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**DESTRUCTIVE RELIGIOSITY” IN THE CONTEXT OF  
THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**

V. L. Benin (a) \*, T. Z. Urazmetov (b)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Bashkir State Pedagogical University named after M. Akmulla, 3a October Revolution st., Ufa, Russian Federation,

(b) Bashkir State Pedagogical University named after M. Akmulla, 3a October Revolution st., Ufa, Russian Federation,

*Abstract*

Since the late 1980s, in the conditions of social crisis and mass confusion of people accompanied by searches for spiritual support, attempts of mass influence on individual consciousness are always active. The trend causes formation of new religious culture. Its novelty results from the civilizational leap of the 20th century which seriously transformed spiritual foundations of world culture in general and religious culture in particular. By the end of the 20th century, the society and the government were influenced by secular and atheistic ideology which regulated the boundaries of human life. The subject of scientific disputes has become concepts of a sect, a neocult, totalitarian, authoritarian, charismatic cults and non-traditional religions which have not been defined in Russian legal acts. Being rather ambiguous, all these concepts have one common seme - "destructiveness".

To recognize religious associations as extremist or terrorist, the government has various legal acts regulating registration of religious organizations, and court decisions. All religious organizations are divided into legal and illegal ones. A sociologist determines destructiveness of any impact on the society, a political scientist - on the state, and a psychologist or a psychiatrist – on the personality. Charges of religious associations in destructiveness brought by religion scholars reflect only their subjective opinion. Without qualified forensic examination and a court sentence, any statements are unfounded.

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## **1. Introduction**

The turn of the second and third millenniums was the knell of the hopes to soften interpersonal relations and solve interstate problems. Moreover, extremism became a striking characteristic of the current period. Therefore, it is not surprising that researchers pay attention to this issue. But countering extremism has aspects which has never been studied. These are religious expert examination and theoretical and practical problems faced by religion experts. Attention to this type of examination is paid due to two reasons. First, the conceptual apparatus in interfaith relations is more complex and less unambiguous than that of political and national extremism. Second, introduction of the discipline “Basics of religious cultures and secular ethics” in school curricula and foundation of Sunday religious schools on the basis of secular educational institutions is potentially dangerous as they can cause interfaith conflicts, especially when the religious literacy level of the majority of teachers is rather low.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Among the problems associated with increased religious tension and transformations of religious culture, religious extremism and terrorism are crucial. A number of problems associated with these manifestations affect all social areas. Various religious organizations are rather active. Identification of features and types of destructive religiosity is important for eliminating or minimizing the destructive impact of religious associations.

## **3. Research Questions**

Religion theory and legal practice should interact to identify destructiveness of religious associations and ideas. It is important to identify characteristics of religious destructiveness. It is difficult to distinguish between socially stabilizing and destructive manifestations of religiosity due to a wide range of confessional associations. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to develop a unified methodology as a system of principles and methods for theoretical and practical activities of the society and government involving various forms of religious life. This determines the task to give a scientific definition of the concepts of “sect”, “totalitarian sect”, “destructive cult” and limit their use as religious categories.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the article is to consider theoretical problems of religion studies associated with the nature of specific confessional groups and their behavior in the interfaith relations; a search for an adequate model of perception of religious associations and doctrines they are based on in the scientific and legal fields

## **5. Research Methods**

The study uses abstraction and idealization, comparative analysis of legal acts and scientific publications, analysis of existing concepts, conceptual apparatus of the study, expert estimation, reflection and generalization of personal empirical experience of expert participation in investigations and religious extremism proceedings. The research is based on authors’ expert activities (Benin & Urazmetov, 2015).

