

The Social Construction of "Extremism" in Russia From Jehovah's Witnesses to Scientology and Beyond

Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR, Torino, Italy)



What Exactly Is Happening in Russia?

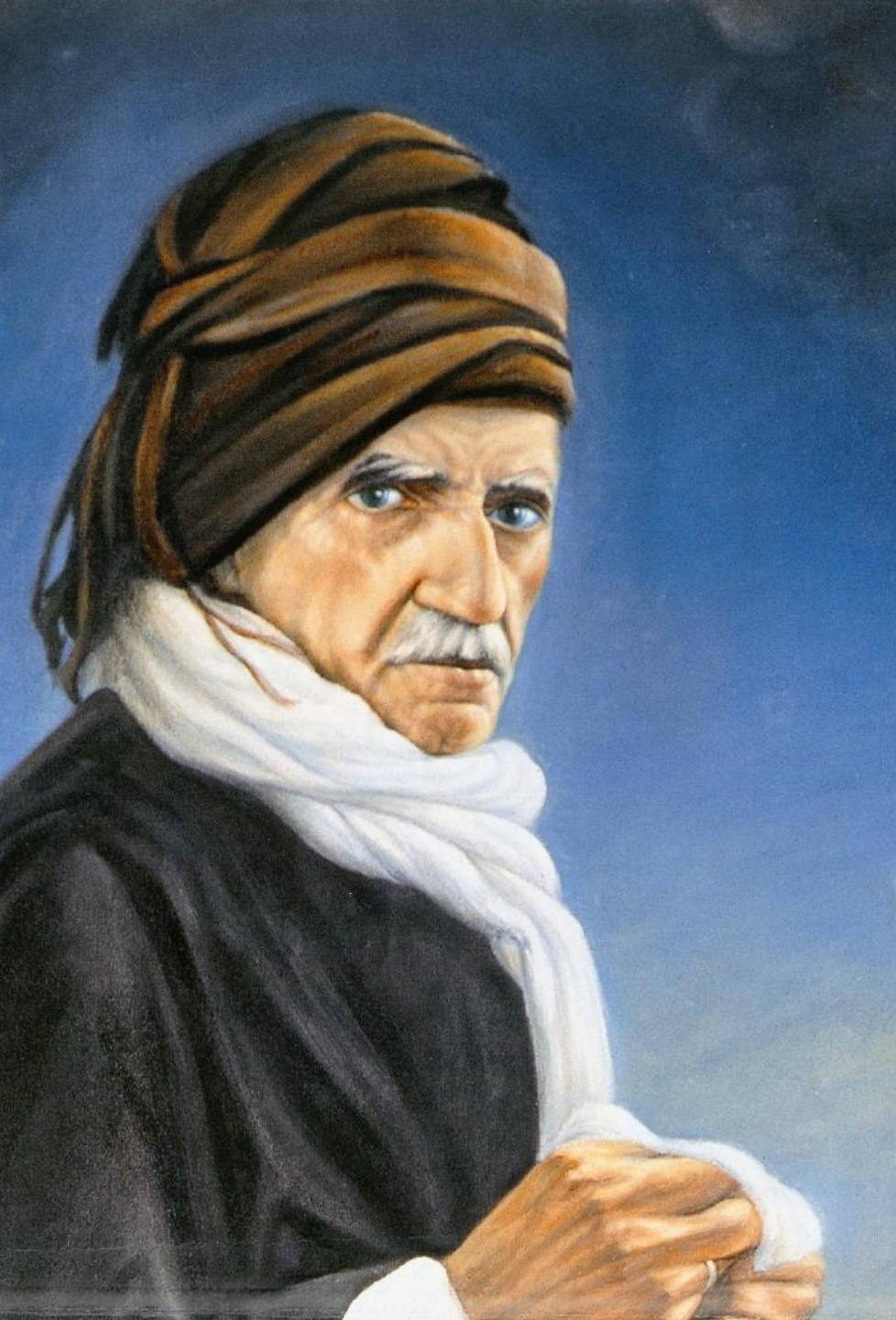


- In 2017, the Supreme Court in Russia confirmed the “liquidation” of the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist” group. Steps were taken towards a similar “liquidation” as “extremist” of the Church of Scientology, whose leaders in St. Petersburg were arrested. Hundreds of religious books were labeled as “extremist” by official experts on “cults”

The Great *Bhagavad Gita* Trial



- Based on anti-cult propaganda, the prosecutor in Tomsk asked a local court to ban an ISKCON Russian translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* as "extremist." The case caused widespread protest in India. Although the prosecutor lost the first degree case in 2011 and the appeal in 2012, accusations of extremism against the *Bhagavad Gita* are still heard in Russia



The Nursi Ban

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

A Jewish Book Also “Extremist”



This is a book that's lasted dozens of reprints (even in 19th century Germany) — a book about religious discrimination against the Jews in Medieval Europe. Saying that this book is extremist is to ridicule the very idea of “fighting extremism.”

