

What the leaders of «traditional» and «non-traditional» religions in Russia think about the relationships with the government, state of religious freedom and state of spirituality of the country

Dr Anneta Vyssotskaya, International Director of the Open Russian Theological Academy

According to the ITAR TASS questioning of the high-ranked representatives of the major religious confessions in Russia conducted at the end of last year the situation with the freedom of beliefs in Russia showed a significant improvement in 2005 (<http://www.vor.ru/>). Such opinion was expressed by the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia, Mufti Damir Gizattulin, the Chief Rabbi of Russia Berl Lazar, the Director of the Public Relations Department of Moscow Patriarchate Priest Mikhail Dudko. Their religious organizations together with the Buddhist traditional sangha represent the so-called «traditional» religions of Russia. Their positive assessment of the situation with the religious freedom proves that they have received much support from the government in their religious activities.

However, the similar questioning of the popular Russian web-portal Portal-credo.ru (<http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=topic&id=405>) of the leading representatives of those religious organizations that were not fortunate enough to be included into the «chosen circle» of the «traditional» religions of Russia showed that they were much less enthusiastic when expressing their opinion about the relationships with the state, the situation with the religious freedom in the country and the real spiritual state of the nation. Here are some of the opinions:

The Chairman of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians- Baptists Yuri Sipko thinks that in reality the notion of the freedom of consciousness as a undeniable right of every human being has not been even formed in the public mind of modern Russia. In his opinion, the role of the religious factor in the public and political life of the country is very big and there is no political party in the country which would not use a religious factor in its interests. Although Russia is a secular state according to the Constitutional Law of the country, it looks now more like a clerical state. However, the role of faith is most insignificant and no signs of the total religiosity of the population are observed. He compared the use of words «totalitarian sect» and «destructive sect» towards non-Orthodox religious groups with fascism of the nation.

The President of the Association of the churches of Christians of evangelical faith and leader of Moscow church «Rosa» bishop Pavel Savelyev says: «We feel at present that there are not any guarantees from the authorities for the Protestant churches». He thinks that the spiritual influence of the Russian Orthodoxy on the society has become weaker and that Russian Orthodox Church must realize that they would not be able to stand alone against the growing immorality in the country.

Deputy Chairman of Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical faith (Pentecostals) Bishop Pavel Bak sees the existing danger for the religious freedom of the protestant workers in Russian religious legislation. He mentioned that recently three of the churches belonging to their Church union were without explanation denied renting places for the worship services although the term of their renting agreements did not expire yet.. Such a discriminatory tendency is observed all over Russia. It seems that there is an unofficial order in the country to restrict the possibilities for Protestant churches to rent buildings or halls for their activities.

Bishop-electus of the Siberian Evangelical-Lutheran Church Vsevolod Lytkin considers the impact of the Russian Orthodox church mainly political while the religious or spiritual influence on the nation is insignificant and majority of the population abides in semi-paganism. Although the attitude of ROC MP to the Lutheran churches is quite friendly as compared with that to the Baptists or Pentecostals, there is a danger of the violation of believers' rights by local government officials

who also set the population against non-Orthodox churches.

Russian Orthodox Church and alternative Russian Orthodoxies

The political influence of the Moscow Patriarchate of Russian Orthodox Church continued to grow during 2005. The church has received much official support and «open doors» from the government to most areas of the Russian society from the orphanages to the army. The support is also observed in the leading Russian state Universities where it is possible now to get a degree in Russian Orthodox theology. In several occasions the church received considerable financial support from the government, as an example of which was a recent subsidy from the president's fund for the construction of a Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii. Politically and economically the church is quickly becoming more and more established.

However, as this political influence and prosperity of the church is growing, the more evident become the inner problems of the church, which result in disagreements with those church leaders and members who are seeking for true spiritual revival and influence instead of the political one. The parishes who disagree with the policy of Moscow Patriarchate leave the church and form separate Orthodox groups. At present there are at least nine large so-called alternative Russian Orthodox Churches: Russian Orthodox Church in Exile, Catacomb Church of True Orthodox Christians (Andreevtsy), Russian True Orthodox Church, True Orthodox Church-Moscow Mitropoli, Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church, True Orthodox Church of Kiev Patriarchate, Russian Orthodox Catholic Church, Apostolic Orthodox Church, True Orthodox Church (United). (<http://vladivostok.eparhia.ru/blagovest/archive/faith/?ID=49>) There are other smaller groups as well. Interestingly, that many of these separated churches included the word «true» into their name. It can possibly testify that all these groups experienced a disappointment in their search for the truth in Moscow Patriarchate of Russian Orthodox Church and preferred to chose a different way even within an Orthodox tradition. Of course, MP ROC considers all these groups heretical and makes them an object of persecution.

These inner problems and divisions as well as other problems in the church cannot remain unobserved by the MP ROC parishioners and the Russian society, which enforces the leadership of MP ROC to speak about them in public. The recent annual report of Patriarch Alexei II (<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=document&div=308>) reveals some of these problems: greediness of some priests, neglecting their priesthood duties, unauthorised introduction of new elements into traditional liturgy, lack of competence and knowledge of Christian doctrine in the church workers, often rude attitude to the people who come to the church for the first time. The Patriarch called the priests to be a godly example to their parishioners, to obey the instructions of the church leadership and to give more effort to social service to the needy and suffering people. The Patriarch even mentioned the «sectarians» as an example of loving attitude to every person, suggesting the priests to show the attitude of loving acceptance to everyone who comes to the church.

