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COMMENTARY: Religious freedom since 1905 – any progress in Russia?

By Irina Budkina, Editor of the Old Believer website

One hundred years ago, Tsar Nicholas II's decree on religious tolerance formally freed Russia's religious minorities from state restriction and persecution. Today, Russia's religious minorities can legitimately ask how much progress has been achieved since then, argues Irina Budkina, an Old Believer and editor of a website on Old Belief in Samara region <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru>, in this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. (The Old Believer movement rejected changes in the 17th century Russian Orthodox Church.) Officials – particularly at provincial level - continue to defer to the Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate, and hand over historic Old Believer churches to the Moscow Patriarchate. Not just Old Believers, but members of other religious minorities in today's Russia believe some religious communities remain more equal than others.

My fellow Old Believers in Moscow have just celebrated 100 years since freedom of religion was first proclaimed in Russia. Tsar Nicholas II's decree on strengthening the foundations of religious tolerance, issued on 17 April 1905, for the first time gave religious minorities the right to hold services openly and build churches. It had particular resonance for Old Believers, who had suffered two centuries of persecution and vilification, symbolically replacing the offensive term "schismatic" with the neutral "Old Believer". On the eve of the decree's publication, the unsealing of the altars in churches at Moscow's Rogozhsky Cemetery – the spiritual and administrative centre of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church – became a permanent symbol of religious freedom in Old Believer eyes.

A hundred years on, this anniversary is not just distant history for today's Old Believers. Perhaps surprisingly, little has changed in a century. Today, especially in the provinces, it can be as hard for Old Believers to reach agreement with the authorities as it was back then. True, no one closes Old Believer churches, seals altars, or imprisons and exiles people any longer for professing the Old Belief. Russia's Constitution proclaims freedom of conscience and equality for all religious organisations before the law. Yet while all denominations may be equal in law, some are more equal than others.

Examples abound. In my home town of Samara, the local authorities never refuse the Moscow Patriarchate diocese's requests to return churches and monasteries confiscated during the Soviet period – all the surviving churches have been returned over the past decade or so, while new ones have been built. The authorities help fund restoration work, earmarking as much as 58 million roubles (over 13,100,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,649,000 Euros, or 2 million US Dollars) for this in 2005 alone.

A year ago, propelled by the desire to return everything to the Moscow Patriarchate, the city authorities purchased a former church from a private owner, a machine-tool factory, and - even before officially registering ownership - triumphantly announced its return to the Moscow Patriarchate diocese. But it turned out to be an Old Believer church. One would think nothing could be easier than to return the church to the Old Believers, especially as they had been asking for it since the early 1940s. They had suffered no less from Soviet persecution – in fact, even more than the official Church. Every single Old Believer priest serving in Samara province during the initial years of the Soviet regime was arrested.

But no – what the authorities are prepared to do for the Moscow Patriarchate, they are not prepared to do for other denominations. "We can't return the building to just anyone without the agreement of the Samara diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church," the city's assistant mayor told the Old Believers with naïve simplicity, sending them off to the aggrieved archbishop to obtain that agreement. The Samara Moscow Patriarchate diocese does not own the building, nor is it an administrative or spiritual organ for the Old Believers. So why should they have to obtain its agreement? Do the authorities think the Moscow Patriarchate is the official Church, the predominant confession? This is no isolated case. Exactly the same is happening in Cheboksary (Chuvashiya Republic), Morshansk (Mordova Republic), Pugachev (Saratov region) and in Siberia.

Nor is the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church the only religious organisation facing obstacles getting back its church property in Samara. For several years a Protestant community has tried in vain to recover a church confiscated during the Soviet period.

Even when property is returned, religious communities have no guarantee they will be able to use it fully. In the mid-1990s a separate group of priestless Pomorye Old Believers received back two buildings of their historical hospice. They turned one into a

church and planned to open a hospice in the other. The municipal authorities promised to re-house several families still living in the second building while obtaining the Pomorye community's assurance that they would not obstruct them in the meantime. Ten years on, however, the occupants have been able to privatise their flats and the municipal authorities have completely forgotten their original promise. The city housing committee has not even deigned to answer the Old Believers' letters for a year.

For most provincial authorities - whose officials are usually former apparatchiks - the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese is akin to the ideological department of the Communist Party. To them, the Old Believers are "nobodies".

