

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION INITIATIVES IN RUSSIA: UPDATE AND COMMENTARY

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This "Update and Commentary" by Dr. Joseph A. Loya, O.S.A., who teaches at Villanova University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, brings forward information since his paper in REE (November 2006) detailed in footnote 2 below. Professor Loya has long served on the CAREE executive committee, and has been a frequent REE contributor.

This update report¹ begins with a review of "Religion Classes in State Institutions in Post-Soviet Russia" published in the February 2006 issue of this journal.² At the turn of the millennium the Moscow Patriarchate, supported by the Ministry of Education, proposed the systematic introduction of an optional "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" course (hereafter, FOC – Russian, OPK) into Russian public school systems. Debate on this issue consistently revealed – and continues to reveal – a deep divide in public and professional opinion. In the summer of 2002 the textbook for the course authored by Alla Borodina became the focus of a criminal lawsuit initiated by a Russian Human Rights organization. The basis of the charge was transgression of Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code that prohibits the incitement of national and religious hostilities: the book was claimed by the plaintiffs to possess anti-Semitic content and thus would serve as a promotional source of inter-ethnic strife and hard line xenophobia. The Moscow district Prosecutor's Office to which the suit was directed refused to act on the petition. In public forums it was also asserted that the course's content virtually coincided with what is taught in Orthodox ecclesiastical seminaries; children would thus be subjected to a purely confessional theological education. Patriarch Alexei II strenuously denied this characterization. He pressed the view that FOC was no mere catechetical exercise, but a valid and substantial culturological plan of study. He also placed himself on record as supporting the teaching of the fundamentals of Islam, Buddhism and Judaism - the traditional faiths of Russia - in regions where those religions hold sway.

¹ This report was presented at the annual CAREE conference, 1 February 2008, held at the Interchurch Center in New York.

² Joseph A. Loya, O.S.A., "Religion Classes in State Institutions in Post-Soviet Russia," *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Volume XXVI, Number 1, February, 2006: pages 52-66.

The textbook continued to be the subject of a contention the public press dubbed “The battle of Borodina.” In June of 2005 Borodina published a spirited defense of her textbook, portraying the opposition as uncultured bureaucrats whose deep sense of religious intolerance causes them to ignore the demands of society. Also in summer of 2005 an ecumenical dustup ensued when the Catholic head of the Moscow archdiocese of Moscow averred that foundations of faith are best provided under the auspices of private institutions. The Patriarchate interpreted the comment as an attempt to undermine its position. The Vatican smoothed ruffled feathers by affirming support for the Italian model of church-state relations, a configuration that closely resembles what the Patriarchate had been advocating all along. In the broad perspective, the FOC initiative gives rise to and tests the content, nature and shape of Russia’s resolution of major issues: How should the state draw the distinction between freedom of religion and freedom from religion? What should Russia learn from the schooling models of other democratic countries, and what constitutes a unique and appropriate Russian pedagogy? To what extent does the Church’s employment of its “culture card” in the promotion of curriculum development compromise the Law on Education that guarantees the secular nature of education in Russia? Is the Orthodox Church recognizing the distinction between education and evangelization? What problems arise for other Christians and non-Christians?

Subsequent Analysis; Recent Developments.

Critical analysis of how the debate is playing out takes into consideration the social-cultural-political context of the issue. In a recent issue of the *British Journal of Religious Education*, Joachim Willems remarks on a new subject area that has been established in Russia's academic institutions: culturology (*kul'turologiya*). This is not to be confused with western cultural sciences. Willems credits Jutta Scherrer with pointing out that the intention of the new culturology is not so much to analyze Russian and non-Russian culture, but rather to aid in its search for an overriding cultural identity – in the form of a holistic, philosophical and historical worldview – in response to the perceived lack of ideology and identity that marked the post-Soviet, post-Communist era. Culturology also endeavors to establish new moral concepts and national cultural values orientated to Russia's unique historical experience. With regard to the contents of

culturology, Scherrer points out that the subject serves politicians who want to politicize the cultural differences between Russia and the rest of the world. Willems suggests that advocates of FOC hope to benefit from the accepted position of culturology, and that it would appear that some supporters want to establish FOC as a kind of children's culturology. Their argument is sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit. Assumed are the right and the duty of all states to introduce young people into their culture.³

