

Russian Orthodox Activists Denounce Evolution at Moscow Museum

Russian Orthodox **religious activists** festooned a Moscow **natural history museum** named for Charles Darwin with banners and leaflets denouncing evolution theory in a display of disdain for secular education.

The incident on Sunday at the State **Darwin Museum** named for the Victorian British naturalist who expounded the theory of natural selection was a non-violent but bold attack on secular traditions that remain strong despite a post-Soviet revival of the **Russian Orthodox Church**.

Footage released by Orthodox activist group **Bozhaya Volya**, or God's Will, showed activists unfurling a banner reading "God created the world" on the building's facade while others threw leaflets bearing creationist slogans into the lobby of a popular destination for school trips and family outings in the capital.

"God created kittens!" read one leaflet visible in the video, which also featured activists holding banners disparaging the theory of evolution as a "pseudo-scientific myth" and singing religious songs.

"Checkmate atheists! In the year 7522 since the creation of the world, creationists have seized the Darwin museum," a member of the group which advocates "the revival and development of Russia as an Orthodox Empire" said on Twitter.

Moscow police said they had not received any complaints from the museum about the incident. The museum, which is closed on Mondays, could not immediately be reached for comment, and the Russian Orthodox Church could also not immediately be reached.

About two-thirds of Russians consider themselves Russian Orthodox and the church has gained influence since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, drawing concern from critics who say it is too powerful in a secular state.

Tension between Russian Orthodox activists and secular liberals has increased in recent years.

Activists have occasionally vandalized art exhibits they have denounced as blasphemous, while two women from the band Pussy Riot were convicted of a religious hate crime for a “punk protest” in Moscow’s main cathedral in February 2012.

The women, who urged the Virgin Mary to rid Russia of then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, are now serving two-year prison terms.

The singers said they had not meant to offend the faithful, only to lampoon the church’s ties to Putin, who was praised by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill during his successful campaign to win a third presidential term weeks later.

Reporting by Gabriela Baczynska; editing by Steve Gutterman.

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