BORUCH GORIN



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

Anti-Proselytization Laws



- In 2016, as part of the so called Yarovaya laws, Russia introduced provisions prohibiting proselytization on behalf of religious minorities outside of religious buildings. They were condemned by most international organizations, but are now systematically enforced

Above: President Putin congratulating Irina Yarovaya, Chairperson of the State Duma Committee on Security, after the passage of the Yarovaya Laws



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

Anti-proselytization cases prosecuted between June 2016 and July 2017 – Source: *Forum 18*

Laws against Extremism



- However, even more dangerous for religious minorities are the anti-extremism provisions of 2002, amended in 2006 and originally intended as a weapon against radical Islamic fundamentalism
- With the amendment of 2006, “extremism” can be found even without actual violence or incitement to violence

Above: Bodies of the victims of the terrorist attack of Beslan (2004): 354, including many children, died. The tragedy was a strong argument to toughen anti-extremism laws

“Extremism” in Russia



➤ I will now examine:

1. How a new notion of “extremism” was socially and legally constructed in Russia
2. What are the ideological basis of the notion
3. What the international community can do about it

I. The Meaning of “Extremism”

- The provisions against extremism have been used in Russia against non-religious opponents of the government, including followers of dissident blogger Alexei Navalny (right). A number of cases were filed against Islamic groups and books, with a broad notion of “extremism.” A good number of cases, however, targeted non-Islamic groups, from Falun Gong to local Russian new religious movements and beyond

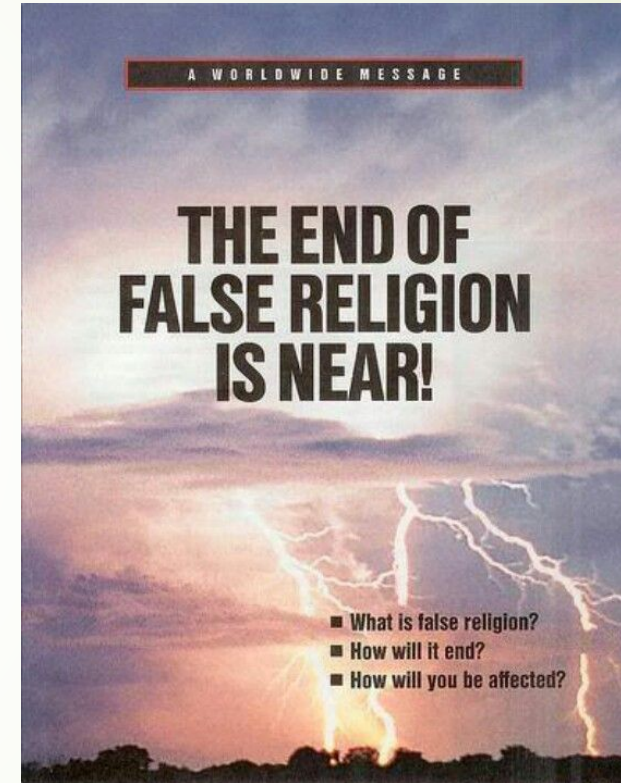
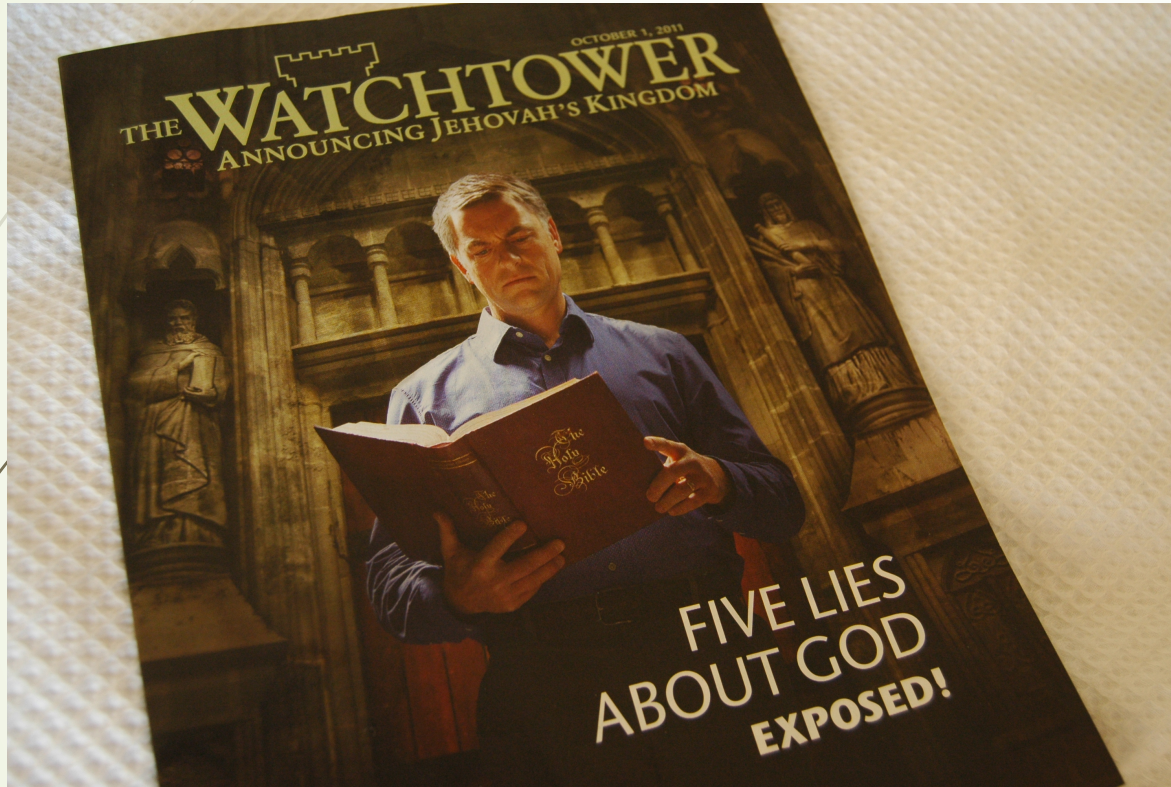


