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BELARUS: Despite protests, "anti-sect" schoolbook to remain

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

Pentecostal and Hare Krishna representatives have so far failed in their bid to have the education ministry withdraw a textbook which they say incites religious discord. The book for 18-year-old children, published by the Education Ministry last year, warns that Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist and Jehovah's Witness activity is a breeding-ground for fanaticism. It also puts the Hare Krishna and Zen Buddhist movements on a par with the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo responsible for the 1995 gas attack on the Tokyo subway, and suggests that Krishna devotees need psychiatric help. The Orthodox are unhappy with a quotation that they say "hurts the feelings of believers". Orthodox Church legal advisor Andrei Aleshko told Forum 18 News Service that once his Church has studied the text it will call on the ministry to withdraw the book.

The Ministry of Education has rejected Pentecostal and Hare Krishna calls for the withdrawal from state schools of a textbook partially concerning religion which they argue incites religious discord. Forum 18 News Service notes that the book, "Man in the World of Culture", warns that Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist and Jehovah's Witness activity is a breeding-ground for fanaticism. It also puts the Hare Krishna and Zen Buddhist movements on a par with the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, which was responsible for the fatal gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995, and suggests that Krishna devotees need psychiatric help. Andrei Aleshko, legal assistant to Minsk's Orthodox diocese, said he is concerned about a quotation in the book criticising Orthodox worship. "If once we have seen the text we agree that it hurts the feelings of believers," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 24 June, "the Church will call on the education ministry to withdraw the book."

The textbook was approved by the education ministry last year for use by eleventh-grade (18-year-old) pupils in Russian-language secondary schools, and has a circulation of 147,200 copies. Most schools in Belarus teach in Russian.

The 3-page section of the book under dispute introduces pupils to "non-traditional religious organisations and sects". Although every religion purports to be in possession of absolute truth, it maintains, "particularly propitious conditions for the manifestation of fanaticism are created by the activity of sects," the most widespread in Belarus being Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. According to the book, sects typically claim "exclusivist ideological principles" and tend towards isolationism, while those espousing non-traditional doctrines also employ "new techniques which transform the psyche of the people they recruit".

Turning to non-traditional religious organisations, which are variously described as "new religious movements," "New Age religions," "non-traditional cults," "totalitarian sects" and "pseudo-religious formations," the book lists the International Society for Krishna Consciousness [Hare Krishnas] and Zen Buddhism alongside groups such as Aum Shinrikyo and the Russian movement the White Brotherhood. These organisations are characterised by unquestioning acceptance of doctrine and blind subordination to a teacher, guru, leader or prophet, claims the book, as well as insistence that members "divorce themselves from the real world".

The textbook also refers to "the common technique of shutting off the mental faculty of reason by means of endless rhythmical repetition of the same phrase." Krishna devotees, it points out, must repeat the 32-syllable Maha Mantra 1,728 times a day, thus leaving little time to think about anything else. "Religious believers such as these typically feel the need to be within their community at all times and are afraid of leaving it," the section concludes. In such instances, it is alleged, "psychiatric help is certainly required".

Writing to education minister Pyotr Brigadin on 8 April, Pentecostal Bishop Sergei Khomich demanded that the textbook be withdrawn from schools, arguing that it will contribute to "the continued incitement of interreligious discord in our country". Since the Pentecostal Union is a registered religious organisation, he points out, Pentecostals should not be listed alongside "sects renowned for their destructive activity, such as the White Brotherhood and Aum Shinrikyo".

In his 7 May reply to the Pentecostal leader, Vladimir Shcherbo of the education ministry's general secondary education department claims that the word "sect" is used in the new textbook as a scientific theoretical term without evaluation or implication of antisocial tendency. While the current edition of the textbook will not be withdrawn, "corresponding changes... concerning the spiritual potential of religion" will be introduced when it is next published, promises Shcherbo.

In a 15 April letter addressed to the country's general public prosecutor, members of the Minsk Krishna Consciousness Community likewise call for the withdrawal of the textbook, since the information published within it "does not correspond with reality and damages the reputation of Krishna Consciousness believers". The Krishna devotees complain in particular about the book's apparent definition of their organisation as a sect.

In a 7 May reply to the community, chairman of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, Stanislav Buko, also maintains that the term "sect" is used in the textbook as a scientific term without evaluation or implication that an organisation so described should lose its state registration. Making no reference to any of the book's allegations specifically relating to Krishna worship, Buko concludes that, if Krishna devotees believe that the textbook violates their legal rights or interests, they may resolve the issue "in the legally prescribed manner". On 3 June the Minsk Krishna Consciousness Community again wrote to the general public prosecutor requesting that "all legal measures be taken to halt illegal actions aimed at offending the religious feelings of believers and the incitement of religious discord in society".

In their original letter to the public prosecutor, the Krishna devotees pointed out the "atheistic character" of the textbook. At the end of the disputed section dealing with sects and non-traditional religious organisations, five quotations relating to religious belief are printed under the heading "Let's take note." Four of these are indeed negative ("To believe means to refuse to understand," "Religion is a weakness...") The final quotation, attributed to parapsychologist Wolf Messing, is specifically critical of Orthodox Christian worship: "When that phrase ['Holy God... have mercy on me'] is repeated hundreds and thousands of times, a hypnotic state results. On top of that there are countless prostrations, hammered out before icons."

Aleshko said he had not seen a copy of the book and asked Forum 18 to supply a copy. "If I ask the education ministry for it, maybe they won't give it to us," he declared.

So far, however, the Pentecostals and Hare Krishnas are apparently the only groups to have protested against the new textbook.

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