On the issue of religious tolerance in modern Russia: national identity and religion

Dmitry A. Golovushkin

Senior lecturer, Ph.D., Chair of Religious Studies, Dept. of Social Sciences, A. I. Herzen State Pedagogical University, St. Petersburg, Russia
E-mail: golovushkinda@mail.ru

The sources of religious tolerance but also of religious nationalism in post-soviet Russia can be found basically in the group identification of nationality and religion. In crisis situations, the historical religion of the Russian society - Orthodoxy - becomes the criterion for identifying the national identity. However, despite the fact that the majority of Russians in our times consider themselves Orthodox, many of them are not believers. The observable effect of the "external belief" results in the fact that the religion tends to become a matter of personal choice and an individual value. It assumes a nationalistic function and to become an ideology. As a result, the political elite considers religion as a means of achieving different non-religious purposes. The Russian Orthodox Church, the official church, is compelled to take this fact into consideration and even support it. This is why religious intolerance and religious nationalism in modern Russia are often directed towards religion.

One of the best ways of ensuring the successful operation of democratic procedures in any society is to strengthen social peace by means of assimilating civic solidarity into the culture and by encouraging dialogue. This is an especially urgent task for post-communist countries, which have chosen the path of democratic development. Thus, the major task for the churches is that of strengthening fundamental moral values, forming relations of solidarity and consensus in society. However, sociological surveys of the last ten years[1] show that religious conflicts and religious fundamentalism, however dangerous these tendencies might be, increasingly determine the atmosphere in modern Russian society.

One can name a variety of reasons for the increase of religious intolerance. However, before examining

KEY WORDS:

Religious intolerance, Post - Soviet Russia, religious nationalism, national identity, freedom of conscience, Anti-Cult Movement, multi-confessional society, state-church relations, religious fundamentalism

them, it is necessary to define clearly the limits of religious tolerance, because without knowing these, one cannot defend the victim, nor identify the aggressor. J. Schpies, leader of the largest German Christian Organization of Students and Academics, says: "It makes sense to speak about religious tolerance in terms of morality and not in terms of pure knowledge". Religious tolerance always ends wherever one teaching has an ambition to monopolize the Truth and the right to expend it. But the Truth should never be imposed by force, and frequent violations of this principle (including use of religious freedom and tolerance as instruments of domestic or foreign policy) lead to a false understanding of the very nature of religious tolerance[2] . In this case, the state should be religiously intolerant towards the falsely understood tolerance. Positive discrimination is the basis for religious policy in most European cultures. Such 'discrimination' does not threaten basic freedoms, which should always be protected by law, regardless of what the contents of the religious doctrines are (apart from those religious doctrines, which endanger the public order or the democratic values, and therefore should be banned). Thanks to such a policy, religious tolerance in industrially developed Western countries is based on solid national and supranational values, which ensures the protection of both old traditional churches and new important religious movements, while at the same time guaranteeing basic religious freedom for every individual. Interaction between these two levels makes it possible to reconcile interests of the church and the state as well as ensuring better understanding of the nature of a multi-confessional society. However, in modern Russia the limits of religious tolerance and the objective criteria of positive discrimination are blurred and sometimes non-existent. This sad fact is evidence of the low level of political culture and cultural pluralism in Russia, and it is one of a whole series of factors that cause the prevalence of religious intolerance in the Russian society.

According to public opinion polls conducted by the Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (RCSPO) in 1999-2002, the Gorbachev-era 'perestroyka', the 'false democracy' and 'imperialism' have been usually named as the main reasons for giving birth to post-Soviet xenophobia. Such sentiments really exist in the society, but they are only partly to blame. Religious intolerance in Russia has deeper social, cultural, political and ethnic roots.

First of all, the theoretical base for religious intolerance is present in every religious teaching. All religions are rooted in special experience, in an encounter with the Sacred, and presuppose the existence of supernatural goals and realities. That is why, in historical perspective, religions by no means encourage tolerance. For example, in Christianity, universalism gave way to the national tradition. In the West this culminated in the emergence of alternative states (secular kingdoms) and alternative (Protestant) churches. As for the East, where the concordance of church and state became a special form of their union, the Christian State retained its global ambitions. However, under the double pressure from the Western and Islamic worlds, these ambitions

mutated into the feeling of exclusiveness and isolation in the hostile environment. Later, according to Prof. D. Obolensky, "after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and of the 'Commonwealth of Orthodox states', local Orthodox churches became increasingly isolated in their national shells and with more readiness demonstrated their supremacy over others"[3] . This attitude resulted in Russia regarding itself, for many centuries (until the monarchy was overthrown), as the only country possessing the true – that is, Orthodox – faith.

