

**Roman Lunkin**

(Institute of Philosophy, Russian  
Academy of Sciences, Moscow)

## **Protestantism and Human Rights in Russia:**

### **Creation of the Alternative to the Authorities**

Protestantism has become a considerable social movement in Russia by the late 1990s. In the post-Soviet period the leaders of different Evangelical Churches are more active in defending democratic values and human rights for the sake of the development of democratic society, than representatives of other confessions in Russia. The clearly expressed democratic position made representatives of the Protestant confessions real participants in political life of the country.

The influence and growing of Russian Protestantism during last 15 years stimulated the formation of social and political outlook of the Evangelical movement which is clearly understood and expressed. The principles of the social doctrine of the Protestants derives from their theological doctrine and ethic rules and form an integral system of views. The developed social outlook of Russian Protestants is still at the stage of formation, but the real social activity of the Church brings the pulse changing the society in contemporary Russia according to the certain principles: strict Bible ethics, freedom of enterprise, freedom for any forms of social activity.

The Protestant “justification” of the Christian value of human rights and liberties is the foundation of political views of the Protestant Churches. The human rights in Russia are most frequent subjects of the church sermons and public statements of the Evangelical

Church and communion leaders. In the 1990s the rights of believers became main themes in the speeches of the Protestant ideologists, in the articles of the Protestant mass media and in sermons of common priests. It should be noted that the political views of the Protestants were formed as a reaction to the restrictions of the authorities and to the xenophobic moods of certain part of the Orthodox society and higher clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church, but not in the open public discussions and not during free political debates of protestant or orthodox oriented politicians.

The characteristic features of the main Protestant communities are principally determined by the necessity to defend themselves from the attempts of the Russian Orthodox Church to take a monopolistic position in the state, so that it could prompt the officials to follow the “anti-sectarian” policy and by the need to withstand the authoritarian local and central administrations, which after 2000 began to destroy the weak democratic institutes of President Eltsyn’s time.

The first steps of the Protestant communities in the cause of the defense of their rights in the society were creation of two concepts worked out in 2002: “The Social Position of the Protestant Churches” for all Evangelical confessions and the separate Social Concept of Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals), which is the largest union of the Charismatic Churches in Russia. These concepts were conditioned by two factors: 1) considerable bringing together of the Russian Orthodox Church and the state in President Putin’s time; 2) the appearing of the Social Conception of Russian Orthodox Church worked out in 2000 at the Archbishop Council as an attempt to confirm the Moscow Patriarchy as a monopolistic spiritual and political force in the society alongside the secular authorities.

In contrast to the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, proclaiming “Orthodox Monarchy” the best form of the authorities for

the Moscow Patriarchy, the Protestant Churches directly expressed their loyalty to the democratic form which, in their opinion, is closer to the Christian idea of the state. “The Social Position of the Protestant Churches” states: “All people must enjoy human rights and liberties. The Christians should defend these rights and struggle against any kind of oppression and enslavement with the help of the law”<sup>1</sup>. The Protestant leaders specially stressed the importance of elections for the free Russian society: “In democratic society elections are the only legal way to create the state structures, as they express the people’s will. The Churches do not call their members to vote for anybody, but they advise them to act according to their conscience. The decision should be made with a prayer and with consideration of what will be the best for the country, for preservation of freedom and for spreading of the Gospel”. In the Social Concept of the Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith the task of the state authorities – “to protect the civic rights regardless of the subjective views and faith of the citizens”<sup>2</sup> – was expressed more directly, than in the all-Protestant doctrine. Besides, the Pentecostal Concept set a political task for the civic-minded believers. It states the necessity to vote and to be elected to the state structures for each member of the Church so that one can become “a blessing for ones country”<sup>3</sup>.

