soviet system, Putin maintains the Soviet mentality and understanding of the world, which basically means seeing West as an enemy to be fought. Furthermore, his clear ambition is to regain control of the Soviet Union’s space. Slowly but steadily, the new version of the Soviet system in the shape of new Russia is developing—Stalin is being rehabilitated, the Soviet anthem has been reintroduced, Putin’s United Russia is becoming the only ruling party, freedom of speech is being suppressed, opponents are eliminated or marginalized. Slowly but steadily, the grand dream of the 1990s about a new Russia is dying, and some kind of reincarnated Soviet Russia is emerging (Langdon and Tismaneanu 2020). The packaging might look new, but inside is the same old Soviet content, although transformed: the economy is controlled by those who are friendly to Putin and his United Russia party (Belton 2020), and only those religious or spiritual groups that are praising Putin, Russia, and the system are tolerated. Any non-Russian presence is feared, and remains under severe scrutiny. Religious groups with links to the US and other Western countries either are subject to severe limitations or have been banned and their properties confiscated, as is the case for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which were accused of being “extremist” and “liquidated” (Kravchenko 2018; USCIRF 2020).

In Russia, there are three major powers ruling the country and tightening its grip: first, the political elite in the form of the party United Russia, which is unquestionably submissive to its leader Putin; second, the oligarchs, who hold the economic power and control almost everything in the country; and third, the

Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). All these three forces are very tightly interconnected, and need each other. The ROC leaders became so absorbed by all this power and influence that they neglected to reform themselves. They preside on the same old-fashioned, didactic institution cherishing its close ties with rulers, as it always was in Russian history, and often neglecting the contact with their people. The ROC hierarchy became an essential player in the State's system, meaning Putin and its oligarchs, defending its interests internally and internationally.

The Church: A Giant with Feet of Clay?

Russia, though, is not as strong and monolithic as some think. Deep down, Russia is full of internal contradictions and deep-rooted tensions, and only a full control at all levels of life guarantees the unity of the state. To maintain stability, the authorities should keep a tight control on everything and everybody.

The ROC is an essential tool in trying to keep the country together and implement the state's agenda. Any competition from any other religious group is simply not tolerable. The reason given is that to be Russian, one should have close ties with the land, speak Russian, and be part of the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time, Putin needs the ROC to spread a good message about him and his party. The ROC is expected to keep control over people's minds. It was supposed to be a win-win situation on both sides, a holy alliance indeed (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

In the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church was part and parcel of the revival of Russia. At that time, the ROC attracted a massive influx of people. To be religious at that time was the same as seeking freedom and respect of human rights after the Soviet repression. Churches were full of people, young and old, educated and simple people from the villages. To be religious and to be politically liberal at the same time was entirely normal. But slowly, the ROC was submerged by its own ambitions to be rich and powerful, and lost contact with many devotees. The relationship became a monologue instead of dialogue. Now, churches are largely empty, and the religion is perceived as a business of old ladies. The new generation of Russians once again is becoming more and more secular. Even though 79 percent of Russians declare themselves Orthodox Christians in the polls, most of the churches, which were renovated, rebuilt, or

built anew, remain empty (Baunov 2019). Nevertheless, the ROC continues building more and more churches.

This disconnect was perfectly illustrated by the massive demonstrations in May 2019 in Yekaterinburg, which is one of the most important cities of Russia, and where during Revolution the Romanov family was executed. The discontent and protests were provoked by the ROC's plans to build yet another church in one of the last remaining public squares (Rainsford 2019). As peaceful protests were going unabated and growing, finally the authorities decided to freeze the project. According to the polls, 74 percent of city's population was against building a church in that square (*BBC News* 2020).

This episode shows that, notwithstanding all the official propaganda, still there is a spirit of liberty that nobody is able to control. However, as long as the system will maintain its tight control on society, there is no chance that this spirit will prevail. On the contrary, in my personal opinion, the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious groups, perceived as agents of the United States or as enemies of the ROC and the government, will continue. There is little to be done from outside to change it—unless the change will come from inside.

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**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 (Kobyzov 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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Opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia: Legal Measures

Willy Fautré

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

w.fautre@hrwf.org

ABSTRACT: Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have faced increasing hostility from the state and the Russian Orthodox Church since the late 1990s, as legislation designed to safeguard the country against violent extremist ideologies and terrorism has instead been instrumentalized to persecute peaceful "non-traditional" religious minorities. For years, Jehovah's Witnesses have been stigmatized and cast as a threat to the Russian national and religious identity. Now, controversial legislative changes have allowed for Jehovah's Witnesses to be labelled "extremist" and formally prosecuted on the grounds of amended anti-extremism laws. This paper highlights how Putin's political concept of "spiritual security" has driven the legal dynamic leading to the criminalization of the legitimate exercise of the right to religious practices over the last 20 years. It exposes the common agenda of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian anti-cult movement led by Alexander Dvorkin, and the Russian government, aimed at the elimination of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities. It analyses the successive laws adopted to this end by the Russian Parliament after immense pressure from these actors. It documents the alarming escalation of human rights violations against Jehovah's Witnesses, which include arrests, administrative fines, pretrial detention, and prison sentences, as well as a legal ban and seizures of all their property. It concludes with some encouraging signs of advocacy from the US government, and some faith in the capacity of Jehovah's Witnesses to survive this repression.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Alexander Dvorkin, FECRIS, Anti-Cultism in Russia, Anti-Cult Movement, Religious Freedom in Russia.

Introduction

As of August 15, 2020, 44 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in Russia: 10 had been convicted, and 34 were being held in pretrial detention. Additionally, 173 Jehovah's Witnesses were under orders forbidding them from leaving their hometowns, and 379 were under criminal investigation. These individuals ranged in age from 19 to 90.

Why are so many Jehovah's Witnesses being put behind bars in Russia? Worldwide, they are known to be law-abiding citizens and to be non-violent. They may be imprisoned as conscientious objectors to military service or for their proselytizing activities in some countries, but this is not the case in Russia.

In Russia, they are accused of being "extremists." Since April 2017, when the movement was banned by the Supreme Court, 1,107 of their homes have been raided, including 310 in 2020. These raids have continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dennis Christensen, a 46-year-old Danish citizen living in the Russian town of Oryol, was the first Jehovah's Witness to be arrested a few weeks after the ban. He was placed in pre-trial detention for over 600 days, before being sentenced to six years in prison.

The acceleration and intensification of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia started with the ban of their movement on April 20, 2017 on grounds of alleged extremism.

The Ban on Grounds of Extremism

On March 15, 2017, Russia's Justice Ministry submitted a case to the Supreme Court, arguing that the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses was an "extremist" organization, and so should be liquidated and all its activities banned. The first hearing took place on April 5, 2017.

The threat of a complete ban quickly received widespread condemnation across the globe. Among many others, it is worth mentioning the joint support of several UN Special Rapporteurs: David Kaye (USA), the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression; Maina Kiai (Kenya), the Special Rapporteur on freedoms of peaceful assembly and of association; and Ahmed Shaheed (Maldives), the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (OHCHR 2017).

However, despite the numerous interventions of international human rights actors, Russia's Supreme Court ruled on April 20, 2017, that the Jehovah's Witnesses' national headquarters in St Petersburg and all local branches were "extremist," and thus should be closed and immediately stop all activities

(Jehovah's Witnesses n.d.). Additionally, the Supreme Court ordered all their property to be seized by the state.

The decision was appealed but, on July 17, 2017, Russia's Supreme Court upheld its earlier ruling to liquidate the Jehovah's Witnesses Administrative Centre and its 395 local legal entities, as well as to ban all activities and seize all properties. It is estimated that these properties are worth over 125 million USD.

According to figures that the Communication Department of the Watch Tower Headquarters in New York kindly provided me with, their evaluation of the losses can be sub-divided as follows:

(a) Properties owned by foreign entities

- Total number of properties and their collective value—208 properties, including the branch in Solnechnoye, which includes the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (WTPA) properties. Their total value is 3,314,663,990 rubles, which is 46,372,149 USD.
- Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value—91 properties, including the branch in Solnechnoye (WTPA properties). Their total value is 2,316,163,236 rubles which is 32,403,123 USD.

List of the foreign entities and countries involved—9 in total:

- Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania,
- Jehovah's Witnesses of Sweden,
- Jehovah's Witnesses of Austria,
- Jehovah's Witnesses of Finland,
- Jehovah's Witnesses of the Netherlands,
- Jehovah's Witnesses of Spain,
- Jehovah's Witnesses of Norway,
- Jehovah's Witnesses of Denmark,
- and Jehovah's Witnesses of Portugal.

(b) Properties owned in Russia

- Total number of properties and their collective value—159 properties, including 2 small buildings on the premises of the branch in Solnechnoye that

were the administrative center. Their total value is 1,391,956,047 rubles, which is 19,473,465 USD.

- Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value—121 properties, including 2 small buildings on the premises of the Solnechnoye branch. Their total value is 1,219,296,672 rubles, which is 17,057,960 USD.

(c) Properties owned in Crimea

- Total number of properties and their collective value—32 properties. Their total value is 288,186,704 rubles, which is 4,031,731 USD.
- Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value—24 properties. Their total value is 225,221,225 rubles, which is 3,150,844 USD.

The ruling immediately came into force. Although in theory this decision did not suppress the freedom of worship for Jehovah's Witnesses, afterwards, all their religious activities were labelled "extremist" and criminalized in practice. The arrest and lengthy prison sentencing of Dennis Christensen was a strong warning to Jehovah's Witnesses and the international human rights community: the law would be strictly and firmly implemented.

In May 2017, Dennis Christensen and other co-religionists were arrested during a raid by police and Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, while they were having a Bible study meeting in Oryol. Dennis Christensen is a citizen of an EU country, Denmark, who is married to a Russian woman and lives in Russia.

Dennis Christensen, Six Years in Prison

On May 25, 2017, heavily armed police officers and agents of the FSB disrupted a peaceful weekly religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses. The authorities took about 20 people into custody and held them overnight, including Dennis Christensen.

After a nearly year-long criminal trial with over 50 court appearances, he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment under Article 282.2(1) of the Criminal Code: "Organization of the activity of a social or religious association or other organizations, in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force

on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity.” The Oryol community of Jehovah’s Witnesses was specifically targeted because the Oryol Regional Court had previously determined their group to be “extremist” (Arnold 2017).

On January 30, 2019, the prosecution demanded Christensen be sentenced to six and a half years for “continuing the activities” of an extremist group. On February 6, 2019, after having been in pretrial detention for over 600 days, Christensen was sentenced to six years imprisonment in a penal colony. On May 23, 2019, the Oryol Regional Court denied his appeal and upheld its February decision.

The international community was quick to react, condemning his sentence and demanding his immediate release, in particular the United Nations (UN) (OHCHR 2019), the European Union (EU) (EEAS Press Team 2020), and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (USCIRF 2019).

On June 23, 2020, Christensen was granted parole after serving half of his prison sentence. However, Aleksei Shatunov of the Kursk Regional Public Prosecutor’s Office filed an appeal demanding that the court ruling be overturned. The appeal was based on false reports that Christensen did not have a record of good behavior while in prison. His parole was denied, and the prison authorities placed him in a punishment cell for ten days despite his poor health. At the time of this writing, Christensen was still in prison, waiting for a new hearing to be scheduled, which could take several months.

