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RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witness Bible, Jewish, Christian, Muslim books banned

By Victoria Arnold, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Banned as "extremist": Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Bible, other Jehovah's Witness and Muslim books, an article on the Jewish concept of the Holy Land, a Jewish historical novel claimed to incite hatred of Catholics, a book on "Christian women persecuted for their faith" and an atheist slideshow.

A court in Vyborg in Leningrad Region has outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Bible as "extremist". The court imposed the ban despite the Extremism Law's prohibition on such bans in relation to the main sacred works of four religions, after the judge agreed with court-appointed "experts" that the book was not a Bible. The ruling means that Jehovah's Witnesses, already subject to a complete prohibition of their activities across Russia, are now also liable to prosecution for possession of this commonly held text. Jehovah's Witnesses have appealed against the decision.

Other Jehovah's Witness literature has also been declared "extremist" in 2016 and 2017, both before and after the Supreme Court ban on their Administrative Centre and all their communities, which came into force in July 2017 (see F18News 18 July 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297).

The same ruling which banned the New World Bible also outlawed three other books seized by Russian customs officials, which do not appear to call for any violation of the human rights of others. Online versions of both Jehovah's Witness and other religious material continue to be blocked.

While Jehovah's Witness and Islamic literature predominates among religion-related items on the Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials, other belief systems' materials can also be added – most recently, several Jewish texts, an online atheist slideshow, and two Christian books. While these items sometimes explicitly criticise other faiths, none encourages violence towards their adherents (see below).

Several items of literature of the Chinese spiritual movement Falun Gong have also been banned, including, in 2011, its core spiritual text "Zhuan Falun" (Turning the Law Wheel) (see F18News 14 December 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1782).

In 2012, an attempt in Tomsk to ban "The Bhagavad Gita As It Is", a key text for Hare Krishna devotees, was unsuccessful after a public outcry both locally and in India (see F18News 21 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1682).

Banning religious literature

Often, publishers and living authors do not know of an attempt to ban their publications until after the court case. Sometimes they bring a legal case about this. On 31 August 2017, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg put questions to the Russian government and publishers after two appeals to the ECtHR by two Russian publishers of Muslim books which have been ruled "extremist", Aslambek Ezhayev and Sözlér.

The Ezhayev case (Application no. 25051/11) relates to two religious texts. Ezhayev has long complained about the way books are put on the banned list by local courts without the possibility of challenging their verdicts: "a book can't defend itself" (see F18News 24 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1209). Islamic scholars have protested at Russia's "absurd bans", including against one of the two authors in the Ezhayev case Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri (see F18News 30 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1726).

The Sözlér case (Application no. 21115/13) relates to the banning by a Krasnoyarsk court of a text by Turkish theologian Said Nursi. This is only one of the Nursi cases Sözlér has faced, not least as the Russian legal system is not based on precedent and prosecutors can keep bringing a fresh suit against the same material. Sözlér distributed Nursi's books in Russian translation before all of his texts in translation were in 2008 banned as "extremist". Muslims continue to be prosecuted and jailed for meeting to study Nursi's works

(see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215) Sözlér has pointed to apparently falsified evidence used to jail two Muslim readers of Nursi's works (see F18News 11 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2340).

Both the Russian government and the publishers must now reply to the ECtHR's questions about the Russian lower court proceedings and how the bans affect European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms rights to: Article 9 ("Freedom of thought, conscience and religion"), Article 10 ("Freedom of expression"), Article 11 ("Freedom of assembly and association"), and Article 13 ("Right to an effective remedy").

The Federal List of Extremist Materials, which details items which have been declared "extremist" by courts and banned from distribution in Russia, now has more than 4,200 entries. A large quantity of these are far-right nationalist or Islamist materials which are violent and/or racist, but the broad interpretation of "extremism" set out in the 2002 Extremism Law means that items which do not incite violence or the violation of any human right may also come to be prohibited (see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

Frequently, this takes place on the grounds of "promoting the superiority and exclusivity" of one faith (or its adherents) over another, although conviction of the inherent truth of one's own beliefs to the exclusion of others is, however, common to many religions, and does not in itself constitute evidence of hatred or violent intent (see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

The Plenum of Russia's Supreme Court issued a definition of "extremism" in June 2011 – "statements that justify the need for genocide, repression, deportations, violence against members of a nation, race or religion" – in which it acknowledged that "criticism of religious beliefs or religious customs should not be viewed as extremism" (see F18News 19 July 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1514).