Some Criteria for “Extremism”



- From the two main cases, against the Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology, four criteria for identifying “extremism” emerged (other than violence or incitement to violence, which are admittedly absent in these cases)

1. Exclusiveness



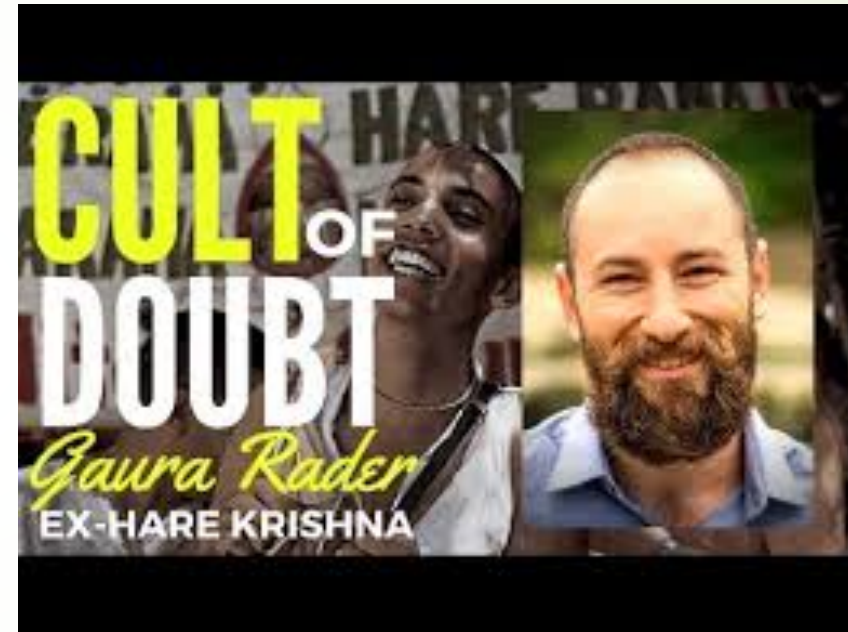
- First, the Russian “experts” and courts say, “extremist” movements claim that they preach the only true religion, and that all the other religions (including Christianity as taught by the Russian Orthodox Church) are false

2. “Breaking Families”



- Second, “extremist” groups “break families,” because if only one spouse joins, or leaves, the movement, divorce is the outcome in the majority of cases. (True or false information about divorces of celebrities is also mentioned as evidence)

3. Mistreating Ex-Members



- Third, "extremist" groups "violate the dignity" of former members, by suggesting that members avoid any contact with them, even when they are close relatives

4. Economic Crimes



- Fourth, under the guise of religion “extremist” movements commit economic crimes, including systematic tax evasion

