



EBF Theology and Education Division

**Symposium „Baptist Churches and Changing Society:  
Eastern-European Experience“**

30 September - 2 October 2010, Tartu, Estonia

**Russian Baptists and Sectarian Image in Society since 1990**

**Alexander Popov**

The theme of the sectarian image of Russian Baptists has partly been discussed in an article by Alexander Negrov and Tat'iana Nikol'skaia – 'Baptists as a symbol of sectarianism in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia'.<sup>1</sup> The article by Negrov and Nikol'skaia includes historical analysis of the Baptist sectarian image. But what is the current situation? Do Baptists in Russia still need to cope with this image? In writing the present paper I have very modest ambitions: I try to bring some order and clarity to this issue from a present-day perspective. But in general this topic is still remaining open for further and deeper discussions. One may say that the sectarian image of Russian Baptists is a 'secret' that they keep from others: from the people to whom they preach, from the authorities with whom they contact, and even from their own minds. However, one may argue, that in certain respect the Baptist church in Russia is still a sect, at least from the sociological point of view. Dr R. Lopatkin, professor of sociology in the Russian Academy of State Service at the President of the Russian Federation, has expressed a position that the number of Baptists has become so insufficient that any general sociological research methods are inapplicable to them.<sup>2</sup> One may argue that 75,000 Baptists is not so insufficient number, but it should be noted that Baptists do form quite a separate group inside the population of Russia. The society lives according to its own culture and keeps its own customs. Most people still treat Baptists as outsiders. At best Baptists are a marginal subculture.

**Definition of sect in Russian context**

Like in other European languages the Russian word *sekta* (sect) was borrowed from Latin *secta* (which literally means 'cut off', passive participle). In today's Russian this term combines two meanings. It may designate a sect as a form of religious community. This meaning is less common. Usually it appears in the context of studies in the field of the sociology of religion, for example, when authors are following the terminology of Max

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Negrov, Tat'iana Nikol'skaia 'Baptists as a symbol of sectarianism in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia', in *Eastern European Baptist History: New Perspectives*, ed. Sh. Corrado and T.Pilli, Prague:IBTS,2007, pp.133-142.

<sup>2</sup> R.A.Lopatkin, 'Vrem'ia samopoznaniia' [Time for self-knowledge], in *140 let rossiiskomu baptizmu. Proshloe, nastoiashchee, perspektivy*, (Moscow: RUECB, 2008), pp.227-233, p.232.

Weber.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, this use of the word *sekta* is limited. It can never be applied in legislative texts, because legally *sekta* as an organization is not defined.<sup>4</sup> In colloquial language the word *sekta* has very negative connotations, referring to a cult or even a destructive and dangerous cult. It may sound surprising, but according to a recent research of the Russian Academy of Sciences the closest association to this term is “nudism”.<sup>5</sup> The word sect, in its second meaning, does not have any concreteness. It is a word which conveys prejudice or contempt or any other negative attitude and it may be applied to any group of believers, disregarding differences of these religious movements. For example, the label of a sect can be ascribed both to Baptists and Khlisty, or even to Satanists, and this makes possible the popular accusation of Baptists in all kinds of perversions, such as sexual orgies or human sacrifices, because, as popular prejudice states – “all sectarians do that”.

### Components of the sectarian image

In the following I propose the four most common prejudices that formed the concept of sect in Russian mentality. The combination of these prejudices I call ‘the myth of sectarianism’.

**1. Sectarians destroy traditional values. They are dangerous for national identity.** No matter what values are shared in the society in a given period of time – communist revolution or monarchy – sectarians are always seen as standing in opposition to them. From the Orthodox missionaries of tsarist times until today, the idea that sectarians are hostile to national interests is widely used by those who want to present Orthodoxy as the only source of Russian national spirituality and culture. Thus Andrei Kuraiev, a leading missionary of the ROC, uses exactly this point in defining sects as religious groups that do not belong to the dominating church.<sup>6</sup> In his opinion the very existence of any sect can be interpreted as a menace to national security. The typical complaint of those who fight against sectarians is that the government is too lenient towards them. No matter how hard persecutions are, they seem insufficient in the eyes of those who seek to deprive sectarians from the right to exist. Interestingly, sometimes persecuted sectarians themselves feel that they must be thankful to authorities who so kindly ‘tolerate’ them. Things could always be worse! Thus Constantine Somov, a Baptist, wrote in 1963, during Communist pressures:

