

Moscow art exhibit called 'blasphemous,' museum officials fined: Religious minorities made uneasy by trial

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A Moscow district court has convicted and fined the director and the curator of a Russian museum on charges of inciting religious hatred. The court ruled that a 2003 art exhibit, "Caution! Religion," was insulting to the Russian Orthodox Church and "blasphemous," according to U.S. news reports.

Director Yuri Samodurov and curator Lyudmila Vasilovskaya of the Sakharov Museum—named for Andrei Sakharov, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and Soviet dissident—were fined \$3,600 each.

The exhibit, vandalized by Russian Orthodox Church members four days after it opened, featured works by about 40 artists, including a sculpture of a church made out of vodka bottles and an icon with the face cut out to allow visitors to insert their heads.

In the March 28 ruling, Samodurov and Vasilovskaya received a more lenient sentence than expected, but Samodurov said the verdict was "a frightening and dangerous precedent." He said he hopes to be acquitted in an appeal.

Also critical of the ruling was Lev Ponomarev, director of the all-Russia Movement for Human Rights. "The judge stated that Russia is an Orthodox Christian state . . . and that demeaning Orthodox Christianity stirs up national hatred toward Russians," he said, as quoted by the *Los Angeles Times*. "As for me, I would consider such statements as stirring up national hatred by the judge himself."

Religious minorities were made uneasy by the trial, the Associated Press reported, seeing it as another measure against critics of the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian minority religions have been alarmed by recent laws, such as 1997 legislation

allowing liquidation of religious organizations not properly registered with the state.
-*Religion News Service*