For the Patriarchate's part, influential spokesperson Deacon Andrei Kuraev employed a rather tortuous metaphor to illustrate the point in asserting the culturological, non-dogmatic nature of FOC. He likened Russia to an old apartment. The new inhabitants – Russia's children – need to be educated as to the existence and location of the various energy lines within the apartment walls that define the code of Russian culture. To lead them into any identification with the Russian State, Orthodoxy must be included.⁴

Also in the realm of cultural analysis, Alicja Curanovic points out that Russian Academia has for two decades been enthralled with Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" theory that posits cultural and religious identities – not ideological or economic factors – will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world.⁵ The promotion of FOC accords well with Huntington's schema in which "Orthodox Civilization" – lead, of course, by a dominant Russian Orthodoxy – is accounted as one the seven "major player" civilizations in the world.

In 2006 the Patriarchate reported finding no instances of inter-religious or inter-ethnic disturbance where the fundamental's of one's religion – Orthodox, Islam or Judaism – is taught.⁶ Even if the Patriarch's statement was a self-interested reading of

³ Joachim Willems, "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture (FOC): a New Subject in Russia's Schools," *British Journal of Religious Education*, Volume 29, Issue 3 September 2007: pages 229-243. Available at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=g780552651~db=all>

⁴ "Deacon Andrei Kuraev on Eve of School Year Advocates Required Teaching of Orthodox Culture in Schools," Portal-credo.ru site, 29 August, 2007: <http://portal-credo.ru/site/print.php?act=news&id=56430>

⁵ See Alicja Curanovic, "The Attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate towards Other Orthodox Churches," *Religion, State and Society*, Volume 35, Issue 4, December 2007: pages 301-318. The theory spawned a cottage industry of criticism and deprecation, plus periodic rounds of seeming vindication, especially after the 11 September 2001 attacks, 2002 Bali Bombings, 2003 Invasion of Iraq, 2004 Madrid train bombings, 2005 London bombings, 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, the ongoing Iranian nuclear crisis, etc.

⁶ "Patriarch Alexy: Arguments Against Teaching Orthodox Culture in School are Far-Fetched," Interfax, 29 September 2006: from Paul Steeve's "Russia Religion News" site, <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0609b.html>

local realities, editorialists observed that adversaries of FOC continued to speak in different languages. Also, they called for more efficient and accountable mechanisms to regulate local, federal and same-level interagency interaction. The absence of formal objective appraisals of the Church's claim that the classes have more to do with morality than dogma was noted, and neither are there any formal outcome assessment reviews that would confirm or disprove the Church's contention that the course produces morally accountable citizens.⁷

For the record, it was not impossible to find instances of the Patriarchate's position being undermined by dissident voices from within its own ecclesiastical ranks. A fall 2007 *Forum 18* report quoted Fr. Petr Meshcherinov of the Patriarchal Centre for the Spiritual Development of Children and Youth at Moscow's Danilov Monastery as follows: "Despite the patriarch's repeated statements that the subject should be culturological, it is obvious that Law of God [the pre-1917 Orthodox catechism] is being dragged into schools, and in its most unfortunate form." Metropolitan Mefodi of Astana and Almaty (Kazakhstan), while in favor of FOC being accorded a place in school curricula, testified seeing instances where the course was filled "by force and under pressure."⁸

In the spring of 2007, counsel for the Patriarchate reacted to the opinion of a governmental representative for the higher courts that contended that teaching any religion by nature disunites people. The Patriarchate's lawyer registered the following points: The 1918 law separating church from state and school from church became ineffective in 1990; The 1990 constitution speaks of the secular state, but not a word about the secular nature of education in state schools, leaving the topic open to various interpretations; The correct sense of the term "secular" pertains to what is "nonclerical" and "civil"; The secular nature of FOC is assured in its teaching by professional pedagogues possessing state teaching certificates.⁹

⁷ "Tolerance Should Top the Agenda," Editorial, *Moscow Times*, 25 September 2006: <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0609a.html>

⁸ Geraldine Fagan, "Russia: Putin sounds final bell for Orthodox culture classes?" *Forum 18 News Service*: http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1021