In its Concluding Observations on the Russian Federation of 25 August 2017 (CERD/C/RUS/CO/23-24), the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) strongly criticised the Extremism Law. Among other recommendations in relation to "extremism", the CERD reiterated its 2013 Concluding Observations recommendation that Russia "amend the definition of extremism .. to ensure that it is clearly and precisely worded, in accordance with article 4 of the Convention [on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination]". Among its other recommendations, the CERD recommended that Russia "do away with the Federal List of Extremist Materials".

Any Russian court can declare a work (eg. a book, leaflet, song, slogan, video, website or webpage) "extremist". The Justice Ministry must then add the work to the Federal List. The List often does not include full bibliographical details, and is irregularly updated. Checking whether a particular item is on the List can therefore be difficult or even impossible. The removal of an item from the Federal List is rare and can be short-lived. In recent years, new titles have been added at an increasing rate (see F18News 27 July 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2084).

Once a publication has been banned as "extremist", anyone owning the work is subject to punishment under Administrative Code Article 20.29 ("Production or mass distribution of extremist materials included in the published Federal List of Extremist Materials, as well as their production or storage for mass distribution") (see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

As of 23 November 2015, an amendment to the Extremism Law prevents some, but not all, sacred texts - "the Bible, the Koran, the Tanakh and the Kanjur, their contents, and quotations from them" – from being ruled "extremist" (see F18News 30 November 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2126).

Jehovah's Witness Bible banned in Vyborg

On 17 August 2017, after nearly 19 hours of hearings over two days, Judge Dmitry Grishin of Vyborg City Court ruled that the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Bible and three brochures – "The Bible and its principal theme", "Has science replaced the Bible?", and "Ways to improve your health" – were extremist materials and should be banned from distribution in Russia.

Consideration of the Leningrad-Finland Transport Prosecutor's suit had taken more than a year and a half since it was submitted in December 2015. Judge Roman Petrov suspended the case in April 2016 and ordered further "expert analysis" of the texts. Proceedings resumed under Judge Grishin in June 2017.

The extra analysis ordered by the court was carried out by Natalya Kryukova, Aleksandr Tarasov and Viktor Kotelnikov of the Centre for Socio-Cultural Analysis, despite the fact that they had produced the reports suggesting the presence of "extremism" on which the prosecutors' suit was originally based. They have repeatedly refused to comment to Forum 18 on their work for this case.

The Centre for Socio-Cultural Analysis was registered in Moscow in 2014. It appears to comprise four specialists in, respectively, art history, mathematics (Kryukova), languages (Tarasov), and political science and religious studies (Kotelnikov). According to

their website, they offer, among other services: "the identification in text and images .. of the promotion of extremist activity and direct, indirect and hidden calls to extremism; the determination of extremism in the activities of organisations; and the identification of signs of forced involvement in an organisation whose activities bears signs of extremism".

The Centre states it works with law enforcement and judicial bodies, as well as unspecified other organisations and individuals. In 2015, it produced analysis of two Jehovah's Witness texts which were then banned as "extremist" in Kurgan, although a higher court later overturned this ruling. Kryukova also produced analysis for the criminal case against two Jehovah's Witness elders in Sergiyev Posad, who were accused of inciting religious hatred in their sermons – they were twice acquitted (see 25 August 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2310).

In court in Vyborg, Jehovah's Witness lawyers Aleksandr Dyubin, Maksim Novakov and Anton Bogdanov claimed that the court-ordered "expert analysis" contained "many mistakes and inaccuracies", and that the experts were not properly qualified. They stressed that Kryukova, Tarasov and Kotelnikov had already produced analysis of the texts at the request of customs officials, and so could not do so again.

Anatoly Baranov, a philologist from the Institute of the Russian Language at the Russian Academy of Sciences, also submitted to the court a comparative analysis of more than 600 randomly sampled fragments from five different Bible translations, including the New World, which concluded that they were identical in meaning.

Jehovah's Witnesses stated that during the hearing on 16 August, lawyer Dyubin questioned Mikhail Odintsov, chair of the Russian Society of Researchers of Religion, on the contents of the New World version. Asked whether the latter was a Bible, Odintsov affirmed that it was.

The judge disregarded these statements, and the Jehovah's Witnesses' assertion that none of the titles showed any signs of extremism.

The Jehovah's Witness lawyers submitted an appeal against the "extremism" ruling to Leningrad Regional Court on 21 September. No hearing date has yet been set. The judge ordered the books themselves to be confiscated, but not destroyed.

