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**FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND THE
REDEFINITION OF CONFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES
IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA, 1905-1914**

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that “freedom of conscience” became the central touchstone for believers, politicians, and statesmen in their attempt to imagine and effectuate a new religious order in 1905 Russia and after. Encompassing both new rights on the part of virtually all non-Orthodox believers and therefore new obligations on the part of the state towards those communities, the concept “freedom of conscience” necessitated the institutionalization and legal regulation of diverse conceptions of the sacred along new lines. Moreover, because this task required the theoretical definition of the conditions necessary for the free exercise of conscience, state authorities were compelled to conceptualize what “religion” and “spirituality” actually represented in generic terms. Yet all the while, both older prejudices and, increasingly, the political constellation of forces in Russia in the Duma period of impinged upon this reconceptualization.

Introduction

In 1905 the Russian state and its subjects made a fundamental transformation in the religious life of the empire. Having resisted and subverted various restrictions on their exercise of spirituality for decades, believers beyond the official Orthodox fold – sectarians, Old Believers, non-Orthodox Christians, non-Christians, and various “recalcitrants”¹ – now received enhanced rights and possibilities for the development of their communities. Conversion among Christian faiths was legalized fully, while certain formally Orthodox subjects gained the possibility of returning to non-Christian faiths. Old Belief in effect gained the status of a recognized “foreign confession,” and various other restrictions on religious life were now repealed. The period after 1905 witnessed the transfer (or attempted transfer) of confessional identity in virtually every possible combination and circumstance, as well as the proliferation of new religions and sects. By the end of 1905, in part due to the October Manifesto, the concept of “freedom of conscience” had substantially displaced older notions of “religious toleration” in official, public, and popular discourse, thereby signaling a general acceptance of the proposition that the new order would involve considerably greater religious liberty than the old.

Yet, for all this, a number of circumstances made it impossible for the state to regard its subjects’ religious affiliation with indifference and to sanction unlimited “freedom of conscience,” whereby the dictates of the individual’s conviction would serve as the only factor in his/her choice and practice of religion. Even as many statesmen genuinely aspired to maximize religious freedom, they continued to regard Russia as an Orthodox Christian state, which implied some degree of preference for Orthodoxy over all other confessions, and for Christianity over non-Christian faiths. Moreover, the questionable character of some religions – especially those that had appeared recently and were therefore the least familiar to state authorities – as well as the problem of atheism and its possible recognition as an official status raised serious moral questions for a society in the midst of a great social transformation.

¹ This paper represents an initial draft of a chapter for a book-length study (very) provisionally entitled “Regulations of Heterodoxy: ‘Foreign Faiths’ and Religious Toleration in the Russian Empire, 1772-1914.”

Nor was it possible to disentangle religious confession from issues of nationality or to abandon assumptions of hereditary and stable confessional belonging, whereby certain ethnic groups, communities, and even individuals were understood to be linked to specific faiths as if by blood. Finally, because it was almost in all cases clergies rather than civil officials who maintained *metricheskie knigi* – civil records on the empire’s population – the transfers of Russia’s subjects from one confession to another would have to be carefully regulated in order to forestall complete administrative chaos. Practice would demonstrate that there was but a fine line between the power to permit conversions and the authority merely to register them.

This paper demonstrates that “freedom of conscience” became the central touchstone for believers, politicians, and statesmen in their attempt to imagine and effectuate a new religious order in 1905 Russia and after. Encompassing both new rights on the part of virtually all non-Orthodox believers and therefore new obligations on the part of the state towards those communities, the concept “freedom of conscience” necessitated the institutionalization and legal regulation of diverse conceptions of the sacred along new lines. Moreover, because this task required the theoretical definition of the conditions necessary for the free exercise of conscience, state authorities were compelled to conceptualize what “religion” and “spirituality” actually represented in generic terms. Yet all the while, both older prejudices and, increasingly, the political constellation of forces in Russia in the Duma period impinged upon this reconceptualization.

Perhaps nowhere did the idea of “freedom of conscience” demand more direct attention than in the matter of conversion. For many of the empire’s subjects, spiritual satisfaction could be attained only through a transfer of religious identity, and thus my discussion here will focus on the problem of formal conversion and its recognition by the state. I conclude that while the government – and in particular the Ministry of Internal Affairs – made a sincere effort to broaden substantially the religious freedoms of its subjects, the dynamic circumstances of the early twentieth century ultimately demanded a redefinition of

¹ Known in Russian as *uporstvuishchie*, “recalcitrants” were former Uniates who had been bureaucratically “reunited” with Orthodoxy in 1839/1875 and Baltic converts to Orthodoxy in the 1840s who subsequently sought to return to Lutheranism.

confessional boundaries that was only partly compatible with official conceptions of confessional belonging, the prevailing political climate, and the imperatives of the state in other realms of governance.

Frameworks for the regulation of confessional transfer

To begin, we need to establish a very basic chronology of events. Already in the late nineteenth century, pressure had been building for religious reform, especially as regards “recalcitrants” and “apostates” seeking affiliation with Catholicism, Lutheranism, or Islam, and by December of 1904 the autocracy agreed to eliminate “all constraints on religious life not established by law.”² On the basis of this decree, the Committee of Ministers initiated an extensive review of the empire’s laws on religion, which in turn led to a new law of 17 April 1905 that substantially liberalized the empire’s religious order.

Almost immediately, the mass transfer of “recalcitrants” began, and its spontaneous character compelled the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) to issue a series of basic rules for the regulation of this process on 18 August (circular no. 4628). By the fall of 1905 the crisis of autocracy had proceeded to such a point that Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto, which granted a series of basic liberties to the Russian population, including “freedom of conscience.” Over the course of 1906, the government assembled data on this question and drafted a series of law proposals. Submitted to the Duma in March of 1907, those proposals were discussed at length in a subcommittee in 1908, and subjected to consideration of the full Duma in May of 1909.³

By September of that year, however, in response to intense pressure from the right and a desire to ensure support for his agrarian reforms, Stolypin withdrew several of the draft laws on religion for further revision.⁴ As all of this occurred, questions not addressed in existing laws or directives were resolved in

² I have addressed these developments, particularly as concerns baptized Tatars and Islam, in my study *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1827-1905* (Ithaca, 2002), pp. 238-45.

³ A subcommittee of the second Duma began to consider these drafts prior to Stolypin’s coup d’état in June of 1907, but they were not discussed by the full Duma.

⁴ The best and most comprehensive account of these developments may be found in Aleksandra Andreevna Dorskaia, “Vopros o svobode sovesti v Rossiiskom zakonotvorchestve, 1905-1917 gg.” (cand. diss., RAN Institut Rossiiskoi Istorii, Sankt-Peterburgskii Filial, 1997); and Iurii Stanislavovich Belov, “Pravitel’stvennaia politika po otnosheniiu k

an ad-hoc manner, usually through decisions of the Senate or administrative rulings by the Department of Religious Affairs of Foreign Confessions (henceforward “the Department”), under the MVD.

Thus, far from implementing a single reform all at once, the government revamped the religious order in a series of steps, each of which was conditioned by specific circumstances and the constellation of political forces at the given moment. The system that emerged as a result was neither complete nor entirely coherent, the assumption always being that new legislation would resolve comprehensively all pending questions. But because that legislation was never passed (with the exception of laws on Old-Believer and sectarian communities),⁵ this explicitly provisional order was the only one ever constructed before the regime’s collapse in 1917.

This piecemeal character of the reform left many fundamental issues unresolved. While the April law articulated the basic principles for the new religious order, it failed to stipulate even provisionally how subjects were to go about changing their confessional status officially. Needless to say “recalcitrants,” who in most cases had been denied affiliation with the confession of their choice for decades, scarcely felt compelled to wait for a well-defined procedure to appear. In particular, former Uniates in the western provinces and the Kingdom of Poland moved quickly to be recognized as Catholics, and Catholic authorities, lacking any guidance beyond the April ukaz, themselves devised a system for accepting these people into their church. By the time the MVD established basic rules for transfer in August (circular 4628), tens if not hundreds of thousands of “recalcitrants” had been accepted into Catholicism.⁶ Even well after August (in some places even until 1908), Catholic authorities accepted many former Uniates

nepравославным вероисповеданиям в России в 1905-1917 гг.” (cand. diss., RAN Institut Rossiskoi Istorii, Sank-Peterburgskii Filial, 1999); Peter Waldron, “Religious Reform after 1905: Old Believers and the Orthodox Church,” *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 20 (1987): 110-139; and Abraham Ascher, *P. A. Stolypin: The Search for Stability in Late-Imperial Russia* (Stanford, 2001), pp. 293-302.

⁵ A law on the registration of these communities was passed by article 87 (i.e., bypassing the Duma) in October of 1906. Subsequent laws addressing the Old Believer question in a more comprehensive fashion were discussed in the Duma in May of 1909, and were amended further by the State Council before going into effect in 1910. For details on this process, see Waldron, “Religious Reform,” and Nikolai D. Kuznetsov, *Zakon o staroobriadcheskikh obshchinakh v svyazi s otnošeniem tserkvi i gosudarstva* (Sergiev Posad, 1910).

⁶ DDDII circular no. 4628 (18 August 1905) in RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 540, ll. 3-4.

without informing civil authorities of the change, as required by circular 4628.⁷ As a result, many people now belonged, in effect, to two confessions at once, since they had been accepted into Catholicism, but had not yet been officially excluded from the ranks of the Orthodox.

