



Religious Freedom Report

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Eastern Europe Faces an Uncertain Future For Religious Freedom and Democracy

By Dan Fefferman

Religious freedom has become something of a barometer for human rights for the nations of Eastern Europe as they adjust to the post-Soviet era. This became clear to me during a trip to my ancestral homelands of Lithuania, Russia, and Belarus last spring.

Vilnius, Lithuania was a major center of Jewish learning in the Middle Ages. It is also one of the reported birthplaces of my mysterious paternal grandfather (his immigration papers give "Russia"—whatever that means—as his country of origin), who died at age 33 in Chicago, leaving few if any details about his background or genealogy.

The occasion of my pilgrimage to Vilnius was the annual conference of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR). As usual, the conference provided a valuable opportunity to hear the latest research by scholars on new religious movements (NRMs), renew old friendships, and learn about the situation of religious freedom both from



The author (at left) with Belarusian friends at a Holocaust memorial in Minsk.

scholars and representatives of the NRMs themselves. A liberal sprinkling of Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, Unificationists, members of the Family (formerly the Children of God), Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, Meher Baba disciples and other NRM members are often found among the sociology professors, theologians, historians of religion, psychologists and assorted graduate students giving papers at CESNUR.

The conference took place

at the University of Vilnius, a center of European higher learning established in the 15th century. The University's medieval architecture provided a fascinating contrast to the rapid pace of change experienced not only in Lithuania itself—where a statue of the Vilna Rebbe competes for tourist attention with a monument to Frank Zappa—but all of the nations of the former Soviet Empire.

Lithuania appears to be

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Tolerance: The Key to Russia's Future

by Galina Krylova

Sooner or later Russia will have to become tolerant.

Several important themes resounded at a conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna this summer. But I would like to talk about only those that are now most urgent for Russia.

First theme: possible restriction of religious freedoms. These rights are guaranteed in part 2 of article 9 of the European Convention for the Defense of Human Rights and Basic Freedoms. In the opinion of many OSCE conference participants, the introduction of new restrictions on these rights cannot be viewed as well founded. In the Russian law on freedom of conscience and religious associations of 1997, the list of restrictions was extremely broad, although the decisions of the Constitutional Court substantially alleviated a whole series of parameters. Nevertheless these restrictions exceed the European standard.

In my own work on a large number of cases, when real restrictions at the local level directly contradict Russian and international legislation, complaints to higher authorities yield few positive results. For example, representatives of the society of Jehovah's Witnesses sent to the Gatchina municipal chamber a request for allotting to them a plot of land for constructing a church. Local authorities directed them to the Orthodox priests for permission. Then for what reason, observing the supposed equality of religious organizations before the law, are the Orthodox not directed to Witnesses for permis-



sion for granting land for construction their church?

Second theme—tolerance. This also is rather painful for Russia. Not long before the Russian Revolution, conversion from Orthodoxy to another confession was punishable as a crime. It is not necessary to talk about tolerance under the Soviet regime. A lot of time is needed for overcoming traditions of intolerance, but much greater problems have arisen for religious organizations that have been listed as so-called sects (and this was discussed in Vienna). In 1994 the Russian Orthodox church drew up a detailed list of “sects” which then was actively circulated by state structures. There followed orders of the State Duma and informational materials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Health, and the like.

In 1999 the prosecutor's office wrote resources for law enforcement agencies where, for example, it was indicated that Jehovah's Witnesses are prone to some forms of crimes and members of the Unification Church to others. To be sure, no convincing evidence of this was provided. And where could it be gotten? The theory about the inclination of Jews to drink Christian children's blood went out of favor long ago.

In 2000 the Ministry of Education sent out to the component elements of the federation a letter where the activities of Mormons, Pentecostals, and other organizations were given a negative characterization. It is therefore not surprising that at a session of the licensing commission of the Department of Education of Moscow on 6 February 2003 a license was given to the St. Thomas Aquinas College of Philosophy, Theology and History on the condition that its rector, who was a member of the Jesuit order of the Roman Catholic church, be replaced.

