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THE PROBLEMS OF INTER-FAITH CONFLICTS IN RUSSIA AND WAYS OF OVERCOMING THEM

Religious intolerance is the other face of ethnic intolerance. There is clear evidence in Russia of disagreements between representatives of different faiths and religious organizations. Not infrequently, their rights are violated by the actions of the authorities or by their failure to act.

Currently, attempts are being made to persuade people in Russia of the existence of a division between faiths that have more or less deep roots in the country, on the one hand, and so-called “non-traditional” faiths, on the other. It is clear that Islam, for example, is more traditional to Russia than the Scientology teachings of L. Ron Hubbard. But the introduction of the concept of “traditional religion” must always be accompanied by a caveat to the effect that traditionality is a relative thing: What many regard as the “exotic” Church of the Old Believers is more traditional than the “Nikonian” Russian Orthodox Church in the sense that it has existed for a longer period. However, by itself the period of time during which a church has operated on the territory of Russia says nothing about the degree of its influence on society: There are more Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia than Lutherans, while paganism is only slightly less influential in the Republic of Mariy El than the Orthodox Church. In this way, the concept of traditionality cannot be reduced to some formal attributes, and great care must be exercised when introducing this concept into politico-legal discourse.

Accusations of xenophobia are most commonly directed at Orthodox believers and at the Russian Orthodox Church. In doctrinal terms, Orthodoxy rejects categorically nationalism and intolerance, refusing to divide peoples into better and worse. However, unquestionable manifestations of xenophobic attitudes in Russian society could not fail to make their way into the church. Literature of a xenophobic, specifically anti-Semitic, nature is circulated in churches, frequently with the connivance of the ecclesiastical authorities.

It cannot be said that the Orthodox Church has any influence on the power structures of the country, but there is no denying that the traditionalist views of certain government officials make it difficult for other faiths and religious organizations to exist. The position taken by certain media may also be contributing to an escalation of negative attitudes towards representatives of religious organizations. Even the popular weekly “*Argumenty i Fakty*”, which is widely read in intellectual circles, recently published a number of articles, whose essential thrust was to present a distorted image of the activities of a number of religious organizations, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses. According to a number of scholars, the attitude towards Jehovah’s Witnesses is a gauge of the tolerance of the society as a whole: In tolerant democratic countries, the followers of this faith are free to proselytize alongside representatives of other religious faiths.

There is reason to hope that all religious organizations in Russia will be accorded most favoured status. Addressing the forum of the peoples of the Caucasus and the south of Russia in Sochi in March 2004, Mr. Vladimir V. Putin, President of the Russian Federation, recalled that “there is separation of church and State” and went on to emphasize that “the State must find ways of supporting the spiritual leaders of traditional faiths”. Furthermore, the repression of all forms of extremism must not, in Putin’s view, “push us into an area of human rights violations”, but we must devise “the kind of approaches that will not interfere with the development of democracy within the country”*.

It is only through joint efforts and by working from a position of tolerance and mutual understanding that it will be possible to successfully tackle problems having to do with the observance of human rights in any area — whether these be issues connected with the observance of social, economic, political or cultural rights or issues associated with the exercise of freedom of conscience and religion and the establishment of a democratic culture based on respect for law.

* D. Shipkov. Jehovah’s Witnesses before the court. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 29 March 2004.