Moreover, many Catholic priests were soon being criminally prosecuted for “knowingly administering Catholic rites to people of the Orthodox faith,” which continued to be a violation of the law even after 1905.⁸ How, then, could one legalize these confessional transfers, recognizing both that the believers themselves had acted in good faith and that the government, in establishing those rules, had not sought to impose any constraints on conversions that the April ukaz had authorized? Could one, for example, require these former “recalcitrants” to go through the procedure for formal conversion that had been established after their transfer – a procedure that included a potentially humiliating waiting period of one month during which Orthodox clergy were empowered to subject them to “admonition”? “In these conditions,” Stolypin and Department Director Kharuzin admitted in 1909, “exit from the current situation undoubtedly represents great difficulty, and the government’s manner of acting should distinguish itself by particular care and deliberation” – so much deliberation, as it turned out, that this issue was finally resolved only in July of 1915, when many of the people in question already found themselves under German occupation.⁹

Nor was it clear the extent to which the very general proclamation of “freedom of conscience” in the October Manifesto superseded the provisions of the April ukaz and its supplements. The October Manifesto granted Russian subjects “freedom of conscience” without the slightest indication as to what this concept actually meant. The April ukaz, by contrast, was the product of lengthy deliberation in the

⁷ The Governor-General of Kiev quoted Lutsko-Zhitomir Catholic Bishop Nedzliakovskii as stating that Catholic priests “are not jurists” and could not therefore comprehend the requirements of circular no. 4628—an argument he dismissed as unfounded in light of the circular’s relative straightforwardness (RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, l. 229).

⁸ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, ll. 218, 233ob., 231ob.

⁹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, ll. 219, 238-40. Presumably, the resolution of this issue in July of 1915 was in part an attempt to strengthen the resolve of this population in resisting the German advance. The MVD’s decision was to require fulfillment of the August rules from all those who left Orthodoxy on or after 1 November 1905, by which time the rules should have been known to everyone. Those converting before then (i.e. from 17 April until 1 November 1905) were recognized as Catholic from the day of their acceptance by Catholic authorities as long as they could provide documentation to that effect.

Committee of Ministers in the first part of 1905, and its wording, if not entirely adequate to address all eventualities, was on the whole circumspect. Not surprisingly, non-Orthodox believers were especially eager to invoke the Manifesto. In the Baltic region, the Lutheran clergy argued that the Manifesto repealed even the April ukaz and established complete religious freedom unrestricted by temporary rules and instructions.¹⁰ In Kazan province in 1911, a petitioner seeking recognition as a member of the reformed pagan sect “Kugu Sorta” wrote to the Minister of Internal Affairs that since the October Manifesto granted him “the right to freedom of conscience,” local authorities had no basis for rejecting his request, “and in particular on the basis of Your Excellency’s circular of 18 August 1905 no. 4628 – that is, a circular that was issued prior to the Sovereign Emperor’s Manifesto of 17 October 1905.”¹¹ To many, in short, the October Manifesto eliminated all the ifs, ands, and buts contained in the April ukaz.

Notably, the government itself had no clear view on the relationship between April and October. The Ministry of Justice referred in early 1906 to the Manifesto as “confirming” the “freedom of conscience” granted by the April ukaz, thereby implying that the former did not in essence go beyond the latter. The Department responded that the “freedom of conscience” identified in the Manifesto “should undoubtedly be understood as a broadening of the confessional relief granted by the ukaz of 17 April and as the granting to each person of complete self-definition in matters of religion [*polnoe samoopredelenie v voprosakh very*].”¹² Still in 1911 that same Department rejected the Kugu Sorta petition noted above with the argument that “the conditions for the transfer from one religion to another are defined by the Imperial ukaz of 17 April 1905,” which established fairly stringent criteria for the recognition of formally Orthodox citizens as non-Christians.¹³ Thus either April or October could be invoked for the purposes of deciding specific cases, but there was no indication as to which of these actually had precedence. Though

¹⁰ RGIA, f. 796, op. 442, d. 2110, ll. 26ob.-27.

¹¹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, ll. 60ob.-61 (emphasis added). On the emergence of Kugu Sorta, see my “Big Candles and Internal Conversion: The Mari Pagan Reformation and the Emergence of Faith,” in Michael Khodarkovsky and Robert Geraci, eds., *Of Religion and Identity: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in the Russian Empire* (Ithaca, 2001), pp. 144-172, as well as the discussion below.

¹² RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, l. 121.

¹³ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, ll. 62-62ob.

there may be a temptation to see state officials merely ignoring the Manifesto in favor of the less generous April ukaz in deciding concrete cases (and this was most likely true in many instances), it would appear that the officials in the Department and the MVD ultimately came to regard the Manifesto as containing a promise of the “freedom of conscience” that was to be realized in new legislation, whereas the April ukaz and its supplements represented existing law that would have to be followed until that new legislation could be produced.

For all the deficiencies of this provisional order in the decade or so after 1905, what is striking is the degree to which the MVD sought to extend and define religious freedom within the parameters set by the ordinances of 1905. Undoubtedly, there was some oscillation in the government’s position that mirrored its political fortunes more broadly – from a position of fairly limited reforms in early 1905, to more substantial concessions in late 1905 and 1906, and to a less compromising position by 1909. Yet for all that, the MVD was quite scrupulous in assessing a wide range of issues and was committed to ensuring that the citizens of Russia had the unrestricted opportunity to exercise those religious rights that were firmly rooted in existing law.

Moreover, the MVD was willing to contemplate quite radical change in confessional questions, as emerged clearly in its discussions on rules for conversion. By January of 1906 the Ministry of Justice had assembled a provisional draft of such basic rules, in which it was quick to emphasize the limits on the newly granted religious freedoms. It argued that the new “freedom of conscience” “by no means leaves the resolution of all confessional questions to the free discretion of individual citizens.” In the current context, this freedom should consist in giving citizens the possibility to practice the religion they have selected and in the elimination of laws limiting this practice, “but should by no means lead to the appearance of any new confessional communities not recognized by existing laws, and all the more to the formation of a class of people without a confession.”

Particularly in light of the fact that clergies maintained civil records [*metricheskie knigi*] in the Russian empire, “it is scarcely possible to offer individual private persons – even in the context of the broadest possible freedom of conscience – the completely unlimited right to convert from one confession

to another, without informing one or another organ of governmental authority for the purposes of the precise registration of those conversions.” In the present context, in short, “change of faith can under no circumstances be regarded as the exclusive affair of the conscience of individual persons.” Accordingly, the Ministry believed that civil authorities had to participate in the matter of conversion by verifying the presence of all conditions necessary for a given conversion, and that district courts were in the best position to perform this function.¹⁴

The Department unequivocally dismissed the Ministry’s draft as being too restrictive. The April ukaz, it argued, gave the right of free choice and practice of religion to all persons who had attained majority (21 years). Thus aside from ascertaining the age of the would-be convert, “there are no conditions in the law for the conversion from one Christian faith to another.” The preliminary review of files by judicial authorities, as suggested by the Ministry, would amount to the power to restrict the freedom granted in the ukaz and thus would represent “nothing other than a hidden form of preliminary permission given by civil authorities for the proposed conversion.” Circular no. 4628 gave no such power to state authorities and merely established a period of time (one month) during which the conversion would not be registered so that Orthodox clergy could attempt to dissuade the person in question from going ahead with his “apostasy.”

In general, the Department sought to minimize the involvement of state authorities in the whole affair, reducing their role merely to ensuring proper registration of conversions. More radically, the Department argued that “now even apostasy from Christianity can be neither prosecuted criminally, nor prevented by any kind of interference by civil authorities.” Finally, the Department remarked that the Ministry’s refusal to recognize new churches and sects could not be justified on the basis of either the April ukaz or the October Manifesto. The government “not only allows the appearance of new Christian [*inoslavnyi*] religious teachings and sects, but is presently concerned with the establishment, through the

¹⁴ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, ll. 64ob.-68. It should be noted that this was a draft that had not yet been conclusively discussed and approved within the Ministry of Justice itself (l. 55).

legislature, of rules defining the conditions for the emergence and activity of newly arising religious communities.”¹⁵

Several of these points made their way into a remarkable 1906 MVD memorandum on “freedom of conscience,” which was drawn up by the Department under director Vsevolod Vladimirov in 1906.¹⁶ This memorandum was an extraordinarily liberal document, whose implementation would have reduced Orthodoxy’s privileged place to a mere formality and essentially secularized almost all realms of public life in Russia.

According to the memorandum, the realization of “freedom of conscience” required the elimination of all provisions allowing the government to permit, encourage, or prevent conversion from one faith to another; the reduction of the age for conversion from majority (21 years) to marriageable age; the right to belong to no religion whatsoever; the introduction of non-confessional records [*grazhdanskaia metrikatsiia*], non-confessional graveyards, civil oaths, and even civil marriage; the possibility of establishing new religions and sects; the termination of Orthodoxy’s monopoly on the right to proselytize and convert; the decriminalization “seduction” [*sovrashchenie*] (i.e. efforts, to attract Orthodox subjects to other faiths); the elimination of all measures designed to compel citizens to perform specific “religious obligations”; the elimination of all privileges for Orthodoxy in “mixed” (inter-confessional) marriages; and the elimination of all restrictions on non-Christians (with the exception of certain limitations imposed on Jews).¹⁷

The memorandum contended that these required changes would not undermine the position of Orthodoxy as the predominant and ruling faith of the empire, but the only privilege that it explicitly identified for that faith was that the imperial family would still be required to belong to it. Otherwise, it noted, the solidity of the Orthodox church “should be based on the moral power of its teaching, and its

¹⁵ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, ll. 116-121.

