



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 19, 2017

Russia's Ban on Jehovah's Witnesses Upheld, but U.K., U.S. Also Curtail Religious Liberties

Russia's Supreme Court has upheld a ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses, naming it an "extremist organization" and charging that its members "pose a threat to the rights of citizens, public order and public security."

As a result of the ruling, the Witnesses' Russian headquarters will be closed, and the properties belonging to local chapters will be now become property of the state.

"Regardless of what negative consequences this decision brings," stated David Semonian, a spokesman for the Jehovah's Witnesses international organization, "Jehovah's Witnesses will continue to act within the law to secure their rights and support their fellow worshippers in Russia who must bear the burden of injustice."

Semonian admitted that though the group was "prepared for a negative ruling," it was "still very disappointing." Stating that there are "powerful elements" in Russia that have framed the group as extremist, he added, "We can only hope a fair evaluation of the facts will eventually prevail and our right to worship in Russia will be legally restored."

Russia's definition of extremism was modified in 2006 to add "incitement of ... religious discord" to acts of violence or hatred. This sounds amazingly like the justification used today to prevent conservatives from speaking on U.S. college campuses.

Though the Jehovah's Witnesses might be unpopular with some, being unpopular is not grounds for being banned, at least not yet in the United States. The First Amendment to the Constitution forbids Congress from enacting any law "prohibiting the free exercise of religion." It could even be said that it is such "unpopular" views that need protection from government interference more so than "popular" ones.

In Russia, however, the New World Translation (the version of the Bible used by the Jehovah's Witnesses) has been banned, and even possession of Witness literature has been cause for incarceration. One Witness leader was jailed for two years in 2010 on this charge alone. There is some speculation that the reason for the crackdown could be that Russian President Vladimir Putin enjoys the support of the Russian Orthodox Church and he wants to keep it. Forty-one percent of the Russian population are members of that church.

Baroness Joyce Anelay, a British Conservative Party politician, speaking for the British government, stated that the ruling "effectively criminalizes the peaceful worship of 175,000 Russian citizens," noting that religious liberty is in Russia's constitution. "The UK calls on the Russian government to uphold its international commitment to freedom of religion," she declared.





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Officials in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom expressed similar condemnation of the ban, charging that the Russian government is “equating ... peaceful religious freedom practice to extremism.”

No doubt what the Russian government has done with the Jehovah’s Witnesses is a violation of religious liberty, and should be roundly condemned. While their religious views are outside of what many Christians consider correct doctrine, it is not the business of any government to determine what is or is not correct religious doctrine.

But it is peculiar that the United States and the U.K. have chosen to condemn the infringement of religious liberty in Russia, but have little to say about the much more severe curtailment of such rights in Saudi Arabia. Only Muslims who conform to what is allowed by the Saudi royal family may freely practice their religion in Saudi Arabia. No Christians are allowed to practice their religion openly there. Neither may Muslims with beliefs differing from those of the royal family, nor those of any other religion.

For that matter, Christians in both the U.K. and the United States have seen their own religious liberty restricted in recent years. While Christians may still believe what they want about such topics as same-sex marriage, they may no more freely practice that belief in some American states than can the Witnesses practice their religion in Russia. A U.S. Christian baker or florist may believe (so far) that same-sex marriage is sinful, but if they actually practice that belief by refusing to help celebrate a same-sex union, they can be heavily fined in some states.

During the last presidential campaign, the nominee of the Libertarian Party, Gary Johnson, even dismissed religious liberty as a “black hole” that should not protect a Christian in such cases.

Christians in the United States and in Europe certainly do not face the severity of persecution inflicted upon the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia; however, the ringing condemnation of Russia’s actions by these Western countries brings to mind the words of Jesus, who said, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (Matthew 7:5, ESV.)



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