Russia’s choice of their first victim under this repressive legislation was a clear challenge designed to test the reaction of the international community, especially the EU, since Christensen is not a Russian citizen but a foreign national from Denmark. This was a cunning political and geo-political strategy.

The Accusations of Extremism

The accusations of extremism against Jehovah’s Witnesses are not new.

By examining statistics from Russia’s Justice Ministry covering the period from 2007 to 2017, Human Rights Watch discovered that local courts had banned at least eight local Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations, and had placed 95 pieces of

Jehovah's Witnesses' literature on the federal registry of banned extremist materials (HRW 2017). In most of the cases where publications were banned, the justification was that there were, allegedly, claims that their interpretation of the Bible was superior to other Christian religions. This was considered a sign of extremism.

Supporting this research, an employee of the press service of the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Ivan Belenko, said in an interview with *Kommersant* on March 17, 2017, that a number of their publications had been included in the Federal List of Extremist Materials of the Justice Ministry. He added that in one year there were 46 incidents of "extremist" material being planted by the police in Jehovah's Witnesses' houses of worship throughout Russia, some of them being filmed by their own surveillance cameras during the raids (*Kommersant* 2017).

In an article titled "Russian Supreme Court Asked to Find Jehovah's Witness [sic] Managing Organization Extremist," published on March 16, 2017, *RAPSI*, a Russian legal information agency, enumerates a series of extremism cases going back to 2013 (*RAPSI* 2017).

Extremism Without Violence

A turning point in Russia's anti-extremism strategy was when an amendment was passed in 2006 that removed the necessity for violators of the law to be associated with violence or calls to violence.

The amended legislation was criticized by the UN Human Rights Committee on April 28, 2015 (UN Human Rights Committee 2015), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Monitoring Committee in Resolution 1896 on October 2, 2012 (PACE 2012), and the Venice Commission in June 2012 (Venice Commission 2012a, 2012b). All of these actors called on Russia to correct the law so as to require an element of violence or hatred. Their voices were not heard by Moscow.

This change in Russia's anti-extremism legislation opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism; the criminalization of freedom of thought, expression, worship, and assembly; and to police raids,

fabricated charges, arrests, and sentencing of members of peaceful groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Emergence of the Concept of "Spiritual Security"

The persecution of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin, or without "historical" roots in Russia, is based on the political philosophy of "spiritual security." This concept is promoted by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church with the support of far-right nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-American movements.

In his 2000 *National Security Concept*, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that "protection of the cultural, spiritual, and moral legacy, historical traditions and the norms of social life" ("National Security Concept of the Russian Federation" 2000, IV) was a matter of national security. He also argued for "a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare, and to counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries" ("National Security Concept of the Russian Federation" 2000, IV).

This spiritual dimension of national security first emerged in post-Soviet Russia with the *Law of the Russian Federation on Security No. 2446-1* of March 5, 1992. The first article of the law placed emphasis on the importance of "spiritual values." In 1992, this indicated the end of the Soviet militant atheism and the state persecution of Orthodox and other believers.

However, the developments that ensued soon stifled the principles of liberalism established in the very first years of the post-Soviet period.

The very liberal 1990 Law on Freedom of Worship adopted by Russia under President Mikhail Gorbachev attracted large numbers of American and European Protestant missionaries, believing that the former Soviet Union would be a vast new missionary territory (Witte and Bourdeaux 1999, 73). This development incurred the wrath of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1996, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad commented on the issues facing the Russian Orthodox Church from this proselytism. He contended that American and European Evangelical and Pentecostal proselytizing groups did not aid the Russian Orthodox Church in its re-evangelization of a population deeply marked by seven decades of Marxist-Leninist atheism. He contended that

instead they operated against it, “like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows” (Payne 2010, 714). This perceived “attack” was framed as being against Russia’s national and religious values. In turn, the population developed and adopted the idea that “non-Orthodox” is defined as those who attempt to dismantle and destroy their spiritual unity and their Orthodox faith. Over time, the “non-Orthodox” became perceived as “spiritual colonizers who by fair or foul means try to tear the people away from their church” (Payne 2010, 714).

A new law was necessary to put a halt to the perceived invasion of Russian Orthodox lands by Protestant and other American “cults,” which were alleged threats to the nation’s identity. To this end, the Russian Orthodox Church and the anti-cult movement led by Alexander Dvorkin intensely lobbied the Russian Parliament and mobilized conservative segments of society to replace the 1990 law with one aligned with their agenda. They won this first battle when President Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007) passed the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which differentiated between traditional and non-traditional religions in Russia (Payne 2010).

The 1997 Law swiftly put an end to the brief period of religious freedom that Russia had just experienced. The 1997 Law, as well as the ideological position and policies that were later adopted by the Russian authorities, were all inspired by the desire to protect the nation against foreign proselytizing movements, and to ensure the “spiritual security” of Russia through the purported role of the Russian Orthodox Church in safeguarding national values and security. This marked the very beginning of the spiritual protectionism of Russia.

Since then, the concept of “spiritual security” as part of national security has been developed and instrumentalized by the ruling authorities and the judiciary, to restrict the rights of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin, and to criminalize their beliefs, teachings, religious publications, and peaceful activities as extremist.

Such allegations progressively and increasingly were included in the Federal Law on Counteraction of Extremist Activities that was passed on July 25, 2002. Also known as the anti-extremism law, it was amended in 2006 to eliminate the requirement of violence, and consequently allowed for the prosecution of non-violent religious groups (Venice Commission 2012a, 2012b).

The Russian Orthodox Church United with the Kremlin Against Jehovah's Witnesses

In all of the Russian Orthodox Church's press releases concerning the ban and the subsequent arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses, it has never condemned the egregious violation of religious freedom or the misuse of the anti-extremism legislation.

All the press releases of the Russian Orthodox *Interfax-Religion* agency have taken a clear stance on the topic. The first two official reactions of the Russian Orthodox Church were as follows.

On April 20, 2017, *Interfax-Religion* published a press release titled "Russian Supreme Court Declares Russian Branch of Jehovah's Witnesses Extremist Organization, Orders Its Closure" (*Interfax-Religion* 2017a).

On May 2, 2017, *Interfax-Religion* confirmed the position of the Church with a press release titled "Russian Orthodox Church Supports Ban on Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia." It stated that,

The Russian Orthodox Church sees *Jehovah's Witnesses* as a dangerous sect and has supported the ban imposed on it in Russia.

"This is a sect, totalitarian and harmful at that. I am well aware of this because I have had an opportunity to speak to former adepts of this sect more than once," Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Synodal Department for External Church Relations, told a program shown on the *Rossiya 24* (VGTRK) TV channel.

Jehovah's Witnesses members are dangerous because they approach people in the street and offer them their literature, introduce themselves as a Christian organization, while their activities are based "on manipulating consciousness, and they erode the psyche of people and the family," the metropolitan said.

In addition to that, adherents of *Jehovah's Witnesses* "warp the teachings of Christ and misinterpret the Gospel," he said.

"Their doctrine contains a lot of false teachings. They do not believe in Jesus Christ as the God and the Savior. They do not recognize the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, they cannot be called Christians," the metropolitan said.

On April 20, the Russian Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Russian Justice Ministry's lawsuit and designated *Jehovah's Witnesses* as an extremist organization.

Metropolitan Hilarion welcomed this court ruling and suggested that the "pernicious and harmful" influence of *Jehovah's Witnesses* would now start to decline. The Russian

Orthodox Church did not take part in proceedings and was not asked for advice, he said (*Interfax-Religion* 2017b).

Then, on February 13, 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church reiterated its full and unambiguous support to the ban with a press release titled “Russian Courts’ Ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses Founded—Justice Ministry” (*Interfax-Religion* 2019a).

The position of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning the sentencing of Dennis Christensen to six years in prison as well as other Jehovah’s Witnesses being imprisoned was as heartless as could be expected. On May 23, 2019, *Interfax-Religion* published a laconic press release titled “Oryol Court Upholds Sentence for Danish Jehovah’s Witness,” in which it said Christensen had been sentenced for organizing the activity of a banned extremist religious group (*Interfax-Religion* 2019b).

The Destructive Role of Alexander Dvorkin and Anti-Cult Organizations

The banning of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia was a great victory for Orthodox anti-cult organizations, in particular for Alexander Dvorkin, the main and emblematic anti-cult crusader in Russia. He claimed victory in *RIA Novosti* news and on the TV Channel Sputnik a few weeks after the decision (*Sputnik News* 2017).

For over two decades, after returning home from the US where he had been influenced by the anti-cult movement, Dvorkin had been fighting against Jehovah’s Witnesses in the name of the Orthodox values dear to Patriarch Kirill and of the spiritual security concept dear to Putin.

In 1999, Dvorkin testified as an expert in religious studies during a trial about the possible prohibition of activities of the Moscow Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation at the Golovinsky Intermunicipal (District) Court of Moscow at the prosecutor’s request (Wallace 2001). At that time, this trial had been going on for three weeks, and was entirely unprecedented in Russian legal practice, as a secular court was being tasked to judge theological issues. A translation of excerpts of the court proceedings was provided to the author by the Communication Department of the Jehovah’s Witnesses Headquarters in New York, US. Within this document, titled “A Heavenly Deliberation / Selections

from the transcript of a trial,” was a section where the Jehovah's Witnesses' lawyer, Galina Krylova, used the testimony of Nikolai Semyonovich Gordienko (professor in the department of religious studies, Gertsen Memorial Russian State Pedagogical University, doctor of philosophy, honorary professor at the Russian State Pedagogical University of St. Petersburg, author of more than 20 books and pamphlets, and witness for the defense) to contest the legitimacy of Dvorkin's expertise.

G.A. Krylova: You are an adherent of Orthodox Christianity. I am holding a copy of your book *Introduction to the Study of Cults*. You discuss cults and those whom you call cultists. You start with Mormons, followed by the Jehovah's Witnesses... You say that you classify sects into two categories and write, “But, in any case, it must be remembered that both groups come from Satan and, therefore, any cult, whether it openly practices Satanism or not, is essentially satanic.” Don't you think that that statement is insulting to Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons?

A.L. Dvorkin: It is a reply to the Jehovah's Witnesses' insults to the Orthodox Church.

G.A. Krylova: In this connection, I have a question for witness Gordienko. Speaking as an expert on religion, are witness Dvorkin's statements in keeping with scholarly representations of that organization and the literature of the Jehovah's Witnesses?

N.S. Gordienko: I will say most definitely that they are not. I have heard his presentation; it has no argumentation. If a student of mine gave me an answer like that, I would not accept it. I would give him a very low grade.

Valery Vasil'evich Borshchev (deputy in the State Duma, vice chairman of the Duma committee on public groups and religious organizations, witness for the defense.): I don't see that the Jehovah's Witness incite religious hostility because they think that their teachings are correct and others are mistaken.

Alexander Dvorkin, a witness for the prosecution, states that any sect “is essentially satanic.” He does not consider his own words incitement of religious enmity, but “an answer to the insults of the Jehovah's Witnesses against the Orthodox Church.”

That is a characteristic of many religions. Of course, that causes tension in society, but within measure since they do not encourage discrimination or violence. Not like when Baptist children's Bibles were burned by priests of the Orthodox Church or when Father Oleg Stenyaev burned the books of Lev' Tolstoy [1828–1910] and Nicholas Roerich [1874–1947] in public. No such facts have been uncovered about the Jehovah's Witnesses.