The verdict: not a Bible

According to the written Vyborg verdict, seen by Forum 18, all four texts contain "justification of the need to implement actions aimed at violent change to the foundations of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation; justification of the need to violate the integrity of the Russian Federation .. calls for religious discord .. statements justifying the need for genocide and mass repressions against adherents of other religions .. allegations of the natural superiority of Jehovah's Witnesses and the inferiority of adherents of other religions .. [and] justification of the opposition and incompatibility of the interests of Jehovah's Witnesses with the interests of other religious groups".

The court also concluded that the texts use "manipulative psychological and linguistic methods" in order to inculcate "negative attitudes towards a person on the grounds of attitude toward religion" and encourage Jehovah's Witnesses "to distance themselves from the institutions of civil society, as well as from the institutions of the family and marriage" and "refuse to perform duties in the ranks of the Armed Forces".

Judge Grishin notes the Extremism Law's 2015 prohibition on banning the Bible, the Koran, the Tanakh, and the Kanjur (and quotations from them), but cites the findings of the Centre for Socio-Cultural Analysis as evidence for why the Russian-language New World version should not be considered a bible.

The experts concluded that the New World Bible is not a Bible because "it does not have such a title [but uses the title "Holy Scripture"], it is based on a translation into English from Ancient Hebrew and Ancient Greek texts, [and] significant changes have been made to the text, which are recognised by the authors of the New World translation themselves .. The most revealing example is the use of a tetragrammaton in the form of Jehovah [to refer to God]. In addition, the key texts of the New Testament, affirming the unity and equality of God the Father and God the Son, are changed so that they can be interpreted in the opposite sense".

While Judge Grishin accepted the Jehovah's Witnesses' argument and the experts' own testimony that the New World version contains text "partially coinciding in its content with the text of universally accepted translations of the Bible", he concluded that this "in itself is not grounds to consider all editions of the Bible as such – in connection with which the norms of Article 3.1 of the Extremism Law cannot be applied".

Customs officials at the Svetogorsk border crossing from Finland had impounded millions of copies of the four books on three occasions in May, June and July 2015. On each occasion, customs authorities took Jehovah's Witnesses to court under Article 16.3, Part 1, of the Administrative Code ("Non-observance of Customs Union rules on goods banned or limited 'on the basis of national interests and objectives'").

Customs officials based their case on examination of the texts by the Centre for Socio-Cultural Analysis (their report on the New World Bible concluded that it induced "hostility towards people based on religious affiliation" and contained "justification of the necessity of carrying out aggressive, violent, cruel actions towards a person in connection with religious affiliation").

The Jehovah's Witnesses' Russian and Finnish branches have unsuccessfully tried to challenge the confiscation of their literature through the arbitration courts (see F18News 5 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2174).

In a 16 July 2015 statement, Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre representative Yaroslav Sivulsky called the block on importing Bibles "the apotheosis of a mindless, unprofessional, and frenzied struggle with imaginary 'extremism'".

Other Jehovah's Witness texts

Several other Jehovah's Witness resources have also been banned. Proletarian District Court, Rostov-on-Don, ruled "extremist" on 24 March 2017 "Questions of Youth: Practical Advice, Volume 2" (2008 New York edition) by request of the Southern Transport Prosecutor's Office. It was added to the Federal List on 15 June 2017.

Customs officials had found a copy in a sailor's cabin on a ship in Rostov's port. A linguistics expert from the Rostov Centre for Judicial Expertise concluded that the book "negatively evaluates" people who are not Jehovah's Witnesses, encourages Jehovah's Witnesses to end relationships with them, and promotes the "superiority" of Jehovah's Witnesses, but also concluded that the text contains no calls for violence and in fact advocates tolerance towards non-Jehovah's Witnesses.

A book of same title, published in New York in 1998 but not divided into two volumes, already appears on the Federal List, having been banned in 2009 in Taganrog.

Serov District Court in Sverdlovsk Region found "Listen to God" and the January 2015 issue of the journal "Awake!" to be "extremist" on 19 February 2016. The first of these texts consists of quotations from the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Bible, the second, of advice on dealing with anger, discussion of God's culpability in human suffering, information on Costa Rica, and an interview with an ill child. Both also contained links to the main Jehovah's Witness website, jw.org, which is itself banned and blocked in Russia.