⁹ "Russian Government Representative in Courts Opposes Teaching Religion in Schools," Portal-credo.ru site, 24 May 2007, and "Patriarch Disagrees with Barshevsky," *Mir religii*, 24 May 2007, both at <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0705f.html>

In late August of 2007 a representative of the Institute for the Development of Regional Education reported that beginning 1 September a new subject entitled "Spiritual culture of the Urals" would be introduced into twenty schools on an experimental basis. The course provides for the study of the culturological foundations of the Orthodox religion. Although the diocese gave assurance that the new subject would not promote propaganda of the cult of Orthodoxy, Urals rights advocates feared pressure from the church on the children. In the event of positive results, the new subject would be added to so-called regional curriculums as desired. The representative stated that if a child attends a school where "Spiritual culture of the Urals" is taught, that child will not be able to refuse to study it. Archbishop Vikenty of Ekaterinburg and Verkhotursk opined, "The spiritual values of the basic religious confessions do not contradict one another, inculcating in the rising generation honesty, fairness, and respect for elders, and not conflicting with other religions." The opinions of leaders of various religious confessions in the area were divided on this matter.¹⁰

The end of August saw the publication of an open letter signed by five hundred ninety-one concerned citizens and addressed to the President of the Russian Federation and influential heads of state departments. Among the points that were registered:

- Introduction of teaching OPK into state schools violates the principle of the equality of all religions and faiths.
- Those who promote the course see two mutually exclusive paths for human development: the path of vice, crime, drug addiction, etc., and the path of faith, completely disregarding the humanistic tradition.
- The very young who lack the capacity for critical evaluation must be protected.
- The rights of Orthodox believers and Russian Orthodox Church are already being observed. They already now have, by law, the full right to establish educational institutions with a religious composition. This also applies to other citizens who confess one or another faith. Such an approach seems fully reasonable.

The letter also cited what anti-FOC forces consider the Patriarch's revelatory "smoking gun" quotation from his instructional letter No. 5925 of 9 December 1999: "N.

¹⁰ Mariia Khudovekova and Alexander Lakedemonky, "Ekateringburg School Children Will be Turned to God: Classes in "Spiritual Culture of the Urals" to be Introduced into City Schools," *Kommersant Ekaterinburg*, 28 August 2007: <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0708e.html>

7. If difficulties with teaching foundations of Orthodox doctrine are encountered, then call the course 'Foundations of Orthodox culture.' This will not evoke outbursts from pedagogues and directors of secular academic institutions, who have been trained on an atheistic basis."¹¹

Metroplitan Kirill of the Department of External Church relations voiced support for the idea of secular colleagues developing a secular ethics textbook for nonreligious students. He pleaded for an end to the "this course divides the children" mantra, pointing out that physical education courses have long possessed an imbedded cause of division and discrimination, and always will.

He would defend to death the right of a Jew not to take the course, but knows of Jewish parents whose children insist on taking it simply because they find them an interesting source of education.¹²

The Minister of Education and the Sciences continued in his opinion that it is impermissible that the title of the class contain the name of any specific religion: "This provokes a definite confrontational mood and therefore the subject must be neutral with regard to any one faith." The efforts of the Ministry should be focused on developing quality textbooks and qualified teachers, he added.¹³

Around one hundred fifty participants in the All-Russian Conference of Directors of Tatar Public Organizations, held in Kazan upon the initiative of the World Congress of Tatars, adopted an appeal to Vladimir Putin that called for "preserving the educational heritage of the Tatar people." The introduction of FOC violates the principle of freedom of conscience and the standards of a secular state.¹⁴

By this time significant momentum had been generated for objective "History of Religion," "World Religions" and "Traditional Religions of Russia" courses. History of Religion was being taught in some Moscow schools and in several (predominantly Muslim) republics such as Tatarstan and Ingushetia. Regarding the intended neutrality

¹¹ "Open Letter of Protest by Citizens of Russia against Introduction of 'Foundation of Orthodox Culture' into State Schools," Portal-credo.ru site, 30 August 2007: <http://portal-credo.ru/site/print.php?act=news&id=56468>

¹² "Metropolitan Kirill: Should not Deprive 80% of Country", *Religiia i SMI* site, 30 August 2007: <http://www.religare.ru/article44906.htm>

