

CULTS AND THE CULTIC LOBBY IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, 2007

An Overview

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Today we increasingly encounter various shapes and forms of totalitarian and destructive cults. In my country, the cults have been actively working, developing and spreading for over fifteen years, and naturally, many features of the phenomenon are very similar to the rest of the world. Nonetheless, we have our own specific characteristics.

When the cults had arrived en masse into the USSR (later in CIS) at the late 1980's they've encountered a wide spread ignorance about them, wide spread admiration to everything western, and a situation where for a very insignificant for Western standards sum of money one could rent a huge stadium, for example. The ideological vacuum and a large number of disoriented people had eased the recruitment work for the cults. Another factor in favor of the cults was the benevolence of the authorities. Since in soviet times everything religious was either forbidden or barely tolerated (the only exception to that was ironically Hare Krishnas, who started their organization in Russia in 1981, most likely with the knowledge and consent of KGB), after the collapse of the Soviet power the pendulum has moved as far into the other direction. Even Gorbachev when in 1989 he had received Moon as a state guest, most likely had done it out of ignorance. However, his later support of Moon cannot be explained by this factor: we can suppose that the monetary factors probably had played the key role. Probably the same factors were the most important in the support of scientology, Hare Krishna, Aum Shinrikyo and other notorious cults by the Russian authorities. Scientology, for example, had the first presentation of "Dianetics" in the Kremlin, then it opened L. Ron Hubbard reading room in Moscow State University, found a lot of support in the Ministry of Health and even in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In the case of Aum Shinrikyo it went as far that Mr. Oleg Lobov, their main high positioned supporter - the secretary of the Defense Council of the state - allegedly even sold to them the recipe of sarin and a combat helicopter.

Since then some things have changed. Initially all cults were so to say, on the streets, recruiting new members. They used all means (mostly deceit and bribery) to obtain this goal and they did succeed to large extent. Now the presence of such multitude of the cults is not visible to such degree. So many superficial observers conclude that the situation has changed and the cultic totalitarian organizations have failed in Russia. There is nothing so far from the truth!

The cults had not changed themselves; they just gradually changed their tactic. After having collected a body of members each group realized that the street recruitment cannot bring them to the desired goal - the control of the entire society. Nor can it even make them a really large body to influence the society by sheer numbers.

Of course, people - and the authorities did get more information about the cults. Ironically, the more the cults did succeed in the short term, the worse it turned out for them on a long term: with each more person recruited, the number of cult-related tragedies did increase as well. Our Center of Religious Studies, founded in 1993 had become nationally known. I and my colleagues very often comment cult issues on the national TV, giving more information about each cult.

So by now we should say, each of the large cults became notorious and people, armed by knowledge about cultic tragedies became much more cautious. So the new cultic tactic is such: the main thing for them is to entrench, to build the lobby, to mass property, including the real estate and industries, to silence their critics, and eventually to show themselves as a permanent part of Russian reality. We should add that 15-20 years ago the cults were seen as almost entirely foreign phenomenon. Now according to our estimate up to half of them are native Russian cults (Probably, the most notorious of these cult leaders is Mr. Gregory Grabovoy, who offered to Beslan mothers to raise their children from the dead for about three thousand euros per person). More over, some of these new Russian cults have moved part of their activity to the West, so the situation can be described by the familiar title: *The Empire strikes back*. But the patterns of behavior of both groups are very much similar. So we deal with groups that are either international or are internationalizing very quickly. On the other hand, the foreign groups are trying to acquire Russian appearance and to look as native as possible. Both foreign and Russian cults after their names become notorious either change the name (some do it on regular basis) or create a multitude of front organizations with 'innocent' sounding names.

But the most important drive of the cults is to the circles of power. The Moonies reach many important power figures via their peace ambassadors program. The scientologists try to recruit business elite through so called Hubbard College of business administration (as they claim in Russia Hubbard College had trained the personnel of such thriving companies as Boeing, Chanel, Volvo, Coca-Cola, etc.). Hare Krishnas try to impress the authorities by their connection with Indian government. Others have other means to find a structure up on high that would protect them. But the most successful were the Neo-Pentecostals - so far the most numerous cultic movement in Russia and CIS. Their leader Sergey Ryakhovsky couple of years ago had become a member of the Presidential Council for the contacts with religious organizations, and little over a year ago was included in the newly founded Presidential Chamber of Public Representatives. He had very actively used the membership in both of those bodies to advance the cause of his organizations throughout Russia. I must add that the Neo-Pentecostals have been very active in advancing their political goals and infiltrating the power structures not only in Russia but also in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, and, perhaps, the most successfully, in Latvia. The most known Neo-Pentecostal leader of CIS Alexey Ledyaeve have published a book named "The New World Order" in which he described a kind of totalitarian theocracy with Neo-Pentecostal leaders at the top. This is really a political program for the entire cultic movement. All of this, naturally, causes a very serious concern. In fact, I did voice this concern in a popular program on Russian TV. It happened in September a year ago. After that Mr. Ryakhovsky had sued me in Moscow court. In May the process had concluded by my victory. In September the Moscow city court has rejected Ryakhovsky's appeal.