False or Specious Accusations

St. Petersburg Church of Scientology head to remain in detention



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CONTEXT

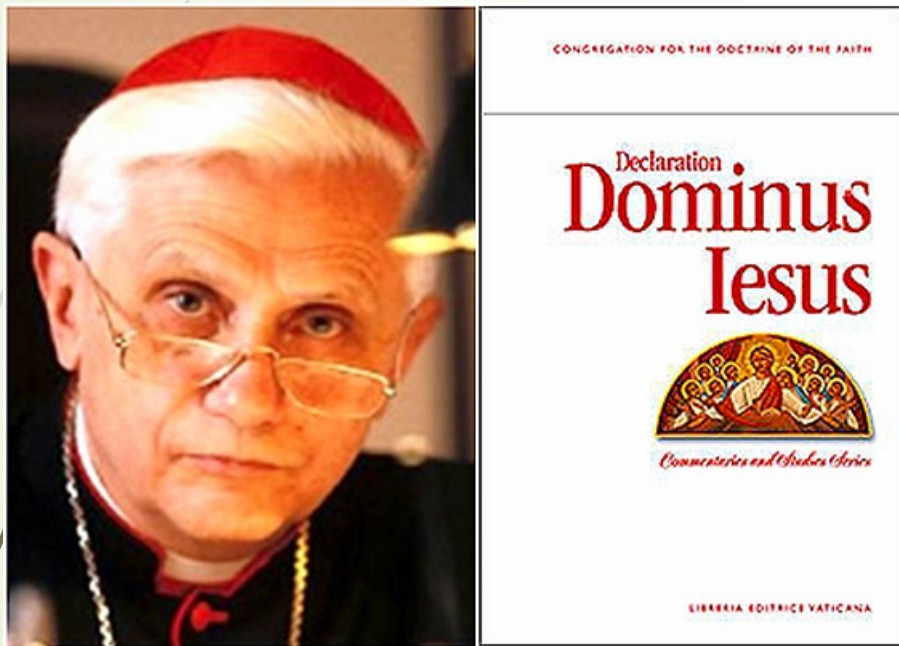
Detention of St. Petersburg Church of Scientology executive upheld

Detention of St. Petersburg Church of Scientology executives appealed

Defendant in St. Petersburg Church of Scientology case put under house arrest

- Some accusations are simply false, or based on specious legal arguments. One example is the arrest of Galina Shurinova, executive director of the Church of Scientology in St Petersburg, accused inter alia of selling courses and books without having properly registered Scientology as an organization. In fact, Shurinova had repeatedly tried to incorporate the Church, but registration was denied, despite a 2015 decision by the European Court of Human Rights condemning this refusal (*Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg and Others v. Russia*, Feb. 16, 2015: Shurinova herself was an applicant in that case)

1. Exclusiveness?



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

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

2. Breaking Families?

Other Grounds For Divorce

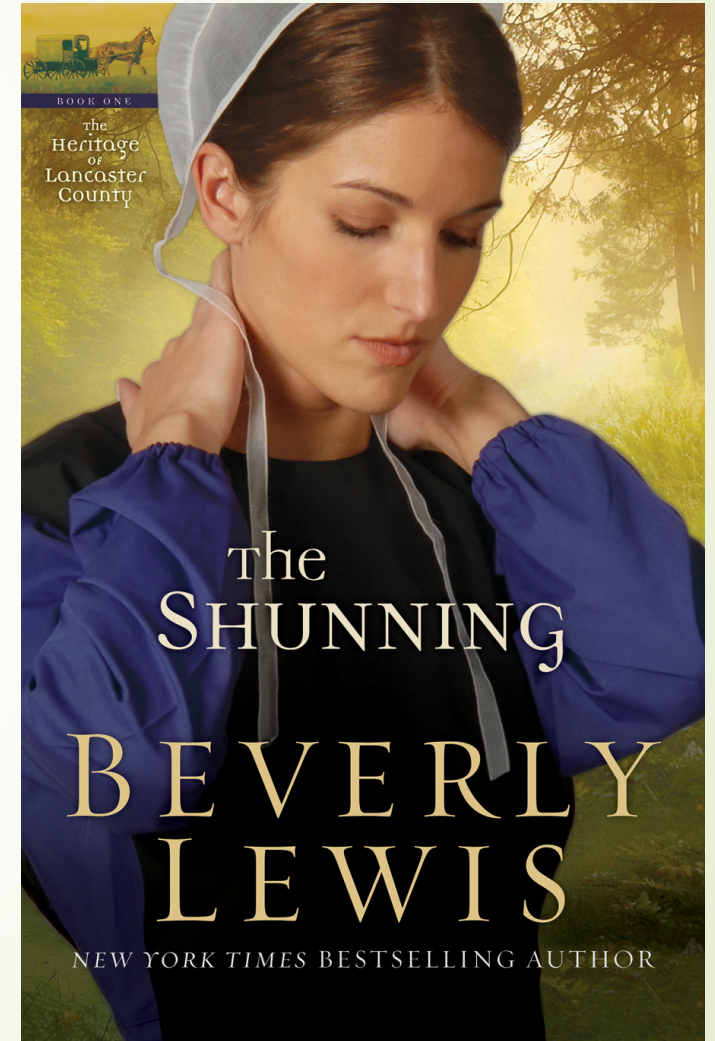
- **Conversion** - Conversion to another religion
- **Mental Disorder** - Incurable mental disorder and insanity
- **Leprosy** – A 'virulent and incurable' form of leprosy



