

## New Religious Movements and the Russian State Policies

---

ANATOLI SOKOLOV\*

*ABSTRACT: The paper presents an overview of the New Religious Movements and the Russian Federation State policies towards them. After showing the main features of these movements the author introduces a classification which divides them into 3 main groups. Finally, he indicates that in order to guarantee the social stability and the positive development of religious life without conflicts, within its religious policy, the Russian government creates conditions to socialise religions and religious associations.*

### Introduction

Main religions in Russia are Christianity (mainly Orthodox), Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc. Unfortunately, there's no accurate number of the total religious believers in Russian.

*Christianity.* According to some documents, more than a half of Russian population calls themselves a follower of the Orthodox. The number of Catholics counts up to 400,000 – 500,000. The number of Gregorian, of the Armenian Church, reached about 1.2 million. And the number of Protestant is nearly 500,000.

*Islam.* According to the recent Russian population survey, there are about 14,6 million people following this religion. But the statistics by the Islam Church's vicar-general show that as many as about 20 million people are Islamic.

*Judaism.* Currently, it's supposed that this religion has about one million followers in Russia of which, according to the Union of Jewish Community's calculation, 500,000 are living in Moscow and other 170,000 are in St. Petersburg.

*Buddhism* is known as one of traditional religions in three areas Buriatia, Tuva and Kalmukia. According to the Russian Buddhist Society, the number of Buddhists in Russia is estimated between 1.2m and 1.5m people.

---

\*. Prof., Dr. Department of South-East Asia, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow, the Russian Federation. The paper has been presented at the International Conference of "Religion and Rule of Law in Southeast Asia: Beginning the Conversation" held in Hanoi, Vietnam, 8-9 September 2006.

Inhabitants in some areas of Siberia and the Far East (i.e. Iakuchia or Chukotka, etc.) are reported to believe in *pantheism* and *polytheism* and as well as the above main religions.

In the transitional period from 80s to 90s of the last century, several new religious associations and movement have been formed in Russia. These phenomena had occurred earlier in US and western European nations, in 1960s. In the former Soviet Union and later in Russia, these New Religious Movements have been spreaded by foreign missionaries. Some religious associations have arisen by their own in the country. It's necessary to note that Prabhupa Xvami who's known to be the founder of the Krisna Thinking sect was one of the first foreign missionaries coming to the former Soviet Union in 1971,

These new religions are called with a few names such as non-traditional religions, other faiths, newly born religions or simply as cult. But the term "New Religious Movements" is more often used by researchers for the phenomena. Different with the international religions, these new movements and associations have existed and operated in the form of centres, delegations, heretic council, community, or "family". They don't have popular religious rites in church. But all believers have to participate into these rites, should be burning with desire to understand thoroughly the new dogma/tenet, but focusing on practical operations.

Referring to many researchers' view, these New Religious Movements are found to have the following common features:

1. The leader has the ability to seed and grow a belief. He announces that he has received "new original knowledge" from God to start his existence.
2. The leader will establish a "special" family or community in which members call him father. Often, members of the family/community will be given a new appellation.
3. The leader creates compulsory rules for members but he himself doesn't have to follow them. The leader will always enjoy more favourable living conditions than his normal followers.
4. Members of the New Religious Movement often leave their own property and change their living place.
5. The new religious movement will often apply certain measures to check activities of members who are usually separated from the normal life. The movement's members will accept the technical measure as a religious discipline.

### **Reasons for Foundation and Spreading of the New Religious Movements in Russia**

1. The systematic crisis of the former government, including its mental-ideological part.
2. The activeness of the international centres of the New Religious Movements in taking advantage of the country's uncompleted legal system for preparing and consolidating their position in Russia.
3. The New Religious Movements can spread out effectively as they are able to skillfully link their primary explanation about the new religious theory with a criticizing method to deal with thinking and resisting possibility of those whom they want to attract.

Most of followers of the New Religious Movements are the first generation. These movements often attract youth. Many documents report that young people under the age of 30 cover 50 – 90 per cent of the new religions' membership. Youth in the society is the targeted source for missionary syndicates to attract new members.

Naturally, young people who are members of new religions are looking to moral and high-minded thoughts. They believe in honesty, justice, mutual help, pure relation and generosity. With the new belief, young people are interested in the original romance and strange rites from the Orient. Members of new religions have quite high qualification. Those who have a bachelor degree, account for 30 – 40 per cent, high-school graduate or studying at university 50 – 70 per cent. Members of low intellectual level cover just a little percentage. Another feature of the New Religious Movements is that male membership (holding leadership and other core positions) is increasing and averagely covering 40 – 70 per cent.

In the period from 1900 to 2002, number of new religious associations and movements registered for operation in Russia has been raised from 16 to 75 units. Most of them are new religions, or new belief that's not traditional in Russia.

Though they are various, such new religions have just achieved a small number of followers, covering from 0.5 to 8 – 10 per cent of the country's total population, and their influence is accordingly unable to be compared to that of the traditional churches in Russia. However, these phenomena should still be watched because new religions are developing the fastest not only in Russia but in the world as well.

