The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Atheism on Trial in Russia's Stavropol

By Victor Davidoff

March 16, 2016

In a courtroom in Stavropol, Viktor Krasnov, a physician's assistant, is accused of the same crime as Giordano Bruno, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Salman Rushdie — atheism. Krasnov probably isn't thrilled to be in such illustrious company, just as no one else is thrilled by this felony case. Hopping into a time machine is a great fantasy, but not when it takes you to the dungeons of the Inquisition.

Krasnov is facing one year in prison under Article 148 of the Criminal Code — for "public actions that express clear lack of respect for society and are carried out with the aim of insulting the religious feelings of believers." His "actions" consisted of a verbal quarrel on the Stravropol page of the social network VKontakte in the fall of 2014.

It all began, as so much begins, with a conversation about women — specifically with a quote from the Apostle Paul: "Christ is the head of every man, and a husband the head of his wife, and God the head of Christ."

"Where's that crap from, the Domostroi?" Krasnov wrote, referring to a medieval Russian book of rules for family life, which recommend, in part, that a husband periodically beat his

wife.

Not just one but two people on the forum explained to Krasnov that this was from the Bible. Krasnov got annoyed and called the Bible "a collection of Jewish fairy tales" — although to be fair, he did add, "for me, anyway." Then one of his opponents threatened to knock some sense into him, to which Krasnov replied, "There is no God!

Apparently deciding to not bother with theological proof of God's existence, Krasnov's opponents turned to the help of the police, prosecutor's office and court instead. They denounced him.

The current tougher version of Article 148 was put on the books in the fall of 2013 as a belated response to the Pussy Riot case. The women in Pussy Riot were charged with "hooliganism," which was absurd — as their lawyers pointed out — since Pussy Riot performed by themselves in an almost empty church. The new version of this article in the Criminal Code was supposed to make it possible to jail any other followers of Pussy Riot without changing the law too much.

But Article 148 is in fact a gross violation of the Russian Constitution. Article 14 of the Constitution clearly states that the Russian Federation is a secular state. Therefore, the rejection of religious dogmas shouldn't put anyone behind bars.

And the article is a violation of simple logic as well. In today's multi-confessional world, every minute of every day, followers of every religion commit public acts that "insult the religious feelings of believers" in other gods. Christians reject the divinity of the Quran; Muslims reject the divine nature of Jesus Christ; Jews reject both — and the list can go on and on to everyone, including practitioners of Voodoo. Therefore, according to the letter of the law, everyone should be sent to jail regardless of their faith, including atheists, too.

The linguistic analysis of the Krasnov case is like a document airmailed directly from the Middle Ages. It stipulates that Krasnov's words could not offend a person of a particular religious group since the subject under discussion is not a person or a group of people but rather religious dogmas and canons. That's why, the experts explained, "these statements are insulting to Orthodox Christianity and aimed at humiliating (offending) the feelings of believers." Medieval scholars would have turned green with envy: on the one hand, no Orthodox Christian was insulted, but on the other hand, that's precisely why all Orthodox Christians were insulted.

It's interesting to note that not all Orthodox Christians agree with these scholarly experts or consider themselves insulted. Father Antony Skrynnikov, a priest in Stavropol who doesn't have particularly warm feelings about Krasnov, all the same wrote in his defense: "My personal opinion is simple: the court case is senseless and I hope that he [Krasnov] is acquitted. In my view he is an unhappy, lost soul. You can feel sorry for him, but you can't want to take revenge against him, enjoy his suffering or be happy if he, God forbid, is convicted."

Certainly as the world slips into a period of new religious wars, governments must take measures to buffer growing sectarian conflicts. But the criminal code is already sufficient to protect believers from violence or insulting acts. Swastikas drawn on the walls of a

synagogue offend more than practicing Jews and Jewish people. It is a coded message calling for the liquidation of people by race, which is a violation of the rights of everyone regardless of their religion or race.

To prevent such a violation, you don't need Article 148 which, as the Krasnov case clearly shows, doesn't so much defend the rights of Orthodox believers as it violates the right of citizens to express their opinion, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 148 of the Criminal Code is a case of the cure being worse than the disease — an indication that, as it was written in St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians that began Krasnov's case, "there must be also heresies among you."

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