¹⁶ See Dorskaia and also 821-10-39 on this. Vladimirov became Department director sometime in late 1905 or early 1906 (I don’t have an exact date).

¹⁷ *Spravka o svobode sovesti*, (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia MVD, 1906), pp. 4-39. This memorandum can be found in draft in RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 39, ll. 7-59ob. I cite here from a copy in the Russian National Library (St.

turning to secular authorities for the maintenance of its authority can only weaken, and in no way augment, its moral power.”¹⁸ The attitude of the memorandum towards all faiths was in fact one of almost complete neutrality.

As noted above, 1906 represented the highpoint of the government’s willingness to make concessions to confessional minorities, and the MVD’s 1906 memorandum represented probably the most radical statement on this issue from any state entity. There is also good reason to regard the memorandum less as a concrete plan for a specific legislative program, than as an essentially theoretical statement as to what the realization of “full freedom of conscience” would entail, without specific reference to the desirability of such an order.

Indeed, when submitting a copy of the memorandum to the Council of Ministers,¹⁹ Vladimirov noted that the memorandum “does not have an official character and is not comprehensive and was prepared exclusively for domestic consumption, so to speak. Therefore its conclusions have not received any sanction.”²⁰ Still, the evidence suggests that even if the Ministry was unlikely to endorse such a radical program of religious reform in its entirety, virtually all of the questions it raised were on the table for serious consideration. If the MVD’s draft laws on a series of religious questions (submitted to the Duma in 1907) stopped somewhat short of the degree of religious freedom advocated in the 1906 memorandum, they remained liberal enough (as many conservative commentators agreed).²¹ For the time being, however, the Department was compelled to resolve concrete cases with the legislation on hand. It is, therefore, instructive to consider how it did so in specific instances.

Petersburg). All of the questions that the memorandum raised are conveniently summarized in RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 39, ll. 72-73. On the Jewish problem, see discussion below.

¹⁸ *Spravka o svobode sovesti*, pp. 32, 23.

¹⁹ Here the document is addressed to N. V. von Plehve, son of the assassinated MVD.

²⁰ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 39, l. 6.

²¹ See, for example, I. Aivazov, “Novaia veropispovednaia sistema nashego gosudarstva.” *Missionerskoe obozrenie* 7-8 (1908): 1032-50; and Il’ia S. Berdnikov, *Nashi novye zakony i zakonoproekty o svobode sovesti* (Moscow, 1914). The ensuing legislative battle is beyond our consideration here, though I hope to make it the subject of a separate chapter in the monograph of which the present essay is a part.

Regulating confessional boundaries

In terms of the transfer of confessional status after 1905, three issues proved particularly intractable, especially in the absence of legislation that might have resolved them conclusively: 1) the problem of conversion from Christianity to non-Christian faiths; 2) the problem of Jewish conversion to other faiths; and 3) the matter of recognizing new faiths and sects. Although there was some overlap among these three issues, I shall treat each in turn, paying close attention both to the concerns of the government itself and to the aspirations of believers. It is precisely in these cases, I believe, that we see most clearly the limits of religious toleration in the post-1905 period and the ways in which concerns of a non-religious nature intruded on the resolution of religious questions.

Tremendous acrimony surrounded the issue of permitting the conversion of Christians to non-Christianity. The Committee of Ministers, in its deliberations leading to the April ukaz, had addressed this question with much circumspection, arguing that the state should not recognize such conversion, even while not actually criminalizing it. Yet the Committee had also recognized that there was a certain category of subjects who “in reality” confessed a non-Christian faith, despite their formal ascription to Orthodoxy. These people, the Committee concluded, should be permitted to return to the faith of their ancestors. These considerations were expressed in the April ukaz and reinforced in circular 4628, published by the MVD in August.

It is crucial to understand that in the April ukaz the state was not actually recognizing conversion to heterodoxy, but rather the need to rectify the inaccurate ascription of certain subjects to Orthodoxy. The people in question were understood never to have been Orthodox. The consequences of this formulation for those seeking recognition as non-Christians were both negative and positive.

On the negative side, the interested parties had to demonstrate that they had practiced the non-Christian faith in question before April of 1905, as well as evidence that either they or their ancestors had actually belonged to that faith.²² Thus, if local authorities reported that the given person had begun to practice a non-Christian faith only after the appearance of the April ukaz, he or she could not expect

satisfaction. Numerous requests from Maris in Viatka province, where a modestly-sized movement for recognition as pagans developed, were rejected with the justification that the petitioners had fulfilled their “Christian obligations” before 1905 and therefore could not be considered as having confessed paganism “in reality” before then.²³

Moreover the fact that “return” was being recognized rather than conversion meant that persons would be recognized as belonging only to the faith of their ancestors. Thus Chuvash and Maris who had been baptized into Orthodoxy from paganism and now wished to be Muslims; persons wishing to convert from Old Belief, Catholicism and Lutheranism to Islam (often women who wished to marry Muslims); and Buriats who had converted to Orthodoxy from shamanism and now sought affiliation with Buddhism – all these groups typically had their petitions rejected because they were now seeking affiliation with a faith to which neither they nor their ancestors had ever belonged.²⁴

On the positive side, those seeking recognition as non-Christians, if all necessary conditions were in place, were not subjected to admonition by local Orthodox clergy. While all transfers from one Christian faith to another were treated as genuine conversions and therefore entitled Orthodox clergy to the opportunity to dissuade the would-be converts from their “apostasy,” no such stipulation was applied in the case of transfer to non-Christianity, and in deciding to allow such transfers civil authorities were not legally required even to contact Orthodox authorities. As Stolypin explained to the Governor of Irkutsk province in June of 1907, in one case “the affair concerns an Orthodox person who wishes to convert to another Christian faith. One must give the Orthodox clergy time and the possibility to make clear to the petitioner his mistake [*zabluzhdenie*] and by means of admonition to retain him in his previous faith. In

²² Cite KM journals and law of April.

²³ By 1909 the governor’s office in Viatka had received enough petitions on the return to paganism that it drew up a standard rejection form stating that the petitioner and his family had belong to Orthodoxy since birth and fulfilled all the rituals of the Orthodox church until 1905, having been to confession and communion. See, for example, GAKO, f. 582, op. 150, d. 118, l. 3.

²⁴ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 284, ll. 1ob., 6. (on Buddhists, although in this case the petitions were merely questioned; I don’t see any resolution). On Christians to Islam, see the cases in RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 572; and RGIA, f. 821, op. 8, d. 798. The Senate ruled in 1906 that the rules for transfer from Orthodoxy to a non-Christian faith pertained also to transfer from another Christian faith to non-Christianity. RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 540, ll. 5-

the second case the petitioner already confesses a non-Christian religion, and it is necessary merely to ascertain this fact and to register his exclusion from the ranks of the Orthodox.”²⁵

When the Over-Procurator of the Synod requested in 1910 that the church be given the possibility to admonish properly those baptized Buriats who sought recognition as Lamaists, the Department emphasized the “fundamental difference” between transfer to Christianity and to non-Christianity. “In the first cases the agent of apostasy is one who is really Orthodox and is leaving his faith; therefore the [Orthodox] church must be informed ahead of time of the impending transfer. In the latter case the petitioner can be only a person who merely formally, as if by mistake, is considered to be Orthodox, but in reality he and those close to him continuously confess the non-Christian religion.”²⁶ Admonition in such circumstances, while certainly permissible, was not required, and there was no reason to delay the correction of a mistake. Setting requirements for the legitimacy of requested transfers, Stolypin wrote in 1910, was “entirely within the jurisdiction of the civil authorities and did not depend on the judgment of any diocese.”²⁷

In fact, the larger question of whether to recognize conversion to any faith, Christian or non-Christian, remained open, especially after the appearance of the October Manifesto. While the Ministry of Justice contended in 1906 that conversion to a non-Christian faith was still “unconditionally prohibited” for all citizens regardless of their initial confessional status, the MVD wrote that “prohibition or more

50b. (Department circular no. 3192 of 5 June 1906). On Chuvash/Mari converts to Islam, see RGIA, f. 821, op. 8, d. 796; and Werth, *At the Margins*, pp. 252-3.

²⁵ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 436, l. 12ob.

²⁶ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 284, ll. 7ob-10. The Irkutsk Committee of the Orthodox Missionary Society had resolved in August of 1906 that (in contrast to the government’s position) one could only regard Buriats’ requests for recognition as Lamaists as “religious apostasy” [*verootstupinichestvo*], and that it was therefore not acceptable to relate to those requests “formally,” “basing oneself merely on the given manifestos” of April and October. See “Otpadenie irkutstikh buriat v lamaizm,” *Pravoslavnyi blagovestnik* 23 (1906), p. 300.

