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## SOVIET RELIGIOUS POLICY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN INDEPENDENT UKRAINE

**Abstract.** *The purpose of the article is to analyze the Soviet religious policy and the problem of overcoming its consequences in the independent Ukrainian state. The **research methodology** is based on the comprehensive application of general scientific and specific historical methods, which allowed tracing the evolution of the state religious policy in the USSR at various stages of its existence. The **scientific novelty** of the article consists in identifying the essence and trends in the development of the Soviet religious policy and determining the ways of overcoming its consequences in the independent Ukrainian state. **The Conclusions.** Being part of the USSR, Ukraine could not form and implement its own religious policy. It was either guided by the documents adopted by the Union-wide party and state bodies or developed similar ones. The Communist Party documents outlined the uncompromising struggle against religion. This anti-religious struggle was waged using various means, forms and methods. The principles of freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state declared in the Soviet regulations were never implemented fully. The state pressure on the church intensified and weakened, but never completely disappeared. The Soviet totalitarian system caused enormous damage to the church, religious organizations, clergy, and believers. The consequence of the Soviet religious*

policy was the restriction of freedom of conscience, the expropriation of church property, repression of the clergy and believers, the closure of religious buildings and the destruction of the religious network. However, the Soviet authorities did not succeed in overcoming religion, which was revived at the slightest opportunity. After gaining independence, Ukraine began to develop its own model of state-church relations, and to form and implement its own state religious policy. Having received a heavy Soviet legacy in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere, the country is overcoming its negative consequences gradually. Their final elimination will contribute to further development of partner state-church relations and promote full support of freedom of conscience and religion.

**Key words:** religion, church, state-church relations, the Soviet religious policy, the Soviet legislation on religious cults.

## РАДЯНСЬКА РЕЛІГІЙНА ПОЛІТИКА ТА ЇЇ НАСЛІДКИ В НЕЗАЛЕЖНІЙ УКРАЇНІ

**Анотація.** Метою статті є аналіз радянської релігійної політики та проблем подолання її наслідків у незалежній українській державі. **Методологія** дослідження ґрунтується на комплексному використанні загальнонаукових та спеціальних історичних методів, застосування яких дало можливість прослідувати еволюцію державної релігійної політики в СРСР в різні періоди його існування. **Наукова новизна** статті полягає у виявленні сутності та визначенні тенденцій радянської релігійної політики, а також визначенні шляхів подолання її наслідків у незалежній українській державі. **Висновки.** Перебуваючи у складі СРСР, Україна не мала можливості формувати і здійснювати власну релігійну політику. Вона керувалася документами, що приймалися союзними партійними і державними органами, або розробляла аналогічні їм свої. На непримиренну боротьбу з релігією найбільшою мірою націлювали компартійні документи. Боротьба з релігією велася з використанням різноманітних засобів, форм і методів. Задекларовані у радянських нормативно-правових актах принципи свободи совісті та відокремлення церкви від держави повною мірою у життя ніколи не втілювалися. Тиск держави на церкву то посилювався, то послаблювався, проте ніколи повністю не зникав. Радянська тоталітарна система завдала церкві, релігійним організаціям, служителям культу та віруючим величезної шкоди. Наслідком радянської релігійної політики стало суттєве обмеження свободи совісті і віросповідання, експропріація церковної власності, репресії духовенства та віруючих, закриття культових будівель, руйнування релігійної мережі. Проте радянській владі так і не вдалося здолати релігію, за наявності найменших можливостей вона відроджувалася. Україна, здобувши незалежність, почала самостійно визначати модель державно-церковних відносин, формувати і реалізовувати власну державну релігійну політику. Отримавши від СРСР тяжку спадщину у релігійно-церковній сфері, вона поступово долає негативні її наслідки. Їх остаточне усунення сприятиме подальшому розвитку партнерських державно-церковних відносин, повноцінному забезпеченню свободи совісті і віросповідання.

**Ключові слова:** релігія, церква, державно-церковні відносини, радянська релігійна політика, радянське законодавство про релігійні культу.

