

RUSSIA: Case of Danish Jehovah's Witness continues

Summary of hearings in case of Danish believer in Orel

Russia Religion News (09.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2K1iQmQ> – In October 2018, in the Zheleznodorozhny district court of the city of Orel, 11 court sessions were held in the case of the Danish subject Dennis Christensen, who faces up to 10 years incarceration (on the basis of part 1 of article 282.2 of the CC of the RF) merely for the fact that he professes the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. The case is being heard by Judge Aleksei Rudnev.

On 8, 10, 15-17, and 22-24 October 2018, the court examined religious books in digital format that were discovered on a computer seized from Dennis Christensen. In the courtroom, separate fragments from these books and brochures were read, specifically encouraging the maintenance of peaceful relations with people and the strengthening of family ties, especially if a life partner has a different religion.

The prosecution called attention to fragments explaining who are the elders of a Christian congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and what their pastoral concern consists of and what personal requirements they must meet. In particular, the instructions enumerated in the New Testament that each of them "must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, moderate in habits, sensible, self-disciplined, hospitable, and capable of teaching, and they should not cause drunken scandals or beat others but be reasonable, not belligerent, not love money, and

manage their households well. . . .” It was left for the lawyers merely to note that the image of the person described is entirely unlike that of a criminal. The prosecutor also called attention to a quotation from the New Testament Acts of the Apostles: “It is necessary to obey God rather than men.” When Dennis Christensen was asked: “Do you know instances when Jehovah’s Witnesses refused to obey laws of the state, making a choice in favor of the laws of God?” he answered that he knows of one such case, when German Jehovah’s Witnesses during World War II went to concentration camps instead of the eastern front, refusing to kill Russian soldiers.

The lawyers also called attention to the fact that not one of the books or brochures found by the prosecution had been ruled to be “extremist.”

On 24 October 2018, the court again extended Christensen’s term of detention in custody by three months, until 1 February 2019. The next day an appeal was filed against this order.

On 29 October 2018, the court studied electronic files from tablets seized from other believers. The prosecution interprets the very fact that the citizens used books in electronic form as measures of conspiracy. Lawyers consider such an interpretation far-fetched.

In describing the seized files, the investigator considered without basis that they belonged to the local religious organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Orel. When lawyers called attention to this, the judge asked the prosecutor whether the files contain any information about the local

religious organization. The prosecutor had to respond that they do not. Christensen also explained that he has nothing to do with these files.

In reviewing other evidence of Christensen's guilt included in the case by investigators, the lawyers called the court's attention to photographs where Christensen and his wife were shown in a supermarket alongside a person in a costume of a fairytale character. The lawyers asked what these and many other pieces of "evidence" prove. They do not prove anything and they have been introduced into the case merely for volume, which shows the essence of this criminal case as based on nothing, the lawyers concluded.

On 30 October 2018 the court continued to examine materials of the case. The prosecutor read various bank statements from 2016. In depicting them, the prosecutor several time repeated the phrase "it has no significance for this criminal case," so that the judge asked: "If the materials have no significance for this case, then why are we wasting time here?" The prosecutor refused to read the next protocol consisting of 48 points.

In trying to prove Christensen's guilt, the prosecution added to the materials of the case a certificate from a military commission regarding nine conscripts who refused service in the army, citing their religious convictions. The lawyers called attention to the fact that the prosecution's use of the wording "refused service in the army" is incorrect inasmuch as the state provides alternative service for citizens. In selecting alternative service, a citizen is following the law strictly. Then the lawyer read out where each of these nine youths had been sent for conducting alternative service. Some

served in the Russian postal service and others in a gerontology center caring for elderly people. The lawyer suggested thinking about the feelings of the elderly for whom these people were caring and how grateful they were to them. Without any doubt, the young believers were fulfilling their civic duty to the state.

On 31 October 2018, the initiative in surveying the materials of the case was passed to the defense. Lawyers called the judge's attention to the fact that after the case was opened against Christensen, the investigation did not arrest him for some time. That means that the investigator himself did not think that Christensen could flee. Consequently, his detention in custody is without grounds.

In addition, lawyers identified defects in the expert analyses existing in the case.

Subsequent sessions in this case are scheduled for 6, 7, 12, and 14 November 2018 in the Zheleznodorozhny district court of Orel (45-a Maxim Gorky St.). (tr. by PDS, posted 11 November 2018)

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