²⁷ Cited in Dittmar Schorkowitz, “The Orthodox Church, Lamaism, and Shamanism among the Buriats and Kalmyks, 1825-1925,” in Khodarkovsky and Geraci, *Of Religion and Empire*, p. 221. Still, by 1914 the Department invoked circular 4628 to contend that Orthodox authorities had the final say as to whether a person had “factually” confessed Orthodoxy before seeking recognition as a non-Christian. RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 754, ll. 21-21ob.

accurately the refusal to recognize” conversions to non-Christian faiths “would at the present time contradict the spirit of the Manifesto of 17 October.”²⁸

By the time it produced its draft law for the Duma on confessional transfer in March of 1907, however, the MVD had retreated somewhat from its more radical position. That draft, while stopping short of criminalizing conversion to heterodoxy, refused to recognize it, and when the Duma moved in 1909 to reinstate that recognition, Stolypin made it a point of defending the original draft in person. Indeed, the Duma’s desire to recognize conversion to heterodoxy was one of the reasons why Stolypin recalled the draft in September of 1909, especially in light of the bitter opposition to such recognition from the right.²⁹

Not surprisingly, unsuccessful petitioners could not comprehend how these restrictions were compatible with “freedom of conscience.” Indeed, they contended that the will of the sovereign was being openly violated by officials unwilling to register them in new faiths. As one group wrote to the MVD in 1910, by their registration as apostates from Orthodoxy “the will of our Autocratic Sovereign Emperor, expressed in the Manifesto of 17 October 1905 and in the rules, imperially confirmed on 17 October 1906, will be fulfilled.... [W]e will [then] be satisfied in our conscience and convinced that the will of the Sovereign Emperor is being fulfilled unquestioningly for the benefit of the people who adore him.”³⁰

Another group wrote that they had been petitioning to be recognized as pagans for three years, “but artificial impediments have been erected.” Having been referred back and forth between different government agencies, “we are unable to gain any explanation [for the rejection] and we cannot comprehend why we encounter such obstacles and red tape.... Thus instead of the desired peace,

²⁸ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, ll. 64, 121. In the 1906 memorandum, the MVD explicitly included “paganism” under the heading of non-Christian faiths.

²⁹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 39.

³⁰ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 430, l. 5ob. The “rules” referred to here was the law on registration of Old Believer and sectarian communities. With a view towards using this law, some would-be pagans began to claim that their beliefs constituted a “sect,” which entitled them to recognition and registration under the 1906 law (see below).

tranquility and happiness heralded from the heights of the throne, smoldering irritation is growing and the gracious law is blatantly being violated.”³¹

Yet another group of 37 petitioners, complaining about the local clergy’s efforts to block their recognition as members of the pagan sect Kugu Sorta, asked rhetorically, “should the clergy abolish the manifesto and the ukazes of the Sovereign Emperor and prevent us from praying to God as our conscience dictates, as the Sovereign Emperor has allowed?”³² A similar petitioner concluded that because of the rejection of his petition, “I am left without conscience, and such a situation is, I believe, desirable to neither the Sovereign Emperor nor the government.”³³

Still, state authorities did not make it a point of actively persecuting such petitioners. True, some pagans who had rejected Orthodoxy were fined for having buried their dead outside of Orthodox cemeteries and without Orthodox rites.³⁴ But the official position was that transfer to non-Christianity beyond those instances provided for in the April ukaz should not result in criminal prosecution or “consequences that hamper [the apostate’s] religious convictions.” Thus when one Mari with Kugu-Sorta sympathies complained that he had been selected against his will as watchman for the local Orthodox church, the Department upheld his complaint. The Mari in question could not be officially excluded from Orthodoxy and given Kugu-Sorta status, but at the same time he “cannot be persecuted for his belonging to it [Kugu Sorta], nor can he be compelled to fulfill any obligations with respect to the Orthodox church.”³⁵

But it was clearly not enough for many of those who sought recognition as non-Christians that they escaped active persecution. Aside from the fact that their marriages continued to lack legal force without Orthodox sanction, these petitioners believed that state recognition conferred a certain legitimacy on their choice of religion and saw themselves as loyal, honest, and moral subjects who deserved better.

³¹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 430, ll. 10-10ob.

³² RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 430, l. 18.

³³ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, l. 60ob.

³⁴ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, ll. 2-2ob. In this case a 25-ruble fine was assessed on villagers. See also RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, l. 143.

Thus one group admitted that they were able to practice their faith without interference from religious or secular authorities, “but at the same time, it should be noted, that our religious teaching, since it does not have governmental approval is in effect private and not legal [*iavliaetsia kak by chastnym, nezakonnym*], and on that basis we cannot freely make use of all the religious rights that have been granted to us.”³⁶

In a more heartfelt plea submitted to the Emperor, these Kugu Sorta members asked, “Are we really not people? Are we really not loyal subjects of Your Imperial Majesty? Is it really the case that we and our children refuse to serve the fatherland in the ranks of army and the militia and by other contributions in kind? Do we really refuse to pay state and other money taxes? Are we really thieves and brigands? No, Your Imperial Majesty, we live quietly, modestly, in a god-fearing way and lead an industrious life.”³⁷ In short, freedom of conscience for many meant not only that the state would not inhibit its citizens’ religious practice, but that it would respect their convictions enough to recognize their spiritual choices.

At times the government could be remarkably callous in dismissing the religious aspirations of would-be pagans even as it accepted the requests of almost all baptized Tatars to be returned to Islam with equanimity. The MVD’s draft law on conversion, which withheld recognition from conversion to heterodoxy, would seem to confirm the conclusion that the Ministry drew the line at “apostasy” from Christianity. Still my own sense is that Stolypin and his associates sought above all to reconcile two scarcely compatible imperatives: to be as deferential as possible to people’s religious beliefs and aspirations (so long as they did not represent a political threat to the state) and to avoid antagonizing the right, which was crucial to the success of Stolypin’s projects in other realms, and indeed to his very political survival. Given the precariousness of Stolypin’s position by 1909, it simply made little sense to violate the sensibilities of the believing Orthodox majority for the sake of a relatively small number of would-be pagans. Still, Stolypin tried to ensure that even these pagans could at least practice their faith, even if that practice would not be given official state sanction.

³⁵ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 430, l. 39-39ob.

³⁶ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, ll. 67ob.-68.

The problem of Jewish conversion was intrinsically more complicated, in light of the fact that Jews were not understood to be a confessional group like most others. Indeed, the MVD's 1906 memorandum was reluctant even to address the Jewish problem in the larger sense of that term (i.e. beyond issues involving Judaism as a faith) because "at the base of particularistic legislation about Jews is not merely a confessional marker; the law distinguishes Jews as a particular alien group [*inorodechskaia grupp*], which is placed in particular conditions in light of its national particularities."³⁸ Nor was there much success in addressing the "Jewish question" separately after 1905, though a few limitations were lifted for privileged categories of Jews in 1904.³⁹

Nonetheless, cases involving the desire of Jews to convert to other religions, or of converted Jews to return to Judaism, were bound to arise sooner or later, and this required the government to contemplate how the legitimate religious needs of Jews could be balanced against a perceived need to protect Russian society from Jewish exploitation and intrigue. The biggest problem in this regard was determining when, and under what circumstances, religious conversion could liberate Jews from the general restrictions that had been imposed on them up until 1905.

Several issues could be decided with relative ease. The first concerned the right of rabbinical Jews to join the Karaim community, a small "sect" within Judaism whose members in Russia constituted a distinct legal status group subject to its own separate statutes. In comparison with rabbinical Jews, Karaims were decidedly privileged, and they incurred few of the prejudices held against Jews generally.⁴⁰ In 1911 a young Jewess petitioned the Emperor that she was "wholeheartedly" in love with a Karaim, whom she was unable to marry without converting "to the Karaim religion."

³⁷ RGIA, f. 821, op. 1333, d. 515, ll. 145ob.-146 (I have added the question marks here for clarity).

³⁸ *Spravka o svobode sovesti*, p. 36. Likewise, the memorandum refused to address limitations on "people of Polish origin" [*litsa pol'skago proiskhozhdeniia*], because they "have not a confessional, but a political foundation" (pp. 39-40). On the problem of defining Poles, see L. E. Gorizontov, *Paradoksy imperskoi politiki: Poliaki v Rossii i russkie v Pol'she* (Moscow, 1999), pp. 100-118.

³⁹ On the dynamics behind the failure to achieve substantial reform on the Jewish question after 1905, see Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 83-106; and Aschr, pp. 164-172.

⁴⁰ See "Evrei-Karaimy," *Zhurnal MVD* ch. 1 (1843): 263-84. According to MVD statistics, there were merely 2195 Karaims in 1843, the majority of them in Crimea.

Already in 1902 the Senate had ruled that the law gave no authority to the MVD to force Karaims to accept anyone into their community. Moreover, the MVD had issued a directive in 1887 reminding the Karaim leadership that they had obtained privileges in 1795 from Catherine II on the condition that they not accept any rabbinical Jews into their ranks. When consulted in 1911, the Tauride and Odessa Karaim Spiritual Board reported that petitions of Jews to join the Karaim community had appeared frequently in the past and had always been rejected, because in the case of such petitions “the guiding motive is the selfish and base goal to make use of the civil rights granted to Karaims or other privileges, or in order to satisfy a feeling of love,” as in the present case. But the Karaim faith, the Board continued, “is not in the least interested in filling its ranks with unbelieving adherents, who regard religion as a means of attaining their material aspirations and who, of course, will be bad Karaims.” This desire to maintain “our distinct, if also small nation,” as well as the earlier MVD directive, made it easy for the Board to reject the 1911 petition.⁴¹

In this case, then, both the state and representatives of the “receiving” religion could agree that such conversions were impermissible, which reminds us that it was not in all cases the state that hindered conversion. Indeed, by 1907 the MVD had encountered enough cases of non-Christian religious authorities refusing, on canonical grounds, to accept earlier converts to Orthodoxy back into their original faith, that Stolypin began to require a preliminary certification from non-Christian clergy that they would indeed accept such people before the latter could be formally excluded from Orthodoxy.⁴²

While some baptized Jews hoped to retain their exemption from legal restrictions after their return to Judaism on the basis of the April ukaz, state authorities quickly decided that such an arrangement was scarcely acceptable. In 1907 the Senate concluded that the April ukaz merely abolished criminal prosecution for the return to a non-Christian faith. Thus a person “who has rejected Orthodoxy by that act subjects himself to all those restrictions that are imposed by state laws on the confessors of that non-

⁴¹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 802, ll. 3-6. In 1910 the MVD also reminded its subordinates that Karaims enjoyed the protection of special laws in the empire and enjoyed all the rights of Russian subjects. Accordingly, “restrictive enactments regarding Jews should not be applied to Karaims.” RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 769, l. 9 (Department circular no. 3027 of 5 April 1910).