Strengthening of the authoritarian tendencies during President Putin’s time and negative attitude towards “sectarianism” on the part of some members of society made the most active representatives of the Evangelical movement – the Pentecostals – declare their social and political program. Some Protestant leaders refused to make political

---

<sup>1</sup> The Social Position of the protestant Churches in Russia // “Religion in Mass Media”, Religare.ru, December 22, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The Principles of the Social Conception of the Russian Union of the Christians of Evangelical Faith. M., 2002, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> The Principles of the Conceptions of the Russian Union of the Christians of Evangelical Faith. M., 2002, p. 6 – 7.

statements and to nominate their candidates because of the contradictory ideology of the Russian authorities, sometimes meeting the demands of the believers and the society, sometimes trying to take the control of the public opinion and religion, especially when evangelical communities try to hold public cultural, social or missionary actions. Nevertheless, a significant part of the Protestant ideologists still make political statements on breaking the believers' rights and criticize representatives of the authorities. The Evangelical leaders mainly reproach the officials for preservation of the monopoly of the Orthodox Church. In the opinion of the presbyters and ordinary members, the authorities not only patronize Orthodoxy, but often restrict the legal rights of the Protestants, meeting the requests of the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and, first of all, they deprive the Protestants of their rented premises, removed evangelical activists from social programs (for orphans, old people etc.), try to push aside from hospitals and prisons.

In the same time, paradoxical, the most influential Protestant leaders did not oppose the authorities, they began to develop democratic points declared by the Russian politicians. The absolute loyalty to the authorities and President, and attempt to support and to develop the democratic initiatives are reflected in the program of the Pentecostal leader of Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky.

Actually, since 2002, Ryakhovsky is a main representative of all Protestant confessions in the President Council on Cooperation with Religious Communities, though before the leader of the Union of the Pentecostal Christians of the Evangelic Faith Paul Okara and the Chairman of the Union of the Evangelic Christians Baptists Yuri Sipko had also been members of the Council. Besides, Ryakhovsky enjoys a reputation of an absolute leader of the Council of the Leaders of the

Russian Protestant Confessions (the consultative organ of the Evangelical movement formed on February 2002) and of the Russian Evangelical Alliance (the public organization, uniting all Evangelical Churches and organizations formed on March 2003). The most active participants of these organizations are Pentecostals, Baptists, Evangelists and Adventists.

Actually, the ideas proclaimed by S. Ryakhovsky are shared by all Pentecostals and by a large part of the Protestants. Besides, it should be noted that S. Ryakhovsky's statements concerning the participation of the Evangelic believers in the creation of the civic society and "strong democratic Russia" are, first of all, an appeals of the large part of the Protestant community to President Putin and to the President Administration, but not the result of public dialogue with the representatives of civic secular society in general.

Ryakhovsky's program, outlined in his numerous speeches and interviews could be summarized in the following points; 1) the Russian administration headed by V. Putin is recognized as a power "given by God"; 2) the Protestants and Pentecostals, in particular, support this power and can cooperate with the authorities in social, cultural, educative and other spheres; 3) the Protestants should stop just "defend themselves" from the unconscientious officials and public stereotypes about "cruel sectarians"; they should assume an attack according to the strategy of influence and penetration"<sup>4</sup>; 4) the Protestants should help President to create a strong democratic state, for that "the Protestants must form in Russia thousands and tens of thousands of public and commercial structures with the help of which the honest believers could build a civic society in Russia".<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> "To Influence, not to Defend". The Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith is Four Years.// All Russian Paper "Charisma News", N 3 (31), 2002.

<sup>5</sup> S. Ryakhovsky. We Have Something to Speak to President About. // The All-Russian Newspaper "Zhivaya Vera", N5 (0740, May, 2004.

The conservative opponents of S. Ryakhovsky are, first of all, confused by his deliberate attempt to cooperate with the state, which is still regarded as a possible organ of persecutions. But we must admit that the conservative Pentecostals from another Union called the Russian Church of Christians of the Evangelical Faith led by Paul Okara, in fact, silently supported the position of Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith and S. Ryakhovsky in person. And the indignation of the traditional conservative Pentecostals with the position of Charismatic leaders has not led to any alternative program of the development of the Evangelical movement in Russia.