## 6. Findings

In modern religious life of Russia, there is a wide range of different manifestations of religiosity which resulted from the growth of religious freedoms initiated at the end of the Soviet era and legislated in 1990 by the USSR law "On freedom of conscience and religious organizations" (USSR Law, 1990). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the states of the former USSR, including Russia, all forms of religious activities were allowed. The largest religious organizations decided to restore their positions lost during the period of state-ideological atheism. Various religious associations considered Russia as a free "market of religious services." Therefore, the leaders of foreign religious associations began to penetrate into Russia. The officials did not resist their penetration. In 1990, Harikesha Swami met with his followers in the USSR, Moon Son Men met with M.S. Gorbachev. In 1992, Shoko Asahara met with the Vice-President A.V. Rutsky. This freedom affected leading universities where active cooperation with various religious organizations began. A striking example is the initiative taken by the dean of the faculty of journalism of Moscow State University Ya.N. Zasursky. In 1992, he founded the "Hall n.a. L. Ron Hubbard." In the main university of the country.

The USSR and the Russian Federation were visited by leaders of odious religious associations and spiritual "teachers". One of the earliest and most striking phenomena in the religious horizon of the fading Soviet Union was Yuonna Swami and Maria Devi Christ who created the White Brotherhood in 1990–1993. The brotherhood functioned in the USSR, and then in Ukraine and Russia. There were a lot of similar "gurus", "holy fathers" and "learned theologians" (V.G. Mushich, Vissarion, E.D. Marchenko, etc.) who influenced minds and souls of their compatriots.

Another characteristic feature of the religious culture of Russia was attempts to revive paganism. Mordovian, Mari, Russian and many other peoples began to pay attention to their cultural and religious past. Neopagan associations were established.

Religious diversity resulted from religious freedom and spiritual imprinting. Public consciousness formed by atheistic propaganda gained access to religious manifestations as a little-known component of spiritual culture. People who were not familiar with the essence of religion acquired a kind of faith which has been actively used by various preachers. In addition, the Soviet people accustomed to state paternalism did not imagine that their exalted spiritual needs could be used for mercantile purposes by fraudsters who stole material values and claimed their power over consciousness. The Soviet people did not know the "road to the temple". Missionaries and gurus offered them ready-made recipes, gave models of new spirituality through the media, entering their houses.

The situation was aggravated by the fact that the Soviet government did not have experience of partner coexistence with religious institutions, since it interacted with them on the basis of full control. Therefore, the early post-Soviet state which did not have a practical model of legislative regulation of the spiritual sphere was forced to act by trial and error.

As for secular religious studies, they were created from scratch. Before the revolutionary events of October 1917, Russian religious studies were still in their infancy. They began to separate their subject from Christian and Muslim theology. In the subsequent Soviet period, religious studies did not develop due to its subordination to the atheistic policy of the state. Therefore, the state, scientific community and

society as a whole were unprepared for new religiosity which rushed into Russia at the end of the 20th century.

Given these circumstances, we believe that it would be erroneous to accuse Gorbachyov and Yeltsin, or government authorities as a whole of religious chaos. The power of new Russia itself was a product of the previous era and experienced the same problems as the society did. As for the scientific community, its representatives saw only new opportunities for development in religious freedom. They did not predict its negative consequences. However, since the beginning of the 1990s, the state and the scientific community began to realize the need to streamline and structure the new spirituality.

With the aim to use strengthening religious institutions, the Russian government began to develop legal acts. The first attempts to determine positive and negative aspects of religious institutions appeared in Russian researches. There appeared growing interest in traditional and non-traditional religions, sects, and destructive cults in the mass media, public and political discussions and in scientific publications.

Attempts to explain negative consequences of activities of some religious organizations caused the decision of the Court Chamber on information disputes. The decision said that "the concept of a sect does not exist in the Russian legislation. The term has a negative meaning. Using it, journalists can insult feelings of believers" (The decision of the Court Chamber on information disputes, 1998). Courts and some government bodies began to track negative consequences of religious freedom which penetrated into social spheres (e.g., Order of the Ministry of Health and Medical Industry of the Russian Federation, 1996). That reflection resulted in a number of federal laws and other acts regulating the religious life in Russia. These include the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" (Federal Law, 1997), "On State Forensic Expert Activities in the Russian Federation" (Federal Law, 2001), "On Resistance Extremist Activities" (Federal Law, 2002), "On Counter-Terrorism" (Federal Law, 2006), the order of the Federal Ministry of Justice "On the state religious expert examination" (Order of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2009), the Presidential Decree "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation" (Presidential Decree, 2015), etc. The government rationalized possible manifestations of religious freedoms and established their boundaries, determined priorities in relations with religious institutions. Thus, the government protected itself and society from religious extremism and terrorism. In addition, the criminal legislation stipulated measures for protection of religious feelings and needs of Russian people.

