

## **International community of human rights defenders v. Russian state-appointed 'experts'**

HRWF (20.08.2017) - On 17 August 2017, the Vyborg City Court in Russia ruled to ban the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (NWT), a Bible published by Jehovah's Witnesses, on the basis of the opinion of three so-called state-appointed experts in religious matters: **A. Ye. Tarasov, V. S. Kotelnikov, N. N. Kryukova**, three so-called religious experts of the **Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies**. International experts disagree with their alleged expertise.

**Alexander Verkhovsky, member of Russia's Presidential Council on Human Rights and the Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis in Moscow**

"Ms. Kryukova, the director of the Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies, is notorious for extremely low-quality expert conclusions. She does not have any training in the study of religions and she always works on the side of accusations, so her opinion is not valuable. Anyway, it's a strange idea to prove that a certain translation 'is not the Bible.' There are many translations, scientists and believers may discuss which ones are better or worse, but it is only an act of faith to see the translation as the Bible or not. Now that the Russian court has declared the NWT "extremist," other religions and their sacred texts may be in danger. Why not? We already witnessed an attempt to ban one translation of the Qur'an." [averh@sova-center.ru](mailto:averh@sova-center.ru)

**Roman Lunkin, head of the Center for Problems of Religion and Society at the Russian Academy of Science's Institute of Europe in Moscow**

"The attempt to ban the JW's translation of the Bible is an embarrassment to the Russian procuracy and court system. The court-ordered "expert study," in my opinion, is based on forgery for several reasons—the experts listed in the study are not specialists in religious studies. Maybe that explains the illogic of the statements that the NWT is not a Bible and does not contain quotes from the Bible, etc. So the experts prepared a fake study for the court—that could be a crime that needs punishment. Now that Russia has banned the Witnesses' NWT, other faiths should be concerned that their new translations of their sacral texts could also be banned." [romanlunkin@gmail.com](mailto:romanlunkin@gmail.com)

**Emily Baran, assistant professor of Russian history at Middle Tennessee State University**

"Democratic governments should not be in the business of determining theology. Yet this is what the Russian court system has chosen to do by wading into matters of scriptural translation. Different Christian communities use different translations of the Bible, Jehovah's Witnesses included. Russia seems to want to have it both ways: on the one hand, claiming to protect the Bible from its own anti-extremist law, and on the other, declaring some Bibles to be not Bibles at all so that it can still apply this law selectively to faiths it opposes. Jehovah's Witnesses are not at fault in this matter, but they have been a primary victim of this flawed and fundamentally undemocratic legislation." [Emily.b.baran@gmail.com](mailto:Emily.b.baran@gmail.com)

**Daniel Mark, chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)**

"The conclusion by the court--by any court--that the NWT translation is not a Bible is nonsense. This is because it is simply not up to courts to decide what does or doesn't count any as one particular group's Holy Scripture. If the Witnesses consider this book their scripture, then it is. The internationally recognized and guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief for all people surely includes the right of the Witnesses to be free from the dictates of any government entity as to what is or isn't their Bible. All people of good will should be concerned with this development in Russia. And we should be mindful of the fact that the principle at stake here puts all disapproved group under threat of similar actions. Unfortunately, this is yet further evidence that the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which I chair, was correct to recommend that the State Department designate Russia as a 'country of particular concern' for the first time."  
[Dmark55@gmail.com](mailto:Dmark55@gmail.com)

**Willy Fautré, director and co-founder of Belgium-based Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)**

"It is not up to a state to determine what is and what is not the sacred book of a religion, which translation of the Bible has the same status as the Bible in the original language. After the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses, banning their holy scriptures – New World Translation - because they "are not a Bible" according to Russian state-appointed experts is another egregious violation of freedom of religion or belief in Russia. Any translation of any other historical sacred book – the Koran of the Muslims, the Tanakh of the Jews and the Kangyur of the Buddhists - can now be declared illegal in Russia, and any sacred book of any other religion is now vulnerable to state censorship in Russia." [w.fautre@hrwf.net](mailto:w.fautre@hrwf.net)

**Mathew N. Schmalz, associate professor of religious studies at The College of the Holy Cross; founding editor of the *Journal of Global Catholicism***

"The claim that the NWT is not 'a Bible' is absurd on its face. There are numerous translations of the Bible—if the Russian court wishes to outlaw the NWT translation, then, if they wish to be consistent, they should outlaw all other translations of the Bible as well. The Jehovah's Witnesses I have known have always been caring and supportive neighbors and good citizens who contribute to the community. Two Jehovah's Witnesses have played especially important roles in my life, supporting me in times of need. Labeling Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist group is not only inaccurate, it is an insult. All religious denominations need to come together to express their outrage at the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses by the Russian government. Allowing the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses to continue will only embolden the Russian government to curtail the legitimate religious liberties of many other denominations."  
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