In an interview with *Gazeta* on 25 April 2003, Patriarch Alexis II of Moscow and all-Rus responded to a question as to whether such people as anti-cult activists Andrei Kuraev and Alexander Dvorkin act in the name of the church when they “go about the country and give lectures, show films, and incite in Orthodox believers hatred for those who believe differently.” He stated: “Today the tasks of the domestic mission are a priority for the Russian Orthodox Church. Therefore the educational work today includes not only preaching the gospel but also arguing, including in public, against this kind of teaching that contradicts Orthodoxy. I do not know of cases of incitement of religious or interethnic hostility by the evangelists you have mentioned. In addition, I am convinced that manifestations of such hostility are directly connected with the ignorance about religion that dominates in the public, which they are trying their best to combat.”

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Conference Highlights Religious Freedom As Factor in Global Security Issues

by Chris Antal

From May 16-18, I had the opportunity of attending a symposium at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, on the topic "Religious Freedom: the Missing Dimension of Security"

My main impetus for attending this conference was the chance to inherit the wisdom of the conference organizer, former US Special Ambassador for Religious Freedom Robert Seiple, whom I had previously met through my involvement with ICRF. A second impetus to attend was the opportunity to dialogue with Jeremy Gunn, whom ICRF President Bruce Casino described as a friend of religious freedom.

Of the 120 participants, most represented major Christian denominations, but others came from Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim traditions and a few from less orthodox movements, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Unification Church.

Robert Seiple set the framework for the conference in his keynote address by articulating the relationship between religious freedom and security, stressing that "religious freedom promotes security for the state through the captured loyalty of



its citizens." Seiple criticized some Christians for harboring intolerant attitudes towards other faiths and emphasized that

"understanding our own faith and respecting our neighbor's is the single biggest individual contribution that we can make to homeland security."

One highlight was an interfaith panel of three professors: Rabbi Marc Gopin, Baptist minister Christopher Hall, and Muslim scholar Osman Bakar of Georgetown University. Gopin pointed out that in Judaism there is a "celebration of the idea of many religions in the world" which is very much "in line with freedom of religion." Hall noted that since all three Abrahamic traditions claim to possess the truth, "religious diplomacy" and "dialogical virtues" are essential, particularly the virtues of "epistemic humility" and "modesty." Bakar pointed out that, from the viewpoint of the Koran, "religious freedom is most important" and "compulsion is incompatible with religion."

The tension between pluralism and evangelism was apparent, particularly when some participants raised questions about the Christian imperative to witness. While Gopin and Bakar seemed to suggest that pluralism itself was the goal, Hall demurred, implying that pluralism might constitute what he called "vapid commonality" which, in his view, was "to be avoided."

Another highlight was Jeremy Gunn's observations about the dangers of stereotypes. Gunn, during a panel



on human rights and religious freedom, stressed that we must learn to "see ourselves as others see us," that we are damaged both "when we hold stereotypes against others," as well as when "we don't understand other's stereotypes of us." He provided, as an example, the various perspectives on the recent war in Iraq, and concluded that we need to "evaluate the perspective of others" as well as better "understand our perspective."

The underlying theme of the conference—that "we need to better understand our own faith while respecting our neighbors"—seems to contain an insurmountable paradox: how can we show respect for people of other faiths if we believe their understanding of God is wrong? The solution seems to lie not only in discovering within our own faith traditions those essential principles which find a resonance in all the world religions, but also by recognizing the existence of those very same principles in the faith of our neighbors.

If you are interested in obtaining the published proceedings from this conference, learning more about the Institute for Global Engagement, or becoming involved in the institute's Council on Faith and International Affairs, visit the official website at: <http://www.globalengagement.org>

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

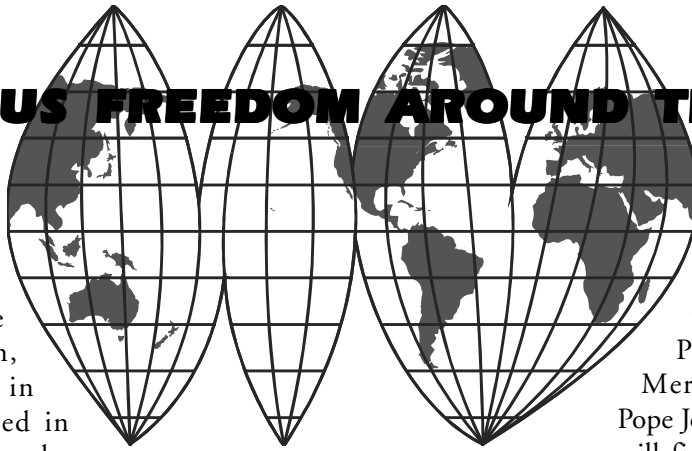
By Rick Hunter

Azerbaijan

A branch of the Adventist Church, having applied in 1996 and reapplied in 2002 for governmental registration and not receiving an answer, opened a church in April in Azerbaijan's autonomous republic of Nakhichevan. Within days of its first worship service, the local Ministry of Justice wrote to inform the church that it was seeking its liquidation through the courts. The church community had been banned from meeting for a year because the Justice Ministry claimed the church's original application should not have listed its address as being in the capital city of Baku.