The position of the Evangelical community based on the decisive support of civic liberties became a reason to criticize the presidential policy of fortifying of state security after the tragedy in Beslan (the Republic of Northern Osetia-Alania, Caucasus) in September, 2004. When President Putin declared that the free elections of the governors will be cancelled and the regional administrators will be appointed by president himself, many Protestant leaders began to express their doubts caused by the changes in the country. For instance, Sergei Zolotarevsky, Bishop of the Union of Evangelical Christians Baptists of the Moscow Region, in his interview with the author (on September 2004) said: “There is no administration that is not from God, so the reforms suggested by the administration should be for the best. The question is how these reforms will be carried out. President said that Russia must follow a democratic way. If so, it will be good”.

The “antiterrorist” reforms of President Putin were even more strongly criticized on the point of human rights by priest of the Adventist Church in Petrozavodsk (Republic of Karelia, the North-West of Russia) Vasily Pavlishche. In his interview with the author (also on September 2004) he said: “Democracy is the best way, because God

Himself gave a freedom of choice to the man. Nevertheless, the democratic changes do not depend on us any longer. There is only a drop of democracy, as it is, in Russia now". At the end Vasily Pavlishche stated: "If it goes on like that, we will have no democracy in Russia by the Second Coming of Christ".

There was also a reaction of the Protestant leaders to the speeches of the higher clergy at the Russian Orthodox Church Council (held on 3-8 October 2004). Patriarch Alexei said that a larger part of the Protestants in Russia are proselytes (the Lutheran Church is the only Church the Orthodox believers maintain relations with). Besides, considering "the struggle with terrorism", the participants of the Russian Orthodox Church Council addressed President Putin with the request to restrict the activity of the "destructive sects" by which many officials and Orthodox ideologists mean the Protestants (the Charismatics and Pentecostals, in particular). Thus, on October 14, 2004, there appeared a statement of the Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith on danger of rousing hatred between religions in Russia.

But the present evangelical movement is rather dissimilar in the understanding of political and social tasks of the church in the contemporary Russian society. The differences of every evangelical church depended on historical peculiarities of the formation of their ideologies that can explain their real influence in the present society.

The historical foundation of the social and political outlook of all Russian Protestants is the ideology of the Evangelical Christians' leader Ivan Prokhanov who acted in the 1920s, during the time of the bolsheviks' New Economic Policy. In the 1990s, Ivan Prokhanov became an ideal Evangelical leader and a Christian public figure for the majority of the Russian Baptists, Evangelical Christians and Pentecostals. Prokhanov was a convinced advocate of the active church participation in

different social projects and in political life. Prokhanov, himself, was one of the founders of the Christian democratic party before the revolution of 1917, and in the Soviet period he suggested to Soviet authorities his alternative program of a just society in the town of believers – Evangelisk. But in the 1930s Soviet authorities headed by Iosif Stalin started to repress the believers. Already from the late 1920s till Gorbachev's perestroika the religious communities could not take part in social life in the Soviet Union. The activity of the single legal Protestant community – The Union of Baptists (organized by Soviet officials in 1944) – was strictly controlled by the authorities.

The political views of young Protestant Churches, which appeared after the fall of the Soviet Union, were formed in the 1990s on the base of the idea of building a democratic state with a strong socially-minded society in Russia. In practice, for many Soviet and post-Soviet Protestants the United States and some European countries are models of such society in opposite to the atheistic and “antichrist” country as USSR was. In the opinion of many Russian pastors and bishops it is the society where all citizens enjoy all necessary rights and liberties and that is one of the main achievements of Evangelical Christianity. The post-Soviet decade is the time, when the leaders of the Protestant Churches, the majority of which were at the first stage of their formation from a missionary community to a large and respected church, openly expressed their political sympathies. Their sympathies to the European and American form of democracy actually formed now a political credo of Russian Protestantism.