Christian faith to which he is converting.” Thus Jews who had received the right to settle beyond the Pale based solely on their conversion to Orthodoxy “are subject to exclusion from those communities to which they are ascribed and expelled to the Pale of settlement.”⁴³ The position of the government was thus clear: those wishing to confess Judaism would be Jews in all senses of the term, legal restrictions included.

Still more complicated was the issue of Jewish conversion to other faiths. It had long been the case prior to 1905 that Jews who converted to any Christian faith were emancipated from restrictions, although an epidemic of apparently insincere conversion by the late nineteenth century had raised doubts about the desirability Jewish conversion.⁴⁴ Not until 1902, evidently, did the question arise as to whether Jews were emancipated if they converted to another non-Christian faith, such as Islam. In that year the Senate had ruled that restrictions applied to all Jews confessing a non-Christian faith. Considering the question once again in 1909, the Senate decided that on the basis of the October Manifesto, conversion from Judaism to Islam was certainly permissible, but that Muslim Jews were subject to the same restrictions as Jewish Jews.⁴⁵

This decision was eventually extended even to cases of Jewish conversion to Christian sects, which became more frequent in the south of Russia after 1905. The Department reported in 1909 that the sectarian movement there, and especially in Odessa, “distinguishes itself by a peculiar feature – the particular sympathy that it enjoys among certain circles of the Jewish population.” Indeed, several Evangelical-Christian/Baptist communities in Odessa, all of them headed by converted Jews, began to request permission from the MVD to baptize Jews into their ranks.⁴⁶ Such a phenomenon could hardly fail to raise red flags for state authorities. Aside from the fact that some of these communities were financially sponsored by foreign societies, since 1894 Baptists had been defined by the state as “a most dangerous [sect].” Although Baptists had been among those benefiting from the more liberal religious

⁴² RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, l. 248 (MVD circular no. 6428 of 5 November 1907).

⁴³ RGIA, f. 1284, op. 224, l. 12.

⁴⁴ John D. Klier, “State Policies and the Conversion of Jews in Imperial Russia,” in Khodarovskiy and Geraci, *Of Religion and Empire*, pp. 93, 108.

⁴⁵ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 540, ll. 11-11ob. (Department circular no. 1213 of 15 April 1909).

order after 1905, the state remained convinced of their “harm.”⁴⁷ Now there was a danger that the Odessa Baptist communities would become doubly harmful, since “the interference of Jews in the sectarian movement, in light of their tendency to intrigue, may give sectarianism a completely undesirable political tint.”⁴⁸

At least as disturbing as the prospect of Jews infecting sectarianism was the prospect that these various Christian sects would merely be used as a front behind which Jews could continue their practice of Judaism after liberation from legal restrictions. The MVD felt compelled to argue for a more restrictive conception of Christianity, in order to prevent Jews from making use of the “extremely primitive organization of sectarian communities” to become Christians only nominally. Assistant Minister S. E. Kryzhanovskii wrote to the Senate that the law permitting emancipation of Jews upon conversion to Christianity had been written when the term “Christian confessions” had referred to “entirely defined religions,” whose dogmas and teachings were stable, generally known, and fully recognized by the state. In contrast, the sects in question lacked even recognized clergies, and “contemporary rationalistic sectarianism in all its innumerable branches does not represent anything definite and stable in either dogmatic or canonical respects.” They lacked a catechism and even a nomenclature, “which would give government authorities the possibility, with a greater or lesser degree of definitude, to differentiate the sects with regard to their relative proximity to Christianity and to make judgments about whether the conversion of a given Jew is genuine, as the law requires.”⁴⁹

As a result, the conversion of a Jew to one of the given sects should not be considered conversion to Christianity in the sense that the law implied, and Jewish converts to Christian sects should accordingly

⁴⁶ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 283, l. 11, 14-15.

⁴⁷ RGIA, f. 821, op. 5, d. 985, l. 33ob. (Circular of the MVD Department of General Affairs no. 242 of 3 September 1894). For details, see Heather Coleman, “The Most Dangerous Sect: Baptists in Tsarist and Soviet Russia, 1905-1929” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1998).

⁴⁸ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 283, l. 11ob.

⁴⁹ The Department was obligated by its own statute to guarantee the genuineness of Jews’ conversions to Christianity (RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 273, l. 40ob).

not be liberated from legal restrictions applied to Jews.⁵⁰ Although the Senate apparently ruled on this question only in 1912 (agreeing that Jewish converts to sectarianism should remain Jews in a legal sense), at least from 1910 the MVD was instructing its subordinates to remind Jews wishing to convert that their acceptance into Baptist, Evangelical, and even Russian-sectarian (e.g., Molokan) communities would not exempt them from legal restrictions imposed on Jews.⁵¹ In short, the various sects and their spiritual leaders were too inconstant and vaguely defined to be able to guarantee that Jews had converted to Christianity based on conviction.

Still, the government did not prohibit such conversions outright and was even willing to recognize them, as long as the baptisms were conducted in accordance with the law. Thus Leon Rosenberg, the head of the Odessa “Evangelical-Christian Protestant community of the Baptist rite” received the MVD’s approval to baptize a number of Jews once he had submitted certificates attesting to their successful examination in Christianity.

By contrast, the MVD refused to recognize Odessa Jew Ioann Oskarov Ebin’s baptism of 81 Jews by the “Evangelical-Mennonite” rite and issued a circular indicating that the certificates of baptism issued by Ebin “cannot have any juridical significance and as such do not liberate their holders from the limitations on Jews established by law.”⁵² The state’s main concern was not to regulate or restrict its citizens’ actual religious beliefs and practices, but above all to act as the final arbiter of formal confessional status on the basis of existing law.

The problem of Jewish conversion to Christian sects points to a third issue that deserves our attention: the issue of new religions and sects. This was by no means an entirely new problem, though the government had never articulated a clear position on it. Iurii Belov has recently asserted that state

⁵⁰ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 273, ll. 10-12.

⁵¹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 283, ll. 7, 63ob., 83, 85

⁵² RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 283, l. 43.

legislation before 1905 was designed to ensure “the complete impossibility” of the formation of new sects within foreign [Christian?] faiths and to combat “schism” [*raskol*] among those confessions.⁵³

One may certainly agree that all the recognized confessions in Russia enjoyed some state protection for their dogmas and the authority of their clergy, and that in this sense they were all “state religions” at least to a degree. And it was certainly the case that Russia’s existing system of confessional administration did not make any real provisions for the appearance of new religious teachings. But the eventual recognition of the Baptists as a religious community in the 1870s and the state’s attempt to manage schism among Mennonites in the 1860s and among Lutherans in the Baltic region in the 1890s suggest that the state was open to legalizing new confessions under certain conditions, if only in order to prevent complete administrative confusion.⁵⁴ Thus the state was attempting – slowly and for the most part ineffectively – to establish some kind of system for dealing with this problem before 1905. Even without the proclamation of new freedoms, the MVD noted in its 1906 memorandum, this was a lacuna that needed to be filled, while the proclamation of “freedom of conscience” “places this question at the top of the list.”⁵⁵

The existing system recognized several major confessions, and the law also made reference to a series of tolerated sects (Hernhutters, Mennonites, Baptists, Scottish colonists, and the Augsburg Confession). Most of these confessions or sects had some kind of statute or at least rules governing their religious affairs, and all of these statutes/rules (with the exception of the statute on the Lamaist clergy of Eastern Siberia) had been combined into a single volume of the Law Code (*Svod Zakonov*) in 1857 that was republished in 1896.⁵⁶ Finally, in practice a few other confessions were permitted to exist and

⁵³ Belov, p. 53, drawing on *Rossii: Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (Leningrad, 1991; evidently a republication of a pre-rev publication?), p. 170.

⁵⁴ RGIA, f. 381, op. 8, d. 3707; RGIA, f. 821, op. 5, dd. 975, 980, 998, 1020. Indeed, in the very decision giving Baptists basic recognition and religious organization, the State Council had instructed the MVD to consider the matter of publishing a single statute on permitted Protestant sects (RGIA, f. 821, op. 5, d. 998, l. 168ob.).

⁵⁵ *Spravka o svobode sovesti*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ “Ustavy Dukhovnykh Del Inostrannykh Ispovedanii,” Volume 11, part 1 of *Svod zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (St. Petersburg, 1857; and St. Petersburg, 1896). For reasons that are not entirely clear to me, Nicholas I had specified, when approving the statute on the Lamaist clergy of eastern Siberia in 1853, that it should not be included in *Svod*

function, such as the Anglican church (which was administered directly by the British embassy). All other religious groupings existed in effect outside the law.