‘It is true we have certain spiritual hardships... But at the same time, nobody crucifies us, nobody throws us before wild beasts, nobody burns us alive, nobody pricks our eyes or cuts our tongues... Our problems are insignificant compared with the problems of the first Christians.’<sup>7</sup>

**2. Sects are agents of foreign countries in their struggle against Russia.** These ‘enemies’ intentionally ‘infect’ Russian people with a sectarian ‘spirit’, in order to weaken the power of this country. Often this point becomes part of different conspiracy theories that typically

---

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Religiovedenie. Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’ (Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt, 2006), p. 1256.

<sup>4</sup> A great part of the legal discussion concerning the legitimacy of the term sect can be found in *Setky protiv Tserkvi (protsess Dvorkina)* [Sects against the Church (Dvorkin’s trial)], (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Moskovskoi Patriarkhii, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Russkii assotsiativnyi slovar’* [The Russian Dictionary of Associations], vol.2, (Moscow: AST-Astrel’, 2002), p.762

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Dvorkin, *Vvedeniie v sektovedeniie* [Introduction to comparative cults], (Nizhnii Novgorod: Izdatel’stvo bratstva vo imia sviatogo velikogo kniazia Alexandra Nevskogo, 1998), p.36

<sup>7</sup> K.V. Somov, ‘Na zare Khristianstva’ [At the dawn of Christianity], *Bratskii Vestnik*, vol. 5 (1963), p. 62.

draw a picture of some evil plot against Orthodoxy (or, in another context, against Communist Party, or against its leaders). It is only a small step further to conclude that sects are enemies of salvation of the human race in general. Alexander Dvorkin, the head of the Committee of Experts of the Department of Justice, during his visit to Vologda in September 2010 claimed in his interview to Orthodox press that “sectarianism is an instrument of political influence used by intelligence services of the USA”.<sup>8</sup> In his opinion virtually all modern sects have a support from the US government. This aspect of the sectarian image is ‘revealed’ by the fact that many such religious groups have foreign names: Baptists, Adventists and Mormons. Writing about Baptists many authors stress that this denomination is supported and directed from abroad.<sup>9</sup>

**3. All sectarians are morally corrupt.** In public opinion, the moral inferiority of sectarians can be seen in a broad spectrum of vices. Sectarians have been accused of cruelty, sexual perversions, and seeking personal interests. Even the piety of sectarians can be interpreted as a crafty mask that hides their true immoral essence. One of the worst sins of sectarians, according to public prejudice, is their hypocrisy. When these believers try to improve their life conditions they are accused of egoism and greed. Often this happens when observers have in mind the models of ascetic Orthodox saints, and consider ascetic-monastic type of lifestyle as the only alternative in pursuing holiness. Accusations sometimes take a form of popular ‘labels’. Here are some excerpts from my personal collection of statements about Baptists: “Baptists do not spare even their own children” (Pushino, 1999); “Baptists want to live at the expense of others. During the war (WWII) children perished in battles while healthy Baptist men strove to escape military service” (Saltykovka, 1988); “Baptists are those whose only aspiration is to move to America for a better life” (Naro-Fominsk, 2001). In an anti-sectarian mind, even people who live in licentiousness are better than sectarians, because the former do not hide their bad deeds while sectarians do. During a lecture for superintendents of the Russian Baptist Union the Orthodox bishop Igor Vizhanov was asked: “Why Orthodox priests do not want to accept help from Baptists in working with alcoholics?” His answer was very straightforward. He said that for the majority of the Orthodox clergy being a Baptist is worse than being an alcoholic.<sup>10</sup> For Orthodox believers all sectarians are perished sinners. According to *Zakon Bozhii*, a handbook of the Russian Orthodox Church, even an occasional conversation with sectarians may provoke God’s curse.<sup>11</sup> In my pastoral practice I have observed several cases when people left Baptist communities after having some crisis in their personal lives, such as illness, divorce or bankruptcy. Some of these people explained those events as punishment, and they tried to improve their situation by breaking their relations with the ‘ungodly’ sect of Baptists.