The correlation of forces in the Protestant world has changed during the Eltsyn's period of “Russian democracy”. In the 1990s the Russian Baptists lost their position of the main Protestant confession in the country. By the late 1990s the number of members and churches had



only slightly increased in the Baptist community. The Baptists considerably lost their influence in the traditionally Baptist regions (the South of Russia, numerous regions in Siberia). In the 1990s, when Pyotr Konovalchik was the leader of Baptist Union, the Baptist administration took a passive position in the social sphere and many energetic Evangelists thought the Union leaders were too servile to the authorities. Since the late 1990s the new leader of the Union of the Baptists Yuri Sipko has actively supported the inter-church social projects and declared the Protestant loyalty to democratic principles.

The major part of the Pentecostals gathered in unregistered, half-underground churches in the Soviet period. In the early 1990s they organized several large Unions. The Pentecostals exceeded the Baptists in number in Russia (in 2004 there were more than 900 000 Pentecostals and no more than 300 000 Baptists). The Pentecostals of different orientations, both “old” conservative believers, practicing already in the Soviet period, and “new” Charismatic believers, attract students and intelligentsia. The young missionary churches of the Pentecostals try to take part in political life from the very beginning.

In the early 1990s, there appeared quite Evangelical unions that had no roots in the Soviet past. One of them is the Missionary Evangelical Christian Union, founded in 1993 – 1994 on the basis of the Baptist churches and the communities of the Evangelical Christians. Founded in the South of Russia, the Union has missions all over the country now. The socially-oriented outlook permits its members to contact with the Methodists and Pentecostals, and to carry out common missionary, social, political and cultural programs (actions against drugs, abortions, also music festivals, etc.).

The development of the Churches of Wesleyan tradition (the Methodist Church, Nazarean Church, the Salvation Army) is another new

phenomenon in Russian Protestantism. The United Russian Methodist Church, founded in the early 1990s, became very influential among the intellectuals. They are, first of all, attracted by a social orientation of Wesleyan Churches and by a democratic character of the church arrangement and service.

Adventism is still a major branch of Protestantism in Russia. The Adventist communities were growing slowly but steadily in the 1990s. But the Adventists developed and confirmed their influence in separation from the rest of the Protestant world. In contrast to other Evangelical trends, the Adventist churches are less open and less active in social and political spheres. But within the boundaries of the Council of the Leaders of the Russian Protestant Confessions and Russian Evangelical Alliance the Adventists together with Baptists and Pentecostals work out possible projects of cooperation concerning the most important social programs for the Russian society.

The members of the Lutheran Churches often take part in the common Protestant social actions with democratic slogans. Lutheranism in Russia has come far out of the boundaries of ethnic (German, Finnish, Estonian) communities where it began to develop after 1991. Finnish and German Lutheranism has become Russian to a considerable extent. Besides, there have appeared socially-active, purely Russian communities, like the Lutheran Bible Church of Siberia (the independent union headed by Vsevolod Lytkin) and the Karelian Church in the North-West of Russia.

The Pentecostals of different orientations, Baptists, Evangelical Christians and Methodists are most active in political actions, initiatives and expressions of their position. The Protestants expressed their sympathies with the Russian authorities of the 1990s, hanging the Russian tricolor during their church services. The majority of the

Evangelic Churches, that were regarded as marginals, sectants, voted as the majority of Russian intelligentsia; at Eltsyn's time for democratic President against the leader of Communist Party Gennadiy Zuzanov. The Protestant leaders (especially, the pastors of the socially active young churches) supported democratic parties, declared their sympathy with President Eltsyn in public, as Eltsyn's decade gave them an opportunity of free Evangelization and expression of their faith. In his interview with the author in August, 2004, one of the pastors of the Pentecostal Church "Novaya Zhizn" in Perm stressed that "without Eltsyn there would have been no democracy in Russia".

At the Duma elections evangelical believers as usual voted the Democratic Yabloko party of Grigory Yavlinsky. During the first years of V. Putin's administration the Protestants voted for the Yabloko party and for another democratic movement - the Union of the Right Forces. At that that period, in 2002 – 2004, many Evangelical pastors declared that they were quite ready to trust V. Putin, but they were careful in their remarks about the official and loyal for president party "United Russia", as they saw only the union of the country higher officials in it.