China

Growth of underground churches has been called "Jesus fever," by enraged Chinese authorities. At the National People's Congress in March 2003, the "Strike Hard" campaign against all unauthorized groups was reaffirmed. These groups include "separatists, terrorists and cult organizations." Unregistered churches are included in the list of "illegal cults." Numerous raids in recent months have netted hundreds of Christians including scores of designated house church leaders. Ordinary Christians are reportedly interrogated, beaten, fined and released, but key house church leaders are imprisoned for lengthy periods and some have been given a death sentence.



France

French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy said Muslims must obey the law, even if that meant baring their heads. French law states that both men and women must be bareheaded in National Identity Card photographs.

Georgia

Genadi Gudadze, the Jehovah's Witness leader in Georgia, reported that two containers of religious literature weighing more than 20 tons were seized by customs authorities in the Black Sea port of Poti. Gudadze



said that customs fabricated a claim that the shipments required a signature from the Finance Ministry. Seizures of Witness religious literature in 2001 resulted in a court ordering the state to pay compensation for having "seriously violated" the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses guaranteed by article 19 of the Constitution of Georgia.

Germany

The head of the German opposition, Christian Democratic Party (CDU), Angela Merkel, who recently met Pope John Paul II at the Vatican, will fight for an article on religion to be written into the European Union Constitution draft. German Christian democrats are the biggest group in the European parliament (EPP), giving weight to their calls for a reference to God in the Constitution draft. Religion is one of the most controversial topics for the Convention on the future of Europe. Former French president and Convention president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing thinks any reference to God should be left out of the Constitution draft.

Iran

Iranian dissident professor Hashem Aghajari—who had questioned clerical rule in Iran and had been sentenced to the contradictory punishments of 74 lashes, eight years in prison and death by hanging has had his whipping reduced to a fine and his eight years reduced to three but still has not heard whether his hanging will be upheld. The sentences against him had provoked massive student uprisings against the government.

Japan

The Tokyo High Court has upheld the death penalty handed to Masato Yokoyama, a former top AUM Shinrikyo member, for spraying sarin gas in a 1995 subway car on the Tokyo subway.

The defense team argued that 48-year-old Yokoyama was under the mind control of AUM guru Shoko Asahara, who had planned the attack as part of a doomsday plot in which only he and his followers would survive.

Kazakhstan

Pastor Sergei Nizhegorodtsev of the Georgievka Baptist church in the Zharma district of Eastern Kazakhstan is being prosecuted as a criminal and had his national identity card seized for refusing to register a religious community and for leading a church that refuses to comply with a court-ordered ban on holding services. Last year, Nizhegorodtsev had his furniture, washing machine and other personal possessions confiscated by a court assessor after having a fine levied on him for unauthorized religious activity.

Laos

Three Christian families in southern Laos have been evicted from their homes for refusing to renounce their religious beliefs. Christians in the northern city Luang Prabang and elsewhere are being pressured by Lao authorities to renounce their faith or face eviction or detention. Some people have been arrested for speaking openly about their faith and, elsewhere, Lao Christians have been ordered to close their churches and to stop their worship practices. According to a US State Department official, these actions were a regression from earlier improvements and could hinder the Bush administration's desire to extend Normal Trade Relations (NTR) to Laos.

Latvia

Two churches protested the article of Latvia's 1995 religion

law that allows no more than one association of any one denomination to register. The law was amended in November of 2002, but the particular article was not dropped. Without registration as a religious association, religious communities cannot own property or have tax-exempt status and cannot officially teach or administer rites. The Justice Minister himself has supported abolishing the discriminatory clause, despite opposition from the Orthodox Church.

Moldova

Police in the unrecognized republic of Transdnester in eastern Moldova have harassed Baptists and repeatedly confiscated books from a mobile Christian street library in the city of Bendery (Tighina). The Baptists belong to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the former Soviet republics where it operates.

