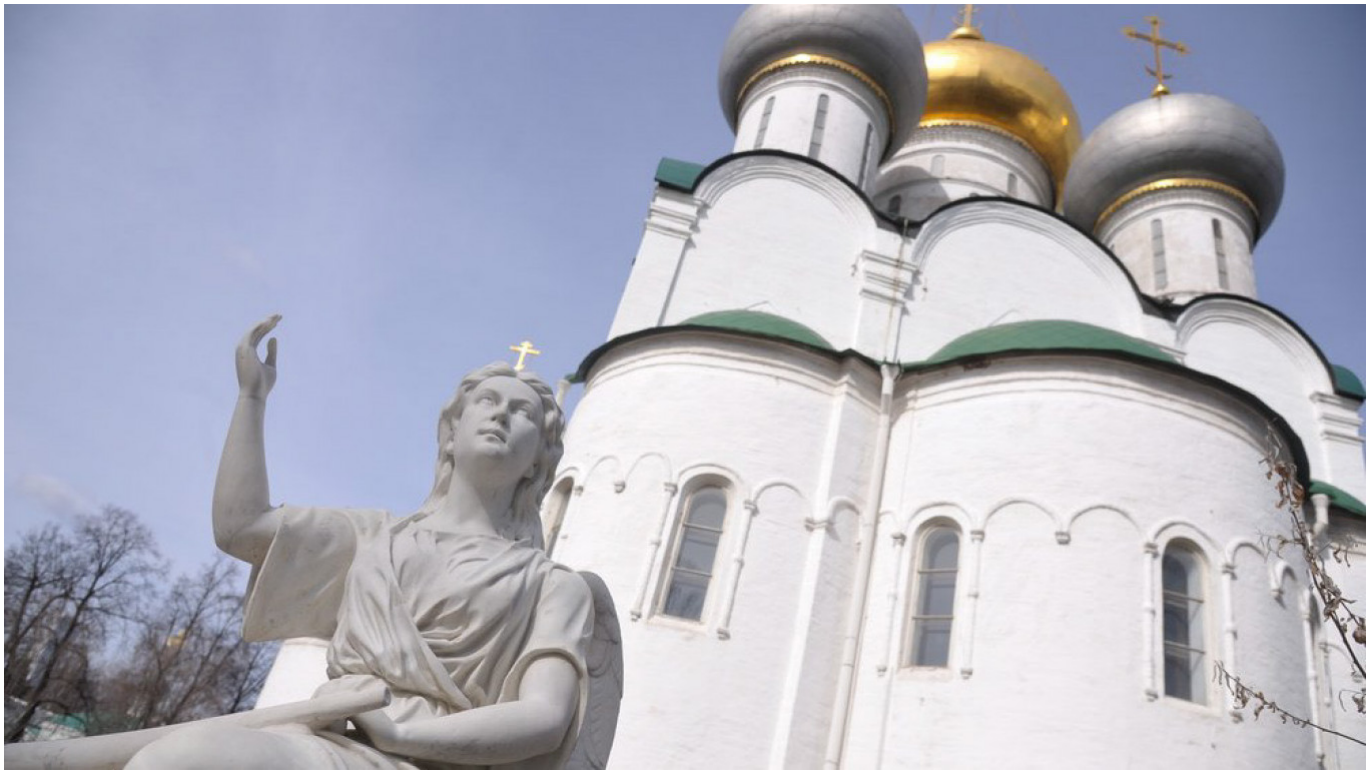
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Russian Orthodox Church Backs Banning 'Offensive' Religious Cartoons

November 09, 2020



Insulting worshippers' religious feelings has been a criminal offense in Russia since 2013. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

All cartoons that offend religious believers should be banned, a senior Russian Orthodox Church cleric has said following the killing of a French teacher by a Chechen refugee last month.

Metropolitan Hilarion, who heads the church's Department of External Relations, told state television Saturday that cartoons depicting the founders of major religions in an offensive light "don't express freedom of speech but manifest religious intolerance."

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"I think that all the world's countries, including in the West and Europe, should ban the publication of caricatures about the founder of Islam and ban any cartoons that may cause

discontent, confrontation and offense in any religious denominations," he said.

The Russian cleric spoke amid a widening rift between the Muslim world and France after an 18-year-old Chechen refugee beheaded a schoolteacher near Paris for showing satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad during a class discussion on freedom of speech. Prominent Russian Muslim figures including Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov condemned French President Emmanuel Macron for defending France's right to mock religion, while dozens of young men joined anti-Macron demonstrations in Moscow.

Many Muslims take offense at depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, while France has a proud secular tradition dating back to the Revolution.

"We must understand that these kinds of caricatures that are published, distributed and shown to schoolchildren really do offend the feelings of millions of followers of Islam," said Metropolitan Hilarion.

"That's why these caricatures should be banned. They're not an expression of freedom of speech as some in France think, but simply a manifestation of religious intolerance," the cleric told the Rossia 24 broadcaster.

The Kremlin has said that Russia would never authorize a publication like Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical magazine that published the Muhammad cartoons, on legal and moral grounds.

At the same time, the Kremlin blasted the "horrifying" killing of three people in a Nice church by a suspected Islamist two weeks after the Oct. 16 beheading.

Last week, a senior Muslim leader in Russia's North Caucasus region asked President Vladimir Putin to put forward at the UN Security Council "a global law against insulting believers' feelings."

"It's a really good proposal. I don't understand who could oppose a ban on insulting the feelings of believers in any form," Putin said of the request.

Russia itself criminalized insulting worshippers' religious feelings in 2013 after protest group Pussy Riot performed an anti-Putin "punk prayer" at a central Moscow cathedral.

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