

# **RUSSIA: Will Russia respect the Bible? Vyborg Court decides not to examine New Testament for extremism**

By Roman Lunkin

Slavic Centre for Law and Justice (09.01.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2jvINR3> – In Russia there is underway a rather complex process of adjustment to vigorous religious activity in conditions of harsh legislation, which assigns believers to the category of potentially dangerous citizens. However, practice shows that excessive suspicions contradict common sense.

On 21 December 2016, the Vyborg district court issued one of the rare decisions in favor of a religious organization, the Gideons Association of Evangelical Christians. Back in June 2016, personnel of the Brusnichnoe customs post seized a large bunch of books of the New Testament and Psalms (20 thousand). For a course of more than a decade the Gideons mission has been importing these sacred books from Finland, and therefore the believers did not at all understand the desire of customs to conduct an expert analysis to look for extremism and to seize the shipment. As a result, the books became damp and were ruined and the mission would have had to pay a great sum for storage of the shipment. After a whole series of investigations and even suspicions of corruption regarding the case (bidding for conducting the expert analysis of the New Testament was announced and the order was given to a commercial firm and the expert analysis cost almost a half million rubles), the court decided that the actions of customs were illegal.

The attorney for the Gideons mission, Anatoly Pchelintsev, notes that the head of the Brusnichnoe customs post, Sergei Lenin, demanded from his client confirmation that the printed production did not contain information that falls under the purview of the federal law "On combating extremist activity." This same law to which customs appeals contains the direct instruction that sacred texts of several religions, including the Bible, may not be found to be extremist.

The Gideons mission had already earlier had an expert analysis by the Herzen Russian State Pedagogical University stating that the text of the books ordered by them conforms to the Synodal translation. But customs did not take it into account and announced the bidding (the psychological linguistic expert analysis of the literature was not supposed to be conducted by a religious studies expert but for some reason by an individual entrepreneur from Murmansk, Mikhail Laktinov).

Pchelintsev noted that an Orthodox priest who works with prisoners spoke during the trial. He confirmed the correspondence of the text of the New Testament and Psalms with the canonical translation, explaining that he receives the copies of religious literature gratis and distributes it among prisoners in jails.

After the amendments to the federal law "On combating extremist activity" regarding the immunity of sacred scriptures of the Bible, Quran, Tanakh, and Kangyur took effect on 25 November 2015, much has changed in the legislation. In July 2016 the Yarovaya Law adopted amendments about monitoring of evangelistic activity, which were accompanied by a squall of court cases against believers.

Translations of sacred texts had already earlier been the subject of judicial investigation. In 2013 the October district court of Novorossiisk ruled the "Idiomatic Translation of the Holy Quran into the Russian Language" by Elmir Kuliev to be extremist (on 17 December of the same year

the Krasnodar territorial court quashed the decision of the October district court).

In a roundabout way, quotations of biblical texts connected with proclaiming the truth of their faith had already been investigated in the course of the trial of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Golovin court of the city of Moscow in the early 2000s. Then there was a return to this topic in 2009, when the campaign to prohibit the literature of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their congregations was begun, which most likely will lead in the near future to the liquidation of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. The Jehovah's Witnesses are quite seriously accused of considering their belief to be better and more true than that of other religions and confessions.

The logic of the prosecutor's office leads to the necessity of proving that the Jehovahists do not have a Bible at all and that this is not the Bible. The prosecutor's office can thus declare new translations of the New Testament, which are most often used by protestant churches, to be "not the Bible" and "not a sacred text."

Expert analyses of new translations of the Bible have already been done in a case against believers that was opened in the same region. Since the summer of 2015, the Vyborg city court has been conducting a case for finding the Bible in the translation that the Jehovah's Witnesses use (The New World Translation) to be extremist literature. In 2015 an expert analysis of the Bible in the Jehovahist translation was done at the request of the Vyborg customs by the Center of Socio-cultural Expert Analysis (investigation 240/15 of 3 August 2015). Among the experts there was not a single person with an academic degree with a specialty of religious studies (V.S. Kotelnikov, A.E. Tarasov, N.N. Kriukova). The expert analysis contains a section on the "Canonical understanding of the Bible." It gives an Orthodox definition of the Bible and the Word of God, of course from the point of view of the experts

themselves. It contains this quotation: "Sectarian practice, which usually is based upon carefully selected and reinterpreted quotations from the Bible, ossifies Christianity, turning it into legalism." Further the experts examine "Sacred Scripture. The New World Translation," the Jehovahist version of the Bible. It is pointed out that the name of God appears there as Jehovah, that the word "cross" is translated from the Greek as stake of tortures, and that some of the books receive different titles. Moreover, the Jehovah's Witnesses' translation, as the experts note for some reason, follows the Masoretic tradition and not the Septuagint, which, in turn, is followed by the Synodal translation. After a comparison of the Synodal translation and the New World Translation, the experts draw the conclusion that the Jehovahist text "permits one to assemble a system of doctrinal and ethical texts that is different from the Christian tradition."

After a whole series of quotations with different translations of the biblical text and of calls in the Jehovahists' literature to study the Bible, the experts' conclusion follows: "On the basis of the foregoing, the New World Translation is not a variant translation of the Bible within the Christian tradition and consequently it is not the Bible as a canonical collection of texts." One of the arguments consists in the fact that for studying the translation a study guide is needed, with interpretations of the texts, and "therefore the New World Translation contains references to all the ideas existing in the doctrinal and ethical literature of the Jehovah's Witnesses."

The Russian Bible Society provided the following conclusion regarding this expert analysis: "In the modern legal society, the secular power cannot assume for itself the role of arbitrator in theological disputes and cannot make any of the numerous ecclesiastical traditions the standard to which all Christians must adhere in their religious practice."

The situation in judicial practice in the sphere of religion

is like a tug of war between various branches of the government and law enforcement agencies. And even if believers win a court case, their status as suspects does not change.

(translated by PDS, posted 12 January 2017)

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