**The Problem Statement.** The collapse of the USSR and the independence of Ukraine led to dramatic changes in different spheres of public life. One of these areas was religion and church, which during the years of the Soviet totalitarian regime accumulated a lot of problems later inherited by the independent Ukrainian state. With the formation of a democratic model of state-church relations and the implementation of a new religious policy, independent Ukraine was able to resolve some of them. However, the remnants of the Soviet policy in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere are still indicative and continue to have a negative impact on religious and ecclesiastical life in Ukraine.

**Analysis of Recent Research and publications.** Considering that the Soviet religious policy was implemented throughout the USSR, scholars of the former Soviet republics frequently refer to its study. Attempts to comprehend its various aspects were made by the

Russian scholars, including V. Alekseev, Y. Zuev, M. Odintsov, G. Pankov, K. Polozova, D. Pospelovskiy, D. Furman, I. Shafarevich, M. Shkarovskiy, and the others. They studied the Soviet model of state-church relations, the position of religion and church in the USSR at different stages of its history, the forms and methods of the Soviet authorities' struggle with religion and the church, and showed the anti-religious orientation of the Soviet policy in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere.

The peculiarities of the Soviet model of state-church relations in Ukraine and the specifics of the struggle against religion in Ukrainian territories were investigated by the Ukrainian scholars I. Andrukhiv, L. Babenko, V. Voinalovych, V. Yelenskiy, O. Ihnatusha, S. Zhyliuk, A. Kyrydon, O. Lysenko, V. Pashchenko and the others. However, the legacy of the independent Ukrainian state in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere, the ways and problems of overcoming the consequences of the religious policy of the Soviet political regime need further study.

**The purpose of the article** is to analyze the Soviet religious policy and the problem of overcoming its consequences in the independent Ukrainian state.

**The Main Material Statement.** In tsarist Russia, of which Ukraine had been a part for almost three centuries, the position of religious organizations was unequal: the Russian Orthodox Church had the status of a state religion, while other religions were tolerated or even banned.

Seizing power in 1917, the Bolsheviks declared religion an "opium for the people", the church an ally of the autocracy, the church hierarchy a counter-revolutionary force, and led a decisive attack on them.

After the creation of the USSR, approaches to religion and church developed by the Russian Bolsheviks began to be implemented in other Soviet republics, including Ukraine. At the same time, Ukraine itself was deprived of the opportunity to determine the principles, strategy, directions and mechanisms of policy implementation in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere independently. The legislation it adopted concerning religion and church was similar in content and purpose to those published in Moscow. According to B. Botsiurkiv, "since the formation of the USSR the religious policy in Ukraine was largely Russia's policy copy" (Botsiurkiv, 1994, p. 132).

The basic regulation that formed the Soviet model of state-church relations and determined the Soviet policy in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere was the Decree "On separation of church from state and school from church" of January 23, 1918. According to this decree, the church was separated from the state, which meant the termination of its government and local funding, and the removal of data on religious affiliation of citizens from the state documents. Religious organizations were deprived of their legal personality, their property was subject to expropriation and became state property. Only certain religious buildings and property, at the discretion of local authorities, could be made available to religious communities for free. The decree proclaimed the separation of the school from the church, and therefore prohibited teaching of religious subjects in educational institutions, allowing only private teaching of religion (Zakonodavstvo, 1973, pp. 67–68).

One of the basic legal acts of the Soviet period was also the Resolution of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR "On Religious Associations" dated April 8, 1929. It determined the procedure of formation, registration and activity of religious organizations, as well as the use of religious buildings and property. According to this document, religious organizations, clergymen and leaders of religious associations were the subject to mandatory registration. Religious

buildings and property made available to religious organizations for use had to be properly maintained and preserved. The functions of control and supervision of religious organizations and their accounting relied on local authorities, who carried out their registration (Sobranje Uzakonyi, 1929, p. 353).

Established by the Decree “On Separation of Church from State and School from Church” and the Decree “On Religious Associations”, the procedure for registration of religious organizations and clergy, the provision of religious buildings and property was in practice excessively bureaucratic. This procedure greatly complicated the practice of the use and gave the possibility to officials, especially in the regions, to arbitrarily interpret the provisions of these regulations and resolve religious issues on their own.