While legal definitions do not allow ambiguity, scientific definitions are rather ambiguous. Authors suggest various criteria for differentiation of religious associations. Therefore, we will rely on etymology. The term "destructive" (latin *Destructio*) means "leading to disintegration of the structural-functional interconnections of the system." In religious studies, the concept is connected with the concept "cult". The concept "destructive cult" implies destructive consequences for a person, his mind, stable psychological state, socialization due to his participation in rituals, prayers, worship services and other religious activities.

R. Lifton describes destructive religious associations as follows: sharp division of the world into "clean" and "unclean", "good" and "bad"; declaring dogmas of the group as absolute truth; belief that only members of this group have the right to live; strict structuring of the environment, regulated communication with non-members; limited access to information; a religious doctrine is proclaimed the highest value which is more significant than the personality (Lifton, 1989).

However, if you rely on these signs, it is easy to see that most of them are typical of many antique and modern religious concepts. World division into “pure / good” and “impure / bad” is typical of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Islam. The cornerstone of any religious dogma is its unconditional truth. As for the right to life, the Last Judgment presented in Islam and Christianity involves complete destruction of people of other faiths and sinners from among the adherents of these religions. Rigid structuring of the environment and unambiguous rules of communication inside and outside the confession are also characteristic of all developed religions. God (s) as a source of religious doctrine is a supreme value which is the personality of a believer. Thus, the features of destructive religious associations identified by R. Lifton describe the basis of any religiosity. The fact that today, in the secularized society, the majority of believers do not think about it, shows that traditional religions have lost unlimited power over society, and tools for implementing these features.

It is paradoxical to admit that all religious concepts have similar features, although not all of them were able to implement them throughout their existence. Moreover, these features are weakening with aging of religions concepts. The shorter the history of a confession, the closer it is to practical implementation of these features. However, at the level of dogmas and doctrines, all confessions remain loyal to these principles.

T. Liri and M. Stewart believe that “in destructive sects, psychological methods, consciousness impact methods, behavioral modification techniques are applied to followers. Group conformity and the need to obey authorities are exploited. In addition, destructive sects use deception, falsification and intimidation. They help them gradually destroy the personality. By manipulating thoughts, feelings and behavior of followers, they transform their consciousness. In destructive sects, human rights are violated. Using a number of special techniques, they influence consciousness and subconsciousness of people, instill phobias and dependencies which prevent followers from leaving the sect ”(Leary, 2002).

The criteria suggested by T. Liri and M. Stewart are ambiguous, if we use them to analyze large religious organizations. The leaders of the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, the Salafi clergy presented by the Ministry of Waqf and Religion in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, use TV and the Internet to influence consciousness of believers. Regular speeches (sermons) given by leaders of various religious organizations, broadcast on media channels during religious and state holidays, solemn events aim to support the need for submission to authority. Intimidation of God's punishment and posthumous punishment is still one of the tools to maintain adherence to religious dogma, both at the level of simple preaching of an ordinary representative of the clergy of any religion, and at the level of higher spiritual hierarchs. If a believer does not know about potential punishment for deviating from the fundamentals of religion, he will not have an effective incentive to follow dogmas. Correct manipulation of dogmas in front of the target audience aims to change consciousness, restructure it in accordance with the purposes of religious activities.

The most dangerous issue of this debate is violation of human rights. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ says that in order to avoid sin, it is more correct for a person to cut off body parts. The same is said in the Quran. One can talk about the violation of human rights by the largest religious organizations which proclaimed and violated human rights, at least until the end of the 17th century (Christian West) and until the middle of the XX century (Muslim East). However, culture and government power secularization

“took” the apparatus of coercion away from religious organizations, although at the dogma level, it still exists.

