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RUSSIA: Presenting Islam as "the true faith" = extremism?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

Muslims in Russia's Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk are challenging a court's designation as "extremist" another work by the Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The verdict also declares the work liable to confiscation wherever it is found. However, the 2002 Extremism Law only permits the confiscation of material if it is published, distributed or stored with the aim of distribution. Krasnoyarsk's Zheleznodorozhny District Court declared that the Russian translation of "Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead" is "extremist", after Krasnoyarsk Muftiate had published 500 copies of the book. A proof copy was sent by the FSB security service to the Rector of Viktor Astafyev University for analysis. The Court based its judgment on that analysis – but refused to accept another analysis refuting extremism claims by three experts in psychology and philosophy from Moscow State University. An appeal brought by the Muftiate is due to be heard by Krasnoyarsk Regional Court on 29 November.

Muslims in the Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk are challenging the designation as extremist of yet another work by the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. An appeal brought by Krasnoyarsk Muftiate is due to be heard by Krasnoyarsk Regional Court on 29 November, Muftiate lawyer Akhmad Kolobayev told Forum 18 from Krasnoyarsk on 28 October.

"In the interests of the Russian Federation," Krasnoyarsk's Zheleznodorozhny District Court declared the Russian translation of Nursi's "Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead" extremist on 21 September as it "aims to incite religious discord and propagandises the exclusivity, superiority and inferiority of citizens due to their attitude towards religion."

Seen by Forum 18, the verdict also – without explanation – determines the work liable to confiscation wherever found, although the 2002 Extremism Law in fact prescribes confiscation of extremist material only if published, distributed or stored with the aim of distribution (Article 13).

A March 2010 instruction to public libraries specifically permits restricted access to such material (see F18News 12 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1478).

Also accused of extremism, Jehovah's Witnesses are similarly the target of a nationwide campaign by the authorities (see F18News 7 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1485). While the Jehovah's Witnesses' organisation has not been declared extremist, members have begun to be prosecuted in recent months for distributing Jehovah's Witness titles which feature on the Federal List of Extremist Materials (see F18News 26 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1480).

Officials in various government agencies have refused to explain who initiated the campaigns against Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of Said Nursi's works (see F18News 25 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1426).

FSB initiates analysis

"Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead" belongs to Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") multi-part Koranic commentary. Russian translations of other parts were outlawed by Moscow's Koptevo District Court in May 2007 and subsequently added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which means their publication, distribution or storage with the aim of distribution is banned throughout Russia.

Last updated on 14 October 2010, the Federal List of Extremist Materials runs to 706 titles as of 28 October.

"Nurdzhular" – which Nursi readers insist does not exist – was banned as an extremist organisation by Russia's Supreme Court in April 2008. Defenders of state action against Nursi followers routinely claim that his works are banned in Turkey, but official Turkish government documents viewed by Forum 18 state categorically that the theologian's works are not harmful in any way whatsoever and are freely available in Turkey (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

Rhetoric from senior officials often attempts to link Nursi readers with terrorism. In the wake of the detention in Moscow Region of

two Muslims from the Russian republic of Bashkortostan on terrorism-related charges, first vice-speaker of the Federation Council Aleksandr Torshin maintained that one of them "heads the international extremist terrorist organisation 'Nurdzhular' and was recruiting suicide bombers in Moscow Region", Interfax news agency reported on 18 October. Nursi readers have insisted to Forum 18 that the two have no connection with Nursi readers.

The Krasnoyarsk Muftiate – which belongs to the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Asian Part of Russia, in turn belonging to the Council of Muftis chaired by Mufti Ravil Gainutdin – ordered publication of 500 copies of "Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead" in May 2008 and received them the following month, according to the 21 September verdict.

A proof copy was passed by a representative of Krasnoyarsk Regional FSB security service to the Rector of Viktor Astafyev University for analysis, it states.

Court accepts one analysis ..

In its 11-page verdict, Zheleznodorozhny District Court lists Nursi's identity as "a preacher and radical interpreter of Islam" and the previous Russian bans on parts of "Risale-i Nur" among the main grounds for banning "Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead". Its main focus, however, is on a 24 December 2008 analysis of the text by three experts in linguistics, psychology and religious studies from Krasnoyarsk's Viktor Astafyev State Pedagogical University.

The Court accepted as evidence of extremism these analysts' conclusion that the work instils as a value in the reader "the exclusivity of the Islamic religious faith, which is presented as the true faith". It thus repeats previous contentious judgments on alleged extremist religious literature in Russia by confusing exclusivity or superiority of particular people – justifiably defined as extremist - with claiming the superiority of a particular religion itself. The freedom to make claims about the relative merits of religious or non-religious views is a central part of freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287).

As an example of such "extremism", the verdict cites the analysts' observation that people not believing in Islam are described by Nursi as "frivolous", "philosophers" and "empty-talkers", as well as references "aimed at belittling European culture". It also repeats the analysts' concern over "militarist metaphors, which inevitably dispose the reader towards perceiving reality through the prism of a military camp situation", and attempts "to influence the reader's psyche and faith mechanism subconsciously, that is, to form conscious values and convictions with an irrational basis".

Seen by Forum 18, the 19-page analysis gives further specific citations from Nursi's work allegedly supporting these conclusions. Thus, references to "followers of the Wise Koran and students of philosophy" - as contrasted with "a non-believer is an enemy of Allah" and "do you know what a stupid crime you are committing with your non-belief and your denial?" - are seen as evidence that Nursi "instils a view towards non-believers and representatives of other religions as criminals who do not warrant forgiveness".