G.A. Krylova: Are you aware of the methods of Father Oleg Stenyaev, who runs a rehabilitation center in Ordynka, or the purported methods of Alexander Dvorkin to help those supposedly suffering under the effects of religious organizations?

V.V. Borshchev: Father Oleg Stenyaev has no serious position or method to assist anyone spiritually. It seems to me that he's the one in need of spiritual help. Dvorkin is extremely unscrupulous and, for that reason, I consider it impossible even to have a discussion with him.

Jehovah's Witnesses won this first major case but after this first setback, Dvorkin continued campaigning against "cults" all over Russia and the former Soviet Republics, spreading defamatory statements. These can be found in his anti-cult book *Totalitarian Cults*, which is a term he allegedly coined ("секта" in Russian, just as "secte" in French, is the equivalent of the English word "cult" rather than of "sect"). In his book, he wrote the following about Jehovah's Witnesses (Dvorkin 2002, 105, 112, 132):

Jehovah's Witnesses' is a commercial organization: ... I would call the Watchtower Society a pseudo-religious commercial organization based on a quasi-communist ideology with elements of paganism and covered by several Christian images and concepts.

The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses has many similarities with the Communist Party: Of all the totalitarian cults operating in our country, this sect, most of all, even outwardly, resembles the Communist Party. Perhaps that is why it manages to achieve such notable successes throughout the post-Soviet space. The structure of Jehovah's Witnesses is remarkably similar to the structure of the CPSU with its "democratic centralism." Instead of services, Jehovah's Witnesses hold "party meetings," "party lessons" and "party congresses" (annual "Jehovah's Witnesses Congress"). In the eschatological perspective, they expect a very specific earthly paradise (read communism), where there will be a lot of food and little work.

Jehovah's Witnesses hate all other religions, especially other Christian denominations: ...The hatred of the Jehovah's Witnesses against other denominations and, above all, traditional Christianity is obvious.

The level of mental illness and suicide among Jehovah's Witnesses is much higher than the average: The level of mental illness among Jehovah's Witnesses, studied by various foreign scientists, exceeds the average by 1.5–10 times. Also, the number of suicides among Jehovah's Witnesses is two to three times higher than among non-cult members.

Despite his abusive language, which could be considered hate speech and incitement to hatred, Dvorkin garnered respect from Russian political circles and has managed to push forward repressive and discriminatory laws targeting non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin.

Soon, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin viewed Dvorkin as a useful instrument as he was fulfilling their respective and complementary agendas.

His second and main victory came with the final banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017.

Who Is Alexander Dvorkin?

Alexander Dvorkin was born in Moscow in 1955. On March 6, 1977, he emigrated from the Soviet Union on an Israeli visa. He did not go to Israel but instead went to the US. While in the US, he got baptized in 1980 in an Orthodox Church in New York. In 1984, he received American citizenship. In 1988, he graduated with a Ph.D. in Medieval Studies, with a dissertation titled "Ivan the Terrible [1530–1584] as a Religious Type." In 1992, he returned to a newly independent Russia with many anti-cult ideas to use against enemies of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1993, he founded the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, an anti-cult propaganda center, which was blessed by the then Patriarch Alexey II (1929–2008) of the Russian Orthodox Church. It grew into a global network of Orthodox-oriented, anti-cult civic groups and missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012, 278 and 302–4).

The Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies is the head center of the Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Cultic Studies (RATsIRS). Unsurprisingly, Dvorkin is also the president of RATsIRS; the vice-presidents are Archpriest Alexander Novopashin and Archpriest Alexander Shabanov; the executive secretary is priest Lev Semenov, Ph.D., associate professor.

Since 1993, Dvorkin has chaired the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, which later became the Russian member association of FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), an international anti-cult organization.

Last but not least, Dvorkin has been the vice-president of FECRIS for years. FECRIS was created and is based in France, whose Constitution strictly separates

state and religions. Oddly enough, FECRIS is heavily financed by French public powers and supposed to be secular, while its Russian member association, which is headed by Alexander Dvorkin, is heavily financed by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Quite recently, the nefarious role of Dvorkin has been recognized by a prestigious US state institution, USCIRF, in its report *The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union*:

By the time the Russian government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in April 2017, Alexander Dvorkin, a Russian anti-cult activist, had spent years lobbying for strong measures against groups he frequently refers to as "totalitarian cults" and "destructive sects"—and the Jehovah's Witnesses were at the top of his list. In an interview with state media shortly after the ban, Dvorkin claimed that the group maintains "strict control over every aspect of its members' lives, including even the most intimate moments of their family lives as spouses have to report on one another." Just as in the days of Stalin, "All members have to keep an eye on each other, to spy on one another," he said. Dvorkin believes that the international human rights community, especially those who advocate for freedom of religion and belief, enable these destructive organizations to prey on society. According to him, "the struggle for human rights is being supplanted with the struggle for the rights of organizations which violate human rights." Banning the Jehovah's Witnesses, to his mind, was not a violation of fundamental freedoms, but rather an essential step for their preservation (USCIRF 2020).

In its recommendations, USCIRF says among other things that the US government should:

- Publicly censure Alexander Dvorkin and the Saint Irenaeus of Leon [sic: for "Lyons"] Information-Consultation Center (SILIC) for their ongoing disinformation campaign against religious minorities;
- [and] counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) at the annual [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)] Human Dimensions Conference with information about the ongoing involvement of individuals and entities within the anti-cult movement in the suppression of religious freedom (USCIRF 2020).

Alexander Dvorkin and the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Center are now in a good position to fall under the Magnitsky law.

Some years ago, Dvorkin was denied access to a conference about religious freedom organized by Human Rights Without Frontiers in the European

Parliament because he was planning to disturb the event. With USCIRF's report, the EU now has an efficient tool to activate its own system of sanctions.

Conclusions

The objective to eliminate the legal and physical presence of Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia dates back to the mid-1990s, when the Orthodox Church and the clerical anti-cult movement headed by Alexander Dvorkin began mobilizing the public and lobbying the Russian parliament to pass a law granting an inferior legal status, and consequently fewer rights, to "non-traditional" religious movements. The first step towards this agenda occurred in 1997 with the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The next legislative instruments to be used against Jehovah's Witnesses were the 2002 Law on Counteraction of Extremist Activities and its amended version in 2006, which removed the criterion of use of or incitement to violence for qualification as "extremist."

The fight for religious freedom in Russia will be a long one. The US is showing the way by exposing the Russian persecution agenda towards Jehovah's Witnesses and other so-called non-historical religious movements. USCIRF has made a number of recommendations for sanctions that include the Russian anti-cult movement and its mentor, Alexander Dvorkin, but also FECRIS, of which he has been the vice-president for years. The EU has its own system of targeted sanctions that can be activated appropriately. The UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, and other democratic countries have mechanisms meant to defend freedom of religion or belief around the world and, in some cases, to adopt sanctions, if necessary.

Jehovah's Witnesses themselves defend the right to freedom of religion for their members in Russian courts, at the European Court of Human Rights, at the UN and at the OSCE. They have survived the Nazi ideology and 70 years of Communism in Russia. They will also survive the persecution of the present regime, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Dvorkin. But it will be a long and costly battle.

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The Rights of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and Beyond: The Role of the European Court of Human Rights

James T. Richardson
University of Nevada, Reno
jtr@unr.edu

ABSTRACT: This article briefly discusses the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses, focusing on their early decisions to use legal systems to defend themselves and expand their rights to practice their faith. Their legal successes in the United States and Canada in establishing religious freedom rights are summarized before examining the role played in the expansion of religious freedom in Europe through cases won in the European Court of Human Rights. Witnesses cases have also expanded the purview and influence of the courts systems in various Western societies. ECtHR has taken on special meaning with dozens of cases filed recently against Russia. The Russian government, with the blessing of its court system, has dissolved all Witnesses organizations, confiscated millions of dollars in property, harassed innumerable Witnesses families, and incarcerated dozens of Witnesses for alleged violations of statutes dealing with extremism. How the ECtHR will deal with these recent cases will reveal much about the future of the Court, and of the Council of Europe, especially if Russia refuses to honor any decisions that are rendered against it.

KEYWORDS: Human Rights in Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses, European Court of Human Rights, Article 9 of European Human Rights Convention, Rule 41, Kokkinakis, Conscientious Objection, Margin of Appreciation, Disciplined Litigation, Vigilante Litigation.

Introduction

The Jehovah's Witnesses began in the United States in the 1870s and have grown dramatically since then in the U.S. and around the world, now claiming about eight million members involved in preaching worldwide. This remarkable growth in members has not, however, been without contention and conflict, sometimes involving violence against the Witnesses because of some of their beliefs and practices, such as refusing to salute national flags, participate in

politics, serve in the military, participate in normally accepted Christian holidays, refusal of blood transfusions, as well as their active proselytizing.

Because of these beliefs and practices, the Witnesses have often found themselves in conflict with authorities in areas where they live and practice their faith, often leading to legal difficulties. Over the years, the Witnesses organization evolved as a result of these encounters into a quite unique religious group. The Witnesses developed considerable legal prowess and experience as they have fought to defend themselves from what they view as unnecessary and illegal encroachments on their religious freedom.

Côté and Richardson (2001) describe the earlier Witness approach to defending themselves as one of “disciplined litigation,” which later evolved into a more selective “vigilante litigation” method of dealing with legal challenges in various societies. And, as many scholars have noted, the legal efforts of the Witnesses on behalf of religious freedom in various legal forums contributed greatly to their being able to practice their religion (Manwaring 1962; McAninch 1987; Kaplan 1989; Botting 1993; Richardson 2014, 2017c; Besier 2015). Those efforts also assisted other religious groups in gaining more freedom to live their faith, while also helping various judicial systems expand their authority and influence (Richardson 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

Witness Cases in the United States and Canada

In the United States, the Witnesses filed hundreds of cases starting in the 1930s and continuing to the present, with many filed during the 1940s over proselytizing practices. And since this auspicious beginning, the Witnesses have won over 50 judgments from the United States Supreme Court, which have established religious freedom for themselves and for other minority faiths. The judgments also helped establish freedom of association and freedom of expression, as well as other important rights, including conscientious objection to military service, medical treatment rights, and rights of parents to raise their children in their religion. These and other cases filed by minority religions also have served to expand the authority of the Supreme Court over state and local governments through a process called “incorporation,” whereby the Court made it clear that certain specific amendments in the Bill of Rights also applied to these nonfederal governmental entities. This situation was perhaps the first example of

court systems forming informal partnerships with willing plaintiffs to establish major goals of the court (Richardson 2017a).

Something very similar happened in Canada in the decade of the 1950s, with the Witnesses filing many cases to establish their right to exist (they were banned for two years during WWII for refusing to support the war effort), and to practice their faith. They won some key cases in the Canadian Supreme Court that allowed proselytizing and deterred police harassment, which was rampant, particularly in Quebec, a Catholic-dominated province. Indeed, a Witness plaintiff, Frank Roncarelli (1904–1981), even won a civil action against Quebec's Premier, Maurice Duplessis (1890–1959), who had directed the revocation of a liquor license for his restaurant after Duplessis learned that Roncarelli had been paying fines for hundreds of Witnesses arrested on various charges flowing from their proselytizing practices (*Roncarelli v. Duplessis*, 1959; see Botting 1993). The cases won by the Witnesses helped establish religious freedom in Canada, and also contributed greatly in 1953 to the eventual promulgation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Witnesses in Post-War Europe

WWII demonstrated to the world the tragic consequences of racist ideologies devoid of any concern for human and civil rights. The terrible consequences of the war gave rise and impetus to a movement to protect those rights, in the hopes of deterring such tragedies in the future. The Western European nations that had experienced the war first hand joined together to establish the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1949, which then promulgated in 1950 the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (the Convention), containing provisions to protect human and civil rights of all citizens in CoE member nations. Over time, the CoE expanded greatly from a dozen original members to 47 nations, with the major growth occurring after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. All CoE member nations had to pledge to promote and enforce provisions in the European Convention in order to gain membership in the CoE.