Second, religious intolerance may also be formed in a person's consciousness and become part of his/her worldview as a result of the need to re-evaluate the remote and recent past, as well as the present. Economic hardships, the drop in social status of whole strata of society, the feeling of bitterness for the fall of Russia's prestige as compared to the USSR, and, finally, the fear of globalization and the dictatorship of consumerism, — all this develops in Russians an 'inferiority complex' and makes people look for those who can be held responsible for what has happened to the country, to the society and to every single person. As a result, even the people who were initially indifferent to religion have started to identify themselves with certain confessions. The historical confession – Orthodoxy – becomes a criterion of national identity, of 'being Russian'. The Russian Orthodox Church is consequently regarded as the keeper of the cultural tradition, and membership in it as an integral feature of national character. In other words, we see a pronounced tendency for strengthened connection between the national and the religious self-identification. This results in religion ceasing to be a value in itself and acquiring a nationalistic function.

Third, an important reason for the increased religious intolerance is the growing gap between the secularity of the modern society and the traditional spiritual values. The research project "Religion and Values after the Fall of Communism", which was carried out in 1991-1999, found that despite the fact that 82% of Russians considered themselves Orthodox, only 4 % were 'real' practicing believers[4] . Therefore, non-Orthodox religions also inevitably address the same, extremely narrow social stratum. This also means that if, for instance, the number of practicing Baptists (and all Baptists are such) grew by just 1%, this would be tantamount to the loss of 20% of potential or actual parishioners for the Russian Orthodox Church. For the society in general, these figures are insignificant, but they are a serious precedent in the struggle for believers, and thereby may lead to the rise of intolerance and aggressiveness.

Fourth, an important source of religious intolerance in modern Russia is the system of relations between the state and the church, which increasingly reminds one of the model used before the Revolution, when Orthodox faith was the official state religion. (Religious freedom in Russia has been on the retreat since 1994, when district and federal authorities, acting in the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church, began to more openly ignore the constitutional clauses which guaranteed religious freedom in accordance with the legislation of 1990 and the Constitution of 1993). Religious climate in modern Russia has been influenced by attempts of sev-

eral political groups to make use of the authority of different churches and of the absolute trust that the public put in them. This use of religion for political and ideological purposes lead to the emergence of an image of non-Orthodox denominations as "an enemy" and contributed to the increase in religious intolerance.

Thus, religious intolerance in Russia exists at four interrelated levels – religious, social-political, governmental and routine everyday level.

What can be said about the position of the Russian Orthodox Church? According to Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk, it has always been too preoccupied with self-reflection and constant efforts to understand and realize its own unique character. Here finding the differences became predominant and Orthodox self-understanding was formed along the principal "whoever is not with us, is against us." Thus, for instance, *the Guidelines for the Russian Orthodox Church's Attitude to Non-Orthodoxy*, worked out in 2000 by the Theological Commission of the Russian Orthodox Church, lay emphasis on the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church does not equate itself to the Christian world in its entirety and rejects the notion that any Christian unity may exist beyond confessional barriers. This document states that the Orthodox Church differentiates between various non-Orthodox denominations and would not cooperate with non-traditional churches on Russian territory, or inside the CIS and the Baltic States. In other words, the Russian Orthodox Church has rejected the idea of "Christian universalism" with its various "branches", which has created a potential basis for Orthodox fundamentalism. This is, however, not to say that all Orthodox believers are aggressively adherent to this understanding of piety: there are a lot of believers who support liberal reforms. Still, the right radical wing of the Russian Orthodox membership numbers quite a few clergymen as well as believers.

The latter find their aim in the fight against all non-Orthodox denominations, thereto using the concept formulated by the anti-liberal ideologist Metropolitan Iohann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga (Snytchev) and the theory of "canonical territory". According to this theory, the territory of Russia belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate, and other denominations, especially the Catholics, have no right to preach here. If this preaching does take place, then it is regarded not as such, but as "common proselytism on a foreign territory" and it can and should be fought against. To implement these policies, all right-wing Orthodox organizations, the Moscow Patriarchate included, are trying to gain support from various political parties, social structures, federal and regional authorities. These activities culminated in the Anti-Cults Movement, which was established at the beginning of the 1990s and united all those who were actively opposing any display of non-Orthodox thinking.