Among the first victims of the Soviet religious policy in Ukraine was the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which in 1930 was accused of anti-Soviet activity and forced to “self-destruct”. As a result, almost all the bishops and about 2 000 priests were arrested (Borotba za proholoshennia, 2020).

Following the reunification of Western Ukrainian lands with Soviet Ukraine in September of 1939, religious organizations and believers in the region also became the object of, and subsequently, victims of, the Soviet religious policy.

During World War II religious and church life began to recover in the occupied territories of Ukraine where the Soviet authorities lost control of social and political processes and the pressure on the church stopped.

During the war the Russian Orthodox Church took patriotic position. Metropolitan and later Patriarch Sergius addressed the flock with patriotic appeals more than 23 times over the war (Alekseev, 1991, p. 334). Hierarchs, clergymen and believers of this church prayed for the victory of the Soviet army over fascism and provided material and financial assistance to the front.

The patriotic position of the church and the clergy during the war, as well the need to unite the efforts of believers and non-believers in the fight against the German invaders were the main causes of changes in religious policy. This process was initiated in September of 1943 at the meeting of Stalin with senior hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. In addition, the review of relations between the state and the church was dictated by the need to create a positive image of the USSR in the eyes of the population of Western states, especially the anti-Hitler coalition allies.

The consequence of the correction of the state religious policy during the war was the restoration of patriarchy and election of Metropolitan Sergius as Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, granting to religious organizations the status of a legal entity, the return of religious buildings and property, restoration of monasteries and spiritual institutions, the cessation of outrageous anti-religious propaganda, and the release of many of the repressed worshippers from prison. Only from September of 1943 to October of 1944, more than 200 churches were opened in the USSR (Odintsov, 1989, p. 61).

The newly created Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (1943) and the Council for Religious Cults under the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR (1944) were responsible for the registration of the religious-church network after the end of the war. Particular attention was paid to the communities that operated at the occupied territories and to the priests ordained during the occupation. The Russian Orthodox Church accused its hierarchs who had been at the occupied territory, of cooperating with the German occupiers and expelled them from the episcopate. Among the excommunicated were the representatives of the Ukrainian church structures Archbishop Alexei and Bishop Polycarp (Odintsov, 1989, p. 37).

The analysis of the Russian Orthodox Church network revealed that it numbered 14 329 parishes served by 70 bishops and 13,104 worshipers of cult. There were 2 theological academies and 8 theological seminaries that enrolled 562 persons. There were 85 monasteries and nunneries with 4632 monks and nuns (Shkarovskiy, 2000, pp. 341–342).

After the war, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which was accused of cooperating with the fascists and the OUN-UPA, was subjected to special harassment and persecution. At the Lviv Church Council of 1946, according to the scenario of the Soviet authorities, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was also “self-destructed”. 11 bishops, 50 Metropolitan archpriests, all abbots of monasteries and nunneries, about 1 550 priests, many monks, nuns and believers were sent to prisons and concentration camps (Litopys holhofy, 1994, pp. 128–130). The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was outlawed, and its supporters pushed by the authorities either to convert to Orthodoxy or to break completely with religion.

N. Khrushchev’s coming to power in 1953 was accompanied by a new offensive on religion. If in 1958, 64 churches were closed in Ukraine, in 1969 this number was more than 12 times higher and made 747. 1 144 communities were removed from registration in 1960, 526 in 1963, and 257 in 1963. At the beginning of 1961, the religious network in Ukraine numbered 7192 religious organizations, while in 1965 these were only 4540 (*Istoriia relihii v Ukraini*, 2003, pp. 6–17).

Documents adopted at the XXII CPSU Congress (1961) were also aimed at strengthening the struggle against religion. The CPSU Program, in particular, set the task to “regularly conduct extensive scientific atheistic propaganda, patiently explaining the failure of religious belief” (Prohrama, 1961, p. 107). The CPSU Statute approved by the Congress also obliged the Communists to “fight decisively against ... religious prejudices and other remnants of the past” (Statut, 1961, p. 4).