In 1953, the CoE established the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which first functioned as a part time court with little power. However, over time the Court developed into a permanent and powerful institution, handling thousands of claims annually. The expansion of the Court's purview was not

without difficulties and controversies, however, and the Court has modified its procedures and approach to the member states in an effort to respond to its growing caseload and to criticisms of some of its actions (Richardson 2017a, 2019). Over the decades since the ECtHR was established, it has become the major mechanism to enforce the provisions of the Convention.

The Convention contained several articles of importance to the development of religious freedom. Particularly Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 10 (freedom of expression), and Article 11 (right to assembly) have been used in numerous cases by religious groups, but many other articles and later added “protocols” have been cited as well, especially in cases involving Russia, which recently launched a major offensive to drive the JWs from the country. (See the ECtHR Web site for all Convention articles and protocols).

Although the articles mentioned were part of the Convention, it should be noted that few violations of the articles relevant to religion were found for the first four decades of the Court’s existence. Indeed, it was not until 1993 that a violation of Article 9 was found in the *Kokkinakis* case from Greece, where proselytizing was a criminal offense (Richardson 1995; Evans 2001). The CoE and the Court assumed that most of the original member states valued human and civil rights, including religious freedom, and thus the states were granted a considerable “margin of appreciation” to manage religion within their boundaries. This led to the original members taking somewhat different approaches, and it also resulted in differential treatment for minority faiths within the original CoE.

The *Kokkinakis* case involved a Jehovah’s Witness who was arrested for proselytizing, fined, and sentenced to prison. Kokkinakis had been arrested many times before, but this time the JWs had submitted his case to the ECtHR, hoping that the Court would finally enforce Article 9 within the CoE nations. The timing was propitious, as the Soviet Union was dissolving, and many former affiliate nations, which did not have a history of valuing religious freedom, were seeking membership in the CoE. The Court (on a 6–3 vote) did find a violation of Article 9 in what might be thought of as an early example of what Sadurski (2009) later refers to as a “pilot judgment,” which sent a message to former Soviet-dominated nations that Article 9 and other Convention articles would henceforth be enforced. Since that initial decision, there have been a flood of Article 9 (and related articles) cases in which violations were found, with most coming from

former Soviet-dominated nations (and Greece), and a few also from original member states such as France (Lykes and Richardson 2014; Richardson and Lee 2014).

Since *Kokkinakis*, which indicated a willingness by the ECtHR to finally deal with religion cases, the JWs have been heavily involved in such cases with the Court (Richardson 2014, 2017c). From 1964 through August of 2020, they have submitted a total of 300 cases to the Court from many different CoE countries, with the largest number from former Soviet-dominated nations, especially Russia. And, the JWs have achieved a truly remarkable record with the Court, having won 66 cases, had 25 “friendly settlements”, and two “unilateral declarations” (which means the country has admitted a violation and addressed it in a manner satisfactory to the Court; see Keller and Suter 2011), for a total of 93 wins so far with the Court. Two cases were lost (but one since overturned), nine were withdrawn, and 98 are still pending, with 57 of them from Russia. Ninety-eight cases were declared inadmissible, with most of them dealing with conscientious objection to military service before the Court finally ruled in 2011 that the Convention required member states to offer alternatives to serving in the military. Of the 98 pending cases, 60 have been “communicated” by the Court to the member nation involved, which means the Court has asked for an explanation of the nation’s position on the case.

Included among the cases in which the JWs prevailed are ones dealing with registration (and reregistration), taxation, censorship of materials, freedom of expression, child custody, deportation, confidentiality of medical records, lack of neutrality of the state, conscientious objection, and disruptions of meetings. Even France has lost an Article 9 case in 2011 because of its efforts to force dissolution of the JWs through a creative use of its tax laws.

The situation in Russia is the most troublesome presently facing the JWs, the Court, and the future of the CoE itself, and it is to those case we now turn.

Russian Witnesses Cases before the ECtHR

Russia has a long history of abusing minority religious groups, although there was a brief period when minority faiths seemed welcome in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the situation changed dramatically in

1997, when the Russian Orthodox Church, working with Western anti-cultists, succeeded in getting a new and quite punitive law passed limiting the rights of minority faiths considerably (Shterin and Richardson 1998, 2000). Since then, Russia has lost a number of religion cases before the ECtHR, usually by unanimous votes of the Court members (Richardson, Krylova, and Shterin 2004; Lykes and Richardson 2014; Richardson and Lee 2014). Some of those prior losses have involved cases brought by the Witnesses, which had been present in Russia for over 100 years, and claimed over 120,000 members in the late 1990s (Krylova 1999). One major Witness case was submitted to the ECtHR in 2002 against the City of Moscow for refusing to reregister the Witness organization after passage of the 1997 law. This case derived from years of frustrating efforts by the Witnesses to regain their registration. When it was finally obvious that Moscow authorities would not handle the matter in a fair manner, the case was submitted to the ECtHR, which in 2010 rendered a unanimous and strongly worded decision stating that Russia was in violation of Article 11 when viewed in light of Article 9.

As indicated, there are currently 57 cases from Russia pending before the ECtHR, some since 2014, with 22 cases from 2015. Thirty-three of the cases have been “communicated” to the Russian government, and some, particularly those dealing with the 2017 dissolution of the JW's national organization, have been granted “Rule 41” status. This means they are to be fast-tracked given the urgency of the situation. The recent cases nearly all derive from Russia's much criticized application of extremism laws passed post 9/11 to the JW's, based on claims that the JW's are an extremist organization involved in activities detrimental to Russia and its citizens (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2020). Following is a list of the cases from Russia that are pending with the Court:

Liquidation of national religious organization	2
Liquidation of local religious organization	4
Seizure of property of national headquarters	1
Censorship of religious literature and website	8
Revocation of permit to import religious literature	1
Detention or criminal conviction for practicing religion	21
Prosecution/detention for evangelizing	4

Seizure of religious literature in transport	1
Home search/ literature seizure	4
Raid on/interference with religious meeting	11

Information furnished by the JW organization indicates that, at the time Russian courts declared the JWs an extremist organization in April 2017, there were 3,500 Witnesses local organizations in Russia, each with from 50 to 250 participants. There were also about 395 local organizations, one in each major city in Russia. All of these entities were affiliated with the national JW organization headquartered in St. Petersburg. The JW owned 401 properties with an estimated value of \$70 million dollars. As of August 2020, Russian governmental entities had confiscated 236 properties valued at over \$52 million dollars. Also, 1,107 homes have been raided, with 275 of the raids occurring in 2020 during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of August 2020, there were 166 criminal cases in Russia involving 379 JW members. Forty-seven cases were pending, and 119 were in preliminary investigation stages. Ten people were already serving prison sentences of from two to six years, and 34 people were in jail awaiting trial, some for almost two years. Another 30 JW were under house arrest. (The Web site jw-Russia.org offers periodical updates of these figures).

Impact of Witnesses ECtHR Cases

As a result of this massive legal effort by the Witnesses, the group is currently registered and active in most CoE countries. Russia is, of course, a major exception, and some of its satellite countries may be following its lead. Members of JW local organizations can usually pursue their beliefs and practices, although harassment does still occur in some CoE nations. This includes such matters as medical practices and conscientious objection, among others. Other minority faiths have also gained from Witness legal efforts, and are able to practice their own religions more freely, although the pattern is somewhat mixed, particularly in former Soviet-dominated nations.

Article 9 and other articles relevant to religious freedom are now being enforced more regularly by the courts, with less deference to the “margin of appreciation,” even with original CoE member states. What at first appeared to

perhaps be a double standard, with the Court ruling much more frequently against former Soviet-dominated nations, no longer seems to be the case (Richardson and Garay 2004). As Evans (2010) has noted, the Court has been intent on making sure that religious groups can exist and function in former Soviet-dominated nations (as well as France), a result that means more decisions against those nations that would deter religious groups from functioning. However, the Court has also shown some interest in recent decades in individual religious freedom claims brought by JWs as well as other minority religion claimants, and has supported them in some instances. There continues, however, to be a lack of interest in the Court for supporting claims brought by Muslim women challenging laws dealing with their dress (Fokas and Richardson 2019).

Conclusions

The Witnesses through their legal efforts have significantly influenced the meaning of religious freedom around the world, especially in Westernized nations such as the United States, Canada, and in the 47 nations that make up the Council of Europe. All these societies are governed by constitutional or statutory provisions offering protections for religious freedom. The presence of a reasonable autonomous judicial system headed by individuals who value human and civil rights, including religious freedom (Richardson 2006), means that those provisions usually can be implemented within the normative boundaries of a given society.

The many Witnesses cases from the societies discussed herein have therefore helped set the standard for the meaning of religious freedom in today's world. Those cases, along with others filed by various religious groups, also have helped establish the authority of national and regional judicial systems over various governmental entities. However, in the CoE the authority of the Court is being challenged (Richardson 2017b), especially by the recent flood of cases from Russia. Given past precedents of the Court, it seems clear that Russia may well lose most of the cases the JWs have filed against it. If this happens, it is not obvious how Russia will react.

Russia has a history of losing cases before the Court, including religion cases (Lykes and Richardson 2014; Richardson and Lee 2014), and typically it refuses to implement the decisions to the extent required by its membership in the CoE.

Instead, Russia usually pays the minimal fines and does little else. This recalcitrant posture by Russia has solidified recently, given statements by the head of the Russian Constitutional Court as well as the recent approval of a new Russian Constitution making it clear that in disputes with the ECtHR (or any other regional court) Russian law should prevail. This position represents a major challenge to the CoE and the Court. If decisions of the Court are not to be followed or enforced by the CoE, what does this mean for the future of the Court and of the CoE itself? Only time will tell on this crucial question, as we await the Court's rulings on the many JW cases with which it is now dealing.

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Being Jehovah's Witnesses: Living in the World Without Being Part of It

Raffaella Di Marzio

Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience (LIREC)

raffaelladimarzio@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This paper aims at furnishing some useful interpretative keys to understand, on the one hand, the decision to become Jehovah's Witnesses and, on the other, the consolidation of this choice through identification with an organization that stands in a unique position within society. The chosen reference framework is the multi-disciplinary model, which Lewis Rambo and others developed to study the conversion/affiliation process, within the reference framework of the psychology of religion. Through bibliographical research, it was possible to single out studies that explore these converts' characteristics and the kind of relationship-identification that forms between each member of Jehovah's Witnesses and the religion they have affiliated with. Differently from what some have argued, becoming Jehovah's Witnesses does not mean to "isolate" oneself or oppose the world, but rather to relate to the world as evangelizers, who aim to motivate those "on the outside" to share their doctrine, intended as a possible way to salvation for anyone who accepts it.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Religion/Affiliation, Religious Conversion, Conversion: Psychological Models, Lewis Rambo.