It is an interesting fact that the Anti-Cults Movement in Russia took its final shape partly owing to the influence of such West European anti-cults groups as, for instance, the Dialog Center based in Aarhus (Denmark) and Berlin (Germany), as well as the American Family Fund. Unfortunately, Russian anti-cultists were

very selective in using the debates held in the West on the issue of the New Religious Movement and its influence on modern society. Most surveys were held on the basis of deliberately arranged fragmented theories and concepts, many of them already seriously discredited in scientific and legal circles. Some of the key works and documents have not even been mentioned, while others were presented in such distorted manner that their major ideas proved to be either omitted or discarded. Thus, for example, A. Dvorkin, head of the Information-Consultation Center of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, completely disapproves of the NRM, over-generalizing about its nature and putting into the category of "totalitarian sects"[5] a number of groups, radically different in character, ranging from Baptists and Mormons to Herbalife International. Among those who hold the same opinion are members of the Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Heterodoxy, St. Petersburg Commission for Protection of the Family and Individuals, Moscow Committee for Salvation of Young People, an anti-cults center "Civil Security" in Yaroslavl as well as numerous anti-sectarian missionary centers created with the help of the Moscow Patriarchate. These organizations have enlisted the support of some psychiatrists and psychologists who have adopted and later provided scientific "justification" for the originally vague concepts of "mind control" and "brainwashing", which sometimes leads them to unjustified conclusions. Thus, for example, you can come across the opinion that "new religious movements and structures threaten the interests of the state, to the point of using their followers as spies and perpetrators of terrorist acts"[6].

Analyzing the role of the religious factor for the political agenda and activities of various political movements, we can also see the role it plays and how its character varies from party to party. The most intolerant attitude towards non-Orthodox denominations and new religious movements is characteristic of national-patriotic political parties: the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the Congress of Russian Communities, the Russian National Union, the Social-Patriotic Association *Derzhava*. Thus, for example, V. Zhirinivskiy, leader of the LDPR, formulated a geopolitical concept that the current crisis in Russia has two underlying reasons. First, political power in Russia has been seized by anti-national and anti-Russian forces that imposed upon the Russian society an alien pro-Western ideology of the "free market" and "human rights". Second, Orthodox spiritual values have been replaced by consumerism. V. Zhirinivskiy claims that the Orthodox faith in the course of its millennial presence on Russian territory has succeeded in developing concepts that are best for the Russian national character and traditions. That is why the LDPR looks upon Orthodoxy as a major source of Russian national thinking. Similar concepts of the "Holy Orthodox Russia" predominate in the ideological makeup of the Social-Patriotic Association *Derzhava*, which proclaims as its key objective the restoration of the former "natural" borders of the Russian state, that is, the borders of the USSR. *Derzhava* hopes that that Orthodoxy will enjoy absolute government

support in this new Russian State, while non-Orthodox confessions, such as Islam or Buddhism, would be supported only "on the territories densely populated by their members".

Russian national-patriotic movement also has its supporters of fundamentalism. Among the movements that see themselves as fundamentalists one will find the Russian National Unity, the Russian National Council and the National Republican Party of Russia. "Their final objective is to develop a 'Russian civilization' based predominantly on Orthodox thinking."[7]. Thus, for example, the Resolution of the December Convention of the National Patriotic Front *Memory* (1994) contains a direct request for the legislature that would establish rightful, legal pre-eminence of the Russian Orthodox Church over non-orthodox denominations. The political agenda of the People's National Party, apart from proclaiming the Orthodox faith as the established religion, claims that non-Russians and members of non-orthodox churches should have no right to be citizens of Russia. Russian state officials should be ethnically Russian and should profess Orthodoxy, while religious freedom can only be permitted as far as this or that teaching does not contradict moral doctrines inherent to the Russian Orthodox faith.

No less conservative in their attitude to religious tolerance are various Marxist groups and parties such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the Russian Communist Laborist Party (RCLP), the Union of Communists, the 'Working Russia' Party and others.

However, religious intolerance is most dangerous at the government level. One should bear in mind that the decisive step towards recognition of the fight for religious freedom in the modern world was taken not by religious, social or political organizations but by constitutions, legislative assemblies and courts. The very concept of human religious rights is inseparably connected with the democratic values and the culture of pluralism. Unfortunately, the current situation with the right to religious freedom and its protection by the government in Russia is a serious cause for concern. In his analysis of the current situation, A. Pchelintsev, director of the Institute of Law and Religion, states that "the Russian society has abandoned its former liberal attitude in the sphere of relationship between the state and religion that was characteristic of the beginning of the 1990s, and now moves towards a neo-conservative view of the issue"[8].

