



## The problem of religious freedom in late imperial Russia: The case of Russian Baptists

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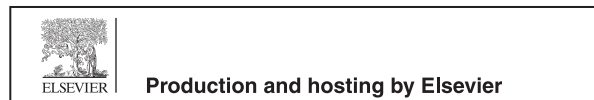
### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the development of the Baptist movements (Stundism and Pashkovism) in late Imperial Russia, their perception by the ecclesiastical and secular authorities, the measures undertaken by the Church and government in order to combat the Protestant sectarianism. Different approaches of the contemporaries to the religious dissent are being investigated. While the members of educated society, liberals and moderate conservatives viewed evangelical movements as a reflection of social changes in postreform Russia and a reaction to the shortcomings of the official Church, the ecclesiastical authorities treated the rise of evangelicalism as a result of the sectarians' "ignorance" and as a threat to the political and social order of Russia. When conservative tsar Alexander III ascended in 1881 to the throne, his former tutor and the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod Constantine Pobedonostsev launched an energetic campaign against the heterodoxy based on a combination of repressive and educational measures. This campaign turned out to be a failure mostly due to passiveness of the official Church which was paralyzed by the strict control of the state. The position of the secular administration which was not eager to be drawn into religious struggle also hampered the attempts to combat the heterodoxy. Finally, the effective repressions against the sectarianism were paralyzed by the protests of the Senate, supreme juridical body of the Empire which had to overview the compliance with the law. Though the repressions against the Baptists were stopped in 1905, they made a negative impact on the Russia's development contributing to the sharpening of the social and political contradictions on the eve of revolution.

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In 1900 Constantine Pobedonostsev, the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod (the lay head of the Russian Orthodox Church), complained in his report to the tsar that his attempts to combat the development of Protestant sectarianism in Russia were paralyzed by decrees of the Governing Senate, the supreme juridical body of the Empire.<sup>1</sup> This statement in fact summed up results of the years-long struggle waged by the Russian state and Church

<sup>1</sup> The history of the struggle between Synod and Senate is described in details in the memoirs of A.F. Koni, the head of the Senate's Criminal Cassation Department. See: [Koni, 1913a](#).

against the evangelical movements – Baptism (Stundo-Baptism) and Pashkovism. Though the main legal prohibitions on the sectarians' activities were lifted only in 1905, it had become clear much earlier that the authorities lost their battle against evangelicalism. Why did the Imperial state and the official Church of Russia failed to combat the non-violent religious movement which comprised only the tiny minority of the Russian population? Why the Church and state could not cooperate effectively in the fight against heterodoxy? Why a significant part of the secular bureaucracy was reluctant to launch the war against the “heretics”? All these issues provide an important insight in the history of the Russian religious life, in the inner working of the governmental apparatus and in the Church–state relations on the eve of the epoch of revolutions.

Before addressing these problems, another important question should be asked: why did the official authorities paid so much attention to the movement which never challenged the foundations of Russia's social and political order? “The spectacle which is thus represented to us of the authorities”, wrote with this regard the well-known British journalist W.T. Stead, “animated as it were by some strange suicidal mania, spending their time, thought and energy, in harrying and destroying those who, as all experience has proved, would be the most trustworthy and loyal subjects of the Emperor if they were but allowed to obey their conscience in the matter of religion, is melancholy indeed”. Due to such a policy, Stead stressed, Russia in matters of religious liberty was regarded in the West as a medieval and barbarous power rather than a civilized state of nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The persecutions of evangelical sectarians became, as a modern historian puts it, a real “public relations debacle for the autocracy”, attracting a close attention of Russian and Western public and engendering harsh criticism of the religious policy of the government.<sup>3</sup> “There is scarcely a prison in South Russia, that does not contain Stundists”, wrote a British writer R.S. Latimer, “there is scarcely a convoy of convicts on the way to Siberia which has not in its midst a Stundist preacher. It is no longer a matter of mere persecution; it is a determination to extinguish them”.<sup>4</sup> Though the scope and cruelty of the repressions were to some extent exaggerated in the writings of European and American observers, it goes without saying that the sectarians experienced serious sufferings as a result of the governmental policy. What, then, was the reason for this struggle against religious non-conformists that reminded the Western observers the times of Torquemada and Archbishop Laud if not those of Nero and Diocletian?

The Protestant sectarianism in late Imperial Russia has become over past several years a subject of a number of fundamental works which seriously deepened our understanding of this important historical phenomenon. In their

books Heather Coleman, Nicholas Breyfogle, and Sergei Zhuk elucidated significant aspects of the sectarian movements, investigating the content of their belief, their role in the spiritual awakening in pre-revolutionary Russia, and the reconsideration of religious, political, and national identities in Russian society engendered by the rise of sectarianism.<sup>5</sup> In my article I would like to stress another dimension of the sectarians' history analyzing religious dissent as the object of the governmental policy and exploring its perception by the Church and secular authorities.

Touching upon the development of Protestant sectarianism in late Imperial Russia, it should be noted that its rise was deeply connected with the changes in Russian social, economic, spiritual life engendered by the abolition of the serfdom in 1861. It is not a coincidence that evangelical sectarianism first emerged in the areas where the capitalism was intensively developing. The first and most prominent trend in the Protestant movement, Stundism, appeared in the late 1860s on the territory of contemporary Ukraine in Kiev and Kherson provinces. The model for the first Stundists were sectarians in the German colonies who gathered at particular “hours” (in German, *Stunden*) for prayer, Bible reading and song. The movement quickly spread throughout the South and West of the Russian Empire, to Volyn', Podol'sk, Ekaterinoslavl, Chernigov, Taurida, Poltava, Bessarabia, Minsk, and Mogilev provinces. By the middle of 1880s, in the Kherson region alone there were about three thousand Stundists, and there were about two thousand in Kiev Province.<sup>6</sup>

The reasons which urged Russian and Ukrainian peasants to join the new sect were linked mostly to their search of the spiritual and moral revival stimulated by the changing conditions of social and economic life. The official Orthodox Church could not often satisfy the men and women who were looking for the freedom of individuality within the new communities with higher moral standards. Thus, peasants in the Kherson region being brought to trial told the police “that the main reason for converting to the Stunde sect was ... a desire to withdraw from a society in which all kinds of corrupting vices prevailed, such as drunkenness, rowdy behavior, thievery, and laziness. When they joined the religious sect they broke off all ties with their former associates and entered a new life which gave them material sufficiency”.<sup>7</sup> It should be added that the new religious movements, with their communal self-government, charity work, and mutual aid, together with the active teaching of pastors who were often elected, proved to be much better adapted to postreform reality than was the bureaucratized official Church.

Of course, the search for the moral awakening was not confined in the late Imperial Russia only to the lower strata of the population, peasants and workers. In the middle of 1870s, a second important Protestant movement emerged, this time among the high society of St. Petersburg. Under the influence of the British preacher Lord Radstock, the

<sup>2</sup> Stead, 1888a, pp. 389, 372.

<sup>3</sup> Breyfogle, 2005b, p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> Latimer, 1909. “Religious intolerance”, noted in his book a famous American writer George Kennan, “is just rampant in Russia today as it was in England during the reigns of the Tudors, and it is only prevented from going to the extremes of personal torture and the public stake by the dread of Western opinion” (Quoted in: Lowe, 1895).

<sup>5</sup> Breyfogle, 2005b; Coleman, 2005a; Zhuk, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Klivanov, 1965, pp. 189–92, 203–3, 206–9.

<sup>7</sup> RGIA (Russian State Historical Archive), f. 797, op. 55, otd. 2, st. 3, d. 96, 1.12.

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