Scientific and atheistic propaganda became one of the important directions of ideological work of the CPSU. The Party, the Komsomol, the trade unions, mass media, scholars, cultural figures, former worshipers of a cult who had departed from religion were widely involved in its conduct. The mass editions of atheistic literature continued: in 1961 – 1962 alone, 667 atheist books and pamphlets were published by the USSR publishers, with a total circulation of 11 million copies (*Khrushchiovskaiia antyreligioznaia kampaniia*, 2020).

The document that aimed at strengthening the fight against religion was the “Instruction on the Application of the Laws on Cults” (March 16, 1961). It outlined the rights and responsibilities of believers and religious organizations, requirements for church activities, specified the procedure for registration of religious associations, opening and closing of places of worship, and the use of church property. The instruction forbade the registration of congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, True Orthodox Christians, True Orthodox Church, Adventist Reformists (*Instruktsiia*, 1961). As it turned out later, the ban on registering communities of these religious movements was one of the strategic mistakes of the authorities, since it led to the formation of a religious underground, which in the mid-1960s alone numbered 1 269 religious communities in Ukraine (CSASAG of Ukraine, f. 4648, d. 6, c. 3, p. 6).

The Russian Orthodox Church also suffered considerable destruction in the first half of the 1960s. During the period from 1961 till 1966, the number of Orthodox communities in the USSR generally decreased from 11742 to 7523 (*Nauka i relihii*, 1987, p. 23). At the beginning of 1961 alone, 850 Orthodox churches were closed in Ukraine (Yelenskiy, 1991, p. 21). At this time, as V. Pashchenko notes, “the situation was largely reminiscent of the 1930s” (Pashchenko, 1997, p. 337).

Religious and ecclesiastical life in the USSR was regulated in such detail by relevant legal acts that it was difficult for religious organizations, clergy and believers to comply with all the requirements contained therein. Violators of religious cults legislation faced administrative and criminal liability. Thus, during the period from 1961 till 1964, over 700 believers were prosecuted in Ukraine. Only in Odesa region about 46 persons were sentenced to different terms for the same period (CSASAG of Ukraine, f. 4648, d. 4, c. 373, p. 103).

With L. Brezhnev coming to power in 1964, religious policy underwent significant adjustments, resulting in a weakening of the state's pressure on the church and a decrease of tension in their relations. The Prosecutor General's Office of the USSR and the Supreme Court of the USSR were instructed to restore legality in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere, to review court cases and sentences against convicts for religious beliefs, to annul decisions on unjustified withdrawal from registration of religious communities and worshipers of cult. Local authorities pledged not to interfere with the registration of religious associations and to return the illegally expropriated religious buildings to worshipers. The provision which contained a list of prohibited religious movements was withdrawn from the "Instruction on the application of legislation on cults".

However, the propaganda of atheism remained an important component of the ideological work of the party. At this time, the former gross anti-religious propaganda began to transform into scientific and atheistic education, the purpose of which was not only to overcome religion, but also to form a scientific materialistic, and atheistic worldview.

To increase the effectiveness of atheistic education, it was supplied a scientific basis, also atheist lecturers were trained, sociological studies of religiosity were conducted and attempts were made to differentiate approach to different categories and groups of believers. The Institute of Scientific Atheism was established at the Academy of Social Sciences at the CPSU Central Committee; its Inter-Republican branch, the Republican House of Scientific Atheism, was opened in Kyiv. Scientific atheism was taught in higher educational establishments as a compulsory discipline, and lectures were conducted as scientific-atheist propaganda.

An important role in the implementation of the government's religious policy belonged to the Council for Religions of the Council of Ministers of the USSR and the Council for Religions of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR and their authorized representatives in the regions. Under the authority of the party organs, they became instruments of controlling the activities of religious organizations and the clergy, artificially curbing the growth of the religious network. Even in times when the state religious policy weakened, the number of religious organizations did not decrease without their participation. In 1966 there were 7481 Orthodox communities in the USSR, in 1976 – 6983, while in 1985 – 6806 (Yelenskyi, 2010a).