Jewish texts

Judge Yury Kurin of Sochi's Central District Court ruled on 22 March 2017 that a nineteenth-century Jewish-themed historical novel and an academic article on the concept of the Holy Land should be banned as "extremist".

According to the court verdict, seen by Forum 18, the FSB security service seized both items during a search of an unspecified building in Sochi. Their ownership is unclear, and no representatives of the publishers or the article's author appeared to be party to the case or present at the hearing.

The novel, published under the Russian title "Forcibly Baptised [Nasilno kreshchenniye]" is by Marcus Lehmann (1838-1890), a German rabbi, writer, and civil servant. It tells the story of a Jewish convert to Catholicism who becomes treasurer at the court of the Polish king, and details the experiences of Jews in fourteenth-century Poland-Lithuania, particularly the persecution and discrimination they encountered. According to the verdict, expert analysis by an FSB criminology laboratory concluded that the novel was intended to incite hatred towards Christians, especially Catholics, and to promote the "superiority and exclusivity" of Judaism over Christianity.

As well as the hard copy novel (published in Russian by Izografus, 2001, Moscow), Judge Kurin ordered two websites which host the text to be banned and blocked. The book's entry on the Federal List, added on 17 July 2017, does not specify print or electronic versions. The book appears to have been withdrawn from the Russian National Library, in whose online catalogue it is marked as "Removed from public access. Federal List [of Extremist Materials] No. 4176".

Rabbi Boruch Gorin of the Federation of Jewish Communities criticised the ban, calling it "an absolute mockery of the entire Extremism Law" in a statement on his Facebook page on 17 July. "To say this book is 'extremist,' a book which had dozens of editions, even in Germany in the 19th century, a book about the religious discrimination against Jews in Medieval Europe — that means to ridicule the idea of the 'fight against extremism'."

The banned article "The holiness of the land of Israel", by Zoya Kopelman, was published in the journal "Fathers and Children" (Issue 35, 2001, Moscow), which is produced by the Moscow-based Institute for Jewish Studies in the CIS. Kopelman is a translator and teacher of literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, specialising in the links between Jewish and Russian culture.

The article examines the concept of the "Holy Land", the nature and meaning of "sanctity" when connected with particular geographical space and whether this can change over time, whether such sanctity is original and inherent or dependent on the presence of pious Jews keeping the commandments there, and the importance of Israel in the prayers and practices of Jews even

when they do not live there.

The FSB's "expert analysis" reported that the article was intended to incite hatred towards non-Jewish ethnicities and promote the "superiority and exclusivity" of Jews over other peoples; it also allegedly incites religious hatred and "infringes on the rights, freedoms, and legal interests of the person and citizen in relation to their ethnicity, religious affiliation, and attitude to religion".

In his verdict, Judge Kurin concludes that dissemination of Kopelman's article would therefore encourage people "to commit a criminal offence, facilitate the commission [of the crime], aid in its preparation, and foment social, racial, national or religious strife among the population".

Kopelman asks "How are human life and the holiness of the Land of Israel connected?", and in answer quotes Israeli Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, who outlines in his 1993 book of essays "Pirkei Moadot" how God gave different lands to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to Lot and Esau and their descendants: "And the border dividing these lands is nothing but a boundary between the holy and the ordinary, between light and darkness, between the people of Israel and other nations. And the unceasing struggle between the population on different sides of this border is the struggle of the holy and the unholy .. a reflection of the duality inherent in this world - the coexistence of good and evil, pure and impure".

Rabbi Breuer also points out, however, that God told the Jews not to conquer these other lands, that they had a right to them only if their inhabitants gave them up. Kopelman's article makes no call for violence or discrimination against non-Jews.

As with Lehmann's novel, Judge Kurin also ordered the page of the Institute's website containing the article to be banned and blocked, although the Federal List entry (also added on 17 July 2017) does not distinguish between print and electronic versions.

The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis commented on 17 July that the experts, prosecutors, and court in this case were clearly ignorant of the nature of Judaism as an ethnocentric religion, "for which ideas of the mission of the Jewish people and the holiness of the land of Israel are very important and inalienable".

Jewish Kabbalah texts

Another Jewish text, Mikhael Laytman's "Kabbalah: Secret Jewish Teachings. Part 10 – Fruits of Wisdom" was banned by Kirov District Court in Yekaterinburg on 1 October 2015. The work did not appear on the Federal List until 23 April 2017, however, after an unsuccessful appeal by the author at Sverdlovsk Regional Court on 23 December 2016.