Approach and Reference Framework

The conversion process of those who decide to become Jehovah's Witnesses can be understood by virtue of dynamics that have been extensively studied by the psychology of religion, which has applied psychological constructs and processes—such as cognitive reformulation, attribution, coping, biographical reconstruction, transformation of self, encapsulation—to the study of conversion processes (Hood et al. 2009). Rambo's holistic model (1993), which is the reference framework of this paper, has the merit of valorizing previous scholarly literature, thus giving new impetus to the development of a multi-disciplinary approach to research on conversion (Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar

Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Within the ample bibliography centered on Jehovah's Witnesses, the results of previous studies exploring the characteristics of these converts and the kind of relationship that develops between them and the organization have been examined in view of the chosen model. Further, in examining the seventh stage of the model—the one concerning the *consequences* of conversion—, special attention has been given to the way Jehovah's Witnesses relate to society; an aspect that is strictly connected with the doctrine and practice of this religion. Though not being “of” the world, yet they live and work “in” the world (*John* 17:14). The implications of this aspect will be better analyzed later.

The Conversion of Jehovah's Witnesses in View of the Model by Rambo et al.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses form a religion well-rooted in the social fabric, and there are families that have been following it for several generations, the focus of this paper is on the conversion of adults who used to have other religious ideas or were nonbelievers. Rambo's model approaches the study of the conversion process by outlining seven stages. The first four refer to the first phase of conversion: the potential convert's personal and social *context*; the *crisis*, that is, a condition of discomfort or dissatisfaction preceding conversion; the *quest*, namely, an action undertaken as an attempt to overcome dissatisfaction or fill one's “emptiness”; and, finally, the *encounter*, that is, the contact with a missionary who presents and proposes a new spiritual way. The last three stages, *interaction*, *commitment*, and *consequences* refer to the phase in which conversion consolidates, and to the personal and social consequences deriving from it (Rambo 1993).

The “Context,” “Crisis,” and “Quest” Stages

In this phase, the role of some factors that are crucial to the inception of the conversion process emerges, such as the social context, one's inclinations and motivational frame that act dynamically to favor adherence to such a religious organization as the Jehovah's Witnesses, which stands out from other organizations because of its peculiar doctrines and practices.

Context, the first stage of Rambo's model, plays a crucial role, because it is the environment in which the conversion process takes place. To understand better what influence is exerted by the *context*, the author distinguishes the environment in general (macro-context) from the micro-context, that is, the environment most closely related to an individual: family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood (Rambo 1993, 21–2). Particularly, the results of further exploratory research carried out by the writer of this paper on members of other religious groups (Di Marzio 2016a, 2020a, 2020b) reveal that the context exerting the greatest influence on one's choice to convert, for very diverse reasons, is the convert's family environment.

An important contribution to this research field is the study by Namini and Murken (2008), which puts in relation precocious family experiences and coping in religious affiliation (Di Marzio 2016b). There is a vast array of studies on the relationship between affiliation and coping, the latter term meaning the whole of cognitive and behavioral strategies an individual enacts to cope with a stressful situation. The role of faith in connection with coping was studied by Pargament, who views religion as an example of those orientation systems that are useful in assessing stressful situations, and facing them by a concrete application of religious beliefs to the specific situation experienced by the believer (Pargament 1997, 300–8).

From a longitudinal study started in 2003, Namini and Murken extracted data relating to three religious groups that were considered somewhat deviant in Germany, so much so that conversion to one of them was also commonly considered “deviant.” Concerning Jehovah's Witnesses, often labeled a “cult,” the authors focus on the debate going on in Germany at that time as to whether or not this organization was due the same rights as the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church enjoyed. The issue was solved in 2006, when Jehovah's Witnesses were officially recognized as a “corporation under public law” (Namini and Murken 2008, 88).

Examined individuals had recently shown interest in one of the three selected groups, or they had become members less than two years earlier: twenty-one members of a Pentecostal Church belonging to the Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden (BFP), twenty-eight members of the New Apostolic Church, and twenty-two Jehovah's Witnesses (Namini and Murken 2008, 88–90). Based on former research results, which had shown that certain religious groups

perfectly fit some characteristics of those affiliating (for example: Poling and Kenney 1986), the authors aimed to see if this correspondence occurs not just for what generally concerns the convert's needs, but also in conjunction with three specific variables related to childhood and juvenile experiences, which could affect one's choice to affiliate with a given group: the makeup of one's family of origin, particularly the loss of one or both parents; the number of siblings; and their order of birth.

As concerns the first variable—the loss of one or both parents—, the authors found that a high percentage of those who converted to two out of the three examined groups, the Apostolic Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, had lost their father in childhood or when they were young. From a psychological viewpoint, this fact would corroborate the hypothesis, worked out in the "Attachment Theory" context, that religion, and especially faith in a personal God, have a compensative function as an "alternative support figure" for lost attachment-related figures (Kirkpatrick 1992). New Apostolic Church teachings exalt the figure of God the Father, who is loving and merciful toward his children, by means of a preaching filled with affective metaphors. This community has the highest percentage of members who lost their father in childhood (43%), four times higher than that of the German population; this one, instead, coincides with the percentage observed in the Pentecostal community (10%), whereas Jehovah's Witnesses stand in an intermediate position between those two organizations (23%). God is viewed as a loving Father among Jehovah's Witnesses as well, but differently from the New Apostolic Church: Jehovah is also a teacher; his role as an authority is emphasized to a greater extent, as are the cognitive elements and doctrinal knowledge (Namini and Murken 2008, 94).

As concerns the variable related to the presence of siblings in the families of converts to the three groups, it was found that most individuals came from large families. This figure refers above all to Jehovah's Witnesses, and the authors interpreted it as a situation that could predispose them from infancy to accept and conform to group standards, thereby facilitating adaptation to a community like that of Jehovah's Witnesses, whose doctrines and religious practices call for one's conforming to elders' authority, and the observance of rules set out on the basis of Scriptural teaching. Based on the results of this research, the authors' conclusions amount to a confirmation of their hypothesis: coping aspects connected with the loss of one's father and with the number of siblings may be

more important than others in favoring the choice to affiliate with a certain religious group.

In his argument concerning the second and third stages of the model, *crisis* and *quest*, Rambo integrates the psychological approach that has gained the greatest consensus among scholars, which approach considers religion as a system of meaning that responds to basic needs (Paloutzian 2014). As to the *quest* stage, the author highlights the importance of “motivational structures,” which help understand to what extent an individual is active in pursuing religious change or is vulnerable to proselytism. He starts his argument by using Epstein’s theory, called Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory of Personality (CEST), which identifies four basic motivations for human action: the need to experience pleasure and avoid pain; the need for a conceptual system; the need to enhance self-esteem; and the need to establish and maintain relationships (Epstein 1985).

Rambo applies these needs to religious conversion, but the author adds two more that he believes were disregarded in scientific literature: power and transcendence. As concerns the latter, by referring to well-established theories on developmental psychology and other studies on how one’s longing for transcendence impacts one’s choice to convert, he posits that a human being’s tendency to develop through stages of cognitive and moral maturation proves that there is an innate longing for transcendence, which would move humans to go beyond their own developmental stage and, consequently, to convert (Rambo 1993, 63-4).

This configuration seems to be confirmed by the results of a study by Jindra, which included some Jehovah’s Witnesses (Jindra 2008). The author proved that there is a relationship between the transformations in the developmental stages of religious judgment and the experiences of conversion or apostasy. By extracting from an ampler study the data regarding interviews with four Jehovah’s Witnesses, the author includes these individuals under a category that also comprises persons who converted to Islam and to other Christian groups, since they held in common their having chosen religious groups that are characterized by strict moral standards and a complex doctrinal system.

Interviews with Jehovah’s Witnesses featured very similar descriptions of a family context with strict religious rules that they had accepted forcibly and whose sense they did not comprehend. Subsequently, they had converted to a group that

equally demanded the observance of restrictive religious standards whose sense and value, however, they came to understand fully. According to Jindra, the four cases examined in this study display individual transformations that can be referred to Oser's theory on the development of religious judgment (Oser 1991), and to Fowler's theory on the developmental stages of faith (Fowler 1981).

Particularly, interviewee "Mr. Smith" reported having been raised in the Catholic Church and having had an unstable childhood because his family was often on the move. Whenever he had doubts on what the nuns taught him, he asked questions that remained unanswered. For example, when he inquired about the Trinity, a nun answered that once in Heaven, he will understand that mystery. When he was 21 years old, by now married, he opened the door to one of Jehovah's Witnesses: during his meetings with the preacher, he was able to grasp many truths contained in the Bible and decided to accept and share a clear and simple teaching that helped him overcome his feeling of inadequacy. As a youth, he had asked himself many questions on how to conduct oneself during engagement, in sexual matters, and in the family, but he had found clear answers only in Watch Tower Society literature; so he had successfully got rid of the uncertainties he felt when faced with important decisions. The very moment he resolved to become one of Jehovah's Witnesses was when he learned that God has a name, which is Jehovah. At 25, after he quit smoking, he became part of the religious community.

In this as well as in other cases, contrary to what the author had posited, the intense and effort-demanding study required of the converts had not affected the individuals negatively. On the contrary, it was these activities that had helped them to cope with and overcome the uncertainty and the chaos that, for very diverse reasons, they were experiencing in their life. Another element in Mr. Smith's reconstruction is the disappointment he had felt as a child by observing his parents' inconsistent behavior, as they were practicing Catholics only when attending Mass on Sundays (Jindra 2008, 208-11). Dissatisfaction with the previous religious experience can frequently be found in other studies as well (for example: Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 102).

In her conclusions, Jindra states that an examination of data enabled her to confirm the close relationship between transformations in religious judgment and the experience of conversion, through which an individual unwittingly shifts from one stage to the other, at times even radically modifying their way of relating to

God, to the world, and to moral standards. A very similar frame can be observed in a subsequent study (Jindra 2014), which examines interviews with nine Jehovah's Witnesses, all of them from a generally disorganized family, social, and cultural background that fostered their search for a more close-knit and theologically more structured group, often with the purpose of having a religious experience in stark contrast to the former one. For these peculiar characteristics, the author views conversions to the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses as a particularly interesting typology, since it can furnish useful information on the causes for religious continuity or discontinuity, namely, why some individuals convert by remaining within the religion in which they were raised, but in a different and more informed manner, while others decide to leave and embrace another one (Jindra 2014, 68–80).

The latter is the case of another interviewee, “Carlo Johnson,” who defines his own life before becoming a Witness as “chaotic and disoriented”: the choice to become a Witness was motivated by his knowing to be ignorant in religious matters due to his distant parents, who gave him a poor Catholic education. During his Bible study with a friend who was a preacher, he fully understood previous beliefs such as God's existence, and the fact that Jesus is God's Son but is separate from Him. Carlo also appreciated the educational and practical framework of this Bible-based school and stated that the study helped him understand that “the key to gaining [everlasting] life is to have knowledge” (Jindra 2014, 99).

Jindra underscores how this convert's reconstruction, similarly to the reconstruction of other Witnesses, is expressed by the language and categories set out in the organization's teachings, an aspect that was brought out in former studies (Beckford 1978, 251). Moreover, Jindra's interviews confirm the results of two studies focusing on the reasons for the success of Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan (Wilson 1977) and in Belgium (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980).