The dynamic religious situation in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was scarcely compatible with this system. Primarily (but not only) among the Protestant faiths, various new religious teachings had begun to appear from around mid-century: Baptists, Evangelical Christians, the “Jerusalem Friends,” the “Gyupfers,” Seventh-Day Adventists, Irvingites (the “Catholic and Apostolic community”), the New Brothers and Sisters, Malevantsy, the “Free Confession,” the Busch Brothers (*Bushisty*), the Separatists, the Free Church of Christ, the Mariavites, and even a self-proclaimed “Syrio-Nestorian Evangelical Church.”⁵⁷ New teachings had also formed among non-Christian religions, such as Burkhanism in the Altai region, Kugu Sorta (a reformed animism) in Viatka province, and the so-called Vaisovtsy among Volga Muslims.⁵⁸

Many of these groups were of course very small (at least according to government statistics), but some – most notably Baptists, Evangelical Christians, and Mariavites – could claim tens of thousands of adherents.⁵⁹ Moreover, the significance of these groups did not depend so much on their size. Rather, their very existence raised basic theoretical questions concerning the relationship of state power to

zakonov. Individual statutes (*ustavy* and *polozheniia*) had been composed for different confessions in the first decades of the nineteenth century (and especially in the 1830s).

⁵⁷ These groups certainly require more attention than I can give them here, but see (aside from the archival files listed above) the printed text “Liuteranskiia sekty v Estliandskoi gubernii” (Revel, 1893) (in RGIA, f. 821, op. 5, d. 1020, ll. 1-33ob.); I. Lindenberg, (Protoierei), “Protestanskiia sekty v Pribaltiiskom krae.” *Rizhskii eparkhial'nyiia vedomosti* 10-15 (1891): 340-56, 376-82, 416-28, 455-57, 487-92, 507-12; and Iulii Osterblom, *Noveishiia religioznyiia dvizheniia v Estliandii* (St. Petersburg, 1885); S. Smirnov, “Nemetskie sektanty za Kavkazom,” *Russkii vestnik* 57 (1865): 230-257; S. D. Bondar', *Adventizm 7-go dnia* (St. Petersburg, 1911); idem, *Sovremennoe sostoianie russkogo baptizma* (St. Petersburg, 1911); idem, *Sekta memmonitov v Rossii (v sviazi s istoriei nemetskoii kolonizatsii na iuge Rossii)* (Petrograd, 1916); *Iz istorii tserkvi adventistov sed'mogo dnia v Rossii* (Kaliningrad, 1993); and Coleman, “The Most Dangerous Sect.”

⁵⁸ On Kugu Sorta, see Werth, “Big Candles”; and the draft of the never-published book S. G. Rybakov, *Novyiia techeniia v russkom iazychestve: Sekty v iazychestve chermis, votiakov i chuvash: vera “Kugu-Sorta” i drugiia* (Petrograd, 1915) in RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 643. On Burkhanism, see RGIA, f. 821, op. 13, d. 430, ll. 8-12ob.; and Andrei Znamenski, *Shamanism and Christianity: Native Encounters with Russian Orthodox Missions in Siberia and Alaska, 1820-1917* (Westport, Conn., 1999), pp. 228-238. On Vaisovtsy, see E. V. Molostvova, “Vaisov Bozhii Polk,” *Mir Islama* 1.2 (1912): 143-52; M. Sagidullin, *K istorii Vaisovskogo dvizheniia* (Kazan, 1930), and Allen J. Frank, *Islamic Historiography and “Bulghar” Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 172-78.

different confessions in the new order. The religious aspirations of these sectarians presumably warranted satisfaction if the principle of “freedom of conscience” was to be upheld, yet the inconstancy and indeterminacy of their dogmas and “clergy” cast grave doubts on the advisability of allowing them to maintain their own *metricheskiia knigi*. Moreover, it was far from self-evident that the state, in the name of “freedom of conscience,” should actively facilitate schism among confessions that had long been recognized and effectively integrated into the existing system of confessional administration.

Some of these issues proved fairly easy to resolve. For example, in 1906 the Senate simply defined Adventism as a variant of Baptist teaching, thus subjecting the roughly 3000 Adventists in Russia to the regulations governing Baptist communities.⁶⁰ The Baptist model also proved useful in the case of Mariavites – a rebellion led by forty dissident Catholic priests against the church hierarchy – although in this case matters turned out to be more complicated. The movement arose in the 1890s on the basis of the visions of the nun Felicja Kozłowska, which revealed the poor moral state of the existing hierarchy and suggested the need to imitate the moral life of the Mother of God (hence the name of the group, from the Latin *Maria* and *vita*). The Mariavites did not seek to break from the church and were even able to gain an audience with the Pope in 1903. But the Polish episcopate intensively lobbied against the Mariavites and suspended the dissident priests in early 1906. By April of 1906 the Pope had ordered the Mariavites to submit to the Polish hierarchy, and when they refused he excommunicated the group in December. Thus was born “the first schism in Polish Catholicism since the Reformation.”⁶¹

The MVD was initially reluctant to interfere in the crisis, due both to the absence of a law regulating the appearance of new religions and sects and to the ambiguous attitude of the Pope towards the movement. By the spring of 1906, however, conflicts between Mariavites and loyalist Catholics over church property had become violent – eight persons were killed in one such a confrontation – so that

⁵⁹ *Statisticheskiia svedeniia o sektantakh (k 1 ianvaria 1912 g.)* (St. Petersburg, 1914), which counted a total of just under 400,000 sectarians of both Orthodox and other Christian origin. Mariavites are not included in this list, which apparently did not extend to the Kingdom of Poland.

⁶⁰ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 769, l. 17 (Department circular no. 5532 of 6 November 1906).

resolution of the problem became much more urgent. Moreover the Pope's April encyclical made clear that he had sided with the "orthodox Catholics" [*pravovernyye katoliki*].

Notably, the Catholic hierarchy itself turned to the government for protection from the Mariavites, arguing that renegade priests could join other faiths if they wished, but were not entitled to consider themselves Catholics while inciting the population against the episcopate. Because Catholic priests performed important functions of state service, the hierarchy argued, the government should aid in removing the Mariavites from their positions and ensuring the church's control of its property.⁶² In fact, the Catholic church in Russia had been granted full control over the appointment and removal of its own parish clergy in December of 1905, as part of the implementation of the new laws on toleration earlier that year. Some in the government were therefore reluctant to interfere in these matters now and perhaps even took pleasure in watching the Polish church struggle with the consequences of its newly-won freedoms.

The MVD, on the other hand, while recognizing the necessity of securing the needs and protecting the interests of both the Mariavites and the members of the Catholic church, made fairly clear that its preference lay with the latter. "Not considering itself called upon to protect either the purity of the dogmas of the Roman-Catholic church or its wholeness, the Ministry, on the other hand, considered it incompatible with the dignity of the government to grant any kind of particular protection to a new religious movement with the goal of inflicting harm on Catholicism."

The Papal encyclical indicated that the Mariavites would have to be regarded as a sect, entirely separate from the Catholic church. But the state could not be neutral in effectuating this divorce: "Although, with the proclamation of the principle of freedom of conscience from the heights of the throne, religious sects have received the right of legal and independent existence, nonetheless such sects and similar confessional unions may not, in the opinion of the Ministry, enjoy identical rights with religions existing in the state that have already been recognized by law, and whose protection is the duty of the

⁶¹ Robert E. Blobaum, *Rewolucja: Russian Poland, 1904-1907* (Ithaca, 1995), p. 248. The short history provided here is based on *ibid.*, pp. 247-49; Nikolai. Reinke, *Mariavity* (St. Petersburg, 1910); and RGIA, f. 1276, op. 2, d. 601, ll. 1-2.

⁶² RGIA, f. 1276, op. 2, d. 601, ll. 2ob.-4ob.

government, on an equal basis with the defense of the legal rights of the Orthodox church.” Adding further that since 1832 the Catholic faith had enjoyed special protection as the majority faith in the Kingdom of Poland,⁶³ the Ministry stated plainly that “the church in question is a state institution and in this capacity is regulated in its external manifestations by existing legislation.... Therefore Roman-Catholic spiritual authorities, obviously, may rely fully on the government’s defense of their legal rights.”

The Ministry thus proposed a set of temporary rules for the Mariavites that declared them a recognized sect with the right of free confession and entrusted their *metricheskii knigi* to civil officials (based on the Baptist model). The rights of the loyalist Catholic clergy and the church’s property were to be protected.⁶⁴ In short, even in the case of Catholicism – surely the foreign confession that had shown itself to be the least reliable and the most politicized in the eyes of the government – the satisfaction of the religious rights of new sectarians could not be realized at the expense of a recognized and properly constituted confession.

All of this is not to say that the government was indifferent to the plight of the Mariavites. Having separated from the Catholic church in 1906, the Mariavite movement had developed quickly thereafter, eventually establishing 74 communities with some 160,000 adherents. The group’s statute was approved in 1909, and by 1912 the government had recognized the sect as an “independent religious teaching” [*samostoiatel’noe verouchenie*], given its clergy the right to keep civil records, and established a system for the appointment of Mariavite bishops with imperial confirmation.⁶⁵

⁶³ The reference here was to an Imperial charter to the Kingdom of 14 February 1832 (article 5), which stated that the clergy of all faiths were equally under the protection and supervision of the legally constituted authorities, but that “the Roman-Catholic faith, as the faith confessed by the larger part of OUR subjects in the Kingdom of Poland, will always be an object of the government’s particular care.” (RGIA, f. 1276, op. 2, d. 601, l. 20). In light of the Polish insurrection of 1830-31, one may well read this charter as signaling the government’s intention to keep a close eye on a troublesome Catholic clergy. But here in 1906, this passage was being invoked to suggest an obligation on the part of the government towards the Catholic church.