Prosecutors seized the book from the library of Yekaterinburg's Or-Avner Jewish Gymnasium. Expert analysis found it to contain "information aimed at inciting ethnic hatred and enmity, propaganda of the exclusivity and superiority of Jews over other people (non-Jews) .. the idea of the inferiority of other peoples, except for Jews".

Laytman, a Soviet-born Israeli citizen, is the head of the Bney-Barukh International Kabbalah Academy. He has caused controversy among Orthodox Jews by teaching the Kabbalah to non-Jews. Although the book contains the suggestion that Jews are in opposition to other peoples, it appears to have no violent or aggressive content.

Islamic literature banned again

Islamic literature also continues to be ruled "extremist". On 3 March 2017, Svetly City Court in Kaliningrad Region banned "Muslim dogma (Akida)", by Turkish academic Ahmed Saim Kilavuz. The Justice Ministry added it to the Federal List on 7 June 2017, noting explicitly that the many Koranic quotations it contains are not banned, in accordance with the 2015 amendment to the Extremism Law.

Kilavuz's work describes the foundations of the Islamic faith, and does not appear to contain any aggressive or violent statements. It was also among 68 Islamic texts banned in a single 20-minute hearing at Orenburg's Lenin District Court in March 2012 – in 2015, an appeal hearing at Orenburg Regional Court decided that fifty of these, including Kilavuz's book, were not "extremist", and they were later removed from the Federal List (see F18News 27 July 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2084).

Despite this, these items continue to be subject to bans under the Extremism Law. Another title which has repeatedly fallen foul of the Extremism Law, both before and after it was reprieved in Orenburg, is "Fortress of a Muslim", by Said al-Qahtani. This is a volume of prayers and greetings for everyday occasions, which contains no call for violence or violation of human rights, but which has been blocked across multiple websites as well as in hard copy. It appears seven times on the Federal List (although the exact editions are not always clear), banned in four separate rulings by three different courts between July 2014 and August 2016.

Soviet District Court in Ulan-Ude issued the latest ban of "Fortress of a Muslim" on 22 August 2016, in relation to the 2011 3rd edition from the Ezhayev publishing house. It was added to Federal List on 8 November 2016.

The lifting of a previous ban or an earlier refusal to rule a text "extremist" offers no subsequent protection. On 1 February 2017,

Kirov District Court in Ufa banned "Selected Hadith", a Russian translation of several hundred sayings attributed to the Muslim Prophet Mohammed. The collection was compiled by Muhammad Yusuf Kandahlawi (1917-1965), a major figure in the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, which is outlawed as "extremist" in Russia.

Pervouralsk City Court, however, refused to ban the book in December 2015 on the grounds that it contained quotations from the Koran. An appeal judge at Sverdlovsk Regional Court upheld this interpretation of the 2015 amendment to the Extremism Law in March 2016 (see F18News 5 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2174).

In an indication of the inconsistency with which the amendment is applied, five items appear on the Federal List with the note that the ban does not cover the Koranic or Bible quotations they contain – but the entry for "Selected Hadith", added on 7 June 2017, includes no such caveat.

Christian texts

It appears that almost any negative portrayal of another religion or its adherents can lead to a text being declared "extremist", regardless of whether this is accompanied by the incitement of violence or discrimination.

Bryansk Region Military Prosecutor's Office requested that "Hearts of Fire: Eight Women in the Underground Church and Their Stories of Costly Faith" and "Islam: a look beneath the mask" be outlawed as extremist. Judge Viktor Rukhnikov of Sevs District Court upheld the two separate suits on 12 April 2016, and the Justice Ministry added both titles to the Federal List on 20 April 2017.

According to the written verdicts, seen by Forum 18, the FSB border service had seized the two books "as part of a planned operation" from two men travelling to Russia from Ukraine, after being tipped off by customs officials who had seen "signs of incitement to extremist activity on religious grounds" in the texts. Igor Balashov and Venyamin Yakubovsky, from whom the books were confiscated, do not appear to have been prosecuted on any administrative charge. It is unclear how many copies of the book the FSB seized.

The books were subjected to psychological and linguistic analysis by the Justice Ministry's Bryansk Laboratory of Judicial Expertise. According to both verdicts, "experts" found them to contain "a combination of linguistic and psychological signs of the incitement of religious enmity and hatred". The verdicts give no further details of the "expert analysis" and quote no parts of the texts which were deemed "extremist". No representative of the authors, publishers, or owners of the books appear to have been present in court.

