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BELARUS: "We are reclaiming our history as a land of religious freedom"

By Antoni Bokun, Pastor of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church in Minsk, Belarus

Concern is growing across Europe about the deterioration of freedom of conscience in Belarus. Few are aware, however, that Belarus was once a haven of religious freedom for people fleeing persecution in Western Europe. In this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>, Antoni Bokun, pastor of Minsk's John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, describes how Belarusians' historical experience has taught them that "religious freedom elevates our nation, whereas religious un-freedom leads to the darkest and most tragic consequences." In 1573 - almost 400 years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Belarusians adopted one of Europe's first legal declarations upholding religious freedom for all, when many other European states executed people for their faith. Pastor Antoni maintains that it is this deep-rooted experience which lies behind today's campaign against religious freedom restrictions. "Inspired by our long history of freedom of conscience, Belarusians continue to work and hope for the day that our country will reclaim its heritage as a land of religious freedom." In 2007 Pastor Bokun spent three days in prison and was heavily fined for leading worship services.

Belarus has been renowned for freedom of conscience for centuries. This is why religious freedom – which the current state authorities have been trying to restrict for the past decade – remains a key concern for Belarusian citizens. In the largest campaign of its kind since current President Aleksandr Lukashenko came to power in 1994, between April 2007 and February 2008 over 50,000 people signed a petition asking the Constitutional Court and other state organs to change the restrictive 2002 Religion Law. Moreover, according to those who collected signatures, every second person approached agreed to support the appeal. Petitioners signed even though the state arrested campaign activists and confiscated campaign material.

Campaigners against the Religion Law affirm that the rights to life, free speech and freedom of belief are inalienable, "because we have them from birth, they are given to us by God and not the government. Since the government does not give us these rights, they do not have the right to take them away." The Law's opponents also stress that they are defending the rights of all Belarusian citizens, as it "violates the rights of all people, even atheists."

Even though it is more than five years since the Law came into force in 2002, Belarusian Christians have not stopped seeking its review. When the Law was under consideration, there were protest demonstrations and numerous appeals against its adoption due to the numerous problems it was bound to create in the religious sphere. Then, once the Law was adopted, the Baptist Union and the Full Gospel Association did not re-register until the very last moment, insisting upon amendments to some of its more odious provisions. While this protest did not succeed, it at least became possible in practice to re-register a number of churches unable to manage the minimum 20 founders. The recent petition marks a new stage in the battle to change the Law.

In multi-confessional Belarus - where Christmas and Easter are officially celebrated twice, according to both Eastern and Western Christian calendars – moves to restrict religious freedom and allot the Orthodox Church the de facto status of state church are inevitably causing resentment. Most people find such a policy perplexing, as they are accustomed to believing that they belong to a multi-confessional nation.

The historical experience of Belarus also shows that religious freedom elevates our nation, whereas religious un-freedom leads to the darkest and most tragic consequences.

The advent of Christianity in Belarus was not accompanied by violence. Christian churches following Eastern and Western rites co-existed peacefully on Belarusian soil from the tenth century onwards. A policy of religious freedom became the basis of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – the state in which Belarusian national identity was forged.

In the fifteenth century there was an attempt to make Catholicism the state religion by barring non-Catholics from senior state positions. In 1436 an Inquisition was introduced against the considerable number of Christians in the Grand Duchy who had accepted the Reformation ideas of Jan Hus. These actions caused conflict and the departure of some Belarusian Orthodox nobles for the state of Muscovy.

The sixteenth century has been called Belarus' Golden Age, not just thanks to progress in the cultural and economic spheres, but also due to religious freedom. Attempts to stop the Protestant faith from spreading ended in fiasco. In 1563 the nobility, headed by the Grand Duchy's leading Protestant, Mikalai Radzivil the Black, succeeded in obtaining a decree under which, "not only subjects of the Roman Church should be elected to all positions and the government, but to the same degree men of noble class, of the Christian faith, each according to his merits." Not long afterwards the overwhelming majority of seats in the Grand Duchy's Senate were occupied by Protestant Christians.

The country became renowned across Europe as "a place of shelter for heretics" where anyone could freely profess their faith, even those who denied mainstream Christian doctrines. Faced with the possibility of being thrown into jail or burnt at the stake for dissent from the prevailing faith in their homelands, French, Italians, Czechs and others began to move to the Grand Duchy. In 1557, for example, Duchess Catherine Willoughby of Suffolk and her husband Richard Bertie came to seek asylum in the Grand Duchy due to their Protestant beliefs, by invitation of Mikalai Radzivil the Black.