⁶⁴ RGIA, f. 1276, op. 2, d. 601, ll. 9-18 (emphasis added to quotation). The Council of Ministers approved the Ministry’s position with only a few minor revisions. Temporary rules for the Mariavites – intended to govern the new community until more comprehensive legislation on the formation of new religions and sects could be passed – went into effect in November of 1906 (using article 87 to bypass the Duma).

⁶⁵ RGIA, f. 1276, op. 2, d. 601, ll. 91-97.

In essence, the Russian state created a full-fledged new confession, entirely independent of its mother church in institutional terms. Moreover, because the 1906 rules left virtually all church property (including parish churches) in the hands of the Catholic church, the Mariavites had gone into deep debt simply in order to institutionalize their religious life. Recognizing this financial crisis, the MVD proposed to offer the Mariavites a subsidy of 600,000 rubles in 1914. While the government was motivated in part by the fact that Mariavites themselves had turned to the state for protection from the very beginning, central to this sympathetic attitude were also political considerations. The Mariavite movement “in the hands of the government represents a constant threat to the Roman-Catholic clergy,” and wherever it was prominent “the Catholic clergy expend on this embittered battle with the ‘internal enemy’ the energy that previously was enlisted for the purposes of opposing Russian interests [*russskomu delu*] and the government in one form or another.”⁶⁶ Thus by the post-Stolypin years the political benefits of the Mariavite movement had become clear.

Nor did the patrimony to the Mariavites represent exclusively a matter of combating the Catholic threat. Already in 1909 Stolypin criticized local police for being too stringent and formal in permitting the religious gatherings of sectarians who had broken off recognized non-Orthodox faiths. For example, even when a mere 20-30 sectarians requested permission for a religious gathering, police had requested that they indicate a specific house of worship when an apartment alone would clearly be sufficient. These sorts of restrictions, which amounted to a prohibition of sects, “lead to justified complaints that the government is taking upon itself the job of maintaining the purity of one or another non-Orthodox Christian confession.” To the extent that a given sect did not violate “state interest or the demands of morality,” its prayer gatherings should not be subject to restrictions.⁶⁷ Thus just as the state was beginning to impose more restrictions on sects comprised primarily of renegades from Orthodoxy, it signaled its greater reluctance to defend the “foreign faiths” from internal dissent.

⁶⁶ RGIA, f. 1276, op. 2, d. 601, ll. 54ob.-55. Already in 1905, the Orthodox Bishop of Kholm and Lublin had indicated that the growth of the Mariavite movement was distracting the Catholic clergy from their struggle with the Orthodox (RGIA, f. 796, op. 442, l. 2128, l. 21).

⁶⁷ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 769, l. 3 (Department circular no. 242 of 12 January 1909).

The upgrading of the Mariavites from *sekta* to *verouchenie* suggests that the term “sect” was itself ill-defined. Curiously, some believers were happy to accept this designation, while others decisively shunned it. Writing in 1910, Mennonites argued that imperial legislation had historically regarded them “not as a Protestant sect” – as the MVD’s draft laws now proposed to characterize them – “but as one of ‘several communities of the Protestant confession.’” Identifying them with new sects, they argued, “would impose upon us completely new forms of church life” and would imply that their dogmas represented “heresy” and “false teaching” with regard to some mother church.⁶⁸

Other groups, however, believed that as “sects” they would be entitled to recognition under the law of 17 October 1906, which provided for the registration of Old believer and sectarian communities.⁶⁹ Maris in Viatka province who sought recognition as pagans were quick to define themselves as “sectarians” of one stripe or another. Thus one adherent to Kugu Sorta wrote, “I became a sectarian” [*ia sdelalsia sektantom*], and contended that local Orthodox authorities were well aware of “my sectarianism.” Another petitioner wrote on behalf of himself and 25 others that they belonged “to the sect ‘Old-Adam faith,’ that is, to the sect to which our grandparents and great grandparents belonged.” Others stated that they belonged to “the religion ‘Adam-Ilan,’ or the ‘Adam-Ilan’ sect.” And some stated explicitly that they were entitled to recognition and registration under the 1906 law, and even made reference to the resolutions of the Duma in May of 1909, when it discussed broader legislation on Old Believers.⁷⁰

The Department finally decided in 1911 that Maris’ attempts to characterize themselves as sectarians in the sense of the 1906 law were specious, since that law “makes provision only for those sects

⁶⁸ *Dokumenty, otnosiashchiesia k veroispovednym voprosam mennonitov* (Gal’bshtat, 1910), pp. 2, 6-10, 22-34.

⁶⁹ Ironically, many of the communities for whom the 1906 law was intended were reluctant to register. See Roy Robson, *The Old Believers in Modern Russia* (DeKalb, 1995). According to official statistics, by the beginning of 1912 only about 15% (ca. 59,000) of the estimated 393,000 sectarians had actually registered their communities under the law (*Statisticheskiia svedeniia o sektantakh*, p. 11).

⁷⁰ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 430, ll. 1, 4, 22ob.; RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, ll. 64-64ob. Mari claims that their beliefs constituted “the faith of Adam” or the “faith of Abraham” (*Adam-Ilanskaia vera, vera Avraamova*) were based on the proposition that their ritual sacrifices were essentially those described in the Old Testament and therefore had Biblical sanction (RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, ll. 99-101ob.). For an Orthodox attempt to counter

that that appear among Orthodox Christians and moreover retain Christian teaching, while the sect 'Kugu Sorta' represents paganism."⁷¹ Needless to say, Kugu Sorta, aside from being an animist movement, offered far fewer political advantages than did the Mariavites. It is not surprising, then, that the government should have moved to recognize and even subsidize the latter while essentially ignoring the former.

Conscience and consciousness

As we have seen, after 1905 the state still arrogated to itself the final say in the matter of its citizens' confessional status, even as it substantially liberalized the rules by which that status could be altered. In its memorandum of 1906, the MVD had quite boldly defined "freedom of conscience" as "the right of each person with a sufficiently mature self-consciousness to recognize or declare his faith, or even the absence of such, with no limitations or any adverse legal consequences."⁷² In practice, the government found itself not only ascertaining that the necessary requirements were in place for a given confessional transfer, but also deciding whether or not a given person had attained a level of consciousness sufficient to exercise the "freedom of conscience" promised in the October Manifesto.

The most basic issue in this regard was the age at which one had attained sufficient moral and intellectual maturity to warrant the right to convert. The April ukaz established this age as majority (21 years), which the MVD initially found to be too restrictive. Most absurdly, this situation made it possible in principle for parents under the age of 21 to alter the confessional status of their children without being able to do so for themselves. In its 1906 memorandum, the MVD therefore suggested the marriageable

this proposition, see Daniil Fedorov, *Pravda li, chto vera iazychnikov i iazychestvuiushchikh chere mis est' vera Avraama?* (Sergiev Posad, 1914).

⁷¹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 515, l. 66. I have to check and see what the law actually said. Certainly it implied Orthodox sects (for lack of a better term), but I'm not sure that it states this anywhere.

⁷² *Spravka o svobode sovesti*, p. 3.

age (13-16 for women, 15-18 for men) as the standard, but by the time it composed its draft law of 1907, the Ministry had gone back to 21 years.⁷³

Thus, for example, when under-aged converted Jews indicated their desire to return to Judaism, they were informed that they would have to wait until they were 21. In one family, two children under fourteen were permitted to return to Judaism with their parents, while two children between fourteen and 21 were left in Orthodoxy until majority.⁷⁴ At least one petitioner attempted to invoke the state's own contention that transfer to non-Christianity did not actually represent conversion. The underaged daughter of converted Jews, Margarita Kosman argued that the age requirement identified in the April ukaz for conversion to another Christian faith should not apply in the case of transfer to non-Christianity. If indeed the April ukaz recognized not a change in religious consciousness, but rather an inaccurate confessional ascription, then presumably the age of the person in question was irrelevant.

The Over-Procurator of the Synod countered that the expression in the ukaz "subject to exclusion [from Orthodoxy]" was juridically the equivalent of "apostasy," which the law clearly recognized only in the case of persons who had attained an age at which they could judge religious questions. The MVD accepted this line of argument in its report to the Senate in 1912.⁷⁵ In effect, then, the act of requesting the correction of an inaccurate confessional ascription was assumed to require the same degree of consciousness and maturity as a request for conversion itself.

The government was also inclined to regard collective petitions as being unreflective of true consciousness – or, more accurately, as reflecting their signatories' manipulation by others. The Irkutsk Governor-General reported in 1907 that several thousand Buriats had gathered to discuss religious issues and "supposedly" decided unanimously to return to Lamaism. "But since change of faith is a matter of the

⁷³ *Spravka o svobode sovesti*, p. 9; RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 39, l. 72; "Zakonoproekt Ministerstva Vnutrennikh Del: Ob izmenenii zakonopolozhenii, kasaiushchikhsia perekhoda iz odnogo ispovedaniia v drugoe (no. 1473, 20 February 1907)," in *Missionerskoe Obozrenie* (1908), pp. 203-4.

⁷⁴ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 754, ll. 5-6, 61-61ob.; RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 754 ll. 7-8. Children under fourteen were allowed to follow their parents if both converted.

