



Russia Moves to Liquidate Fifty-Six Religious Groups

By Derek H. Davis

On October 15 the Russian Ministry of Justice took steps to begin liquidating 56 non-Russian Orthodox religious organizations. The groups face dissolution, Russian news sources reported, because they failed to file required annual reports on their activities. Those targeted include a range of non-Russian Orthodox organizations and churches but hardest hit were various Christian groups, both Protestant and Catholic. Baptist groups were prominent on the list, but Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist and Pentecostal groups were also included. Well known humanitarian groups such as World Vision and Youth with a Mission were also named, as was the Russian branch of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Non-Christian organizations were also named, including Muslim and Buddhist associations.

According to the Slavic Legal Center in Moscow, many of the organizations believe they are in full compliance with filing requirements and are surprised to be included in the list. They are unsure if the posting is a scare tactic or if the Ministry of Justice indeed intends to pursue liquidations on a massive scale. Anatoly Pchelintsev, an attorney for the Slavic Center for Law and Justice, remarked that "such actions fly in the face of official Russian state policy on the freedom of worship and creed." Pchelintsev believes the responsible officials are unaware of the complicated international ramifications of their actions and cites the possibility of "chaos and destabilization in church-state relations." He added that in the case of most of the affected organizations, the threatened punishment goes too far. "In Russia there already are more than a dozen cases in which courts rendered decisions in favor of religious organizations since the punishment for their failure to submit information did not formally fit the crime committed." Moreover, he added, "liquidation for failure to submit information is equivalent to sentencing a jaywalker to the death penalty. After all, liquidation means that the organization's life is put to an end." In addition, said Pchelintsev, "such actions are inconsistent with the policy of the Russian government, which guarantees freedom of conscience and religious confessions for each person. The widespread liquidation of religious associations for petty violations will lead to the crudest infringement of human rights in our country and to the self-isolation of the government."

Pastor Vitaly Vlasenko, Director for External Church Relations of the Russian Union of Christians-Baptists, had a less dramatic reaction. He warned against undue alarm, suggesting that the action by the Ministry of Justice is a mere "wake-up call." He reported that thousands of religious organizations were registered during the 1990s, and that because a number of them are now defunct, the Ministry is probably only attempting to clear out organizations that no longer function. In some cases, he noted, registered and actual activities no longer match. For example, he said, in one instance, "a Baptist organization registered in Moscow is active only in Siberia."

However, according to Joseph K. Grieboski, president of Washington DC's Institute for Religion and Democracy, "the move to liquidate several organizations can be seen only as a move to limit and control their activity further. Despite recent European Court of Human Rights cases against such activities and registration standards, the Russian Government continues its ongoing tightening of religious activity and continues to threaten free exercise of faith in Russia."

It is too early to know precisely why the Ministry is threatening dissolution of so many religious groups. Russians are accustomed to a degree of arbitrariness and intimidation as pertains to non-Orthodox religions, but are such threats really necessary? Could not the organizations have been contacted separately and asked to supply needed information for compliance rather than discovering from outside sources that they suffer possible dissolution? According to Pchelintsev, a majority of the organizations named in the list are seriously frightened, if not already in panic mode.

The Ministry of Justice's action only bolsters the claim by many within Russia that the government is not serious about religious freedom but consistently works in tandem with the Russian Orthodox Church to pester, persecute and eliminate if possible other religions. By most estimates, more than eighty percent of Russians today identify themselves as Orthodox. There is a saying in Russia: "To be Russian is to be Orthodox." Nevertheless, the restructuring of Russia that began in the late 1980's was supposed to be about creating a democracy where freedom was ensured for all citizens, and all religions were to have equal standing before the law.

But the Russian Orthodox Church was always a vocal critic of this new policy of religious freedom, and prevailed upon the Duma to pass a highly restrictive new law in 1997 that slowed Russia's experiment with unlimited religious freedom. This law, which comprehensively regulates church-state relations in Russia, specially acknowledges the unique contributions to Russia's culture and statehood of several of the nation's oldest religions—Russian Orthodoxy in particular—but it also discriminates against the Federation's less traditional religions by requiring special registration procedures and by limiting the scope of the activities in which they can lawfully engage.

Many religious organizations have already been liquidated under this law; frequently it has been used as a tool for officials throughout Russia to remove unwanted religious groups. In the spirit of this sanctioned discrimination, it remains difficult for many religious organizations to buy or even rent property to be used for worship purposes, meet for worship services, conduct schools, disseminate religious literature, or proselytize. "The Russian Orthodox Church is already halfway towards becoming a state church," the business daily *Kommersant* wrote recently. Another kind of disquiet was expressed by Anatoly Krasikov, an expert in socio-religious studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, who warned, "if Orthodoxy becomes a new ideology, we'll be right back to a totalitarian state."

The Ministry of Justice's action against 56 religious organizations might be a genuine but harmless attempt to bring the organizations into compliance with law. But many inside Russia doubt whether there is not something more troublesome at play here. It might well be Russia's latest attempt to elevate Russian Orthodoxy to a position made prominent by reducing and eliminating the competition. Russia must confront the task of how best to treat religion and religious institutions within an emerging democratic order. Given Russia's history, the Russian Orthodox Church might expect to have a dominant *cultural* role long into the future, but it is the Russian people, in democratic course, who must ultimately deny the church a preferred *legal* position. Their decision is key to the advance, or decline, of freedom in the new Russia.