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RUSSIA: Catholic and Protestant "extremism"?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Russia has ruled as "extremist" a sermon given in 1900 by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, a candidate for sainthood in the Catholic Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Unlike the 15 other Ukrainian texts (not written by Sheptytsky) simultaneously ruled "extremist" the sermon focuses on the Catholic faith. Officials have refused to reveal to Forum 18 why the sermon was ruled "extremist". The Metropolitan has recently been posthumously honoured for saving Jews from the Holocaust. Blog entries by Pentecostal Petr Tkalich also form the basis of an "extremism" investigation in Asbest. He criticised what he describes as "Soviet Orthodox". Official pursuit of religious "extremism" may continue widening beyond the Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works now routinely facing prosecution. Possession of "extremist" texts renders the possessor liable to criminal prosecution.

Russia has ruled "extremist" a sermon by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, a candidate for sainthood in the Catholic Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Blog entries by Pentecostal Petr Tkalich may also form the basis of an ongoing "extremism" investigation in the asbestos-mining town of Asbest (Sverdlovsk Region).

State moves against Protestant churches already sometimes involve Counter-"extremism" Police and/or informal accusations of "extremism". Officials usually go on to prosecute Protestants with charges other than "extremism", however (see F18News 2 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1902).

Forum 18 has found this to be highly localised, with some officials supportive of Protestants exercising freedom of religion or belief and others hostile. In contrast, new documents concerning Jehovah's Witnesses indicate there has been co-ordination with Moscow during local officials' preparation of an "extremism" case (see F18News 2 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1902).

At present, official pursuit of religious "extremism" is mainly limited to present Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of theologian Said Nursi (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1724).

Catholic "extremism"?

A sermon by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky (1865-1944) - a candidate for sainthood in the Catholic Church - was added to Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials on 4 October (No. 2087). Its distribution is consequently banned across Russia and possession of it renders the possessor liable to criminal prosecution.

Republished in 1990 in the Polish city of Lublin, the banned edition of Sheptytsky's "The True Faith" ["Pravdiva Vira"] was among 16 Ukrainian-language texts ruled "extremist" by Moscow's Meshchansky District Court on 14 March 2013. All had been among works seized in a December 2010 raid by Counter-"extremism" Police on Moscow's Ukrainian Literature Library. The other 15 texts - which were not written by Sheptytsky - appear to be secular Ukrainian nationalist works, with titles such as "The Ukrainian National Idea" and "Ukrainian Liberation Concept".

From 1901 until his death, Sheptytsky headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which resembles the Orthodox Church but recognises the Pope. The Metropolitan is particularly revered by Greek Catholics around the world. For example, the Ottawa, Canada-based Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies was named in his honour. Its website notes his attempts to improve Catholic-Orthodox relations among many other examples of "heroic virtue". Sheptytsky was in October honoured by the Anti-Defamation League for protecting Jews from the Holocaust, by supplying false identification papers and shelter from the Nazis, at a time when such acts were punishable by death.

The now banned edition of "The True Faith", which Forum 18 has seen, is a sermon Sheptytsky gave in 1900 to Greek Catholics in Bukovina Region, now partly in western Ukraine. Unlike the titles of the other 15 Ukrainian texts simultaneously ruled "extremist", however, the sermon's focus is on faith rather than nation. Insisting that "Christ's Church has to be a transnational institution," for example, Sheptytsky warns that anyone who wishes to turn it "into a number of purely national institutions is forgetting about the

Church's divine foundation and not understanding it in a Christian way".

For the most part, the Metropolitan urges his audience to uphold the Catholic faith: "We Ukrainians are filled with love for the Catholic Church, we always saw her as our own mother." He argues that the Catholic Church is the true Church due to its papacy, claiming that this is inherited from St Peter: "Christ gave supreme authority to Peter and all his heirs (..) In other words, the Pope of Rome is recognised as the visible head of the Church."

Sheptytsky nowhere criticises other religious communities, however, let alone expresses hatred or advocates violence. He refers to non-Catholic beliefs only when considering if non-Catholics might obtain salvation. Here, he suggests people unfamiliar with the Catholic faith and "who live in another faith, observing all its prescriptions, purely and sincerely convinced that this other faith is true, may also be saved by the love of Jesus Christ." While Sheptytsky adds that an atheist "who knows the true faith but does not hold to it will not be saved," he does not call for any action against atheists.

The freedom to make claims about the relative merits of religious or non-religious views is a central part of freedom of religion or belief. Confusion between claiming the superiority of particular views and claiming the superiority of particular people is made in every attempt to ban religious "extremist" literature in Russia with which Forum 18 is familiar (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1724).

Ten-minute hearing

It remains unclear why "The True Faith" was ruled "extremist". Records on the website of Meshchansky District Court show that Judge Maria Kudryavtseva heard 18 civil cases in succession on the afternoon of 14 March 2013, devoting just 10 minutes to each one. She found in the state's favour in all but one case, where the plaintiff did not turn up. All were filed "in the interests of an undetermined group of people" by Meshchansky Interdistrict Public Prosecutor on 9 January. Written rulings were produced between 14 and 22 March, but are not available on the website.

The records do not reveal the nature or content of the cases, and it is unclear why there are 17 rulings when the Federal List has only 16 matching titles.

The 14 March rulings all determine printed materials "extremist", a spokesperson at Meshchansky District Court confirmed to Forum 18 on 20 November. She declined to comment further, however, remarking only that, "The text of those rulings – of that category of case – may not be published."