**4. Sects exercise total control over their followers in order to make profit for their leaders.** According to the common opinion a sect is a trap. It is very easy to get in, but very hard to get out. A sect is seen as a strictly ruled and organized group led by a despotic leader or leaders whose only goal is to abuse ordinary members so that they themselves may have some personal benefits. A typical testimony of a person who left a sect was written in 1924

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=79517&type=view>

<sup>9</sup> E.g. *Sovremennyye erisi i sekty na Rusi* [Modern heresies and sects in Russia], (Zhitomir: NI-KA, 2001), pp.61-62

<sup>10</sup> The video record of that lecture can be found on the website of Moscow Baptist Seminary:

[www.moscowseminary.org](http://www.moscowseminary.org).

<sup>11</sup> *Zakon Bozhii* [God’s Law], (Jordanville: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1957), p.49

by a man who first belonged to the Baptist church in Irkutsk, and then was excommunicated. He wrote to his former congregation:

You are deceived and you are isolated from the world and social life. You are in quarrels with your relatives and even with the dearest ones. You hate all people who belong to other faiths... You are armed to fight against the authorities... You are dipped into superstitions and you are intentionally kept in ignorance. Pastors and preachers... continue to spread the seeds of hatred. They want you to be despised by all for your dull superstitions and backwardness in order to keep you together under control. They want you to be exploited shamelessly because they want to have material profits from you. For them the Gospel is a spiritual truncheon with which they threaten all those who, like me, do not agree with their their disgusting deeds.<sup>12</sup>

Although this text belongs to atheistic propaganda, it opposes Slavic sectarian faith and compares it with some other and “better” religions, apparently Orthodoxy. This text demonstrates that, according to the myth of sectarianism, in pursuit of human souls sects use all kinds of instruments. Virtually any activity of sectarians can be considered as a trick used for strengthening their power over human souls. For example, Lev Mitrokhin, the leading specialist in Russian Protestantism in Brezhnev’s times, claimed that Evangelical Christians-Baptists use their preaching, music, and prayers in a special way to keep their members in the sect.<sup>13</sup> According to Mitrokhin, illiterate people, unemployed or semi-skilled workers, as well as elderly persons are especially open to this kind of manipulation.<sup>14</sup>

### Evolution of the sectarian image of Baptists

In the following section I will try to summarize the history of sectarian image of Baptists in Russia and make some general conclusions. Religious non-conformism in Russia has a long history. In the seventeenth century, the reforms of the Orthodox Church produced the movement of Old Believers which consisted of dozens of different varieties and groups. The Old Believers still belonged to the Orthodoxy though they did not agree with its official version. In the eighteenth century there appeared a new trend in Russian sectarianism called Spiritual Christianity. These groups broke with Orthodox traditions and represented a charismatic type of spirituality. To some extent they were close to evangelicalism. (However, they put emphasis on inner revelation and did not use the Bible very extensively, partly, because they were illiterate.) All these new religious movements were severely criticized by Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, they were very seldom called *sekta*. Instead, other terms of native origin like *raskol* (dissent), *tolk* (connection) or *soglasii* (agreement) were applied to them. Probably the term ‘sect’ in its present negative version was not formed in Russia until the second part of the nineteenth century. In the famous explanatory dictionary by Vladimir Dal’ (1865) the word ‘sect’ is defined as “brotherhood of those who have accepted their own special religious doctrines”.<sup>16</sup> This is a rather neutral definition. Dal’ claimed that the word ‘sect’ – *sekta* – came into Russian from French. French was the language of Slavic

<sup>12</sup> From A. Dolotov, ‘Sektanstvo v Sibiri [Sectarianism in Siberia]’, in *Kritika religioznogo sektanstva*, (Moscow: Mysl’, 1974), pp.102-131, p.117

<sup>13</sup> Leonid Mitrokhin, *Baptism* [Baptists], (Moscow: IPL, 1966), p.239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Negrov, Tat’iana Nikol’skaia ‘Baptists as a symbol of sectarianism in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia’, p.133