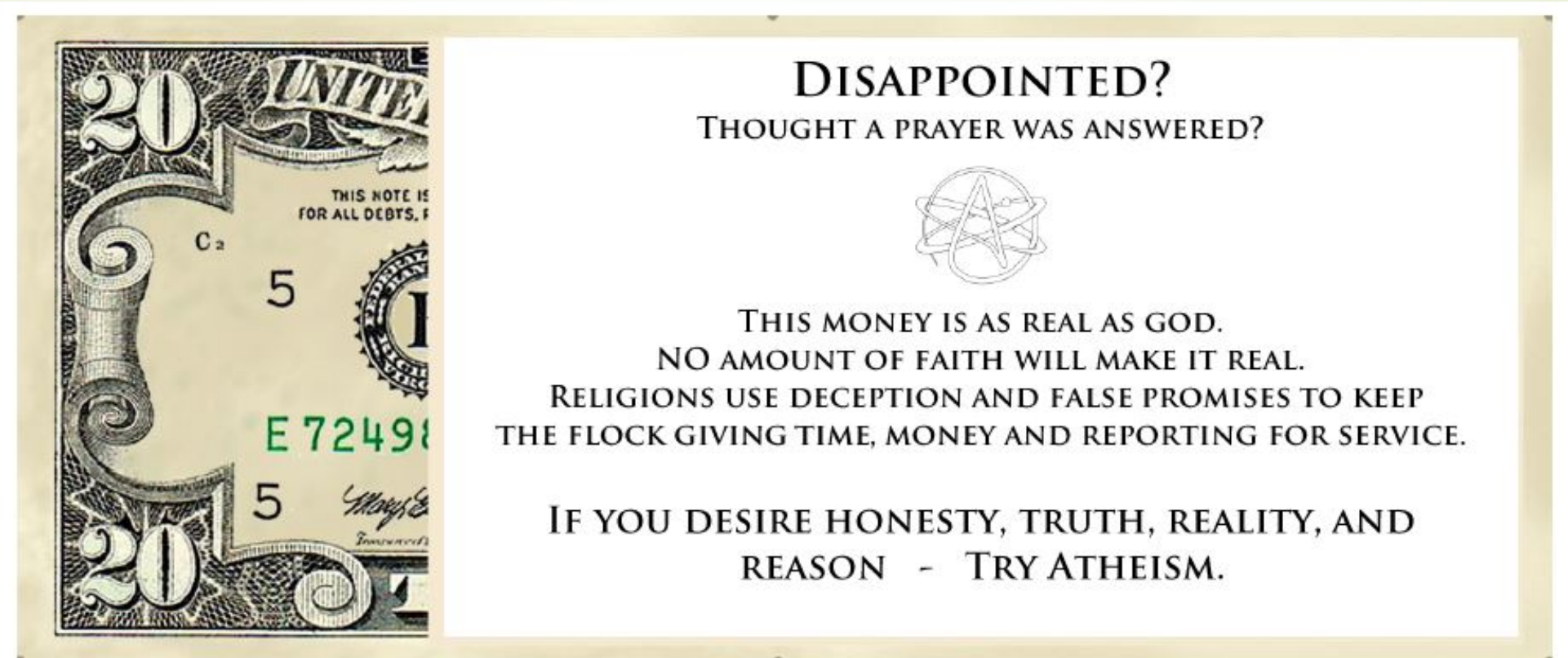
- When only one spouse changes his or her religion, divorce is frequent – in all religions. This can be documented through the case of India, where family law allows for automatic divorce in case of conversion of one spouse to a different religion, and tens of thousands of applications for “conversion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

3. Mistreating Ex-Members?

- ▶ Until a few years ago, the Catholic Church regarded those excommunicated as “vitandi,” a Latin word meaning “persons to be avoided.” Many religions have policies of forbidding any communication between members and “apostate” ex-members, including groups we normally regard as nice and peaceful such as the Amish. And for some Islamic schools the “apostate” who has left Islam may be punished with the death penalty



