

RUSSIA: Almost two-year-long trial of Jehovah's Witness nears end

In trial of case of Danish believer in Orel, defendant himself provided explanations

Russia Religion News (18.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2AVCJZv> – On 15 and 16 January 2019, Dennis Christensen, who is charged with “arranging the activity of an extremist organization” (Art. 282.2 of CC RF), presented to the court his explanations. He confirmed that he professes the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, analyzed the motives ascribed to him by the investigation, pointed out the shortcomings in the indictment, openly exposed the secret witness of the prosecution, and declared his complete innocence.

Concerning his faith and intent

“It is true that I am an elder,” he confessed in court. “Among Jehovah's Witnesses this is not an office but a way of life of a minister of God.” As evidence, Christensen quoted for the court excerpts from the Bible that speak about the high moral requirements for elders. However he decisively refuted the accusation of “convoking meetings” and that he is an “organizer” of worship services. Christensen described in detail that Christian meetings are an expression of Christian love on the part of each person and that they were conducted in Orel before his arrival and will be conducted if he is not there.

In analyzing the motives ascribed to him as extremist, Dennis Christensen described why he likes the religion of the Witnesses: "We call one another brothers and sisters... After such meetings a person feels encouraged. We discuss how to provide practical help to those who are sick. It is possible they need help in purchasing groceries or preparing meals. The elderly often need help if something breaks or a light bulb needs changing. We discuss how to help people so that they will have close relations with God and how to explain biblical truths to them. We discuss how one can improve relations with neighbors, coworkers, and classmates. Sometimes about what we could do in order that our city becomes yet cleaner." He summarized: "As is evident from the aforesaid, when I became a Jehovah's Witness and subsequently, when I came to Russia, I did not have any intention to commit a crime."

Was it forbidden to believe in Jehovah

Back in the SIZO [investigative cell], Christensen received the possibility to acquaint himself with the judicial decision finding the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of Orel to be extremist. He read an excerpt from the ruling of the Russian Supreme Court of 18 October 2016: "The rights of members of the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of Orel to freedom of religious confession will not be violated, since they are not denied the possibility of exercising and conducting religious rituals not connected with the distribution of religious literature of extremist contents." After this Christensen declared: "If the Supreme Court considers it legal for believers, including former members of the local religious organization, to conduct and profess their religious rituals, why then was I accused

that in my case these actions are illegal? If the Supreme Court has given such an explanation, why am I accused that I should have understood it differently?"

Christensen explained that the local religious organization of Orel ceased to exist on 18 October 2016 on the basis of a court decision. But this did not mean that believers in the city of Orel were required to cease believing in God. "Since article 28 of the constitution has not be changed up to the present time, I consider that I and my fellow believers had the right to conduct worship services, which were not in any way connected with the legal entity that had been liquidated."

Concerning the secret records of telephone conversations

"The F.S.B. secretly surveilled me in the course of nine months," Christensen said. "And I did not suspect this. And in all of that period I never denigrated anybody, I did not encourage genocide, nor the persecution of other people, nor the destruction of the family, nor violence, nor anything else that I am accused of. The fact that in my telephone conversations various questions were discussed which were connected with my life as a believing person is not evidence that I committed some kind of crime." "In none of my telephone conversations did there even occur the expression 'local religious organization,'" Christensen continued. "Meanwhile the prosecution arbitrarily declares that I talked about the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of Orel. And I never had anything to do with it either legally or actually. Consequently I never had either the intention nor the desire to revive the activity of this organization."

Exposure of a secret witness

Separately Dennis Christensen focused on the testimony of a secret witness with the pseudonym of "Ermilov." "The court was not able to be convinced of the fact that the real name of this citizen is Oleg Kurdiumov. He is a teacher of the Orel State University," Dennis Christensen said. "Under the pretext of a person who was interested in the Bible, Kurdiumov began, in accordance with instructions of the F.S.B., to take pictures with a hidden camera, and then also on instructions from the F.S.B. to secretly record on a dictaphone our conversations with him. Since the audio and video tapes he obtained did not contain any information about crimes committed by me, Kurdiumov decided to supplement them with his own fantasies, giving testimony under a pseudonym. I regard this act as unworthy of a university instructor... As the witness Kurdiumov explained, much of the information he gave to the court, he read on the internet network. That means, his testimony cannot be used as evidence in the case, inasmuch as it is only hearsay."

"Esteemed court, I wish to emphasize that in contrast with the side of the prosecution, I never viewed the peaceful worship services of believers to be a continuation of the activity of the liquidated local religious organization," Dennis Christensen said in conclusion. "I never had the intention of committing a crime." (tr. by PDS, posted 18 January 2019)

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