The *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* adopted by the State Duma in 1997 is evidence that the state has no intention to make protection of human rights proclaimed in the Constitution its top priority. The text of the preamble of the Law contains the recognition of the special role of one denomination – namely, Orthodoxy – in the history of Russia, as well as a list of confessions "respected" by the state. This violates the constitutional principle of equal protection of all religious associations by the law (Article 14, RF Constitution). According to Article 2 of the *UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*, the expression "intolerance and

discrimination" means any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on religion or belief. Article 10 of the RSFSR *Law on Religious Freedom*, of October 25, 1990, used to contain this conceptually important provision stipulating that "the state will maintain neutrality as regards the issue of freedom of conscience and religious beliefs". However, this provision was not only excluded from the new legislation, but the concept itself was radically transformed. In fact, the new law is practically giving Orthodoxy the status of the state religion. The Russian Orthodox Church, rather than playing the role of an institutionalized religion, is proclaimed to be the basis for the restoration of Russian national identity, which in itself is the restoration of imperial ideology.

As a result, ever since the adoption of *the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations*, opposition to the "expansionism of foreign missionaries", threatening the "spiritual renaissance of Russia" has become an integral part of religious policies of the Russian state. According to the prominent English specialist in religious studies P. Jenkins, the fear of sects has often been a deliberately created phobia. Such phobias have a considerable unifying force, since they create an image of a "common enemy", which enables the general public to join forces against the common threat and reinstate once again the universally accepted standards and beliefs.[9] Thus, the *Doctrine of Informational Security of the Russian Federation*, adopted September 9, 2000, clearly states that "one of the major directions for ensuring informational security in the sphere of spiritual life, should be the opposition to the influence of foreign religious organizations and missionaries." However, the document fails to give a clear definition what should be considered "religious fundamentalism" or a "totalitarian sect". What one clearly finds lacking in the document are any serious studies of a possible classification of new religious movements and structures and definition of their negative or positive influence on society. Similar terminological vagueness and groundless xenophobia is manifest in the majority of documents issued by the authorities in charge of registering new religious associations, as well as in local legislation on missionary activities. Thus one gets an impression that the laws are aimed at creating new myths and new "enemy images", rather than at stabilizing the religious situation in Russia.

It is worth mentioning that all efforts to legitimize the state anti-sectarian policy in Russia are often explained by appealing to the situation in the West. While it is true that Europe has no uniform legislation on religious issues, it is also a fact that they have adopted the European Convention on Human Rights, and some governments have already faced a lot of criticism for the unsatisfactory situation of religious freedom in their countries, having to alter their legislation accordingly. Now religious legislation in Europe is evolving towards promoting personal rights and freedoms of citizens in all, including the religious, spheres, and only Russia is walking backwards.

The analysis given above shows that heterodoxy in Russia is primarily seen as a threat to national values and state interests. For that reason, religious intolerance,

as a rule, is aimed at a religion that is considered false by the established religious community, that is seen as threatening the foundations of the society, since its teachings threaten the political authority and policies of the government and finally, a religion that is equated with an alien political and social-economic system. Since the borders between the Islamic, the Buddhist and the Christian worlds are not transparent for mutual "expansion", the main lines of confrontation will be the following:

a) opposition of the Russian Orthodox Church to Catholic and Protestant "pretensions" to the "Russian canonical territory";

b) joint fight of the Orthodox Church and the state against foreign and new local religious movements that are automatically declared "totalitarian sects";

c) opposition of the established Orthodox Church to any expansion of alternative Orthodox churches - the Foreign, the Catacomb and the Renovated - and their influence, as well as opposition to the Russian Protestants, whose activity deprives the Russian Orthodox Church of its "monopoly" for Russian religious life;

d) opposition of the Moscow Patriarchate to the "secession of local national churches" in the "new foreign countries", that is, in Ukraine, Estonia and other countries, which deprives Moscow of its own Eastern Rome.

Defeat in any of these tasks threatens to bring up radical changes in the established position of the unsuccessful party. This worries both the church authorities and some political leaders, since the official position of the Orthodox Church in Russia is connected with the political situation in the country (history shows that totalitarian regimes are no exception to this rule) and, moreover, it serves as basis for "national identity". Reorganization in this sphere will require changes not only in the religious tradition, but also in the character of political power and the sentiment of the public. However, if these changes do not take place, resulting religious intolerance might lead to deplorable consequences, the first signs of which are already manifest in modern Russian society.

Firstly, there exists a danger of a definite turn towards the anti-liberal Russian "special way", i.e. a totalitarian imperial regime using nationalist-clerical ideology.

Secondly, there are social and economic consequences. In the atmosphere of pre-dominance of "religious nationalism", social order and consensus in the Russian society will be broken. This will lead to the failure of modernization programs and will be an obstacle on the way out of the crisis the country is now trying to overcome.