4. Economic Crimes?



- Almost all religions have been accused, in one country or another, of greediness and tax evasion, a perpetual argument used in anti-religious propaganda by atheists. In short, by applying the four Russian tests, most religions could be easily labeled as “extremist” and “liquidated”

II. The Crusade Against Extremism: Why?



- The use of the category of “extremism” in Russia may seem irrational. But it is important to understand how it has been socially and politically constructed, and by whom. Russia’s main anti-cult organization, the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre, has worked for more than twenty years to promote the notion. Its leader, Alexander Dvorkin, became the president of the Justice Ministry’s Expert Council for Conducting State Religious Studies Expert Analysis, a key actor in the cases for banning groups and books as “extremist”

Spiritual Security

- Although Dvorkin's extreme methods and his cavalier attacks against (inter alia) the Mormons, the Baha'is, Hinduism, and Islam have often embarrassed the government and the Russian Orthodox Church, he has also been used by circles promoting "spiritual security" as part of a new Russian concept of national security



**Александр
Дворкин**

профессор Православного
Свято-Тихоновского гуманитарного
университета, сектовед

An Official Definition of Spiritual Security



- “Russian Federation’s national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia’s peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population’s spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.”

Russian National Security Concept, 2000

“In the Head of Vladimir Putin”

- The Putin administration needs the support of the Orthodox Church. But it would be wrong to regard the government's effort to protect the Moscow Patriarchate from competition as mere cynicism. In his celebrated 2015 book *In the Head of Vladimir Putin*, Michel Eltchaninoff insisted that Putin really believes that the West, and Western religion, are deeply corrupted and the future belongs to Russia, the only country that, thanks to the Orthodox Church, has preserved traditional moral values

MICHEL ELTCHANINOFF

DANS LA TÊTE DE VLADIMIR POUTINE



BABEL
essai

Dangerous Exports



- The Russian approach is being exported to friendly countries, including Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and Serbia. Dvorkin became the vice-president of the European anti-cult federation FECRIS. As economic support to FECRIS by other countries is drying out, Russian hegemony on European anti-cultism is a concrete possibility. It is also paradoxical, because most European anti-cult organizations are deeply secular, while Dvorkin represents a radical faction of the Russian Orthodox Church

III. What Can Be Done



- What can friends of religious liberty do? They can trust the European Court of Human Rights (above), but Russia has already indicated, and proved, that it is ready to ignore its decisions

United We Stand



- A common mistake is to protest only when Russia targets a group we happen to like. Some quote a laundry list of alleged wrongdoings attributed to the Jehovah's Witnesses and to Scientology. This, however, is not really what is being discussed in Russia now.

If individual Witnesses or Scientologists have committed common crimes, they should of course be prosecuted. But by “liquidating” entire organizations, Russia is proscribing *ideas* and banning *books* as “extremist.” With this definition of “extremism” nobody is safe, as stated after the Jehovah's Witnesses case by the Russian Catholic Church



Deconstructing the Ideology

- In order to effectively fight the Russian faulty definition of “extremism,” one has to deconstruct the underlying ideology. This should, however, not become a crusade against the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Not all Orthodox, and not even all bishops, support the “liquidation” of religious minorities, or the lunatic fringe of “cult hunters.” We should not confuse the various Dvorkins with the Orthodox Church, although the extremist anti-cultists seem to be protected by high placed members of the Orthodox hierarchy

Defining Religious Liberty



- The Russian Orthodox Church did not have the equivalent of the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council, and did not fully elaborate a doctrine of religious liberty. It still confuses freedom of religion with mere freedom of worship. But religious freedom also includes freedom of *proselytizing*, i.e. to tell, for example, Orthodox believers that their religion is false and they need to convert in order to be saved