So, all cults that have reached a certain size begin to build very actively their lobby. The lobby consists of several groups: pro-cult scholars, pro-cult human rights defenders, journalists, psychiatrists, lawyers, and finally pro-cult politicians.

The role of scholars is taken in Russia by former communist professional anti-religion propagandists. With the fall of communism, they lost their well-paid sinecures. After looking for new jobs a lot of them realized that the newly arriving cults would pay well and offered

their services to them. Now they call themselves "experts-religious scholars". During the last few years though, there have begun to appear some young and newly made sociologists of religion actively propagating their "progressive" methodology.

As for the second group it should be said that many former professional dissidents and human rights activists having also lost their *raison d'être* in the post-Soviet period, have now decided that they must defend the rights of small and defenseless "religious minorities" suffering terrible persecution and discrimination at the hands of an aggressive majority. Perhaps, the most well known of them, the *Moscow Helsinki group*, as it was proven several times, has been receiving money from Scientology. More over Moscow Helsinki group actively participates in virtually every public event organized by Scientology. Just recently the head of Moscow Helsinki group Ms. Alexeyeva had publicly proclaimed: "Many people tell me to stay away from Scientology for the sake of my good reputation. But I will always remain deaf to these advises". I should say that two groups: Scientology and Falun Gong (Falun Dafa) have been leaders in using "human rights" community in their own goals. By the way, both of them cooperate very actively with each other. Falun Gong (which, incidentally in Russia consists mostly of ethnically Russian adepts) have been pursuing its own personal vendetta against Chinese government, and has successfully recruited most of "human rights" community to fight their battle.

There are not many journalists who professionally explore the field. Among them there is a small but very noisy group of "professional revealers of truth" and "fighters against retrogrades" which is close to dissident-human rights defenders circles and who are ready to publish under their names any text that the cults will offer them.

As for the lawyers specializing in the area of cults, there are very few of them and in fact, the most well known of them are those who represent the cults in various proceedings. Some of them are tightly connected to Scientology (out of them the most notorious is member of the board of Scientological Citizen's Human Rights Commission - Ms. Galina Krylova who recently had represented Scientology in Strasbourg Court of Human Rights), while others are at least partially funded by the State Department of the USA (the best known of these is the *Slavic Center of Law and Justice* headed by Mr. Anatoly Pchelintsev and Mr. Vladimir Ryakhovsky - the brother of the chief Neo-Pentecostal of Russia who was mentioned above). Of course, both groups do receive income from many sources, both cultic, and pro-cultic.

Russian pro-cult psychiatrists have incorporated themselves into the *Independent Psychiatric Association* closely connected with the very same former dissidents-human rights activists and being at least partially subsidized by the cults.

As for the last group - the pro-cult politicians - a lot of them could be named (and some were named above). There is an entire political party: "The Union of Right Forces" which takes consistent pro-cult position. A former deputy education minister Mr. Alexander Asmolov had been an active supporter of the Moonies and some other cults. Another notorious case is Mr. Sergey Kirienko who had gone through several Hubbard college courses before Mr. Eltsyn had appointed him for a prime minister post. Now Mr. Kirienko is the Minister of Nuclear Energy.

These are just a few examples. I could have easily mentioned much more names.

The last thing I should mention that I do not see the cults as mere religious organizations concerned primarily with spiritual goals. These are power and money hungry bodies that care

nothing about human lives, human dignity and human well being. There are multiple cases of people who suffer because of them in Russia. More over, we have many cases of outright crimes committed by cult members and cult bosses in my country. These crimes range from swindling and racket to drug traffic, pedophilia and murders. And the number of these crimes does multiply.

We often hear from cult lobby that these organizations constantly change for the better. According to this viewpoint, the new religious movements (NRMs) have already outlived their initial, fanatical phase and have now become respectable and "main-line." We are often accused of treating such organizations according to what they were long ago, and not what they really are today. However, the Russian experience shows otherwise. Most of these groups came into Russia at the end of 1980-s. They started from scratch in my country and had a chance to show that they were really different. However, it did not happen, and what we see in Russia is exactly the same modus operandi and modus vivendi that these groups exhibit in virtually every country they operated in before; there are no changes whatsoever, except, perhaps, a better and more aggressive PR. And it proves that until these groups continue to violate the basic rights of their members we could not expect from them to play anywhere near a positive role in our societies.