¹³ "Fursenko Thinks Final Decision of Teaching History of Religions Should be Made by Society," *Religiia i SMI* site, 31 August 2007: <http://www.religare.ru/article44925.htm>

¹⁴ Irina Begimbetova, "Tartar Diaspora Opposes Teaching OPK in Schools," *Kommersant-Kazan*, 31 August 2007: <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0708e.html>

of this subject, the textbook *Religions of the World* (Grades 10/11, ages 15-17) states in its Introduction:

“You should know that ‘study of religion’ (*izuchenie religii*) and ‘learning religion’ (*obuchenie religii*) are two different concepts. In the course, ‘World Religions’ we study religions. If you want to receive religious instruction in the sense of ‘learning religion’, this is possible in parochial Sunday Schools or in churches by priests and preachers. Whether you go to them or not is a matter of your own free choice.”¹⁵

The Minister of Education of the republic of Tatarstan stated that the experimental course “History of Religions” would be taught in a number of schools of the Tatarstan Republic in the new term. In the event of positive results, the course may in the future become a part of the mandatory curriculum. The course material is close to that of a historical social science block studied by pupils, and so it will be conducted by teachers of history and social studies.¹⁶

The course “Foundations of World Religions” would appear in the tenth and eleventh grades of several Moscow schools as an elective on a trial basis. Its textbook, a 400-page resource edited by the director of Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, does not carry the recommendation of the Ministry of Science and Religion.¹⁷ In contrast, by 1 September 2007 FOC was adopted as a “required” in the provinces of Belgorod, Bryansk, Kaluga, Smolensk and Tver. These developments witnessed to the growing “oppositional verticality” of the issue: school administrators of the large metropolises and federal-level civil servants generally oppose FOC, while a significant number of regional school administrators favor it.

On the eve of the beginning of the school year the Patriarchate voiced its conclusion that a voluntary and elective basis for FOC is the most honest and useful policy to employ. The Minister of Education and Science exerted his commitment to culturological courses that are “neutral with respect to religion.”¹⁸ Willems noted that discussions of a History of Religion demonstrate a widespread spectrum of meaning to

¹⁵ Willems, <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=g780552651~db=all>

¹⁶ “Approval of Text Telling Pupils about Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism,” Portal-credo site, 30 August 2007: <http://portal-credo.ru/site/print.php?act=news&id=56472>

¹⁷ “Moscow Schools to Teach “Foundations of World Religions,” *Vremia novostei*, 20 August 2007: <http://www.kirchen-in-osteuropa.de/archiv/07082302.htm>

¹⁸ Mikhail Moshkin, “Moscow Patriarchate Reaches a Compromise: RPTsMP agreed that Study of OPK in Schools Will Not Be Mandatory and Now Everyone Should Follow Its Example,” *Vremia novostei*, 31 August 2007: <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0708e.html>

the question of what neutrality, in fact, means. For some, neutrality means describing religion without reference to the problem of the existence or non-existence of God. For others, atheism alone best guards against the introduction of emotional shadings to religious content.¹⁹

Also in September Ilia Peresedov published an article that contained interviews with teachers in the Belgorod region (one of the areas where FOC is required). Those interviewed stated that the course indeed splits the children. They also noted a disparity of materials: ragged math books vs. a quality FOC textbook supported with compact disks and diocesan magazines. FOC texts were reported to be totally devoid of critical self-reflection. Because FOC provides teachers with additional contact hours and subsidy, opposition is not very vocal. An Internet survey in Belgorod province showed that 29 percent of respondents favored FOC, 45 percent decisively opposed it, and 23 percent did not see a need for this subject. A survey of upper class pupils in Ekaterinburg showed 24% for FOC and 76% against it. Moscow teachers polled as follows: 12% for introducing a subject studying religion (including FOC); 41% for subjects giving information about religion and other forms of worldviews (for example, history of religions and religious studies); 46% against teaching such subjects in secondary schools.²⁰

During the second week of September Parliament approved on first reading a draft law that would standardize for all accredited institutions not only the structure of school discipline and teaching conditions, but requirements for exam results as well. The draft law stressed the freedom of the institutions themselves and of local authorities to formulate curricula taking into account national and regional peculiarities. Still, the move towards federal-level standardizations were interpreted by pro-FOC segments as being prejudicial to their regionally-based cause.²¹