Such scathing attitudes have seeped into officialdom more widely. Recently I came across a 2004 school textbook on regional studies, *The History of Samara Region from the Ninth to Eighteenth Centuries*, and could not believe my eyes. "In the 1760s the government began to settle schismatics to the south of Samara," it proclaimed. "Schismatics were settled along the banks of the Volga." Just like that, schismatics, with no inverted commas in sight.

Are these historians merely ignorant, biased because of their own religious background, or careless about the impact of what they write? If this is regional studies, a subject mostly concerned with teaching children about the birds, trees and flowers in the Volga region's forests, what are Old Believers to expect if the Foundations of Orthodox Culture is introduced into the local school curriculum? "The Foundations of Orthodox Culture is a neutral subject, it is not catechism," we are told. Excuse me, regional studies is far more neutral, but the authors of that textbook still managed to rake up disparaging terminology used by diocesan missionaries in the times of the bitter struggle "against the Schism". Such tendentious presentation leaves most people with an utterly distorted idea of Old Believers.

The Old Believers' origins go back to the 1650s, when Russian Orthodox Patriarch Nikon with the support of Tsar Alexis introduced changes into Orthodox worship and texts. The Old Believers accused Nikon of heresy and did not accept the changes, just as they did not accept the later changes of Tsar Peter the Great, who turned the Orthodox Church into a government department. Backed by the Nikonian Church, the state persecuted Old Believers for adhering to what they regarded as the authentic Russian Orthodox tradition.

Even the local media in Samara – despite their very sympathetic coverage of Old Believers' difficulties regaining their church in the city - barely understand what Old Belief is. "Old Believers Forced to Agree with Orthodox", "Old Believer Church Given to Orthodox". Such headlines cannot but offend Old Believers, for whom Old Belief is true, unblemished Orthodoxy.

On the other hand, at least they are writing something. More usually no one even mentions Old Believers. On the evening of 15 May, Samara's Old Believers gathered around the television. Old Believers hardly ever watch TV, particularly light entertainment and soap operas, but this was a special occasion – the Moscow celebrations marking the centenary of the unsealing of the altars at Rogozhsky Cemetery, with guests from all over Russia and abroad. Samara's Old Believers hoped to see the procession around the old Rogozhsky settlement. But they watched the news bulletins in vain – not one federal television channel broadcast an item on such a significant event for Old Believers. Were they afraid to raise a less than comfortable subject?

Many Old Believers compare the present day with the situation 100 years ago and it is not yet clear in whose favour the comparison will be – at least in Samara. For Old Believers here the memory is too fresh of the peculiar way the municipal authorities marked Easter and the centenary of religious freedom this year. In a bitter irony, 100 years to the day since the decree on religious tolerance was published we were forbidden from holding our Easter vigil in the city's Old Believer church. Our believers – including many who are elderly and infirm - prayed outside the padlocked doors all night long. A light shone inside where security guards kept watch. Meanwhile, municipal officials, led by Samara's mayor, congratulated the Moscow Patriarchate archbishop in the city's cathedral and lauded "the spiritual rebirth of Orthodoxy".

Will Old Believer churches in Samara and other Russian cities be unsealed? Who does it depend on? Many blame situations such as in Samara on the arbitrariness of local officials. Perhaps, but there is one curious factor. Looking back 100 years, we find that the arbitrariness of local officials held sway even then.

Only two months after the publication of the 1905 decree, Samara province sent an instruction to all its districts requiring "non-indigenous" Old Believers to pay a special toll for the upkeep of Orthodox churches. Thanks to bureaucratic arbitrariness, people recorded as being "official Orthodox" or who had converted from the state Church to Old Belief were forced to finance churches which, for them, were heretical. But a stop was put to this arbitrariness. The Interior Ministry explained to those zealous Samara officials back then that this approach did not accord with the spirit of the new decree on religious tolerance.

Will anyone step forward to help today's Old Believers or other religious minorities? Does anyone want to? Samara's Old Believers have written once to the federal inspector for Samara region and twice to President Vladimir Putin's representative in the Volga Region. Not once did they receive a response, not even a routine brush-off. Are they too busy? Indifferent? Or are requests by "second-rate" denominations merely distractions to be brushed away? Do the Sovereign's servants understand that, in order to consolidate the vertical axis of power, a department for the Orthodox faith is required?

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- Irina Budkina, an Old Believer and editor of a website on Old Belief in Samara region <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru>, contributed this personal commentary to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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

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

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