R.R. Abdulganeev (Abdulganeev, 2012) defines religious destructiveness through belonging to the counterculture. He views it as a protest against the existing system of values and world order, religious traditions and official churches. For R.R. Abdulganeev the desire to gain power, control over society is implemented through destructive religiosity with its aggressiveness, violence and superiority. In contrast to “traditional” beliefs, “non-traditional” religions are prone to extremism and terrorism and have long rehabilitation terms for those who left them.

But these signs of destructiveness can be opposed to monotheism in Judaism which was countercultural up to the time of Moses, Christianity which was countercultural up to the time of Constantine I the Great, Islam which was countercultural before the capture of Mecca in 630. Who were Moses, Muhammad and Jesus Christ in relation to their religious, national and political environment? They criticized the state, the existing model of interethnic relations and religious beliefs. They called for active actions against them and they deal with countercultural activities. In other words, at the early stages, many religions were countercultural. At the dogmatic level, they continue to remain countercultural.

R.R. Abdulganeev describes external destructiveness as impacts on the ethical component of the personality of the adept aiming to suppress and subordinate him, overcome moral and spiritual barriers eliminate the basis of conflict-free coexistence in society, break ties with the social environment, encourage an ascetic way of life with constant and long fasting, sleep deprivations and many-hour prayers, distribute the “cult of confession”. What are the large prayer books in Orthodoxy for? Do Orthodoxy and Catholicism require regular confession? Do Christianity and Islam magnify asceticism and proclaim contempt for material goods? Are infinite vigils and meditations typical of a Buddhist? As we can see, unequivocal signs separating “bad” religious concepts from the “good” ones elude us again. In other words, either the signs are not signs of destructiveness, or all religions are destructive. We believe that the first statement is true.

As we can see, foreign and Russian studies do not distinguish between destructive and constructive religious associations. The review of attempts to define the notion “destructive cult” can be finished by M. Weber’s quotation: “Take, for example, the concepts “church” and “sect”. They have a number of features; the border between them and their content will be ambiguous” (Weber, 1990). And although the researcher did not mention a “destructive cult”, the analysis allows us to extend Weber’s view. Detailed analysis of the positions of Russian religion scholars such as A.L. Dvorkin (Dvorkin, 2002) allowed for the same conclusion.

Thus it can be argued that since the turn of the XIX – XX centuries and until the present, the issue of deconstructive religions has been answered yet. Identification of religious destructiveness is a task of psychologists, psychiatrists and judges. If a religion scholar speaks about destructiveness, he goes beyond his competence. Attempts to determine destructiveness of religious activities for society and personality are untenable, since the consequences of religious deconstruction are areas of other sciences.

In our opinion, subjective definition of destructiveness of a religious cult by a religion scholar increases its ambiguity. The concepts of totalitarianism, authoritarianism and sectarianism have been used in religion studies. However, the only result of that use will be an increase in subjectivity of new articles

and theses which will provoke new attempts of religious associations to protect themselves from stigmatization of their members.

From destructiveness, the state protects itself and its citizens with laws. Using laws, the government protects falsely accused of destructiveness from slander, insults of honor and dignity. This gradation does not imply division into sects or totalitarian / authoritarian / destructive cults due to the high degree of subjectivity of the latter concepts. Therefore, these concepts are not applied in legal field

## 7. Conclusion

Analysis of various existing organizational forms and types of religious organizations allows for conclusion that it is not possible to distinguish between them. There is no consensus on this issue in secular religion studies and among theologians and lay people. This creates the ground for speculation and religious crimes. Biased and unscrupulous representatives of the clergy manipulate facts that distort the true picture of coexisting faiths.

Modern Russia needs to intensify research to help society and the government recognize, stop and eliminate consequences of religious extremism. However, in the system of higher education, training of religion experts has just begun. Moreover, there is still no clear training system. There is no independent judicial examination system and mechanisms of interaction between experts and the government. There are no effective mechanisms to protect the identity of an expert from extremists and terrorists. This factor complicates the fight against religious extremism and terrorism.

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