New Soviet traditions, holidays and ceremonies were developed and implemented to displace religious rituals from family and domestic life. However, believers, willingly joining the Soviet rites, continued to participate in religious activities.

Although the principles of state religious policy were formed in Moscow, its direct implementation was carried out in the Soviet republics. The peculiarity of its implementation in Ukraine was the more rigid attitude of the republican party apparatus to religion and the church, than required by the relevant all-party and government legislation. Patriarch Filaret (Denysenko), who was an eyewitness to what was happening at that time in the sphere of state-church relations, noted that in Ukraine the pressure of the party apparatus on the church "was much stronger than in Moscow where only separate cathedrals were closed. Kyiv believers were deprived of both the Sophia Cathedral and the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra"

(Mytropolyt Filaret, 1992). This was confirmed by the activities of the Council for Religions of the Council of Ministers of Ukraine, which did not register any Orthodox churches during the last 40 years before independence (Yelenskyi, 2010b).

Thus, during the years of the Soviet regime, an “anti-church” model of state-church relations was formed and implemented in the place of the destroyed classical model of state-church relations that existed in tsarist Russia. According to O. Sagan, “such a model... theoretically guaranteed freedom of conscience, but in reality believers were perceived and discriminated against as political enemies. Public policy “atheization” led to significant human rights abuses” (Sagan, 2001, p. 67).

The state religious policy underwent fundamental changes during the Perestroika, initiated by the then Secretary-General of the CPSU Central Committee, M. Gorbachev. The beginning of a new stage of state-church relations was marked by his meeting (April 29, 1988) with the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Pimen and members of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on the eve of the 1000th anniversary of the baptism of Russia. Celebrating this date not only at the church but also at the state level testified to the authorities’ choice of a course towards normalization of the state-church relations.

Due to democratic transformations in the USSR, the revival of religious and church life began, which was reflected in the growth of the network of religious organizations, the denominational diversity of the religious environment, the increase in the number of believers, the deployment of social services and charitable activity, and expanding relationships with co-religionists abroad. Religious revival was accompanied by the revision of political evaluations of religion, the elimination of administrative influence on religion and the church, the elimination of disrespectful attitudes to believers, the search for ways for dialogue and cooperation of believers and atheists in the realization of socially important tasks, and the loss of relevance of scientific atheistic propaganda. Religion has once again confirmed its incredible ability to survive. Whereas in 1988 there were 5.5 thousand religious organizations in Ukraine (Liubchuk, 2001, p. 53), in 1991 there were 12 962 (Navchalni materialy). Orthodoxy revived, Protestant movements intensified, numbers of the Jewish and Muslim communities increased, and new religions emerged.

Ukraine, which embarked on the path of democratization and then gained independence, faced the problem of developing its own model of state-church relations, as well as forming and implementing its own government religious policy. The successful solution of these problems required the removal of the Soviet legacy from the religious and ecclesiastical sphere. In the Law of Ukraine “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations”, adopted shortly before the proclamation of independence, one of its tasks was defined as “overcoming the negative consequences of state policy on religion and the church” (Zakon Ukrainy “Pro svobodu sovisti...”, 1991, Article 283).

Among the first legislative acts aimed at overcoming the negative consequences of the Soviet religious policy was the Law of Ukraine “On the rehabilitation of victims of repression by the communist totalitarian regime of 1917 – 1991”, according to which persons subjected to repression for religious reasons were subject to rehabilitation (Zakon Ukrainy “Pro reabilitatsiiu...”, 1991, Article 262).

During the first years of independence, the special Law of Ukraine “On alternative (non-military) service” normalized the procedure of substitution of military service with alternative service, if the performance of military duty contradicted the religious beliefs of the person (Zakon Ukrainy “Pro alternatyvnu...”, 1992, Art.188).

In order to solve the problem of church property, raised during the Soviet period, the authorities of independent Ukraine adopted normative legal acts aimed at returning religious buildings and property to religious organizations, among them the Decree and Executive Order of the President of Ukraine L. Kravchuk (Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy "Pro zakhody...", 1992; Rozporiadzhennia Prezydenta Ukrainy "Pro povernennia...", 1994).