Protestants and the state

The civic activity of Russian Protestant churches grew significantly during last year. (See also Watching trends in Russia, Security deteriorating for Protestant churches and RUSSIA: Religious liberty is shrinking <http://www.ea.org.au/rlc/>) Examples of this are a number of open letters of Protestant leaders to the government authorities including President Putin where they told about the violation of the rights of Protestant Christians in the country. These examples also include protest pickets and meetings against the violation of the rights of Christian organizations by the government, which were organized by Protestant churches last year. Although these actions do not bring real positive changes in the situation and obviously the churches experience a greater threat as a result of such open actions, however, it does produce a change in people's thinking and also

forces the government to do something in return. To speak out is dangerous but it is better than to keep silence. However, such actions of protest do not always find support and understanding among other Protestant churches who have developed a habit of keeping silence about such violations, knowing by experience that speaking about persecution or violation of your rights usually results only in greater persecution or violation.

As an example of a positive consequence of such open protest actions can be mentioned the case with a Pentecostal church in Izhevsk where policemen in a most rude manner seized 70 believers after a prayer meeting and took 46 of them to the police station for interrogation. After the protestant leaders made this case known to the wide public, it even attracted the attention of the members of USA Congress, as a result of which Izhevsk authorities received an official letter from them with a request to conduct an investigation of this violation of human rights and to put a lawful punishment on the policemen. Recently it became known that the police major who was the senior officer responsible for the attack on the believers was put on probation for 3 years and dismissed from the leadership position by a court verdict (<http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=39351&cf=>). Although it is a very minimal punishment it is still a big achievement because previously in similar cases none would be punished.

One more example of this positive attempts to restore justice is the case with a Moscow Protestant Church Emmanuel. The church organized a protest picket against the violation of their rights by Moscow officials. Although they received a permission to do it the picket was attacked by the policemen and the participants of the picket, including the church pastor, were taken to police, interrogated and fined. In November last year the court considered the actions of the authorities unlawful after the church applied twice with a complaint (<http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/index.php?act=news&type=archive&day=16&month=11&year=2005&id=38147>) .

The negative attitude to «sectarians» cultivated in public through mass-media for many years sometimes results in the most absurd and dangerous situations for the Protestant churches. Sometimes the name «sect» is used against protestant churches in order to give the appearance of justice to some criminal actions having nothing to do with the religious issue. The most recent case happened in Nizhnevartovsk where a local businessman who for several years has battled for the property where the church “Word of Life” meets (founded in 1991 and over 1000 members now plus 25 daughter churches in the region) (<http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/index.php?act=news&type=archive&day=19&month=12&year=2005&id=38987>). Despite the court confirming the property rights of the church the businessman still tries to get hold of it. In the attempts to win he has used mass media for a campaign against «sectarians», tried to put the church building on fire, tried to provoke a fight with the church leaders and the church lawyer, and threatened the church leaders many times. On December 16 he came with a group of other attackers, started shooting into the air and then aimed the pistol at the church pastor and bishop Vasiliï Viktyuk, threatening that he will shoot all the «non-Orthodox». The local policemen who arrived to the place of the incident took 6 church members to the police station instead of the businessman and later refused to start an investigation as if nothing happened. The businessman claims to be a Russian Orthodox and that he has the blessing of a local Orthodox priest for his actions. Although it is most doubtful that a priest can bless such behaviour, he does not interfere into the situation and does not give any refutation of such claims.

The tendency for consolidation of the Protestant churches in evangelism, social work and rights’ defence continues to grow. The Protestant churches are learning to work in unity without concentrating their attention on the differences in theology and church traditions. Such changes can be explained by a large inflow of new believers into the older Protestant churches , including well-educated people and highly qualified professionals, people with a more modern level of thinking, more open to the acceptance and use of new things. At the same time the younger Protestant

churches with a large number of young people, which were characterised in many cases by a youthful extremism and intolerance to the older generation of churches, gradually gained experience and wisdom and developed respect for the older churches.

Conclusion:

The information presented shows that in 2005 the government authorities in Russia continued the policy of supporting the chosen «traditional» group of religious confessions while gradually marginalizing the others. Although such religious discrimination is very subtle it is still obvious that it moves in the direction of worsening. Even supposing that the government can change its mind and include into the chosen circle some other «traditional» groups like Baptists, Lutherans and (hardly possible to believe) even Catholics, there still will be other groups like Pentecostals, Charismatics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Old-ritualises (Starobryadtsy) and alternative Orthodox believers who will be more and more under the category of discriminated and persecuted.

For prayer:

Please, continue to pray for the growing spiritual revival in the Moscow patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, that all the church members including the leadership may concentrate on the Truth and be filled with God's love and spiritual power, that the knowledge of God's Word may be available to all church members of this church, for the reconciliation with other Christians in Russia. That this church would realize that treating other Christians as «sectarians» and thus considering them separated from the Body of the Church, and that she does not have a monopoly from God for the Truth. Otherwise she becomes a huge sect (separated part) herself.

Please, pray that the discriminative actions of the officials and religious extremists against Christian churches and individual believers may become known to the public and receive just punishment.

Please, pray for continuing growth in number, wisdom, love, unity among all Protestant churches, establishing good relationships with local Russian Orthodox priests and parishioners and recognising the growing spiritual impact of Protestant Christians on the life of the nation. For God's protection in cases of the aggressive behaviour of the nationalistic and religious extremists and the attempts to violate the rights and religious freedom of Protestant Christians from the authorities.

In November 2005 it became known that the Ministry of Justice in Russia prepares a religious reform in Russia, which would be very unfavourable to the «non-traditional» religious organizations and groups. (<http://www.worldevangelicalalliance.com/news/view.htm?id=238>). However, after the interference of the public and publications in the mass-media the Ministry said that it is only a working document. Please, pray that any changes in the religious legislation in Russia would not affect negatively the work of the Protestant churches and would not create a complete legal ban to their missionary, evangelism and social work