Reached on 22 November, a spokesperson for Meshchansky Interdistrict Public Prosecutor asked, "And what do you want from us?" when Forum 18 began by noting that the Prosecutor was plaintiff in cases determining printed materials "extremist" at Meshchansky District Court on 14 March. When Forum 18 went on to ask why the Ukrainian text "The True Faith" was ruled "extremist", however, she maintained that she could not hear what was being said and put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Protestant "extremism"?

In the asbestos-mining town of Asbest (Sverdlovsk Region), Pentecostal pensioner Petr Tkalic is under investigation for "incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of human dignity" (Criminal Code, Article 282, Part 1), he told Forum 18 on 27 August. Tkalic is a member of Rock of Salvation Pentecostal Church, whose parent congregation came under pressure from the Asbest authorities in the early 2000s (see F18News 2 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=383).

Tkalic told Forum 18 that the investigation is due to "Boiling Pot", a two-part article criticising the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) that he wrote on his blog in 2006. The investigation was opened in late July 2013, Tkalic recalled, after his home was searched and computer equipment seized by law enforcement agents on 21 May. An "expert" analysis of the article as found on this equipment continues, he added, and will possibly not be completed until 2014.

"Expert analyses" commissioned by the prosecution in such cases often contain numerous flaws (see eg. F18News 28 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1808).

"Boiling Pot" accuses "Soviet Orthodox" of having an "interesting attitude" towards the Bible. It maintains, for example, that now-Patriarch Kirill rarely cites from and does not display the Bible in weekly addresses on state television. While Russia fights "sects", it continues in the text seen by Forum 18, "Soviet Orthodox" are in fact a "sect" because the Bible is evidently not an authority for them. The article concludes that Russia is the Biblical "boiling pot (..) tilting toward us from the north, from where disaster will be poured out" [Jeremiah 1:13-14].

Reached by Forum 18 on 20 November, Yegor Medvedevskikh, Deputy Head of Asbest's Investigative Department, confirmed that his department had opened a case in July under Article 282, Part 1 linked with the 21 May search on Tkalic's home - which he stressed "took place in accordance with a court order". Medvedevskikh also confirmed that a set of "psychological and linguistic

legal analyses" is ongoing, and that results are not expected until late 2013.

Medvedevskikh stressed, however, that the investigation is "into the fact of publication, at the present time we haven't determined who is responsible, Petr Tkalic or someone else." He also insisted that the Investigative Department had paid "no attention" to the two "Boiling Pot" texts from 2006 – "Of course not." Yet Medvedevskikh was unable to tell Forum 18 whether the content of the texts currently under examination for "extremism" also deals with religion. "I can't say anything about that due to the secrecy of the investigation," he remarked. "If I say something, the analysis might say something completely different, and my words won't be understood rightly."

"It's difficult to say with certainty whether the 'Boiling Pot' texts are at issue, or something else," Petr Tkalic's lawyer Damir Gaintudinov of Agora human rights association told Forum 18 on 25 November. As a witness rather than a suspect, Tkalic has not had the chance to examine materials pertaining to the investigation, Gaintudinov explained.

During questioning, however, an investigator mentioned that two "expert" analyses have been commissioned of the 'Boiling Pot' texts and literature seized during the search of Tkalic's home, said Gaintudinov, although these details are not specified in corresponding written orders for the analyses.

Non-religious criticism of Russian Orthodox

Another ongoing "extremism" investigation due to criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church concerns blogger Maksim Yefimov. Also under Article 282, Part 1, this was launched in Russia's northwestern Karelia Republic in April 2012, shortly before law enforcement agents searched Yefimov's home and seized computer equipment in the republican capital, Petrozavodsk. Prosecutors initially sought to refer Yefimov to a psychiatric hospital, following which he fled Russia. Karelia's Supreme Court overturned the authorisation for this in June 2012.

Yefimov's 160-word article, published in late 2011 on the website of his organisation Youth Human Rights Group of the Republic of Karelia, is entitled "Karelia is tired of priests". Referring to "the Orthodox breed", it alleges that the "total corruption, oligarchy and the total power of the security services is connected with the rebirth of the Russian Orthodox Church." It also alleges in the text seen by Forum 18 that Orthodox churches are being built with state funds, and that the Church is being given kindergarten buildings when there is a severe shortage of them (see F18News 16 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1701).

Reached by Forum 18 on 21 November 2013, Yefimov stated that Karelia's Supreme Court rejected his request for the "extremism" investigation to be closed in August. There have so far been eight analyses of "Karelia is tired of priests", he added – four ordered by investigators and four on his behalf – but none has uncovered anything unlawful.

Orthodox "extremism"

A breakaway Orthodox publication has already been banned as "extremist" for criticising Patriarch Kirill. A single issue of "Easter in the Third Rome" was ruled "extremist" by Abakan City Court (Khakassia Republic) on 22 June 2012, Khakassia Republican Public Prosecutor's Office reported. The publication – sponsored by the former Moscow Patriarchate bishop to Chukotka and Anadyr, Diomid (Dzyuban) – is now at No. 1452 on the Federal List.

Seen by Forum 18, the banned issue consists solely of theological criticism of the Catholic Church and what is seen as Patriarch Kirill's ecumenical stance towards it. It does not call for any actions – violent or otherwise – towards people holding such views (see F18News 29 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1842). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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