Pakistan

Private educational institutions in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) are protesting against the provincial government's decision to replace the prevailing uniform of shirt and trousers with the traditional dress of *salwar kameez* as of the next educational year. The rationale of the ruling party is that trousers and shirts are un-Islamic and a sign of slavery, and that they impose a financial burden on parents.

Russia

Russia's Supreme Court has ruled that Muslim women will be allowed to wear headscarves in photographs for official docu-

ments. The case was based on a previously rejected suit by ten Muslim women from Tatarstan



who objected to a police requirement that they be bareheaded in ID photos. The Interior Ministry criticized the ruling, saying that it would "seriously impede the establishment of identification" and that it planned to appeal.

Saudi Arabia

The U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom named Saudi Arabia as the top violator of 15 cited countries in an annual report on the status of religious liberties worldwide. Formed by Congress in 1998, the commission remains the world's only government-sanctioned entity to investigate and report religious-freedom violations. The commission found a pattern of "harassment, detention, arrest, torture" and deportation of foreign Christians and similar treatment by religious police toward Shi'ite Muslim clergy. The report also questioned why the US State Department had not designated Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern (CPC)," the diplomatic term for the most severe violators of human rights.

Tibet

China's longest-serving female political prisoner, Ngawang Sangdrol, who has spent almost half her life behind bars, has been allowed to go to America for medical treatment after being released from Tibet's gulag late last year. She was first imprisoned at 13 for shouting in public: "Long Live the Dalai Lama!"

Eastern Europe's Uncertain Future

from page 1

embracing western-style democracy fully while retaining a large degree of old-world charm, due in part to its good fortune of not being heavenly bombed during WWII. Like most Eastern European countries, and unlike the United States, it does require religious groups to register officially with the government. But unlike in some countries, registration is normally granted even to the smaller and newer groups, and most groups are free to operate with few restrictions.

Lithuania was only the first leg of my journey, however. A brief stop in Latvia after an overnight trip on the sleeper train provided a glimpse into another Baltic state that seems to be doing fairly well both economically and in terms of human rights after its liberation from Soviet rule. In Riga, hundreds of young people crowd internet cafes to play the latest computer games on the 'Net. A handful of youths also check out the NRM around the corner without fear of being followed by the KGB.

It was a different story, however, in St. Petersburg (Russia) and Minsk (Belarus). In these cities the Russian Orthodox Church has combined with the post-Soviet regimes to make life difficult for the new and smaller religious groups, which are seen as potentially threatening western influence. Never mind that some of them originated in the Orient. To a lesser degree, this "western" status is even given to the Roman Catholic Church, whose bishop in Moscow (although he doesn't call himself "bishop" in-country for fear of offending the Orthodox hierarchy) once said that: "In Russia,

we are a new religious movement."

Visiting with members of the Unification Church in St. Petersburg, I learned that the church, though legal on the national level, has been refused local registration and thus cannot own property. Instead of speaking in a church center, as in Lithuania, I was invited to address UC members at the local Krishna temple, which kindly provides its auspices to several unregistered groups for such occasions.

A lively "anti-cult" movement, supported by the Orthodox Church and receiving advice and assistance from its more secular European and American counterparts, pressures the Russian government to move against the "sects." Several lawsuits have been brought against the western-based groups, including the Southern Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Scientology, and Jehovah's Witnesses. (*See article on page 2.*) The Roman Catholic Church faces restrictions such as having its priests' missionary visas rejected and being unable to train native pastors due to a lack of local seminaries.

Belarus, the last country of my circuit of northeastern Europe, represented both the high point and low point of the journey. There, new religious movements find truly fertile soil among a generation of young adults who yearn for freedom in the post-Soviet era of this, the most Stalinist of former Soviet satellites. And here, the government has responded with what most human rights experts agree is the most repressive religion law in all of Europe.

The government is anxious to show its friendlier side. The head of the State Committee on Religion and Nationality, Stanislau Buko, tells me that the critics have it all wrong. Religion is doing very well in Belarus. People are free to believe whatever they wish. There are hundreds of churches and synagogues operating, and thousands of believers attend services without fear of repression. This is true, I admit, but for the smaller groups there are problems.

"Such as?" he says.

My colleague, "J," raises his hand. I'm the one named Daniel here, but it's J who is in the Lion's Den. He was the Unification Church's first missionary to Belarus in 1992, but the church was refused registration as a religion. Other public organizations that Unificationists established for educational and charitable purposes were closed down and forbidden to operate. "J" was arrested for violating the "Freedom of Conscience Law" because he allegedly taught religion in violation of his visa. Although he was eventually acquitted, he moved to Russia where he has been able to organize for the Unification Movement without running afoul of the authorities.