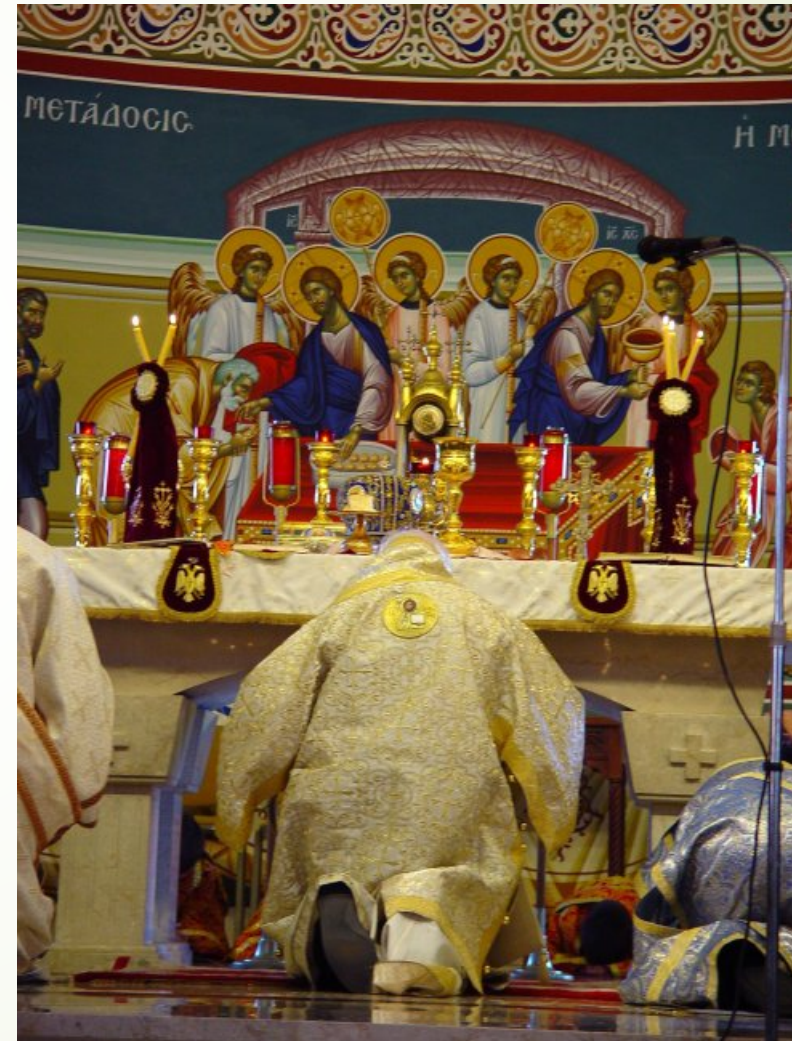
Proselytization: Theological vs Legal Status

- This is precisely what “proselytization” is, and not all religions practice it. Some condemn it for theological or moral reasons. Pope Francis has rejected proselytization as “simply silly.” This may be a good choice, but cannot be imposed by law. International conventions clearly include the right to proselytize within religious liberty



Canonical Territory?

- Some Russian Orthodox maintain the notion of a “canonical territory,” where proselytization by other religions should be legally forbidden. This position is incompatible with religious liberty, but we should not demonize the Russian Orthodox Church because of it. On the contrary, we should recognize the uniquely beautiful liturgical, theological, and artistic heritage of the Russian Orthodoxy, and engage it on a dialogue about religious liberty



A Heavy Heritage



Above: Anti-Jewish pogrom in Czarist Russia

- It should also be considered that, except perhaps for a short-lived spring under Boris Eltsin (1931-2007), Russia has never experienced religious liberty and a culture of respect for religious minorities, first with the Czars, second with the Soviet regime, and later with Putin (although, within the Putin administration as well, different positions co-exist)

Contemporary Evidence Regarding the Impact of State Regulation of Religion on Religious Participation and Belief*

Jonathan Fox
Ephraim Tabory
Bar Ilan University

We examine the impact of religious competition on religiosity by looking at state support for religion as a structural factor affecting religious pluralism. Our independent variable consists of a series of six measures that deal with state support for religion from the Religion and State database (RAS) for the 1990 to 2002 period. Our dependent variables include measures of attendance at religious services, religious beliefs, and self-categorization as a religious person. These indicators for 81 countries are based on the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Program. Regression analyses controlled for demographic, social, political, and economic indicators, and the nature of the dominant religious denomination. The results indicate that state regulation of religion is significantly and negatively correlated with religiosity in 14 of 72 regressions which include these variables. Twelve of these fourteen regressions are those in which attendance at religious services or individuals classifying themselves as religious are the dependent variables. This is consistent with predictions that religious monopolies will reduce participation but not belief.

While "at first glance the regulation of the religious market seems far removed from the individual" (Finke 1990:614), the impact of the degree of religious pluralism on religious participation has been the subject of considerable debate. Peter Berger (1967) claimed that competition leads to an erosion of belief and subsequent religious participation. An "economic" perspective claims that pluralism leads to more participation as it offers a wider choice for a religiously diverse public to meet their religious needs (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1987; and see Sherkat and Ellison 1999 for a summary of this research). Many of the studies that exam-

*Direct correspondence to Jonathan Fox, Department of Political Studies, Bar Ilan University, 52900 Ramat Gan, Israel (foxjon@mail.biu.ac.il). The Religion and State Dataset, including the specialized version used in this study, is available at www.biu.ac.il/soc/po/ras/. This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 896/00) and the Sara and Simha Lainer Chair in Democracy and Civility. The authors gratefully thank Robert Barro for providing us with the religiosity data used in this study, and acknowledge the input of Bernard Lazerwitz and the anonymous reviewers of this journal.