Days later Vladimir Putin, in the course of a session of the Council for Implementation of Priorities of National Projects and Demographic Policy, expressed his commitment to the constitutional separation of church and state. "As regards

¹⁹ Willems, <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=g780552651~db=all>

²⁰ Ilia Peresedov, "General Education or Parish Church Schools?" *New Times*, 3 September 2007: <http://www.religare.ru/article45013.htm>

²¹ Olga Pavlikova, "Uniformity of Curricula in Question," *Gazeta*, 4 October 2007: <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0710a.html#01>

education of children in the spirit of our four religions, I am for that," the president added, noting that "it is necessary to find a form that is acceptable for the entire society."²² The vice-chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, responded with the view that finding a form of education that would be acceptable to absolutely everybody is "hardly possible in principle."²³

The following news was reported in the 15 November issue of *Izvestiia* under the title, "Foundations of Orthodox Culture Will not be Taught in Schools: State Duma Adopts Amendments to Education Abolishing Regional Curriculum":

On Tuesday the State Duma adopted on second reading amendments to the law "On education," abolishing the so-called regional curriculum. Beginning 1 September 2009, "Foundations of Orthodox culture" will be removed from the curriculum; it has been introduced as a regional curriculum in a number of provinces. Teaching of national languages and literature also will be stopped in several republics. . . . In its turn, the press secretary of the Moscow patriarchate, priest Vladimir Vigilansky stated: "The decision of the Duma was made despite the wishes of a majority of the country. Children will be deprived of the opportunity to deal with traditional values and the culture of Russian civilization. It seems to me that the deputies are in thrall to disinformation being spread by opponents of the foundations of Orthodox culture and they simply do not know what they are doing"The State Council of Tatarstan is disappointed with the position of the State Duma. An advisor for the head of the Committee on Culture, Ildus Davleev said: "Once the regional curriculum is removed then it will turn out that our opinion will not be considered." It is necessary to note that opposition to this draft law also was expressed in other regions, for example, in Kuban. But on Tuesday at the session the head of the Duma Committee on Education, Valery Grebennikov, stated: "Conceptually, the law proceeds from a granting to offices of state administration of the right to establish certain (educational—Izv.) standards." At the same time the Duma adopted a law granting to religious educational institutions the possibility to issue diplomas in the state form. Here, according to Fr Vladimir, the Duma members simply fulfilled the president's promise: "We now remain the

²² "Putin Expresses Opinion on Religious Education in Schools," *Religiia v svetskom obshchestve*, 14 September 2007: <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0709a.html#09>

²³ "Moscow Patriarchate Favors European Model for Teaching Religion in Schools," Interfax, 14 September 2007: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/print.php?act=news&id=20330>

last country in Europe where diplomas of religious higher educational institutions are not recognized."²⁴

In late December the Reverend Cyril Hovorun, formerly a representative of the Patriarchate's Office of External Church Relations and now President of External Church Relations for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, informed this writer in a personal note that the Moscow Patriarchate is endeavoring to introduce FOC as a component of a newly proposed "Spiritual and Ethical Culture" subject area. He continued: "Within this subject, the pupils or their parents may choose any major Russian religion they want to study. This, on the one hand, prevents children from getting confused when all religions are studied at the same level. On the other hand, it prevents violation of the religious conscience of any pupil. There seems to be a consensus about such a paradigm. The future will show if this paradigm will be accepted by the state."²⁵

In 2003 Russia committed itself to the international Bologna Accords that seek to assure comparable and compatible educational standards throughout Europe. Developments that undercut regional curriculums and the FOC initiative could be read as a reflection of Russia's desire to make itself accountable to that commitment. This ongoing story may equally be indicative of the general transfer of administrative responsibility from the regions to federal-level command centers – a movement that is characteristic of the Putin era.

²⁴ Boris Klin, "Foundations of Orthodox Culture will not be Taught in Schools: State Duma adopts Amendments to Education Law abolishing Regional Curriculum.," *Izvestiia*, 15 November 2007: <http://www.kirchen-in-osteuroopa.de/archiv/07112201.htm>

²⁵ Personal email, dated 23 December 2007.