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Dal’, *Tolkovyj slovar’ zhivogo velikorussogo iazyka* [Explanatory dictionary of the living Great-Russian language], vol.4 (St.-Petersburg: Volf, 1882), p.171

educated nobility and French culture was in many ways a model in Russia. In other words, to be a sectarian in the Russian Empire those days did not necessarily imply being outcast. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Molokans somewhat proudly called themselves sectarians. They even were publishing a periodical under the title *Sektantskii vestnik* [Sectarian messenger].<sup>17</sup> In his apologetic pamphlet "The truth about Baptists" the 'patriarch' of the Russian evangelicals Vasilii Pavlov makes an attempt to rehabilitate the word *sekta*. Pavlov argues that already from the early years of Christianity sectarians played a very positive role, and they actually were the bearers of God's truth.<sup>18</sup> The cardinal change in attitude towards sectarians took place in the 1890s and later, during the persecutions against Slavic non-conformists initiated by Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the leading figure of Orthodox Synod. This was a reaction to the rapid growth of evangelicals among the Russian-speaking population in the previous decades. The expansion of evangelicalism was considered a great menace to the very existence of the Russian Orthodox Church. This situation demanded extraordinary measures. The struggle against sectarianism began to denote fight against evangelicals. For example, a popular propagandistic tract issued in 1912 was titled "Baptists as the most malignant sect".<sup>19</sup> The myth of sectarianism, to a great extent, emerged in this context of anti-Baptist and anti-evangelical sentiments. That is why it is so hard for Baptists to "wash out" the sticky label of a sect. A wide audience is aware of the cruel oppression of evangelical believers in those years of Pobedonostsev's measures. But it is less known that this was accompanied by intensive propaganda which deserves special attention, perhaps even thorough research. A short poem, being only one example, demonstrates this ideological struggle against sectarians. The poem was published in 1897 in an anti-sectarian periodical *Missionerskoe obozrenie* [Missionary review] under the title "What is *shtunda*?"<sup>20</sup> The poem contains the full agenda of the anti-sectarian campaign. It starts with pointing out the foreign origin of the evangelical movement (*shtunda*<sup>21</sup>): "Our German colonists ... gave birth to this darkness". Then the author gives a full list of false doctrines of the sectarians. The sectarians 'neglect holy rites', they 'cast icons to the dust', and 'put their hats on in the temple'. The author concludes that the whole *shtundist* movement is evil. According to him evangelicals demonstrate "willful, rebellious inclination to moral turpitude, hoping to receive salvation without good deeds", and in this way the *shtundists* are not better than atheists. God's punishment for them must be much more severe than the steps taken by the authorities. Certainly, the propagandist efforts of the Orthodox clergy were not limited to writing poems. They also organized pogroms against evangelicals using prejudices and fears of simple peasants (one such pogrom has been described in the novel "Shtundist Pavel Rudenko" by Sergey Stepniak-Kravchinsky, see also "Highway of Sorrow at the close of the XIX Century")<sup>22</sup>. After the communist revolution in 1917 the attitude towards sectarians basically remained the same, though in the 1920s there

---

<sup>17</sup> Samples of this periodical can be downloaded from <http://www.ecbarchive.org/archive/periodicals/sv/>.

<sup>18</sup> Vasilii Pavlov, 'Pravda o baptistakh', in *Almanakh to istorii russkogo baptizma*, (St.-Petersburg: Bibliia dl'a vsekh, 1997), pp.220-272, p.222-225.

<sup>19</sup> *Baptisty, kak naibolee zlovrednaia sekta* [Baptists as the most malignant sect]. (Moscow: "Izdanie podvor'ia Russkogo Sviato-Panteleimonova monastyr'ia na Afone", 1994)

<sup>20</sup> Makarii (bishop of Kaluga), 'Chto takoe shtunda' in *Missionerskoe obozrenie*, vol.2, 1897, pp.71-72

<sup>21</sup> From German *Stunde* – hour, class. The word was used as a general term for all evangelicals in the Russian empire by the end of the XIX century. See Alexander Negrov, Tat'iana Nikol'skaia 'Baptists as a symbol of sectarianism in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia', pp.134-135.

<sup>22</sup> The most accessible version of this text can be found in Stepniak-Kravchinskii S., *Sochineniia* [Works], T.2:(M.: Khuozhestvennoi literatura, 1958)