Adverse Effects on the Majority Religion

- In 2008, Israeli scholars J. Fox and E. Tabory won an award for best article of the year in sociology of religions by documenting, with massive quantitative data, that discriminations against minority religions have negative effects on religion in general. In the long run, worship attendance decreases also in mainline churches. These sociological theories seem less known in Russia, although a May 2017 Pew survey concluded that only 6% of Russian Orthodox adults attend church regularly

A Delicate Dialogue

- In the dialogue with the Russian Orthodox culture, I would recommend to avoid a mistake frequent among well intentioned American defenders of religious liberty. They propose to Russians the American model, where the State regards all religions as equal. This is an excellent model for the U.S., but will never be accepted in Russia. Of course, all religions should enjoy the basic religious liberty. But does this mean that the law, in certain countries, cannot recognize that one particular religion is uniquely connected to the nation's history?



The Italian Case

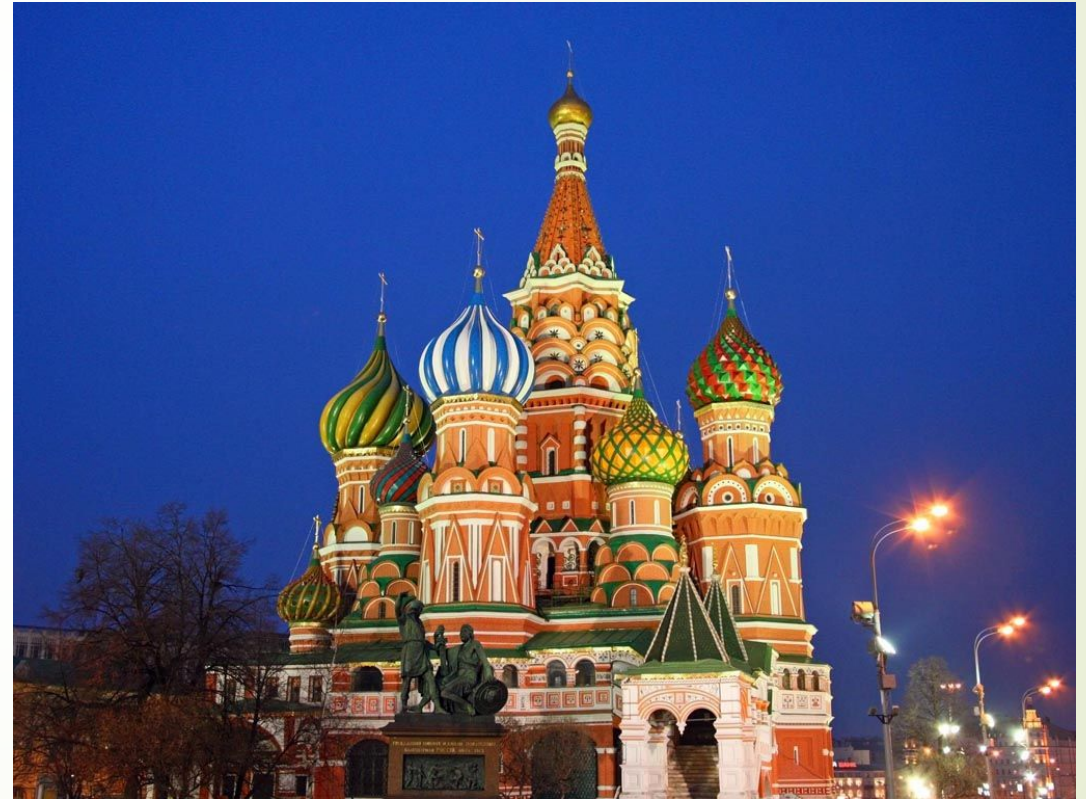


October 4, 2016: celebrating 50 years of ISKCON in the Italian Parliament

- Not necessarily. In Italy (where, of course, not everything is perfect in the area of religious liberty), the Constitution does recognize the unique historical role of the Catholic Church, while offering the possibility of co-operating with the state to other religions, and freedom to all religions that respect the law

A Religious Liberty Model for Russia

- It would perhaps be possible to apply to Russia the Italian model, by recognizing the unique status of the Russian Orthodox Church, involving other traditional religions in a special cooperation with the government, and granting the basic religious liberty, including the liberty of proselytization, to all groups that are not violent nor commit common crimes. Perhaps, the Italian (or the British) model may appear more palatable to the Russians than the American one





► For further information, please contact Dr Massimo Introvigne at maxintrovigne@gmail.com