Neither book appears to encourage violence against non-Christians or support discrimination against them, but prosecutors couched the case in terms of state and societal security.

The verdict claims: "At present, threats to the national security of the Russian Federation are predominantly internal. Therefore, the most important area for ensuring Russia's national security is the fight against organised crime, ensuring state and public security and protecting public order. A significant threat to Russia's national security is the most dangerous form of organised crime – extremism .. combating extremism as ideology, intolerance, incitement of hatred or enmity, humiliation of human dignity on grounds of race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, or membership of any social group is the most important way of ensuring national security".

"Hearts of fire" was produced by Steve and Ginny Cleary of the US-based Christian mission support organisation Voice of the Martyrs, with a foreword by American missionary Gracia Burnham. The Russian edition was published in the US in 2015, shortly before the FSB seized the books on 4 September 2015. As attested on the verso of the title page, the edition was intended for free distribution.

Based on interviews carried out by the authors, the book describes the experiences of eight "Christian women persecuted for their faith" by atheist governments or other religious groups (mostly locals, plus one Australian missionary) in different countries (Indonesia, Bhutan, the Soviet Union, Communist Romania, Pakistan/Iran, China, India, and Vietnam).

Despite depicting often extremely violent actions, committed by Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, the book portrays none of its protagonists as desiring revenge or encouraging hatred of non-Christians.

"Islam beneath the mask", by Dariy Hussein, was published in Ukraine's capital Kyiv in 2012. Its author appears to be an Iranian who converted from Islam to Christianity and is keen to encourage other Muslims to do the same. His book's explicitly stated goal is "to show the real essence of Islam, which, as a rule, nobody publishes .. God put it in my heart to write this book to tell people what true Islam is. I hope that an intelligent person who is capable of sound reasoning will understand and make the right choice of religion – a choice on which depends not only life on this earth, but also life after death".

To this end, Hussein offers a highly negative view of the Koran, the Muslim Prophet Mohammed, and sharia law. He suggests that terrorist atrocities arise directly from Islamic teachings and compares Islam unfavourably with Christianity. For example, he

contrasts the Koran with the Bible by claiming that they portray "two different Gods", one calling for "murder, violence, and excess pleasure", the other for love of neighbour.

Hussein is critical of the portrayal of women in the Koran and their position under Islamic law. He notes the right of Muslim men to have four wives and the "right" of girls to marry from the age of nine (while for men it is 15). He then adds: "What can you expect from followers of a religion whose leader was himself a fornicator and all his life fornicated and had a harem? Dear girls and women who want to marry a Muslim, I want to warn you".

Alongside more dispassionate accounts of the history of Islam, Mohammed's early life, and the differences between Sunni and Shia, Hussein also criticises the commercialisation of the haj pilgrimage, compares the veneration of the Kaaba in Mecca to pagan idol worship, and claims that inside the Kaaba are "Satan and evil spirits, but not God".

At no point, however, does the book openly call for violence towards Muslims or their forced conversion – Hussein encourages Christians to conduct evangelistic work among Muslims only with friendship, love, prayer and respect for their culture.

Atheist slide show

As well as religious writings, atheist material can also fall foul of the Extremism Law. On 28 February 2017, Yoshkar-Ola City Court ruled that a ten-minute video of still images on atheist and anti-religious themes was "extremist". It was added to the Federal List on 19 May 2017.

The video consists of a series of cartoons and photographs, with no sound. They include, among others: a picture of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, captioned "First after God"; pictures of the Bible captioned "I read it. Now I'm an atheist" and "Down with the brain!"; photos of priests and nuns apparently drinking alcohol; an image of Muslims at prayer outdoors entitled "Soon in your city"; cartoons satirising creationist beliefs; and a picture of a man's head captioned "Going to church? Leave your brain at home!"

The video contains no obvious calls for violence or incitement of hatred for believers. A possible exception is a photograph of a burning church bearing a quotation attributed to Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durutti – "The only church which illuminates is a burning church" – which could be taken as a call to burn churches. The quotation is also linked in the image to Norwegian far-right and neo-pagan musician Varg Vikernes, who was convicted in 1994 of church arson, as well as an unrelated murder.

No verdict is available, so it is unclear whether it was this one slide which led to the ban or whether all the images were considered equally at fault. As the entire video is now banned, however, it is possible that the use of any one image from the series, even outside the context of the video, may lead to prosecution for distribution of "extremist" material. (END)

For more background see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2246, and of the dramatic decline in this freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215.

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.

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Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY