I am not a religious person in terms of a confessional belief, nor am I a politician. I am just a psychologist and psychiatrist. In addition, I am a citizen of my country. Russia and the United States are quite similar: Both are great countries with multiethnic populations and mosaic cultures. At the same time we are quite different, particularly regarding our sociocultural expectations and attitudes toward religions/confessions.

American culture has from the beginning been multireligious and multiconfessional, with a high level of religious tolerance. Russia became a Christian country in 988-989 by an authoritarian decision of Vladimir I. For almost a thousand years, the Russian Orthodox Church was the only state religion and was characterized by a deep and strong intolerance of other religions. It even resisted the smallest attempts to revise its officially established canons.

The forced atheism of the Soviet period interrupted religious traditions as such, and, at the same time, accented not only the civil loyalty of the church but its double standard in spiritual and secular life. Today, there are not many really faithful believers. Yet there are many that see the traditions of Orthodox Christianity as the Russian tradition and the core of Russian identity.

Despite all the differences between Russia and the United States, we may see some similar processes and conflicts at work in the religious sphere. First is the so-called anti-sect movement—the struggle against totalitarian sects and cults by violent deprogramming accompanied by a push for prohibitive laws.

I compare Russia and the United States—these two poles of modern Christian culture—in order to underline two points:

1) Russia is included in the worldwide process of redefining religious freedom; and
2) In this process, we are dealing with psychological realities as well as religion.

You know the current situation in Western countries much better than I do; therefore I will focus on the Russian situation. The downfall of the Soviet empire and the subsequent transition period generated a high level of individual and collective anxiety (according to some data, about 65 percent of the population instead of the usual 15 percent). This is mostly unconsciousness anxiety that searches for a “real enemy” to explain itself and to struggle against in a just struggle. In such a situation, all struggle against all.

For example, A. Dvorkin is one of the leading anticult experts of the Russian Orthodox Church. He represents the extremist pole and plays an important role in the struggle against “foreign religions.” Yet one newspaper wrote that he is “an agent of international Zionism” who persecutes religious freedom and that he wants to weaken the Russian Orthodox Church in order to establish “Judeo supremacy.”

Psychologically speaking, many people and groups have lost their old habitual identity and need a uniting mythology to rebuild their identity. Identity is very significant; human beings need to have a sense of identity. But to have an identity means not only to identify oneself with one unity and its mythology but also to divide “we” and “they.” Anxiety stimulates the realization of this need by self-assertion but not self-realization. Self-assertion, accordingly, wants to limit another’s freedom for one’s own. As we know, self-assertion is the precursor of self-realization but the development from assertion to realization isn’t a universal, compulsory process.

We have both tendencies in Russia now. Anxious neophobes speak in xenophobic language, using terms such as “foreign religions,” “persons of Caucasian nationality,” “activity of foreign secret services,” “genocide of Russian ethnicity,” and “threat to national security.” In this way, attitudes toward religions in Russia are similar to attitudes regarding family planning, sex education, food preferences, and so forth: They are divided between “our” and “alien.” Very often I see staunch atheists bellicosely support “traditional, national” religions against “nontraditional, alien” religions.

On the other hand, many people, mostly those in the period of self-searching ranging from 20-30 years of age, are disappointed with habitual and widely propagated values. They want to exercise their own self-initiated ways of identity searching. Nobody can say if it is “right” or “not right” because here we deal with personal choice, responsibility, and risk. But I have to say that proselytes of “nontraditional” beliefs are more tolerant of differing beliefs than adepts of the
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so-called traditional religions.

I don’t respect aggressive self-assertion, but I have to say that I respect the right of choice. At the same time, I empathize with the soul pain, spiritual-searching, and personal problems of those from both positions.

Why are self-assertive attitudes toward religion so strong in Russia today? Obviously, on one hand we are dealing with political games. Balls of religious intolerance are being thrown by politicians. However, let’s not shut our eyes to the other side: To a large degree, people psychologically need and prefer such games. My question is, what stimulates them to play such games, in which to win means to restrict another’s right of religious freedom?

I don’t know of any other explanation aside from social anxiety and the style of coping with anxiety in the frame of a dialogue between traditional and futuristic trends. Even educated psychiatrists and psychologists are involved in these games. One colleague told me, “It was absolutely right for psychiatrists to diagnose these sectarians as schizophrenics.” I asked her, “Do you remember your friends in 1970 who were victims of oppressive psychiatry? It looks quite like your idea. Do you agree?” “It’s different,” she said. “All ways are right in the struggle against the devil.” Regrettably, she is not alone in such a position.

Common people can’t understand why more than 4,000 preachers of different religions, most of which were barely heard of yesterday, are suddenly working in Russia. They are impressed by the outreach through meetings and sermons on TV and radio. As the famous Russian poet Osip Mandelstam wrote, “I like my unhappy earth because I haven’t seen any other.” People may declare they are for religious freedom and yet behave as if saying, “I hate two things: restriction of conscious freedom and sectarians.” Furthermore, even really democratic people can’t understand why some groups or movements are named “churches” (for instance, Scientology). Nor can they easily accept commercialization of religious activity. Let’s agree there are many psychological problems that need very tolerant approaches.

The Russian Independent Psychiatric Association (IPA) became involved in this problem when some Russian professionals concluded in 1994, based on the letters of parents and the examination of one mentally ill woman, that activity of nontraditional religious groups “causes
irremediable damage to physical, mental and moral health of people.” It was the first, but not the last, attempt to use psychiatry as an oppressive instrument. This line was continued by the state Duma, the Commission for National Security, and even the Health Ministry despite the work of the IPA and other organizations, which was supported by the American Psychiatric Association.

Our disagreement was motivated first of all by the interests of the so-called sectarians and second by our resistance to new uses of psychiatry as “scientific grounds” for persecution and violations of human rights.

For four years we were called “freemasons” and “small Chubaises.” Chubais, you may recall, is the name of the vice-premier who is the most disliked person in Russia. He is called a “red-brown” and so on. Our members, as well as specialists in the Russian center of medical psychology, the Bekhterev Institute in St. Petersburg, were rejected as experts by courts because “their democratic mentality will be a barrier to decisions, which are necessary.” I could tell you many dramatic stories.

Despite our difficulties, we have achieved some definite results. One is, the official practice of declaring that, “psychiatric damage” is caused by nontraditional religious groups has almost stopped; at least, it has become much more silent and careful. Unfortunately, the new Law on Freedom of Conscience has created wide bureaucratic options to limit freedom of religion.

We are continuing our activity in defense of religious freedom through our patients and clients, public discussions, legislative initiatives, work with the professional press and mass media, participation in the efforts of non-government democratic organizations, etc. We are secular professionals, so we cannot be judges in the spiritual and religious discussions, but as professionals it is our responsibility to help protect people.

I would like to emphasize that we are not on one side or against any religion. We are just for freedom of spiritual and religious self-determination and self-realization and against psychiatric terror.

What is the prognosis of the Russian situation? We need enough time for the development and growth of mutual respect and to allow the coexistence of different religions as well as non-intervention by the government in this extremely delicate sphere. No one culture can do it in
a moment or by order. While it is a long process, fortunately, it has started.