Thirdly, if Russia does not have religious freedom, it will face a lot of problems on the international arena. This might damage Russia's international relations and result in isolation instead of the desired equality.

Fourthly, religious nationalism is dangerous not only for the society, but for the Russian Orthodox Church as well. The latter is rapidly assuming the character of a conservative social institution, defending the old traditional order and becoming a political instrument in the hands of the reactionaries.

It is clear that such tendencies are highly dangerous. However, one cannot yet say that in modern Russia "religious orthodox" nationalism has already firmly established itself, along with its classical, parity, economic and defensive varieties. Besides the above mentioned factors that encourage its development, there is a number of factors that oppose and resists its dissemination.

The first and most important factor is the process of social modernization in the Russian society, which broadens the worldview of the people. Religion in its traditional forms is losing its role as a predominant vertical line of the world conceptualization and we witness the rise of new sub-cultures that no longer coincide with national borders but are determined by personal choice and interests. According to the independent journalist Ye. Ikhlov, "the Russian society that has moved far enough from the traditional lifestyle and got used, in the past couple of dozen years, to the increasingly predominant climate of spiritual and intellectual pluralism, can no longer be satisfied with the leadership of a structure that is socially passive"[10] . As a result, despite the fact that 82 % of Russians today regard themselves as Orthodox, overwhelming majority of the population is against building the state system along ethnic-confessional lines. Besides, it is highly doubtful that the Russian State today will agree to share its power with anyone, let alone the Orthodox Church. All political processes active in our society since 1991, in fact, lack any religious constituents. And, finally, we can clearly see the changes in the very sentiment of Orthodox believers and the appearance of so-called "new orthodox believers" with their active social attitude, pragmatism, ecumenism, dissatisfaction with their current spiritual counseling, personal spiritual experience and adherence to the values of democracy.

It might seem a paradox but religious intolerance in modern Russia is to a great extent based on the national "inferiority complex" and the wish to prove to the world that Russia will survive on account of its "spiritual wealth". However, no one today understands what this wealth is and how it can be used in contemporary life, and spiritual tradition is no more than a symbol. In the final analysis, misgivings about non-Orthodox denominations' influence in Russia have no solid ideological base, nor legal authority behind them, and their actualization remains fragmentary and inconsistent.

In conclusion, the real "return to one's roots", the discovery of one's national identity based on religious tradition cannot in itself be the source of conflict. On the contrary, it facilitates the dialogue between cultures and promotes religious tolerance. It's a known fact that people with a strong feeling of national and religious identity tend to be tolerant towards the "others" and their "strange ways". In other words, tolerance does not mean rejection of one's views and beliefs but rather their further development and amplification.

Notes:

1 *See* Papers in Sociological Research (1990 - 1992; 1996). Institute of Sociological Research, Russian Academy of Science. Moscow, 1996. 74 p.; Papers in Sociological Research (1995; 1997) Russian Independent Institute of Social and National

Problems. Moscow, 1997. 183 p.; Papers in Sociological Research (1994 - 1995) Russian Academy of Science. Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography. Moscow, 1997. 85 p.; Papers of Sociological Research (1993 - 1997) Moscow State University; Center for Social Studies. Moscow, 1997. 151 p.; State, Religion, Law: Sociological Analysis // Religion and Law. 2001. N 1. pp. 26 - 29.

2 The case in point is the so-called "tactical tolerance", which is mostly used by totalitarian political systems with the purpose of promoting their own ideology. – *author's remark.*

3 *Qtd. in* Pospelovskiy D. V. The Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th Century. Moscow, 1995. p.18.

4 *See* Old Church, New Believers: Religion in Public Perceptions in Post-Soviet Russia. St. Petersburg, Moscow, 2000. pp. 7 - 15.

5 Dvorkin A. Introduction into Sect Studies. Nizhni Novgorod, 1998. p. 24.

6 Kondratiev F. K. Medical and Social Consequences of Destructive Activity of Totalitarian Sects: an Analytical Survey. State Research Center of Social and Legal Psychiatry of V.P. Serbskiy. Moscow, 1998. p. 4.

7 *See* Ovsienko F. G., Trofimchuk N. A. Confessional Factor in Russian Political Process: Place and Essence // Religion and Culture. M., 2000. p. 81 – 82.

8 Pchelintsev A., Ragozina L. State, Religion, Law: Sociological Analysis // Religion and Law. 2001. N 1. p. 29.

9 Jenkins P. Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis. Oxford, 1996. p. 158.

10 Ikhlov Ye. V. Difficulties for Inter-Confessional Dialogue in Russia // Nationalism and Religion. Moscow, 2000. p. 149.