⁷⁵ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 754, ll. 9-14ob. The line of argument was based on the fact that age was indicated only in the points of the April ukaz pertaining to conversion to another Christian faith (points 1-2). Point 3, concerning

conscience of each separate person and in a petition on this question submitted by one person for everybody one may suspect coercion, collective petitions were not accepted, and those Buriats who wished to change their religion were instructed to submit a petition from each of them separately.”⁷⁶

This approach was taken up by the Department itself in correspondence with the Transbaikal Governor in 1910: “[T]he question of change in faith, being a personal affair, cannot be summarized in a collective petition.”⁷⁷ Maris in Viatka province were also instructed to resubmit their requests on an individual basis – that is, one petition for each household.⁷⁸ This demand had partly to do with the fear that “instigators” would have an easier time leading masses of Orthodox people astray using collective petitions. Taking the trouble (and incurring the expense) of filing a petition on one’s own behalf presumably required a higher degree of commitment to confessional transfer.

But this demand was also rooted in the proposition that religious belief represented an affair of each individual person – i.e., that “conscience” could only be exercised individually.⁷⁹ The problem with collective petitions was that the circumstances in each case were presumed to be particular. The government could fulfill its self-appointed task of ascertaining whether the petitioners “in reality” confessed the non-Christian faith to which they now aspired only on a case by case basis.

Confusion surrounding the term “ancestors” [*predki*] in the April ukaz also demonstrates that in the case of non-Christianity the state was willing to recognize only an uninterrupted religious consciousness inherited from immediate predecessors. In 1910 the Holy Synod suggested that “ancestors” could not be taken to refer to all ancestors, “but only the nearest ones, about whose confessional affiliation a family legend could be maintained, one that is sufficiently alive to influence the formation of religious predispositions in the members of the family.”

transfer to heterodoxy, made no reference to age, presumably (as Kosman contended) in light of the peculiar understanding of what was actually occurring when someone was transferred from Orthodoxy to heterodoxy.

⁷⁶ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 436, ll. 7-7ob. In response, Buriats had a local scribe draft a generic petition, which they then had printed in 1000 copies for twenty rubles (l. 9ob.).

⁷⁷ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 284, l. 6.

⁷⁸ GAKO f. 582, op. 148, d. 175, l. 11; GAKO f. 582, op. 150, d. 118, ll. 2-2ob.

⁷⁹ The individual nature of toleration after 1905 is a point stressed by Steinwedel, p. 282.

In this case, Stolypin rejected the Synod's attempts to define such terms by noting that the job of evaluating petitions "relates exclusively to the competence of civil authorities."⁸⁰ Yet the Ministry's own standard, as presented in its draft law, was quite similar and applied only to parents and grandparents – that is, to those whom the petitioner "could have encountered while they were still alive and with whom it was possible to have had a more or less close moral connection and whose direct influence he could have felt."⁸¹

Accordingly, in one of the very few cases in which Maris were permitted to return to paganism, the MVD motivated its decision by stating that all of the petitioners' "ancestors and present relatives were and remain pagans, and their father transferred to Orthodoxy only in 1865," with the goal of receiving a material benefit. In short, the context in which these two brothers lived and their recent family history suggested that their connection had never been broken. A third peasant, with whom they had submitted their petition, was denied recognition as a pagan, "in light of the his own and his ancestors' belonging to the Orthodox faith."⁸²

Similarly, a few of the baptized Tatars who requested permission as Muslims had their petitions rejected when they admitted that their ancestors had been baptized shortly after the conquest of Kazan in 1552.⁸³ Here, the connection with Islam was simply too distant for the state to fulfill their request. In short, consciousness was determined not so much on the basis of believers' own assertions, as by the presence of circumstances that would have made possible a genuine and historical attachment.

This determination seems particularly odd in light of Senate rulings in 1907 and 1911, which afforded decisive significance to believers' own wishes. The MVD had noted in 1908 that "the law does not indicate in which external forms the confession of a non-Christian faith, as the basis for exclusion from Orthodoxy [in accordance with the April ukaz], should be expressed." The Senate responded in 1911, based on its earlier 1907 ruling, that "the very desire of a given person to be excluded from

⁸⁰ RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 284, ll. 3, 7ob.

⁸¹ "Zakonoproekt MVD," p. 202.

⁸² GAKO, f. 582, op. 148, d. 91, ll. 16-16ob.

Orthodoxy” serves as “proof of confession of a non-Christian religion” for the purposes of invoking the April ukaz.⁸⁴ I have not been able to ascertain why this ruling, which amounts to the repeal of circular 4628, was not applied more broadly.

The fear that instigators might exploit the weaker members of the Orthodox community gave birth to the argument that “freedom of conscience” would ultimately be realized not by having the state stand back and allow a contest among different religions to run its course, but only by protecting “conscience” from those, like Tatar Muslims and especially Catholics, who did not allow others to develop their own religious consciousness, but sought instead to influence them for “political” purposes. Already in May of 1905 Minister of Internal Affairs Bulygin and Department Director Smirnov worried that Catholic clergy would engage in “proselytism and propaganda” in places “with populations that have not yet been strengthened in Orthodoxy, and that the clergy of other non-Orthodox and non-Christian confessions will make use of the ukaz of 17 April for the seduction of Orthodox people, and in this way the basic principle of the ukaz – the granting of the freedom of confession to each person based on his own conviction and conscience – will be violated at its root.”⁸⁵

A. N. Tkachev, a member of the Second Duma, used a similar set of propositions to argue against the MVD’s proposal to legalize non-Orthodox proselytism and to decriminalize “seduction.” He explained that the “seducer” “seeks to disturb the conscience of the other-believer with doubts about the truth and holiness of his faith, to undermine trust in its witnesses, and at the same time he presents his own faith in a special light of truth, indisputability, and divinity of its purity.” A weaker mind would be likely to give way, and “thus there occurs an obvious violation of freedom of conscience, by means of propaganda.”⁸⁶

⁸³ RGIA, f. 821, op. 8, d. 796, l. 88ob.

⁸⁴ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 275, ll. 20-24ob.

⁸⁵ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, l. 250 (emphasis added).

⁸⁶ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 61, l. 18ob.

Publicists, too, noted that the religious reform had allowed each to believe in his own way, but “has not taught anyone to make peace with different tastes, to respect that which another person loves.”⁸⁷ Especially in a context where non-Orthodox clergy was characterized by a “fanatical impetuosity” in propagandizing its faith, the law, “while not preventing each person from following the dictates of his own conscience in matters of religion, nonetheless has the duty to protect that conscience from anyone’s coercive influence.”⁸⁸

The vast majority of such sentiments were expressed in the context of the bitter religious struggle between Catholicism and Orthodoxy in the empire’s western provinces.⁸⁹ These arguments were rooted in the perception that the Orthodox population was itself insufficiently strengthened in Orthodoxy to hold its own against such a resourceful opponent, and that this population was entitled to attain a higher level of religious consciousness before others should be given the opportunity to influence it. Thus, aside from a general resistance to the idea of granting “freedom of conscience” to “fanatics” who would themselves violate it, there was in these statements also the proposition that the exercise of conscience depended on a fully developed consciousness, and that the state could allow freedom of the former only once it could vouch for the attainment of the latter.

Conclusion

The continued presence of various caveats and restrictions even after 1905 should not obscure the fact that the reform represented a substantial liberalization of Russia’s religious order. Many of the proposals in the MVD’s draft laws were already being realized administratively (though, without full legislative sanction, there was the danger that they would be administratively reversed). Moreover, in failing to ensure the passage of the several draft laws in 1907-09, the MVD was in a sense a victim of its

⁸⁷ Koren, “Svoboda sovesti, ili inkvizitsiia,” *Kholmско-varshavskii eparkhial’nyi listok* 39 (25 September 1905), p. 469.

⁸⁸ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 260, l. 209ob. This was the view of Vil’na-Kovno-Grodno-Minsk Governor-General in 1908.

own industriousness: the Ministry produced so much legislation between the first and second Dumas that much of it – including the drafts of religious laws – could not be discussed until 1909, when the government was no longer willing or able to defend it for political reasons.

The religious reforms of 1905 came at a very awkward historical moment, to the extent that basic notions of belief and confessional belonging were highly contested and in the midst of a fundamental transformation. Religion seems to have represented at once a set of propositions about the individual's relationship to God and an essentially hereditary source of communal or even national identity that submerged the individual in a collective and in history. Thus the MVD could instruct its subordinates not to persecute citizens for their religious beliefs (even in the case of de facto pagans), and yet insist that those seeking recognition as non-Christians only be permitted to return to the confession of their ancestors – in effect allowing the exercise of conscience but refusing to recognize its consequences.

In institutional terms, religions could be well-established, coherent and hierarchical institutions with well-defined dogma and clergies; or they could be poorly defined “sectarian” communities of a relative handful of adherents, lacking identifiable clergies and systematized religious teachings. It therefore proved difficult to treat those confessions equally. In the end liberal philosophies of religious toleration, which many statesmen embraced more than superficially, were conditioned in the construction of the new order by persistent acceptance of Orthodoxy's privileged place, the absence of non-confessional civil records, and the politicization of the right – so that some stories after 1905 remained more sacred than others.

⁸⁹ For basic overview of that struggle, see Robert Blobaum, “Toleration and Ethno-Religious Strife: the Struggle Between Catholic and Orthodox Christians in the Chelm Region of Russian Poland, 1904-1906,” *Polish Review* 35. 2 (1990): 111-124.