While admitting that the work contains no direct calls to violence against non-Muslims, the analysts also maintain that the reader might – among other interpretations – understand as a call to arms: "The army of the Eternal King, consisting of tribes of angels, genies, people and dumb animals and plants, in battle for the preservation of life, having received a Divine order: 'Make ready weapons and instruments, for defence!'"

.. but rejects another

In its 8 October, 21-page appeal seen by Forum 18, the Krasnoyarsk Muftiate - appearing as an interested party in the case – objects that the use of terms such as "frivolous" for non-believers is a "normal attitude of any religion". Moreover, it notes, "it is perfectly clear that the author did not have in mind anyone specific (..) and was also addressing his own soul, and any other soul which possesses or could for any period possess similar negative characteristics or states from the point of view of Islam".

As the author's heart and soul are elsewhere stated as prototypes of faithful and frivolous persons, the work cannot possibly contain calls to enmity between believers and non-believers, the Muftiate points out: "For the author cannot call himself to enmity against himself."

The author uses militaristic comparisons, the appeal continues, "not with the aim of militarising believers, but to demonstrate that hierarchy, order and discipline are the foundations of stability in any society". The full quotation referring to non-belief as an absolute crime also explains that the non-believer, by violating Islamic precepts, cannot approach Allah and will not be forgiven – it is thus clearly stated as involving divine punishment in the next world.

The Krasnoyarsk court also rejected the 28 April 2010 analysis by three experts in psychology and philosophy from Moscow State University – seen by Forum 18 - which concluded that "Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead" contains no signs of extremism. This analysis stressed that "a belief in the superiority of one's world view over other world views is characteristic of the doctrines of Islam, other religions and atheism, as it accounts for the choice of that particular world view" (see F18News 26 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1450).

In countering the Moscow analysts, the Krasnoyarsk court maintained their conclusion that Nursi's work contains no unambiguously extremist statements "gives grounds to suppose that it is nevertheless possible to arrive at interpretations which are ambiguous, depending upon the reader's individual reception of the text (..) they do not rule out the reader's disproportionate individual reception of the text". It also rejected the Moscow analysis' argument that the work is no different from other religious books "as a comparison with other religious books was not the subject of this case".

In its appeal, the Muftiate questioned - if a comparison of religious books was not a subject of the case - why a religious studies expert participated in the Krasnoyarsk analysis. It also raised several procedural concerns, including the Court's refusal to admit testimony by the Moscow analysts and insufficient opportunity given for rest breaks and preparation. Judge Yelizaveta Ashikhmina had rejected these complaints in her 21 September verdict.

Ihom Merazhov, who participated in the 20-21 September hearings as a representative of the Krasnoyarsk Muftiate, told Forum 18 the sessions each day lasted for over nine hours. After Merazhov left at 5.30 pm on the second day to catch a return train to Novosibirsk and Muftiate lawyer Yevgeny Kolobayev protested at the hearing lasting beyond 6 pm – the end of the working day - Judge Ashikhmina continued into the evening and pronounced her verdict in their absence, he said.

The woman who answered Judge Ashikhmina's telephone at the court on 29 October – who would not say if she was Ashikhmina or not - refused to discuss the 21 September decision, including why one analysis was accepted and one was not. She would only confirm to Forum 18 that according to court procedures, the working day ends at 6 pm.

Krasnoyarsk prosecutions

There has been no further development in the cases of four Nursi readers in Krasnoyarsk accused of "Nurdzhular" activity, their lawyer Akhmad Kolobayev also told Forum 18 from Krasnoyarsk on 28 October. They are all living at home but have pledged not to travel while the case against them remains open, he said.

On 26 February 2010, the four - Aleksei Gerasimov, Fizuli Askarov, Yevgeny Petry and Andrei Dedkov – were accused of violating Article 282.2, Part 1 of the Criminal Code ("organising activity by a banned religious or other association"), which carries a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment. Three of the four were detained for up to 36 hours amid FSB raids on 20 flats in Krasnoyarsk on the night of 16-17 February (see F18News 4 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1416).

Dagestan prosecution

In another case involving alleged "Nurdzhular" activity, Ziyavdin Dapayev was ordered by Abdullah Abdullayev, an investigator at Dagestan FSB, to pledge not to leave Dagestan days after he returned from an international conference on Nursi's work in Istanbul from 3-5 October, Dapayev told Forum 18 from the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, on 28 October. He may travel within Dagestan but must inform the FSB beforehand, he added.

Days before leaving for the Istanbul conference, Dapayev – long a suspected "Nurdzhular" participant - was also formally charged with violating Article 282.2, Part 1 of the Criminal Code ("organising activity by a banned religious or other association"). He believes court proceedings may follow in as little as a month.

Dapayev confirmed that a similar case against his fellow local Nursi reader Ruslan Bulatov was dropped in August.

Prosecutors originally launched the investigation into Bulatov and Dapayev's activity under Article 282.2, Part 2 of the Criminal Code ("participation in a banned religious extremist organisation"), which carries a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment. The investigation began as homes associated with Nursi readers in three Dagestani towns were subjected to armed raids.

Dapayev told Forum 18 in March that "of course" they read Nursi's works, but vehemently rejected any accusations of extremism or terrorism (see F18News 4 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1416). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287 - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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