



The Russian government has proposed a law restricting the activities of new religious movements, which according to definition is anything that is not Russian Orthodox or Muslim. The devotees arranged for me to meet Professor Alexander Vasilyevich Medvedev of the State University of the Urals, who is also the Chairman of the Religious Affairs Committee of the Ural Region, which investigates new religious movements. The devotees hoped that by meeting Professor Medvedev, we might persuade the government that the law would not be in accordance with basic rights of liberty or freedom of choice of religion. I agreed to meet the professor, not so much because I thought we could make much progress with the government, but to please the devotees. I have seen that Russian bureaucracy is like a thick wall. If those in higher positions don't like what you're doing, that's it. Besides, how much would a professor in the Urals know about ancient Vedic culture?

The devotees accompanying me wanted to wear non-devotional dress to the 12:00 p.m. meeting, but once again I insisted that we let our tradition speak for itself and dress as proper Vaisnavas. We arrived early, which is always my policy with meetings of any kind, especially with public officials. We were shown to the professor's office. Within a few minutes Professor Medvedev arrived, looking exactly as I imagined a Russian professor might: bespectacled, with a white goatee, and dressed in a wrinkled suit. He looked at us curiously as he took his seat. I began by expressing our concern about the proposed law, I emphasized that freedom of religion is part of the new Russian constitution, and that the Krsna consciousness movement is following a religious tradition which is more than 5,000 years old.



As i was speaking, I thought about the situation. "I never imagined the day would come," I said to myself, "when I would be deep in the heart of Russia defending religious freedom." When I finished, Professor Medvedev agreed that all bona fide religions should, in theory, be excluded from the proposed law. "Professor," I asked, "do you have enough knowledge of our tradition to understand that we are, in fact, bona fide?" His answer took me by surprise. "By definition a Vaisnava is one who worships Lord Vishnu," he said. "There are a number of Vaisnava movements in India, and all of them originate in the Supreme Lord. You adhere to a sampradaya that accepts Krsna as supreme, but of course, you know that many scholars say that Krsna is the eighth incarnation of Visnu. Be that as it may, the cult of Krsna is indeed very old and followed by the greater number of people in India.

"So I know something of the worship of Krsna, but bear in mind that my expertise is the study of the Vedas, which for the most part glorify Indra, the king of heaven. The name of Indra is mentioned more times in the Rig Veda than any other deity." I was surprised. "We've got a chance here," I thought. He continued. "The problem among our leaders," he said, "may not so much be in having to accept your movement but to accept the fact that the Vedic culture could have very well been the original culture here in Russia. You know, in Russia practically all scientists accept that the Vedic culture once flourished here, the center being in the Volga River region. The debate among our scientists is only if the Aryans came from India or if they originated here. There is much evidence to the fact that the Vedic culture existed here, most notably the Russian Veda."