The necessity of overcoming the Soviet legacy in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere and normalization of state-church relations was discussed in the Statement of President of Ukraine L. Kuchma on moral and political rehabilitation of the church (Uriadovyi kurier, 1999), as well as in his Decree "On Urgent Measures to Ultimately Overcome the Negative Consequences of the Former Soviet Union's Totalitarian Policy on Religion and Restore the Violated Rights of Churches and Religious Organizations" (Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy "Pro nevidkladni zakhody...", 2002).

The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, by amending a number of legislative acts, normalized the issue of the activities of clergymen (chaplains) in penitentiary institutions (Zakon Ukrainy "Pro vnesennia zmin...", 2015).

The legislative and executive bodies of Ukraine made efforts to harmonize the relations between the school and the church, which were strictly separated in the USSR. In particular, the Law of Ukraine "On Education" gives religious organizations the right to act as founders of educational institutions and determine the religious orientation of their educational activities (Zakon Ukrainy "Pro osvitu", 2019). In addition, the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine included Theology in the List of specialties which are taught at higher educational institutions on specialist and master degree programs, as well as the decision on state recognition of certificates of higher spiritual education, scientific degrees and titles issued by higher educational institutions (Postanova Kabinetu Ministriv Ukrainy "Pro derzhavne vyznannia...", 2015).

However, some of the problems raised by the totalitarian regime in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere were not completely resolved by the Ukrainian authorities. Thus, despite Ukraine's commitment to the EU to draft a law on church property restitution, this issue remains legally unresolved.

The current issue of military chaplaincy, which should be regulated at the level of law, is regulated only at the secondary level nowadays. Although the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine has come very close to adopting a special law, this problem has not been resolved so far, which hinders the full-fledged activity of this institution in the Ukrainian army.

The final overcoming of the Soviet legacy in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere in Ukraine is hampered by a number of factors, including the complexity of the economic situation, confrontation of different political forces, and the lack of political will in the leadership of the state.

The Conclusions. According to the analysis, the Soviet totalitarian system has done great harm to the church, religious organizations, priests and believers. The consequences of the Soviet religious policy were restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion, expropriation of church property, closure and destruction of cult buildings and property, antagonistic relations between the state and the church, conflict in the religious environment, decline in the religiosity of the population and religious rituals, decrease in the number of worshipers of the cult, destruction of the religious-church network, deprivation religion of its social importance, and restriction of its scope by individual consciousness and domestic life.

The provisions on freedom of conscience, separation of the church from the state, although proclaimed by the Soviet Constitutions, were never implemented fully.



The result of the Soviet religious policy was antagonistic relations between the state and the church, significant restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion, expropriation of church property, destruction of religious and church networks, closure and destruction of religious buildings and property, conflict in the religious environment, decline of the level of religiosity and religious rites, reduction of the number of clergymen, deprivation of the social significance of religion, limiting it to individual consciousness and the domestic sphere. Consequently, the church was always more or less dependent on the state.

Among the determining factors of the orientation of the Soviet religious policy was the personal attitude of senior leaders of the state to religion and the church, as well as the political situation inside the country and in the international arena. Despite the easing of the state religious policy during certain periods, it was never fully conducive to fully guaranteeing the right to freedom of conscience and religion. Depending on who was in power, the state pressure on the church increased, then weakened, but never completely disappeared. Only the tactics of the struggle against religion changed, but the strategy, its final combating, remained unchanged.

Despite the use of various means, forms and methods of combating religion, the Soviet authorities never managed to overcome it. Religion demonstrated its vitality and was revived at the slightest opportunity.

Having received a heavy legacy from the USSR in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere, Ukraine is gradually overcoming its negative consequences. Their final elimination will promote further development of state-church relations, as well as full guarantee of freedom of conscience and religion. The study of this problem will remain relevant until the final removal of the remnants of the Soviet religious policy from the religious and ecclesiastical life of modern Ukraine, which will contribute to full freedom of conscience and religion and further development of state-church partnerships.

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