Attention should be paid to this matter because, as mentioned above, the majority of new religions' members is young and middle-aged people how are active, highly educated and good living conditions. To a considerable extend, this part of population will play a decisive role in the country's development not only at present but in future as well. It means their attitude toward any relating matter will make no less important impact on determination of the coming developing stage and the general development of the Russian society.

New religions in Russia can be generally classified into the following three groups:

1. Religions that have a long history but representing another cultural and religious tradition, don't have a historic, national and religious origin from the Soviet Union or Russia, were imported into Russia during the past twenty years, nominally submit to and were controlled by foreign religious centres. Typical examples are the different lines of Protestantism originated from the US, South Korea or elsewhere, and several movements separated from Islam and Buddhism.

2. The so-called New Age – one of the New Religious Movements, occurred 100-150 years ago. It's always been propagandising its self-governing culture and religion with eclecticism. It's not rare that this religion created its own programs for the development of the society and people. It occurred in Russia in years of 80s and 90s of the last century and submitted to foreign religious centres. New Age religions include Scientology, Xan Mion Mun, international Krisna Thinking community, Bahaii Belief delegate.

3. New Religious Movements that have native origin, but occurred for the first time and developed during the past 20 years, close to the New Age group in term of attributions. Up to now, the strongest ones of this group are Porophiri Ivanov's movement (also called people of Ivanov surname), Post-New Testament's movement (led by Vixxarion), etc,

Lately, all the movements have not only changed generally the existing religious background of Russia but disturbed the religious situation, making it unstable and unbalanced as well.

The occurrence and spreading of the New Religious Movements has raised many problems that haven't existed not long before in the relation between the Russian government and churches. While recognising the freedom of religion and belief, the government also pointed out that it could hardly make no care for the situation if

there are basic changes in a very important aspect of the country's social life – the spiritual aspect.

It should be noted that the spiritual – religious part have principled significance in personal self-decision regarding such important things as the relation with the government, society, patriotism, military duty, education, labour, health, concept of family and marriage, etc. Therefore, it's necessary for the government to understand that these problems should be considered priority in making domestic policies to strengthen and unify the society, to make the community healthy in term of both moral and physical state.

The above problems have been mentioned in necessary situation and based on available experience as well as a clear viewpoint. While the relation between the government and the old traditional religions in Russia have been easily concretised and co-coordinated, these new problems remain open and require more research to be finalised with an objective and reasonable policy regarding relation between the government and churches, and particular each of them.

According to many researchers, key orientations of the government's religious policies towards the New Religious Movements are described as follows:

1. Establishing a united secular information centre to research the new religious phenomena in Russia today. Establishing a database that should be regularly updated with New Religious Movements in the country including their symptoms, structure and development.

2. Training new experts at the state level in religion who can do research in a full and objective way and give detailed remarks and assessments on these New Religious Movements

3. Drafting and publishing relating publications for reference, always organising technical conferences on the New Religious Movements based on which detailed solutions to the matter will be proposed to the government

4. Observing and supervising frequently – within the laws – religious activities to keep them pursuant to the existing Constitution and laws of the Russian Federation. Full preparation in case of negative activities against the society's benefits and violating the laws should be one of the most important tasks of the government.

5. Paying special attention to prevention of illegal actions regarding financial abuse

The final purpose to build systematic relation between the government and the New Religious Movements is: continuously establishing a citizenry society, strengthening the background of the government and the legal system, and protecting citizen's freedom and benefits. While protecting the stable life and security of its citizens, the government has the right to receive full and exact information to complete that duty effectively.

In 1990, in Russia the bill regarding freedom of religion and religious institutions was passed. In the period of 1990-1997, there has been a possibility in Russia that a certain part of the registered associations had a fake nature in fact. Some of them carried out activities that were not corresponding with the charter and the purpose registered. Some were not purely religious ones but using the legal status for other non-religion purpose. That was due to the incomplete of the legal system.

At that time, the procedure for a religious institution to register includes 1. application letter 2. a list of followers (10 persons above 18 years old) 3. a charter of operation. Such a procedure was not enough for a full description of the applied association and its operations.

According to a bill passed in 1990, those who enter executive agencies should resign from positions in religious associations and quit it. In fact, centres for religion study were dismissed (e.g. the Atheistic Institute – the biggest institute in Russia). Courses of religious expert training system have also been dismissed. There's only a few of departments for religion study in universities (e.g. The University of Moscow, The University of Saint Peterbourg, Permer, etc.) but inclined to the historic and philosophical aspect of religion.

The bill regarding freedom of religion and religious institutions in 1990 has created conditions for abuse. For example, upon articles provided in the bill, any registered religious institution could be free from tax on charitable donation. Another example, as kids could also enjoy that freedom of religion, their parents had no more prior role in their kids' religious education and orientation. In the 1990 bill, there's no base for limitation or suspension of self-called religious institution's operations. All these shortcomings has caused many problems to the governmental offices, to religious institutions and the society in general

In 1997, another bill "Regarding the freedom of religion and religious institutions" was passed. That's an effort to settle the existing and accumulated problems. One of the most urgent tasks put to the government was to set up a more serious and responsible attitude to the registration of religious institutions. Once

registered, a religious institution will receive not only the legal status but also being lawful in the government's view, meaning its operations will naturally be considered pursuant to the laws.