The Church leaders and common members of the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches became active electors in the last decade. The Evangelic believers are now among the deputies in the Municipal Councils and city Dumas (in 2004, the Baptist was elected to the City Duma in Tolyatti, Samara Region, and the Pentecostal to the Municipal Administration in the Zaoksky District of the Tula Region). In 2000-2003 evangelical believers actively supported candidates for the mayors in Russian regional capitals or voted against nationalistic and xenophobic politicians (for example, in Voronezh and Perm).

When Vladimir Putin became President in 2000, the democratic parties and movements of democratic orientation were

actually excluded from the political stage, they lost even the small number of votes they had in the 1990s in the federal and regional parliaments. The absence of the democratic parties and movements is a serious obstacle for the participation of the Protestant Church representatives in real political life of the country. Nevertheless, when their confederates disappeared from the political stage, many Protestant ideologists became more active in manifestation of their democratic views. One of the leaders of the Salvation Army Major Alexander Kharkov in his interview with the author said: “The Protestants should not feel themselves like fragments of Russian liberalism as the democratic movements - Yabloko party and the Union of the Right Forces; they are not good examples at all”.

Expressing loyalty to the political line of the federal and regional authorities, the Evangelical leaders found their way to defend the values of democratic society. They do not think that authoritarianism of some administrators and anti-democratic projects are reasons for confrontation, they are rather weakness and immaturity, that could be reformed only in an open sermon. Without doubting the competence of the authorities and politicians they denounce fascism, nationalism and anti-Semitism. Besides, the officials' discrimination of the Evangelic Churches is estimated as “an evil will” of some bureaucrats and pressure of the Orthodox higher clergy and some “patriotic” public figures, but it is not interpreted as an official position of the authorities.

The improvement of mistakes of state officials and of various social defects Protestants take as a duty of every Christian believer. They try to solve the problem themselves and not to reproach authorities. For example, the demand to restrict the activity of nationalistic and fascist organizations in Russia derives not only from the Christian idea of equality of all peoples before Christ, but also from the pragmatic idea of

socially active Russian Evangelical “patriotism”. Pastor of the community of the Pentecostals-Unitarians in St. Petersburg describes patriotism in the following way. ”...It means to pray for the prosperity of the town where Lord placed us, as Apostles. We must obey the state laws and make our contributions to the life of the society, because we are light and salt of the earth and we must help everybody in need. No imperial trends and nationalism”<sup>6</sup>.

We should also point out that opposition to any kind of nationalism and the defending of Human Rights in that sphere is a moral duty of the Russian Protestants. It is proved by the words of the Pastor of “God’s Church” in Yaroslavl Andrei Dirienko: “All people-loving religions in Russia must cooperate in teaching our society the true moral values given by God. We must understand that without them it is impossible to block the way of the fascist ideology in our country”<sup>7</sup>. Anti-Semitism is especially denounced in the sermons, as the Protestants accept “the selection” of Jews by God. The opposition to anti-Semitism is most characteristic of the Pentecostal preachers and Churches, they organize missions on sending Jews to their historical Motherland – Israel (where, in the Pentecostals’ opinion, they must wait for Christ’s Second Coming).

The democratic views of the Evangelical movement are also reflected in their understanding of the international political values. In general, the Protestant leaders declare their idea of developing together with the West: the Russian Protestants do not see a special “spiritual and political way” of Russia and try to build an open, democratic society in Russia that can be an integral part of the Western civilization.

The firm conviction in the idea that human rights should triumph all over the world made many Protestants take the pro-American

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview given to the author by V. Shatrov in September, 2003.

position during the war in Iraq in 2003 – 2004. In contrast to the Orthodox society and priests, the Protestant pastors did not denounce the American policy and did not justify Saddam Hussein. The dictatorial regime of Hussein, according to the Protestants, is an obvious evil, though, in their opinion, any attempt to destroy this or that dictator brings victims. From this point of view the Protestants come to the conclusion that the Christian Church cannot support the USA military actions in the Persian Gulf and cannot denounce their attempt to establish a democratic form of administration.