was a more relaxed atmosphere for evangelicals. However, this was a tactical maneuver rather than a strategic change in attitude. Communists borrowed the concept of sectarianism Orthodox writers. The only input of Soviet ideologists consisted in the emphasis on the struggle of social classes. In this ideological light, the sectarian leaders became rich exploiters whose main goal was to enslave their co-religionists in order to have personal benefits. As soon as the economic basis of sectarianism was broken by the October Revolution sects had no other option than to disappear from the arena of history. The communist government structures, from their part, made efforts to accelerate this process.<sup>23</sup> One difference in the position of sectarians in the USSR, compared to that in the Russian Empire, was that they were not the only enemies of the Soviet power. Being more influential, the Russian Orthodox Church itself was an enemy for Communists. The Soviet anti-religious propaganda was directed first and foremost against Orthodoxy. We can hardly find a any document issued by the Communist governmental institutions that was devoted exclusively to evangelicals. Anti-sectarianism was a part of a wider anti-religious campaign. As a result, by the time of Perestroika an ordinary Soviet person often did not distinguish between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians. This helped to improve the social position of evangelicals at the beginning of the 1990s. People were returning to religion – and confessional differences were less important for them. The period of relative indifference towards sectarianism in the society did not last long. The leading role in the revival of the traditional negative image of sects belongs to the Orthodox Church. Moscow Patriarchate had ambitions to restore its traditional monopoly in the spiritual life of the Russian people. By the end of the 1990s sectarianism became again a scarecrow for the people in the street. The law of freedom of consciousness, issued in 1998, clearly defined Orthodoxy as the only traditional religion (alongside with Islam and Buddhism in non-Russian regions). All other religious groups were given significantly more limited rights. On 12 February 1998, the Juridical Chamber on Informational Conflicts of the President of Russia issued a document which stated that the term *sekta* “in the given circumstances has certainly a negative meaning” and hence it is not recommended for use in official texts and publications to avoid insulting believers.<sup>24</sup> In spite of this recommendation the word *sekta* is still used widely by mass media. It is not a war against any particular sect (though sometimes groups that cannot defend themselves become an object of an intensive media assault). However, every battle in this war is aimed to weaken denominations that do not belong to the “state religion”. Although Baptists are in present day Russia strongly criticized in some nationalist and Orthodox circles, they are not ranked first on the list of dangerous cults. Nevertheless, most people do not distinguish between Baptists and “other non-Orthodox,” and anti-sectarian attitudes easily expand over to Baptists.

### **What Russian Baptists can do about their sectarian image?**

Exploring the ways Baptists could deal with the myth of sectarianism one can recognize two opposite strategies. Firstly, Baptists can ignore the negative attitude of the society and to continue to live according to their Christian principles. Secondly, Baptists can strive to prove

---

<sup>23</sup> This paradigm appears in details in the work of Galina Lialina, *Baptizm: illiuzii i real'nost'* [Baptists: illusions and reality], (Moscow: IPL, 1977).

<sup>24</sup> Ob obrashenii koordinatora rukovodiaschego kommiteta upravlencheskogo tsentra regional'noi religioznoi organizatsii “Svideteli legovy” V.M.Kalina v sviazi s publikatsiiei v gazette “Komsomol'skaya Pravda” materiala “Sankt-Peterburg. Zdes' budet gorod khram.” Determination # 4(138), 12.02.1998.

that the sectarian myth is inapplicable to them. The first strategy was typical for the Baptist Union before 1928. It was also characteristic for the Council of Churches of ECB (the underground Baptists) during communist years. The second strategy was preferred by the Union of Evangelical Christians led by Prokhanov, and later it was predominant for the All-Union Council of ECB. Russian Baptists today often combine both ways, though they are not always consistent. As far as legislative position, the greatest achievement of Baptists in Russia was that they achieved partial recognition as a traditional religion. At present, very few journalists or officials would dare openly to call Baptists sectarians. Evangelical organizations, such as Slavic Center for Law and Justice<sup>25</sup> are carefully monitoring mass media. They eagerly defend the interests of believers, sometimes initiating court cases, as soon as they notice even insignificant abuses of their rights. Perhaps the most conspicuous case when the sectarian image of Baptists was used with political purposes happened in Smolensk in 2009. One of the candidates for mayor's position was distributing a sham newspaper which claimed that his competitor was supported by local Baptists. The newspaper also said that this latter candidate's aim was making Baptists dominant in this city. This provocation was revealed publicly and the candidate who distributed sham newspapers conceded that he had lost the election.<sup>26</sup> Formal and legislative correctness, however, does not mean that the society in general has given up the usual stereotype. Believers feel that they need to do something with the negative views concerning them. Sometimes they try to behave less 'sectarian'. Some elements of their identity, which public opinion considers sectarian, are more likely to be modified. For example, many Christians renounce the name 'Baptists'. There are several Unions like Russian Association of Independent Churches (Peter Sautov) or the Union of Evangelical Christians (Alexander Semchenko) which stress their difference from Baptists. Even churches that belong to the Russian Union of ECB are very reluctant in referring in their name to being a 'Baptist'. Sometimes believers try to imitate the Orthodox Church through introducing similar ritual elements in their worship services, building churches in the Orthodox or Catholic style, and using special garments and attributes for ministers. This tendency was consciously taken further in the Evangelical Russian Church, led by Evgenii Nedzelski, who tried to create "an evangelical church with Russian face".<sup>27</sup> At the same time, it becomes more and more apparent that such methods have limits and may have an effect contrary to good intentions. The society at large recognizes the counterfeit "orthodoxy" of evangelicals quite easily, and the result may be blaming evangelicals of deception. Russian Baptists are sometimes sensitive to accusations of a lack of patriotism. ECB authors like to quote Solzhenitsyn's praises of Russian Baptists<sup>28</sup> and try to prove that the Baptist Union is an expression of indigenous national spirituality.<sup>29</sup> Most ECB church leaders cooperate with local authorities. Sometimes, in their pursuit to prove their national sentiments, church leaders lose diplomatic balance. Thus, Evgeniy Bakhmutsky, the new vice president of the RU ECB, in his