In January 1573 the Belarusian and Polish nobilities ratified the declaration of the Confederation of Warsaw, which read: "And since there is no small variation in the Christian faith in our republic, warning that no form of hostility should arise between people for this reason, which we see is clearly taking place in other states, we pledge to ourselves, for ourselves and our descendants for all time to preserve peace between us and not, on account of differences in faith, to shed blood in the churches or to deprive anyone of property or social standing, or to subject anyone to arrest or banishment, or to assist any authorities or government in such actions."

The 1588 Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania reiterated the principle of religious freedom. For Europe, enflamed by religious wars, the Confederation of Warsaw became a model of how to resolve issues of freedom of conscience. Writing in his diary at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Belarusian Calvinist nobleman Fyodor Yevlashovsky recalled that: "In Vilnius I sat at the table of [Catholic canon] Fr Bartholomew Nedvitsky, together with his Italian servants. When they found out that I was an evangelical Christian, they were astounded at how it was that a canon priest dared invite me to dinner. And when I told them that no hatred arises between us because of that, and we get along as good friends, the Italians praised this, saying that God lives here, and began to lament the laws in their own land – or rather lawlessness. At that time difference in faith was not a reason for any kind of difference in friendship, and so that age seems to me a golden one, because now untruth exists between people of the same faith, to say nothing about those of different faiths, and you can forget about charity or sincerity."

Yevlashovsky's complaints about the seventeenth century are not without foundation. The accession of Sigismund Vasa to the throne marked the end of religious freedom in the Grand Duchy. Aiming to destroy the Reformation there, the king doggedly pursued all means of ridding the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of everything non-Catholic.

King Sigismund overtly flouted the provisions of the Confederation of Warsaw and restricted the rights of those who did not share the prevailing faith. Mass emigration of non-Catholics resulted, including Orthodox believers who refused to become Eastern-rite Catholics under the 1596 Union of Brest. The lack of religious freedom led to other states benefiting from the migrants' talents and labour. Belarusian émigrés such as Simeon of Polotsk and Yan Belobotsky brought Russia into closer contact with western civilisation. Religious persecution forced Ilya Kopyevich, a student of the Calvinist high school in Slutsk, to flee to the Dutch Republic – another state famed for its religious freedom – where he devised a simplified Cyrillic orthography.

In 1796 the Russian Empire occupied the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and a new era of un-freedom began. Whereas the Catholics had held the privileged position previously, the state now began to propagate Orthodoxy in every possible way. In 1839 the Eastern-rite Catholics, who by this time accounted for more than 50 per cent of the Belarusian population, were forcefully incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church.

General-Governor Muravyov of Vilnius, nicknamed 'hangman' during his bloody suppression of the January Uprising of 1863, declared: "the Russian Church, the Russian bureaucrat and the Russian school will do what the Russian bayonet cannot." Soon, identical Orthodox churches began to be built throughout the country and Catholic churches were turned over to the Orthodox Church. Today's Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Minsk, for example, is a former Bernardine Cistercian Catholic church. One law stated that "the prevailing Orthodox Church alone has the right to win over followers from other Christian confessions and faiths to accept its teachings on faith." "Seducing" people from Orthodoxy to another faith, on the other hand, was punishable by up to three years in prison.

After the fall of the Russian Empire, freedom of conscience could only be realised outside the Soviet Union - including western Belarus, which was then part of Poland. Within the Soviet Union, militant atheism led to the destruction of almost every church on the territory of eastern Belarus by 1939. The difference between the two halves of our country, in separate states for just 20 years, can still be felt to this day. The Holocaust devastated the historic Jewish population of our country, and aspects of their religious freedom are limited by the current state authorities.

Despite being formally guaranteed by the Soviet Constitution, there could be no talk of freedom of conscience under communism. Similar guarantees in the 1994 Constitution are ignored today - but the present government is proving as unsuccessful as the Communist Party was in removing freedom of conscience from the hearts of Belarusians.

The current policy of the Belarusian government, sadly, is to create a kind of mixture of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. In this the authorities give the appearance but not the reality of granting privileges to the Orthodox Church, while restricting religious freedom for all - including Orthodox Christians. These efforts are being met with opposition, however, particularly from Protestant churches.

The most repressive religious law in Europe continues to be in force in our nation. However, inspired by our long history of freedom of conscience, attempts to get the Law overturned carry on. Belarusians continue to work and hope for the day that our country will reclaim its heritage as a land of religious freedom. (END)

- Antoni Bokun contributed this commentary to Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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Belarusian official rejection of a petition, signed by over 50,000 Belarusian citizens, calling for change in the country's harsh Religion Law is reported in F18News 29 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1121.

Pastor Bokun's heavy fine and imprisonment for three days in 2007, for leading worship, was reported in F18News 5 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=969.

One aspect of Belarusians' determination to exercise their right to religious freedom by sharing their beliefs in public – against the Religion Law - is documented by F18News 15 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=842.

The emergence of faith-based political opposition in Belarus is described in F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>.

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