In the first case, Bryan Wilson (1926–2004) identifies the characteristics of Japan, a context featuring uncertainty on issues such as marriage and the raising of children, and where an individual cannot rely on any stable authority, as one factor that favored the success of Jehovah's Witnesses, who, on the contrary, offer clear rules issued by an appointed authority (Wilson 1977). In the case of Belgium, a Catholic majority country, the authors start from the 1930s, when among converts there were many immigrants or people who felt isolated because

they had recently moved there from other places. Becoming Jehovah's Witnesses enabled these ones to overcome isolation, and find a reference community more welcoming and supportive than the Protestant communities or the Catholic Church, from which the converts came (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 108).

"Encounter" Stage

In the fourth stage, the potential convert comes into contact with the missionary, with whom an interpersonal relationship is formed: the missionary "initiates" the potential convert, and furnishes due support in approaching the group. In Jehovah's Witnesses' conversions, some components of the missionary strategy identified by Rambo can be found:

1. The *degree* of proselytizing is set as a continuum, which extends from a maximum of proselytizing activities, as in Jehovah's Witnesses, to a minimum, as in Judaism and Hinduism (Rambo 1993, 79). Groups that are active on the continuum to a maximum degree exert themselves by investing many resources to recruit and keep members within the organization, and they stimulate everyone to spread the doctrine, with the purpose of achieving a large number of conversions. These movements have a vast array of publications designed to train missionaries, where indispensable information is found regarding the nature of conversion, the motives a missionary should cultivate, and the method to be used in proselytizing (Barrett 1988).

2. The *strategic style* can be of two kinds, which can also be placed on the extreme ends of a continuum: diffuse or system-oriented and concentrated or personalistic (Heise 1967). The latter especially refers to individuals who, for different reasons, are not fully integrated in their social context, and feel the need for a group to adhere to and belong with. These individuals are often the first ones to convert to a new religion (Rambo 1993, 79), as was also revealed in the above-mentioned studies (Wilson 1977; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Jindra 2014).

3. The *mode of contact*. Snow et al. (1980) identify two modes of contact: the first one mediated by public and private communication channels, the other one favoring face-to-face encounters between the individual and the missionary, who invites the potential convert to take part in meeting sessions or offers a home study. The latter is the mode whereby Jehovah's Witnesses stand out, even

though other types of communication channels are used, and do have a bearing on the mission's positive outcome. As concerns the missionary's typology, numerous studies prove that social networks can facilitate conversion even in cases of more cognitively motivated conversions such as the ones characterizing affiliation with Jehovah's Witnesses. To give just one example: in a study on nine Belgian congregations, Dobbelaere and Wilson found that 60% of the individuals had become Jehovah's Witnesses because of a relative's proselytizing work (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 101).

4. The *benefits of conversion*: the three types of benefit that Rambo identifies at a general level also appear in the experiences of Jehovah's Witnesses.

At a *cognitive* level, the first category of benefits is strictly connected with learning the specific language used by the missionary to facilitate the potential converts' assimilation of the new doctrinal system, through which they will be able to attribute to their own lives a definite sense and purpose that will become an essential part of their personal identity. In the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, the stress placed on the study and practice of Bible precepts makes "language" a predominant aspect during the conversion process in comparison with other religious groups (Rambo 1993, 81–6; Beckford 1978, 254–55).

The second category—*emotional* benefits—, though present to some extent, is not particularly emphasized in Jehovah's Witnesses' reconstructions, and it usually refers to the positive effects an individual has experienced after beginning to associate with the religious community, where he has found "friendship" and "solidarity" (Jindra 2014).

Nevertheless, psychological research on "emotion regulation strategies" can be useful in scrutinizing this aspect. Single individuals cope with their own emotional reactions by using what psychology calls "emotion regulation strategies," which come under the ampler theoretical constructs on the regulation and control of Self and are capable of modifying one's and others' emotional experience in a manner that is flexible and adaptable to the different situations (Gross 1998). By applying this construct to religious organizations, it can be argued that a group-specific religious culture, conveyed through doctrine and community life, may be defined and studied also as a peculiar type of emotional environment (Belzen 2015). An interesting study by Ringnes and Ulland (2015) compared the "emotional culture" among Jehovah's Witnesses

and the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF). The primary goal among Christians from the Toronto group was to arouse strong emotions in the believers, while among the Witnesses moderation and emotion control were encouraged. The authors concluded that the way the leadership regulates emotions in a religious group heavily impacts the way members regulate their own emotions, and as highlighted earlier when examining the above-mentioned studies, the way they reconstruct their conversion experience.

A further, important contribution in this field is a study on twenty-nine Jehovah's Witnesses active in Norway. The researchers asked the following question: Which group-based emotion regulation strategies are offered to Jehovah's Witnesses' members in this group culture? From a thematic analysis of the interviews, two emotion regulation strategies emerged: social sharing and cognitive reappraisal, which are strictly connected to each other. This study also made it possible to introduce a new concept called "emotional forecasting": the relevance an individual ascribes to possible future prospects is an important emotion regulator *here and now* (Ringnes et al. 2017, 331).

The authors identified three emotion regulation strategies employed by the Witnesses: the conviction of belonging with eternity, the certainty of surviving death, and happiness. To give just one example: faith in the coming Armageddon, along with the promise of future happiness, is an important emotional resource that is capable of affecting the believers' existence at present times, when they are to cope with daily troubles and any needed sacrifices. Furthermore, emotional strategies facilitate conversion because they answer the individuals' existential questions, stabilize their acquired identity, and strengthen the very existence of the community, since the group's success also depends on the degree to which members regulate their own emotions to serve collective ends. When a group's higher goal is that of controlling one's instincts with objectives to achieve in the long term, and at a superior level, religious persons focus on the way things should be in the future, consequently attributing less importance to the immediate satisfaction of one's desires. All Witnesses interviewees stated that they conducted their lives keeping the awaited transcendental future in constant focus. This is an interesting fact that helps understand the psychological implications of the end-of-the-world belief shared by all Christians, albeit with different nuances of meaning (Ringnes et al. 2017).

The third category of benefits is the one that Needleman calls *new ways of life*

(Needleman 1970, 16–8). In their reconstructions, Jehovah's Witnesses often state that before converting, they had a desire to attain human and spiritual maturation, to learn how to pray, meditate, and understand the Holy Scriptures. They attained this aspiration when they became Jehovah's Witnesses (Jindra 2008; 2014; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Beckford 1978, 255–56).

"Interaction" and "Commitment" Stages

Jehovah's Witnesses' missionary work also has a "return" effect, in that such a commitment successfully consolidates the preacher's faith, who through his "door-to-door" activity feels increasingly to be an active member of the community he has affiliated with (Introvigne 2015, 129). This consideration allows us to connect the fourth stage of Rambo's model, *encounter*, with the three subsequent ones, in which the feeling of belonging and the decision to make a steady commitment consolidate with time.

In Jehovah's Witnesses' conversions, the stages Rambo calls *interaction* and *commitment* cannot easily be distinguished. After encountering the preacher and accepting an invitation to study the Bible, the stage Rambo calls *interaction*—which converts to other groups experience as a time of transition and uncertainty (Di Marzio 2016a; 2020a; 2020b)—shapes up indeed as a more or less long phase of consolidation of the conversion. This occurs thanks to the activities that a potential convert is invited to carry out: Bible study, weekly meeting attendance, and the "door-to-door" mission together with other Witnesses. The interviewees' accounts show that active involvement seems to have played an important role in creating the decision and consolidating the conversion process, which fact easily fits into the context of social constructivism theory (Berger and Luckmann 1966), whose tenet is that the consolidation of a new body of knowledge occurs through its practical application and through interaction with the reference community.

Throughout the *interaction* and *commitment* stages, individuals change their relationships, learn new doctrines, and get involved in rituals that enhance their sense of belonging. Interiorization and integration of these changes lead to a biographical reconstruction of transformed self (Hood et al. 2009, 232) and to taking on a new role, in full awareness of the consequences and responsibilities

that come with it, which are shared with the entire religious community (Rambo 1993, 102–41).

In particular, one of the elements marking the *commitment* stage is, according to Rambo, the “testimony,” that is, the way a convert recounts the inward path that led them to the decision of affiliating. Testimony comprises two mutually interacting processes: language transformation and biographical reconstruction (Rambo 1993, 137–39). As regards this theme, the author mentions Beckford’s study on Jehovah’s Witnesses’ conversions, which highlighted that religious groups may request individuals to learn to recount their own conversions so as to strengthen the group as a whole. Based on other testimonies they listen to, the converts learn what is expected from their account and, over time, they begin to see their own life and experiences within that specific reference framework, eventually turning, in a variable time span, into new persons.

For instance, Beckford observed that Jehovah’s Witnesses have a peculiar way of telling about their conversion: unlike the Evangelicals, they do not report a deep sense of sin, of crisis, and of surrender to Christ, but rather an experience of coming to know and discovering the truth, intended as a conquest achieved through the study and work carried out within the organization. It is a gradual process of assimilation of Bible truths as are conveyed according to the appointed authority’s interpretation. In this context, converts are seekers of truth who put themselves at the organization’s service to disseminate its literature and publish God’s will by bearing witness to and announcing it. Further, the author underscores that throughout his observations of the movement, both the organization and the kind of conversion accounts changed over time, since both align to transformations in doctrine (Beckford 1978, 253–58).

Doctrine, above all as concerns Bible interpretation, is guarded and conveyed to the believers by an appointed authority:

today’s Jehovah’s Witnesses hold that the “wise and trustworthy servant” appointed to guarantee the correct interpretation of God’s Word and to provide “spiritual food” to the believers is not a physical person, and not even the whole of the “anointed ones” present on earth, but it is the Governing Body, whose members are anyways all part of the “anointed” (Introvigne 2015, 110).

This aspect, that is, the decisive role of the Governing Body in developing the interpretive strategies that guide the believers in Bible reading, moved some researchers to apply to the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ organization Stanley Fish’s

theory on “interpretive communities” (Fish 1980). An example of these studies is the one by Gilmour, who, based on Fish’s theory, published an in-depth analysis of a commentary edited by the Watch Tower Society and entitled *Revelation—Its Grand Climax At Hand!* (Gilmour 2006).

In the *commitment* stage, the “rituals,” which in the case of Jehovah’s Witnesses take place in religious ceremonies through songs, the study of Scriptures, and Bible talks, take on a strong religious and unitive connotation. In particular, besides the annual Memorial of Jesus’ death, especial relevance is acquired by the rite of baptism, a personal choice one makes after a variable time span (months or years). Before getting baptized, Witnesses must follow a path through which they repent of their sins and begin a “turn-around” process, meaning that they commit themselves to changing their way of life to “dedicate” themselves “to Jehovah,” in prayer and worship, and learn to know Jehovah and to speak about him to their relatives or friends. To get baptized means to show others that “you really want to be God’s friend and to serve him (*Psalms* 40:7, 8)” (*What Can the Bible Teach Us?* 2015, 185–96).

According to Rambo, the *commitment* stage also has an inner facet, which he calls “surrender.” It is one of the aspects of the conversion process that is most difficult to understand, because it is the moment when converts decide to abandon the past and change their lives for good. In the phenomenology of this process, the author identifies five elements that can also be found, to some extent, in those who decide to become Jehovah’s Witnesses:

— The *desire to surrender* the past and any behavior that run contrary to Bible morals is a prerequisite for accepting the new member, for whom long-converted Jehovah’s Witnesses are examples to imitate, as their life testifies the positive and lasting effects of their choice (Rambo 1993, 133–34).