Pastor of the Church “Delo Very” (“The Case of Faith”) in Izhevsk (The Udmurt Republic) Yuri Degtyar, for example, differentiates “the truth” of the state and “the truth” of the Church in this point. Degtyar remarks that sometimes we want to eradicate a sin, to punish evil and destroy a regime suppressing an individual. But, unfortunately, trying to fulfill that, a person makes a victim of another person”. Justifying the USA “defence of human rights in Iraq”, the Izhevsk pastor passes to the next point: “Any state administration has the right to punish evil given by God”. Yuri Degtyar comes to the conclusion: “...But the Church should not intrude into the sphere that God did not entrust it with. It should not cover its hands with the innocent people’s blood”<sup>8</sup>.

The defense of human rights and liberties in the Protestant mind in the early 21st century is connected with several principal features of the social and political situation in Putin’s Russia: 1) the weakness of the federal authorities in general, which means a possibility of different influence including xenophobic and anti-democratic moods; 2) the decrease of the influence of democratic institution and growing of the

---

<sup>7</sup> A. Dirienko. Not to Repeat the Mistakes of the Past. // All-Russian newspaper “Ecclesiast”, N6(91), 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Yuri Degtyar. The Destiny of Iraq is in Your Hands. // The Christian newspaper “Delo Very”, N2 (72), February, 2003.

authoritarian tendencies in the administrative structures; 3) the beginning of secret repressions that organized by the part of the officials, who often were and still are employees of the Federal Security Service loyal to the state ideology of President Putin's time. That ideology consists in the critical attitude towards the democratic values as unsuitable for Russian life and in regarding the West as "a secret enemy", preventing Russia from creation "a strong state".

The activity of the Protestant leaders is quite remarkable against a background of the general stagnation of social and political life and passive position of the authorities in supporting of institutes of the civil society after 2000, reminding the situation in the last period of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR Leonid Brezhnev at the late 1970s. Certainly, the Evangelical believers in Russia that make the majority of non-orthodox believers in Russian society today are not repressed by Putin's regime till the death and officials don't take pastors to prison camps. But the latent repressions and Soviet style of ruling force the part of civic society included evangelical movement to consider the present Putin's power as an unpredictable alien.

The Russian Protestant ideologists are very careful of the policy of the President Administration of the Russian Federation, when they declare their readiness to build a democratic society in Russia; they hope that some group around President will hear and understand the Protestants. At the same time, a part of the Kremlin officials obviously tries to manipulate the Protestant communities and their leaders in the same manner, as in the Soviet Union. The President Council on Cooperation with Religious Communities is specially formed according to the preferences of the people in President's surroundings. It is noteworthy that the Protestants in the President Council are represented by the leader of the Adventist Council Vasily Stolyar, Bishop of the only

Pentecostal Community – the Russian Union of the Christians of Evangelical Faith – Sergei Ryakhovsky (he is only Evangelical leader that often supported the President Putin in public speeches) and by the representative of the Lutheran Church Vladimir Pudov, the former official in the Soviet Council on the Religious Affairs. The Baptist leader Yuri Sipko is not a member of the Council because, as he says, he is “too strait in his judgements of the authorities which naturally does not pass without consequences”.<sup>9</sup>

The post-Soviet period of the formation of democratic views of the Protestant Churches led to the political concept, combining a strong defense (and religious justification) of the democratic rights and liberties and to an attempt to keep the idea of the authorities formed in Eltsyn’s period of “Russian Democracy”, when the authorities, chaotic as they were, tried to introduce democratic norms to public life. The impossibility to reveal one’s views openly after 2000 arouse reaction in the Evangelical society. The Protestant ideologists actually became messengers of the integral democratic ideology at the time, when the principles of democracy find less and less real support in the state structures, and the ideologists of democratic development left the political stage. While there is no strong civic society in Russia, the Evangelical movement tries to become its strong part, welcoming democratic declarations of the authoritarian officials.

---

<sup>9</sup> “A Holiday in the Baptists’ Street and They Managed to Organize it” // *Christianskie Izvestia* (Christian News), N8 (21), August, 2004.