---

<sup>25</sup> For more information see <http://www.sclj.org/about.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://jesuschrist.ru/news/2009/2/26/15634>.

<sup>27</sup> Sergei Filatof, Anastasiia Strukova, 'Ot protestantizma v Rossii k russkomu protestantizmu' [From Protestantism in Russia to Russian Protestantism], in *Neprekosnovennyi zapas*, 2003, №6(32), electronic version <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2003/6/filat3.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Igor Podberezskii, *Evangel'skiiie khristiane Rossii* [Evangelical Christians of Russia], (Moscow: Protestant, 2008), p.458.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Savinskii, S.N., *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii. Ch. I : (1867-1917)*, [History of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Ukraine, Russia and Belorussia, part I : (1867-1917), (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dla vsek , 2001), pp.31-37

interview to the portal *religions.ru*, claimed that Baptists should recognize positive achievements of Stalin. When the astounded journalist asked how Baptists can praise Stalin who used to be a fervent persecutor of evangelicals, Bakhmutsky answered: "Not many state leaders are just good or just bad. Even Hitler, who was criticized by all, was the first to start the campaign against smoking."<sup>30</sup> Well, no doubt, more thoroughgoing ethical discernment is needed! Typically, efforts of evangelicals to be accepted by the society are quite reasonable. Thus, we can observe that for many communities the official church statutes are not just formal documents written on demand as it used to be before the fall of the USSR. The believers sincerely try to live according to the norms approved by authorities, and express this desire also in their official documents. One of the missionary challenges for Christians consists in living in honest ways in a corrupted society. Unfortunately many bankruptcies and business schemes of Christian enterprises demonstrate that life without bribing, for example, is a hard task for businesspeople in Russia. Also, it is publicly known that one can find true oligarchs among those who confess the evangelical faith (for example, Semichenko, the bishop of the Union of Evangelical Christians). Following the example of the Russian Orthodox Church the Russian Union of ECB issued "The Social Position of Protestant Churches"<sup>31</sup> (note: not Baptists or evangelicals!). This document calls believers for an active role in the society; evangelicals are encouraged to participate in the social and political life of the state. While offering some helpful ideas about cooperation between the Baptists and the rest of the Russian people, "The Social Position" is quite an idealistic document. In reality there is considerable reluctance towards such cooperation from both sides. Most evangelical believers have never read this document neither can support its statements unanimously. Alongside with many cases of mutual cooperation and understanding between Baptists and wider society there is another strong tendency. Being disappointed with the attempts to adjust to the society, some Russian Baptists are choosing their traditional policy of confrontation. More and more often they position themselves as those who proclaim the Gospel despite their image or acceptance in wider culture. The fact that the president of the RU ECB stopped attending the regular meetings of the president of Russia with religious leaders of the country demonstrates this growing disharmony. All believers in Russia have to face the factor of growing secularism. This shapes attitudes towards religion, including Christianity, in the society. Baptists and other evangelicals are not the only denominations that face marginalization in society. An internet poll asked a question: "Are Baptists a sect?" The visitors of the website voted for different given answers. According to that poll the visitors of the website preferred most the following answer: "All religions are sects". Even the Russian Orthodox Church is not very successful in its efforts to restore religious spirit of Russia as it was in the 1800s. But it has accepted certain patterns of secularism. To be an Orthodox may just mean to admit that Orthodoxy is a part of the national culture. Actually it does not necessarily mean that a person agrees with doctrinal positions of practices of Orthodoxy. But to be a Baptist still means, at least in its ideal, to agree to evangelical faith and to practice Christian lifestyle in a pietistic way. With less acceptance of Christianity in the society, the evangelical believers may become even more marginalized as they are today. To find ways of witness in Russian culture, influenced by secular tendencies, is a challenge for Baptists.