— The *inner conflict* between a desire to start a new life imbued with transcendence and the fear that, by converting, they will lose some liberties. This aspect is more difficult to detect in the individuals’ biographical reconstructions, as in describing their conversion they hardly record the inner conflict accompanying it; also because, by the time they render their testimony, that stage is completely over (Rambo 1993, 134–35).

— The *relief and liberation* following conversion are defined in different manners (Rambo 1993, 135–36). Galanter describes a similar process when

speaking of a “relief effect” the individual experiences upon deciding to affiliate with a given group (Galanter 1999, 81–3). In relation to Mr. Smith’s and Carlo Johnson’s testimonies collected by Jindra, certainty about the existence of Jehovah God and knowledge of his name and of the truths revealed in the Bible strengthen faith and give hope of a happier and restored future. At this stage, converts feel ready to face sacrifices and challenges that previously seemed insuperable.

— The *support of the faith community* helping the new converts to confirm their decision and overcome possible crises (Rambo 1993, 136–37). This factor emerges frequently in testimonies: to many individuals, becoming Jehovah’s Witnesses meant for the first time to feel part of a spiritual fellowship, an aspect that was totally nonexistent in previous religious experiences (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 108; Jindra 2014).

Rambo concludes by underscoring the “fragility of surrender”: the decision to convert is not immune from crises of variable gravity; for this reason, it requires continual re-confirmation and reenactment (Rambo 1993, 133).

“Consequences” Stage

Rambo leaves to the seventh stage, *consequences*, his observations on the psychological appraisal of conversion effects (Rambo 1993, 142–64). There is a significant literature exploring this aspect in connection with new religious movements in general, and specifically referring to movements that anti-cult groups and hostile former members consider “dangerous” and label as “cults,” among which Jehovah’s Witnesses are often included.

Psychological appraisal of an individual’s religious conduct is to be carried out by psychology of religion, which studies conversion by placing a person and a person’s relationships in a central position, employing the same scientific methodology as is used to understand all other modes of behavior: relying on observation, taking in objective knowledge, collecting figures that are accessible, comprehensible, and reproducible on the part of other researchers, to the end of identifying the positive or negative effects that a given religious choice has on the individual.

To do this, a psychologist should employ the same methods used by a cultural anthropologist, that is, studying people's religious behavior in their own cultural context, considering the specific features of the particular form of religiosity under analysis. This methodology is also important for safeguarding the psychologist's neutrality when proposing figures and psychological interpretations of religious behavior (Vergote 1993, 76–85). This perspective underlies the following considerations, which concern some consequences borne from the choice to become Jehovah's Witnesses, both at an individual and a collective level.

Psychological Effects of Conversion

It was shown earlier that the process leading an individual to becoming a Jehovah's Witness is gradual, cognitively oriented, and effort-demanding, as it requires study as well as other activities, the foremost being the preaching work. All converts who were interviewed in the above-mentioned studies state that they made their decision after thorough evaluation, also thanks to the guidance and supervision of those who had the task of studying the Bible with them. Based on these data, and taking into account also the results of many other psychologically-oriented empirical studies on different types of converts (Hood et al. 2009), allegations against the Jehovah's Witnesses organization whereby they would exert forms of "undue influence," "mental manipulation," "deception," or "coercion" on individuals are shown to be totally groundless. The choice to devote oneself to the study of the Bible and to Jehovah's service appears to be free, personal, and conscious.

A large literature on different religious organizations exists which examines how conversion affects mental health. The allegation against groups and movements that are labeled as "cults," whereby they would be harmful to their members' mental health, does not seem to be supported by any empirical evidence, and it contrasts with the orientation and data from a vast array of academic publications on the topic:

As to the relationship between religion and mental health, it is not possible to judge whether a given religion is "healthy" or "unwholesome," beneficial or pathogenic. For neither religion nor mental health exists by itself, as an abstract entity, but solely in an individual's experience (Aletti 2010, 14).

Along the same lines, though from a different perspective, Richardson states that there is no empirical evidence that religion and mental health are associated differently in new religious movements compared to traditional religions (Richardson 1995).

Numerous studies investigated the alleged dangerousness of some religious groups by comparing the converts' mental condition with that of the general population. The results show that there is no significant difference between the two samples. (Buxant et al. 2007; Buxant and Saroglou, 2008a, 2008b; Namini and Murken, 2009; Hood et al. 2009, 435–58).

The study by Namini and Murken is especially interesting for the purpose of this paper, as it is a longitudinal study on the well-being and mental health of converts to some new religious movements in Germany, among which the authors include Jehovah's Witnesses. The first figure to appear is that in converted individuals the sense of well-being was enhanced, whereas the level of social adaptation shows no significant differences compared to control groups from the general population, since the level remained relatively stable in time. Among the many positive aspects of affiliation, those that are more frequently and more extensively linked to mental health and well-being, are one's sense of religious consistency and steadfast attachment to God.

The results of this study, along with other studies, referred to by the authors (Miller and Strongman 2002; Besier and Besier 2001; Ellison 1991), make it possible to confirm that affiliation to religious organizations such as Jehovah's Witnesses does not present a danger to the converts' mental health. Further, the authors specify that Jehovah's Witnesses suffering from mental disorders generally show a good level of adaptation to social life, likely thanks to the supportive action of faith as experienced in a communitarian context (Namini and Murken 2009).

“Religious” Resistance in Concentration Camps

As stated earlier concerning the studies on religious coping, faith enhances an individual's resistance capacity, as if it was a reservoir of energy that the believer draws on to cope with and overcome highly stressful situations (Pargament 1997). This effect of conversion is apparent from the countless cases of

resistance to the persecution suffered by many minorities, at all times and all over the world. As for Jehovah's Witnesses, an emblematic aspect is the role played by faith in enabling many believers collectively to endure while imprisoned in concentration camps. With regard to this, Bruno Bettelheim (1903–1990) stated that Jehovah's Witnesses

not only showed unusual heights of human dignity and moral behavior, but seemed protected against the same camp experience that soon destroyed persons considered very well integrated by my psychoanalytic friends and myself (Bettelheim 1963, 20–1).

From a psychological viewpoint, it is interesting to underscore that the motive for that resistance was essentially religious, that is, based on the Witnesses' immovable will to stand fast to moral principles rooted in their faith. In the face of an alienating condition, though being subjected to brutal violence, they were supportive and helpful not just to one another but also to other prisoners:

It was precisely their principles that enabled the Witnesses to display unparalleled solidarity toward one another and toward other groups of prisoners, which fact deeply affected the morale and, consequently, also physical resistance to privations, as shown by Bruno Bettelheim's and Tzvetan Todorov's [1939–2017] analyses of camp life. For this solidarity, which, for example, resulted in their sharing food and taking care of the sick, the Witnesses often exposed themselves to Nazi violence (Lotto 2008, 301).

Living in a World One Does Not Belong To

To become Jehovah's Witnesses also means to live in a peculiar way the relationship with those who are not part of their denomination—family members, former members, religious and secular institutions, society—. This is a consequence that is only appreciable if put in relation to the doctrine and practice of this religion, which holds that the believers are “in” the world but not “of” the world. Many authors have studied from different perspectives, and in a detailed and exhaustive manner, the seeming ambivalence of this doctrinal system (for instance: Chryssides 2016, 171–73; Introvigne 2015).

This paper specifically aims at seeking to understand the peculiar attitude of Jehovah's Witnesses toward the outside world from a psychological viewpoint. To do so, it is indispensable to try looking at the “world” with Witness “eyes,” that is, starting from the three meanings their doctrine ascribes to the term “world” (*kósmos*):

(1) humankind as a whole, apart from their moral condition or course of life, (2) the framework of human circumstances into which a person is born and in which he lives, or (3) the mass of mankind apart from Jehovah's approved servants (*Reasoning* 2009, 435–36).

When, in their publications, Jehovah's Witnesses ask if the world will be destroyed by fire, or if Satan is the ruler of the world, and what the attitude of true Christians should be toward the world and toward those who are part of it (*Reasoning* 2009), they refer to the third meaning, that is, not to society in general but to human society that is hostile to God, which underlies the quotation of *John* 17:14: "I have given your word to them, but the world has hated them, because they are no part of the world, just as I am no part of the world" (*New World Translation* 2013).

Only after grasping what "world" means in Jehovah's Witness doctrine, and in view of a number of above-mentioned testimonies, is it possible to attempt a psychological assessment of the Witnesses' attitude toward the world of "non-Witnesses," and their degree of social adaptation. It is a general assessment, not considering single cases and possible exceptions, which highlights a peculiar, twofold aspect: though not being "of" the world—a fact that is evident, due to their different doctrines and practices—, Jehovah's Witnesses live and work "in" the world (*John* 17,14), to which they incessantly present and propose a way of community life, with solid religious values and a substantial set of doctrines. The lifeblood of this universal mission is the theocratic doctrine based on the appointed authority's interpretation of the Bible, the study of which is constant, profound, and effort-demanding for each Witness.

In this specific context, the attitude of preachers who go from door to door to carry out their mission is to be interpreted as a way to put oneself at the world's "service," an offer of salvation for all those who would freely accept it. In this case, "separateness" and "difference" do not mean opposition or hostility, but rather consistency of faith and an offer of salvation. Further, it is important to underscore that most Jehovah's Witnesses work without problems with people from other religions. Their children successfully attend school courses with people who have another religion, and, in their work as evangelizers, they speak to people of all religions, if these are willing to listen.

As concerns "spiritual separateness," an interesting consideration stemmed from the study by Wilson, who stated that despite being members of a community

that is somewhat “separated” from society, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not live isolated as individuals. On the contrary, they are

perhaps much less isolated than are many people whose lives are integrated into the normal patterns of social life in the wider society, in which, however, they have relatively few really close ties, and, in modern conditions, perhaps no sense of communal belonging (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 108).

Conclusion

As is true for any conversion, to become a Jehovah’s Witness means to work out an often-radical change in one’s existence both at a personal and social level. As shown in this paper, the holistic and interdisciplinary model for the study of conversion developed by Rambo et al. (Rambo 1993; Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014) can be a useful reference framework to understand this as well as other types of conversion.

Using the results of studies that were selected because their methodology was based on the converts’ autobiographical reconstructions, this paper has focused on the personal and social motives behind an individual’s choice to affiliate with an organization which has historically succeeded in “challenging” social customs, and in witnessing a consistent adherence to its principles of faith, unto the sacrifice of life. As mentioned, this attitude can be understood only by considering how the Witnesses relate to the “world,” and by attributing the right meaning to this term in the context of their doctrine.

Critics of Jehovah’s Witnesses sometimes interpret this aspect erroneously, conveying the idea that the Witnesses are asocial individuals, hostile toward society in general. This misunderstanding, for instance, has aroused the wrong idea that the Witnesses’ position as respects the “world” may be harmful to their children in cases of child custody, that the Witnesses have “internal courts” because they challenge state courts, that they do not render military service because they are against the state, and so forth. In some countries all over the world, dissemination of inaccurate news on the Witnesses’ position as respects the “world” has led to systematic forms of persecution, which are still ongoing (Knox 2018), and has moved important international institutions to issue statements of concern (USCIRF 2020).

