

ADOPTION OF PRINCIPLE OF FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE IN RUSSIA

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The adoption of principle of freedom of conscience in Russia was not easy. Similar to other countries there was a confrontation between religious groups. In the 17th century there was a split within the Russian Orthodox Church. The supporters of the old rites, the Old Believers, suffered persecution. In the 18th century, during the reign of Peter the Great, the patriarchate was abolished and the Synod was established as a state organ to administer the Russian Orthodox Church. The same period was the most favorable period for some other religions, Lutherans for example, and their religious activity. Russia is a multi-confessional country and this is an important factor which determines characteristics of the development of its religious life. The Russian Orthodox Church was the state church and only in 1905, Nikolai II, the Emperor, issued a decree to enhance the religious tolerance. However, in 1917-1918 the Council of the Russian Orthodox Church as convened and they got back the patriarchate. Also that Council developed documents on the reform of the Russian Orthodox Church and its relationship with the state. But the normalization of religious life was interrupted by the October Revolution of 1917 which started total extermination of the clergy and believers in Russia. Thousands of bishops, priests, believers of all religions were shot or transported to the camps, for example, to the camps on the Solovetsky Islands in the North of Russia. The Communists intended to destroy the religion completely. But they could not do it. And it resulted in blatant discrimination. Thus, the Constitution of 1936 mentioned the freedom of worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda. This principle was maintained throughout the entire Soviet period. The government chose a convenient head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan

Sergii, who openly stated the principles of the Church-state relations in his Declaration: "Your joys are our joys". The Russian people rephrased it as "Your fails are our joys." At that time, there were bishops who had the opinion contrary to the statement of Metropolitan Sergii. That opinion was most clearly expressed in the "Letter from Solovki Bishops to the Government of the USSR" written by the ten bishops exiled to the camps on Solovetsky Islands where they died. Here are a few lines from this letter: "Those who signed this statement are fully aware of how it is difficult to establish mutual benevolent relations between the Church and the state in the current reality and they cannot keep silent about it. It would be a falsehood which is far from the dignity of the Church and, moreover, aimless and not convincing lie if they began to assert that there are no discrepancies between the Orthodox Church and the Soviet Union government. However, the existing discrepancy is not what it seems to the political suspicion and the enemies of the Church. The Church does not deal with the redistribution of wealth or its socialization as the Church always recognized it as a right of the state and was never responsible for that. The church does not concern political systems as the Church is loyal to the governments of all countries where live its members. It gets along with all forms of polity from the eastern despotism of old Turkey to the republic of the North American states. The discrepancy is that the religious teaching of the Church is incompatible with materialism which is the official philosophy of the Communist Party and the government of the Soviet Union.

At that time the True Orthodox Church came into being. Its members did not recognize the demands requested by the government from the church and this church began to exist separately from the Patriarchate. They went to the camps, perished and it is lucidly described by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in "The Gulag Archipelago". The True Orthodox Church has existed for a long time. There are still some islets of it in the present time. My grandmother, who lived in a village in Tambov region, like many others, remained a member of the True Orthodox Church even in the sixties, although the Bishop of this Church, Sakharov, approved to go to the temples of the Moscow Patriarchate. The principle of freedom of conscience was rejected in the 60's and 70's. But that's when a religious movement arose in the USSR. Many began to address to faith. An enormous role in the development of that movement played an open letter from priests Gleb Yakunin and Nikolai Eshliman to the Patriarch. They raised ques-

tions not only about the interference of the state in the Church's life, but also about the fact that the authorities of the Church considered it as something normal. They wrote the following: "The Russian Church is gravely and seriously sick and the sickness is entirely caused by the fact that the authorities of the Church ve deviated from their duty beyond the limits which one cannot go". They wrote about illegal registration of christenings and other religious rites, about massive closing of churches, monasteries and church schools, about the cease of rites at home and mourning ceremonies at cemeteries, about forced removal of children from the church and about the interference of worldly officials in approval of the church's clergy.

In the late 60s, the beginning of 70s, the struggle for the adoption of the principle of freedom of conscience started. Gleb Yakunin established a Committee for the protection of believer's rights. It is very important to note that the Committee, which mostly consisted of Orthodox people and I was its member as well, protected the rights of believers of all religions. Human rights activity of this Committee united believers of different confessions. The Baptists were very active. An action group established by them was later reorganized into the Council of Evangelical, Christian, Baptist Churches. We were engaged in a common cause, defended the right to freedom of conscience. We published clandestine spiritual literature. I personally worked at a clandestine printing office organized by Viktor Burdyuk. We produced thousands of copies of prayer books. Like the Baptists, and sometimes together with them, we organized unions to help the families of believers who were in the camps. We formed such small informal funds. One of these funds was formed by my friend Flora Khachaturian (her husband's name is Tomashevskaya). They helped Orthodox, Jews, Baptists and members of other religions who were in the camps.

Human rights activity cultivated the true religious tolerance. I must say that besides Gleb Yakunin there were other priests who fought for the adoption of freedom of conscience and tolerance. They were Father Alexander Men', Georgii Edelshtein, Dmitry Dudko. We all, including myself, were in their parishes.

Well, in the post-Soviet period, a short period of reforms, Father Gleb Yakunin and I became deputies. I was a deputy of the Moscow Council and Father Gleb was a deputy of the Supreme Council. Being a deputy

of the Moscow Council, I created the Freedom of Conscience and Charity Commission. A similar commission was created by my friends who were deputies of the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation at that time. And we began to put into practice the principle of freedom of conscience. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote me that creation of these commissions was an important matter. Together with Father Gleb, we soon became deputies of the State Duma. And in 1997 I headed a group which worked on the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations". My opponents insisted on singling out traditional confessions from others. I objected: "Define first which confessions are traditional". How long a confession should exist to be considered as a traditional confession? If we look at this factor, then the first traditional confessions would be pagans, then Old Believers, and then the followers of Patriarch Nikon. Catholics and Lutherans existed in Russia also for many centuries. Eventually, we managed to retain the principle of equal rights of confessions in that law, although Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism were marked out in the preamble. Nevertheless, the principle of freedom of conscience was valid in Russia in the 90s. Thus, on the initiative of the Seventh Day Adventists, the International Association for Religious Freedom was established and it united representatives of many different faiths. For some time I was the president of that association.

Attempts of rapprochement with Catholics still continued. Here I must note an interesting fact that in the 70's - 80's Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad supported a rapprochement with the Roman Church. He mentored his ally, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk, in this spirit. Now Metropolitan Kirill is known as Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. And in the 90s, the spiritual children of Metropolitan Kirill came to me, a State Duma deputy, and asked to speak out in defense of Kirill against attacks of Radonezh, a fundamentalist organization which accused Kirill of sympathy with Catholicism. And I spoke out in defense of Metropolitan Kirill.

Now we can say that there are threats to freedom of conscience in our country. Prohibition of Jehovah's Witnesses proves that. Of course, there is a problem with blood transfusion, but as far as I know, this problem is solved positively in critical situations. But anyway Jehovah's Witnesses religion was banned not for that. They were accused of extremism. I do not know what extremist actions were carried out by Jehovah's Witnesses. In total, several dozen of local organizations have been banned for

the last years. That's all indicate the restriction of freedom of religion in Russia. However, this process is more global. This is a struggle of power of the state with civil society and its institutions. Being an important institution, religious organizations have been appeared under attack.