---

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.regions.ru/news/2308611/>

<sup>31</sup> *Sotsial'naiia positsiia protestantskikh tserkvei Rossii* [Social position of Protestant churches in Russia], (Moscow:2003)

## Conclusion

During last decades, Baptists have won official recognition by the state. At the same time, their impact upon the society is minimal. How to be 'salt and light' in this situation? Many people in Russia are indifferent towards evangelical faith. The recent congress of the RU ECB which elected a new president (an important event for Baptists themselves) was not even mentioned in secular mass media. The sectarian image of Russian Baptists is being transformed. Now they do not seem any more as dangerous as marginal. The fundamentalist tendencies (partly imported into Russia by American missionaries) just make the split wider between believers and society. Some social projects, which have a potential to find at least local publicity, could improve the situation. However, churches have limited resources, and sometimes limited commitment to such projects. Society at large usually does not consider Baptists as a partner in social projects. In addition, social empathy is still shallow in Russia. The times of '*miloserdie*' – so typical of the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s – have been replaced by more pragmatic and economical values in the country. Looking forward I cannot show much optimism. I agree with Igor Podbereszky that in the given situation Baptists are doomed to be marginal.<sup>32</sup> Keeping strictly their spirituality and traditions they may run into contradiction to the modern tendencies and values in the society. But a cardinal reformation of Russian Baptist spirituality may be even more dangerous for the Baptist identity. However, in changing circumstances weaknesses may turn into advantages. History demonstrates that even a negative image formed in the previous years may not be a hindrance for revival and improved positions in the society, as was the case, for example, in the 1920s. Meanwhile, there are no clear signs that evangelical faith may gain or re-gain any central position in Russian culture.

## Appendix

### Что такое штунда?

Что такое наша штунда,  
Наводнившая народ?  
Где родилась и откуда  
Получила дерзкий ход?

Наши колонисты – немцы,  
Вольнодумцы по уму,  
Римской церкви отщепенцы,  
Породили эту тьму.

В штунде разом все затмилось;  
В ней померк Священства свет;  
Тайноводство разорилось  
И святых обрядов нет.

---

<sup>32</sup> See Igor Podbereskii, *Byt' protestantom v Rossii* [To be a protestant in Russia], (Moscow: Blagovestnik, 1996), pp.69-71; *Evangel'skiiie khristiane Rossii* [Evangelical Christians of Russia], (Moscow: Protestant, 2008), p.456-459.

Злобой дышит сатанинской  
Вся штундистская семья  
И с азартностью воинской  
Чувствовать дает себя.

На святыню нападает  
И, кощунствуя над ней,  
Речи хульны изрыгает  
В наглой дерзости своей.

Шапки надевает в Храме  
И иконы вержет в прах:  
Адское подьмет знамя,  
Коим заправляет враг.

Чем же штунда привлекает  
Многих слабых Россиян,  
Чем она их обольщает,  
Церкви наносить изъян?

Своевольство, непокорность  
Воле Божьего суда,  
К развращению наклонность  
И спасенье без труда –

Вот та сеть греха, соблазна,  
Коей в штунду ловит враг,  
Вид всему дая показный,  
Убивая Божий страх.

Обращайтесь вы, штундисты,  
К покаянью вас зовем;  
Вы не лучше нигилистов  
В направлении своем.

Вы теперь пока свободны;  
Власть земная вас щадит;  
Но ведь славу преподобных  
Сам Всевышний защитит.

Грянет громом правосудья  
И сметет с лица земли  
Всех вас дерзких, безрассудных  
Кои против Церкви шли.

*Макарий, Еп. Калужский*