Based on comparison of the existing law (the 1997 bill) with the 1990 one regarding the New Religious Movements' operation, the new following points were found:

1. Limiting and prohibiting operations of the New Religious Movements that originate from another country.
2. Limiting registration of the New Religious Movements if there's any unclear information or doubt about the origin, religious ideology and operations.
3. Dismissing and prohibiting operation of religious institutions that violate the laws. Besides, a lot of religious institutions and unions that desire a legal status but undergo no governmental clarification and try to avoid the government's supervision, have found another way to legalise themselves through a less complicated procedure: to register as a social institution. Currently, this is also a big matter that started to be discussed and analysed by researchers but with a fresher attention.

In general, the New Religious Movements' operations are controlled by the corresponding provisions and clauses in the existing Constitution and the 1997 bill "Regarding freedom of religions and religious institutions" as well as other laws of the Russian Federation.

Russian laws announce the equality for all the religious institutions, without discrimination against old or new, traditional or non-traditional religions.

Today, the most complicated problem relating to the operation of the New Religious Movements that have either overseas or domestic origin is how their existence and operation will match with the provisions in the Russian Federation's President's Decree "Regarding the concept of the national security" (number 24, issued on January 10<sup>th</sup> 2000). For example, this Decree mentions clearly the requirement "to guarantee the national security including opposition to the negative influence by religious institutions and foreign missionaries", "... opposition... the expanding of culture and religions originated overseas in Russia".

At the end of 2003, the Religious Department, of the State Institute of Public Service of Russia has drafted and officially introduced a large-size and important publication titled "The concept of religious policy by the Russian Federation's government". Key points of this publication are picked up as follows.

The concept is based on the international principles and standards that the Russian Federation has agreed, on the international conventions of the Russian Federation, on the Constitution of the Russian Federation, on the federation's bill "Regarding freedom of religions and religious institutions" (1997), and on other legal standards of the Russian Federation as well as "Regarding the concept of the national security" (2000).

The necessity to create a basic concept of the Russian government's religious policy is coming from the increase of religious factors in the modern political processes, in the social and individual life as well as due to the social doctrines based on which some Russian religions has expressed their view point from the religious angle about their relation with the government.

The background of the concept is a provision in the Constitution "the Russian Federation is a secular state. Any religion should not be the national or compulsory one. Religious associations are separated from the government and equal in the eyes of laws" (the Constitution, article 14).

*Religious policy* is a system of actions by the secular government in the relation with churches, in accordance with the freedom of religious belief and upon consideration of the variety in forms of religious existence in the society.

*The relation between the government and religions* is a part of the government's religious policy, and a collection of mutual support and effect between the governmental agencies and the religious unions (including legally registered religions and unregistered ones).

### **The Purpose and Tasks of the National Policy of Religion**

The purpose of the government's religious policy is to create favourable conditions for positive development of the domestic religious life without conflicts, and to strengthen the country's social stability. The religious policy is aiming to guarantee Russian citizen's basic rights that are agreed in the international conventions, regarding freedom of religion as well as preservation and development of the traditional religions that were established during the history of nations within the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation's religious policy is established when its new national development is occurring in the context of globalisation and new challenges.



This publication has also fixed the policy's tasks in the fields of legislation, culture and social politics. The publication also mentions an important task that's socialisation of religions as a general task of the nation's religious policy.

The government defines threats to the national security, social stability and personal benefit within the following destructive trends and processes:

- Conflicts that raise discrimination between religions
- Violation of the Russian civil rights by some religious groups and associations
- Use of religions for political purpose by movements that tend to isolation, separation and extremism
- Negative influence by some foreign religious groups and missionaries, over-spreading of overseas culture and religions, and domestic extreme religious expressions (corresponding to the concept of the Russian Federation's national security)

The Russian government understands that its struggle with the above negative and unconstructive manifestations will just be effective upon the unification of the whole society, with the full participation and contribution of religious organisations and associations and their followers into that struggle.

In order to guarantee the social stability and the positive development of religious life without conflicts, within its religious policy, the Russian government creates conditions to socialise religions and religious associations. In the framework of implementation of the religious policy, socialisation should be understood to be a system of actions by the government aiming at creating conditions to attract religious associations and their followers into the construction of a people's society, to prevent isolation, religious extremism, the theory holds that religion must be in power and other negative phenomena, to establish religious communication and tolerance in both the secular and religious environment.

One of the methods of socialisation is to establish a social partnership among the government, churches, religious and inter-religious associations, and social organisations. The purpose of social partnership is to improve the society's stability via realisation of potential moral and spiritual value of the religious traditions of nations, religious associations and individuals in Russia.