A student leader of the Belarusian Unificationists spent nine months in prison on trumped up charges of assaulting a guest at the church center and stealing his cell phone. This is a country where there is no such thing as presumption of innocence, and the KGB is still actually called the "KGB."

The UC was one of the first to be de-registered by the government when it began its

clampdown on the new religions. Unable to meet openly, members huddle in attics and back rooms, fearing that the police may come in at any moment and arrest them for illegal religious activity.

Other groups fare no better. The Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which does not recognize the authority of the Moscow patriarchate, had a new church demolished under Belarus' religion law, which requires the Orthodox patriarch give permission for new religious construction. Several Pentecostal churches report repression, as do nearly all of the NRMs, which must operate underground.

Before leaving, I visit the site of a former concentration camp where 210,000 people, mostly Jews, were murdered in crematoriums during WWII. In a talk with Belarusian youth leaders that evening, I mention that there used to be 300,000 Jews in Minsk, but now there are only a few hundred. One earnest young man raises his hand and explains: "They all moved to Israel."

One can see that Belarus still has a long way to go in terms of "getting it."

The next day, as I prepare for the 2-hour drive across the border to Vilnius and my plane home, a wave of panic overcomes me. Is the KGB on my trail? Am I going to be stopped at the border? I decide to leave my ICRF literature behind, especially the article I wrote in the last newsletter criticizing the Belarus religion law.

A part of me knows it's irrational, but for some reason I can't get over the fear. I have relatives on both sides of the family who didn't survive the Holocaust in what is today Belarus. Does

this fear come from my Belarusian relatives calling out to me from beyond their unmarked mass graves, or is it "just me" being insecure?

The repression experienced by the new religions of Belarus today, of course, cannot be compared to what happened sixty years ago in that same country. But it is sad that the international community today, as then, seems either ignorant, apathetic, or powerless to do much about it.

I breathed easier as I finally did cross the border into Lithuania and soon reached the Vilnius airport that Easter Sunday—a day of hope and new life for Christians, and a day of fear for Jews who never knew when an Easter sermon would be an occasion for a pogrom against the Jewish "Christ killers."

Those same mixed emotions of hope and fear remain with me today as I consider the future of religious freedom and human rights in Eastern Europe.



Leading songs with "J" at Krishna temple in St. Petersburg

ICRF's Web Site

- Reports on religious freedom in 100+ countries
- On-line back issues of ICRF's newsletter
- Great links to internet resources on human rights



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Tolerance

from page 2

Instances of religious intolerance can hardly be viewed apart from the general direction of relations between the state and religions. Although the constitution of the Russian Federation and federal legislation on freedom of conscience and religious associations guarantee to religious organizations equality before the law, to a great extent this provision remains in word only.

And finally, the third theme of the forum—the role of mass news media. Unfortunately, many publications dealing with questions of faith are blatantly ignorant and, it seems, calls by OSCE for educating reporters who write on religious topics have brought about little change.

Conditions of intolerance with regard to believers of other confes-

sions, especially those that have centers abroad, are increasing in Russian society. In one of the recent editions of the semi-official orthodox publication *Rus Pravoslavnaia* there was broad collection of materials containing crude and slanderous expressions of an explicitly anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic character. Practically all of Russia's neighbors are declared to be its enemies. The collection's composers "predict" that after "a great slaughter" in which the Vatican will appear on the side of the enemies of "holy Rus" everyone will have to bow to the "Orthodox God."

In April the NTV channel showed a broadcast that was quite offensive toward Pentecostal Christians, which included participants from the department of "sectarian studies" of the St. Tikhon's Orthodox Institute. They were accused

of performing "ritual murders," making zombies of believers, and breaking up families. Meanwhile representatives of this "totalitarian sect" participate in the Council on Cooperation with Religious Associations of the Russian presidential administration.

In our country there is a traditional trust in the news media. This is why they should devote their energies to forming tolerance in our multi-confessional society and respect for the rights of each person to freedom of conscience and observing the constitutional principle of the equality of religious organizations before the law.

In any case, sooner or later Russia will have to become tolerant; otherwise it will be difficult for us to occupy a worthy place in the family of European nations.

The author is a leading human rights lawyer of Russia.