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Research Notes

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in the Era of COVID-19

Maria d'Arienzo

University of Naples "Federico II"

maria.darienzo2@unina.it

ABSTRACT: During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been episodes of intolerance towards the Ahmadiyya community, particularly in Pakistan. However, in compliance with the Quranic precepts, the Ahmadis have not responded with violence to the persecutions suffered. On the contrary, they have carried out, thanks to the dynamism of their communities, numerous initiatives of solidarity with the populations most affected by the pandemic. They have also spontaneously adopted COVID-19-safe methods of worship, and thus have been able to limit the numbers of community members infected.

KEYWORDS: Ahmadiyya Community, Ahmadis, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at, Religion and COVID-19 Pandemic, Ahmadis and COVID-19 Pandemic.

“Those who spend in prosperity and adversity,
and those who suppress anger and pardon men;
and Allah loves those who do good” (Qur. III, 134)

1. The Experience of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in Pandemic Times

Natural disasters and epidemics have often been interpreted as a divine punishment for the wrong behaviour of humans. As evidenced by sociological and anthropological studies, the reactions to the sense of helplessness and bewilderment caused by such events often result in persecutory attitudes and intolerance. They are perpetrated to the detriment of those who are considered “different,” and are often referred to as voluntary spreaders of contagion. But the

crisis may also lead to an awakening of conscience, implemented through a recovery of ethical sense and a progressive refuge in the spiritual dimension.

On the one hand, the idea that natural disasters are to be attributed to divine wrath for human sins determines the resurgence of discriminatory and violent acts. They are comparable to the acts often identified as the cause of divine punishment, and are often perpetrated against those in a minority position and socially vulnerable. On the other hand, the same ideas may lead to recover a community dimension of greater sharing and solidarity.

In this sense, the experience of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic is paradigmatic.

The Ahmadiyya movement was founded in 1889 by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) in a village of Punjab in India. It was discriminated against for theological differences with orthodox Islam since its birth, especially in present-day Pakistan. It has also recently suffered targeted attacks, motivated by a veiled religious intolerance. The movement is considered heretical, since the proclamation of its founder as a reformer of the divine mission of Islam appears to reopen the seal of the prophets, considered by orthodox Islam to have been closed by the Quranic revelation to Muhammad.

In Pakistan, in the second quarter of 2020, there has been a sharpening of the persecution of the Ahmadis, as they have been unfairly held responsible for the spread of the virus, or even declared a greater threat than the virus itself.

However, even in this difficult situation, the typical Ahmadi activism in the face of adversity took concrete form as a strong drive of solidarity and spirituality. Its root can be found in the inner effort to maintain an attitude of meekness with respect to violence and aggression. One reason this activism was effective is the organization on which the Jama'at is structured. Its articulation in multiple diasporic communities, present on different continents, finds its unity through the direct connection of the nationally organized Jama'ats to the Caliph.

2. Eschatology and Calamities in Ahmadiyya Community Theology

In Muslim eschatology, based on the Quran and the traditions of the first centuries of Islam, the precursor signs of the day when souls will be judged for

their conduct, related to the advent of the *eschaton* and the universal judgment, are of particular interest.

In the theology of the Ahmadiyya Community, among the eschatological signs is the progressive proliferation of calamities and diseases. As attested recently by the Caliph of the Community,

the frequency of storms, earthquakes and pandemics has increased greatly in the world. Generally, these pandemics and calamities come to caution mankind that they should fulfil the rights of their Creator as well as His creation (Masroor Ahmad 2020b).

The calamities, therefore, while not constituting a specific sign indicated in the Scriptural references relating to the advent of Judgment Day, are a warning to humankind. They are also a call to respect the precepts willed by the Creator to promote a virtuous, happy, and prosperous life based on the principle of solidarity.

For Muslims, as is well known, practices of solidarity and philanthropic acts constitute an essential element of religious practice. There are numerous Shariatic references to the equitable redistribution of wealth, based on the Islamic anthropological and religious conception of a close link between faith and action.

To consolidate and preserve Islamic brotherhood— “And help one another in righteousness and piety” (Qur. V, 2)—, numerous verses of the Quran urge Muslims to perform acts of charity and to share their goods. Indicative are the Quranic references to the paying of “Zakat,” among which are:

Observe Prayer and pay the Zakat (Qur. II, 43).

O ye who believe! Spend of the good things that you have earned (Qur. II, 267).

If you give alms openly, it is well and good; but if you conceal them and give them to the poor, it is better for you; and He will remove from you many of your sins. And Allah is aware of what you do (Qur. II, 271).

And whatever of wealth you spend, it is for yourselves, while you spend not but to seek the favour of Allah (Qur. II, 272).

Surely, those who believe and do good deeds, and observe Prayer and pay the Zakat, shall have their reward from their Lord (Qur. II, 277).

So, give to the kinsman his due, and to the needy, and to the wayfarer. That is best for those who seek the favour of Allah, and it is they who will prosper (Qur. XXX, 38).

Those who observe Prayer and pay the Zakat and who have firm faith in the Hereafter... (Qur. XXXI, 4).

And they feed, for love of Him, the poor, the orphan, and the prisoner (Qur. LXXVI, 8).

The Holy Book encourages the wealthy to contribute to the welfare of society by assisting the poor and needy, with both kindness and a sincere and non-pharisaic spirit:

A kind word and forgiveness are better than charity followed by injury. (...) O ye who believe! render not vain your alms by taunt and injury, like him who spends his wealth to be seen of men (Qur. II, 263–64).

The Islamic conception of the social function of wealth, aimed at the realization of distributive justice, requires that everyone contributes to the growth of the welfare of the community in which he or she acts. To help one's neighbour is, therefore, a basic rule of conduct of Islamic life:

And worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom your right hands possess. Surely, Allah loves not the proud and the boastful (Qur. IV, 36).

The primary function of attention to the needs of others and to the common good in Islam is therefore to achieve a fair distribution of wealth, both through direct donations and through projects of assistance for the disadvantaged and community development programs. There are also targeted interventions that allow those in poverty to make themselves economically independent.

3. The Behaviour of the Islamic Believer in Crisis and Adversity

If the general attitude of solidarity normally constitutes an obligation for Muslim believers, this duty becomes even more strict in critical situations when adversity arises.

Such, indeed, is the historical moment caused by the pandemic crisis of COVID-19, during which the difficulties of all are exacerbated. Consequently, the daily and subjective effort of the Muslim to walk the path of salvation becomes even more demanding.

The Quran explicitly regulates behaviour religiously aimed at preserving humans from their own individualism. They are called to walk the “right path” to salvation. Addressing those who take action to receive divine forgiveness and

aspire to paradise, the Quran designates them as those “who spend in prosperity and adversity, and those who suppress anger and pardon men; and Allah loves those who do good”(Qur. III, 134).

This verse seems particularly significant for the identification of the method to follow to realize one’s faith. Muslims, therefore, in the face of the crisis caused by the Coronavirus must adopt a precise attitude, consisting of an active behaviour of *facere* and a passive one of *non facere*.

3.1 “Donate Your Assets”

Regarding the first conduct, especially in times of difficulty, believers are asked “to donate their goods.” Qur. III, 134 says that Allah loves the “muhsinin,” those who do good. Here, “doing good” implies an active commitment to the material and spiritual sustenance of all, not only of Muslims, in situations of difficulty and need.

Indeed, during the months of the pandemic, the Ahmadiyya Community has distinguished itself for its resolve. It has engaged in various solidarity initiatives undertaken for the benefit of all, without confessional distinction or theological declination, in line with the motto of the Jama’at, “Love for all, Hatred for none.”

Among the various solidarity initiatives by Ahmadi charitable organizations can be mentioned the donation of a disinfectant tunnel to the Family Medicine Center in Pristina, Kosovo (Yvejsi 2020b), as well as the donation of food in Kenya (Machengo 2020). Also, economic aid, food packages. and disinfectants were distributed to hundreds of families in Lagos, Nigeria (Qudoos 2020). Individual and collective medical devices were donated to the General Hospital in Peja, Kosovo (Yvejsi 2020a). Help and consultation hotlines by Ahmadi medical experts and volunteers were set up in Europe and the Americas.

3.2. “Repressing Anger”

Qur. III, 134 also prescribes a passive behaviour, i.e. the inhibition of revenge with respect to an offense suffered.

The repression of anger, and the failure to react to the wrongs suffered, becomes a test for the believers. They are called to demonstrate their submission to the will of Allah, by cultivating love and developing the attitude of forgiveness.

During the COVID-19 crisis, there have been many attacks against the Ahmadiyya Community and its members. Its charitable activities, although also benefiting those outside of their community, have been stigmatized as non-spontaneous and pharisaic, or even dangerous. They have been interpreted as intended to highlight the discrimination in the distribution of aid suffered by religious minorities in Pakistan. Real persecution in Pakistan has targeted persons falsely labelled as “infected,” whose only “infection” was belonging to the Jama'at.

With respect to injustices, including the most violent ones, the Quran prescribes a compassionate and forgiving attitude. The Quranic exegesis of the Ahmadi on that point is clear. Qur. III, 134 describes three stages of behaviour in case of confrontations. In the first stage, when the believers are offended, they must avoid instinctive reactions and suppress anger. In the second stage, they must take a further step and grant unconditional forgiveness to the offender. In the third phase, the believers must not only grant the offender complete forgiveness, but must also show benevolence and favour.

4. Worship and Contagion Prevention Measures in Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at

At the beginning of the year 2020, in his first Friday sermon, Caliph Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad stated that, “as we enter the new year, storm clouds continue to gather ahead” (Masroor Ahmad 2020a). The Jama'ats warned for the arrival of a calamity for years—mostly with reference to wars—, did not show alarmism nor dismay, but rather used their resources for preparation.

The Caliph, already before the international spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, warned that it was not appropriate to feel safe anywhere, not even in Europe. In fact, every Ahmadi was advised to stock a three-month's food ration at home to be prepared for any emergencies. Thus, at the organizational level, the Ahmadiyya community, which is particularly dynamic, was able to adapt to the pandemic crisis.

Without waiting for the pandemic alarms launched by the World Health Organization, or the social confinement decreed by individual governments, Ahmadi communities in different countries had coordinated their organizations, and implemented timely restrictions and guidelines for their mosques. They enacted provisions aimed at protecting the health of the elderly and children. They recommended to keep the distance necessary to prevent the possibility of infection. Ahmadi in other countries were alerted by the Jama'at in Italy, the first Western country to contain the spread of the virus among the population through the declaration of a state of health emergency.

Risk prevention measures have been taken in all Ahmadi mosques throughout the world, including in Germany, where only a partial quarantine was implemented by the government, and Sweden, where no general quarantine was enforced.

The philosophy of the search for unity, common good, and brotherhood characteristic of the Ahmadi, has allowed to implement, in full autonomy and even in the absence of timely governmental responses, ways of conducting worship protecting the health and safety of all.

The dynamism inherent in the organizational structure of the Jama'at Ahmadiyya, which finds its centralization in the leadership of the Caliph, has allowed a timely and effective response to the crisis. The aim was both the protection of general welfare, and a full compliance with the Quranic prescriptions on the responsibility of the faithful.

The “caring for the good of others” and the “repression of anger” in the adversities prescribed in the Quranic verse as behaviours to follow in order to be *muhsinin*, loved by Allah, are in fact evoked as the pillars of faith that animate social action. They have both an active and material and a passive and spiritual dimension (*facere* and *non facere*). They embody the spirit of the Jama'at Ahmadiyya as expressed in the motto of the Ahmadi movement, “Love for all, Hatred for none.”

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