



CONFERENCE PAPER

Religious Education in Russia: Between Methodological Neutrality and Theological Partiality¹

Elena A. Stepanova

Institute for Philosophy and Law, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences,
Ural Institute of Humanities, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

ABSTRACT

Religious education in Russia remains the subject of sharp public debates. The paper briefly observes the history of religious education in the country. Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, religious instruction was an essential part of the primary school curriculum; the imperial system of religious instruction ended up with the Bolshevik revolution, and the subsequent Soviet decree of January 1918 that separated church from state and school from church. In Soviet times, religion had no place in the moral education of children. The fall of the Soviet Union, including its socialist ideals and educational prerogatives, led to uncertainty and confusion in the educational sector. Today, however, religious education is becoming increasingly important. By introducing *Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics* in public schools and Theology in higher education institutions, the Russian Federation has asserted the state's vested interest in ensuring the moral and spiritual development of its citizens.

KEYWORDS

school curriculum, religious studies, religious education, moral education, "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics"

¹ The work was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (RSF), Grant number 18-18-00216.

Introduction: Religious Education in Imperial Russia and Soviet Union

Religious Education is a fairly new enterprise in Russia. Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, moral and religious instruction was an essential part of the primary school curriculum in the Russian Empire despite the state having never instituted a system of universal public education. Most primary schooling was in the hands of religious communities, from Buddhist monasteries (*datsans*) near Lake Baikal, and Muslim *maktabs* on the middle Volga to the Russian Orthodox church-parish schools across the empire. Although the Orthodox Church was the established one, the empire recognised a number of religious minorities, and every imperial citizen had to have a religion, which was usually determined by birth and recorded in one's passport (Clay, 2015).

The imperial system of religious instruction ended with the Bolshevik revolution and the subsequent Soviet decree of January 1918 that separated church from state and, consequently, school from church. In the 1920s, the Soviet Union introduced compulsory universal, militantly secular, public primary education that was part of the broader Marxist-Leninist project to create a new civilisation and a new kind of human being, the "new Soviet man". In 1929, a new law on religious associations, which remained in effect for the next six decades, drastically curtailed freedom of conscience and placed strict state controls on religious life. In the same year, the Constitution was amended in order to deprive believers of the right to conduct religious propaganda while assuring all citizens the right to engage in anti-religious propaganda. For Soviet authorities, religion had no place in the moral education of children, and their brutal, state-sponsored destruction of believers and religious institutions had a deep and long-lasting impact on those religious communities that survived the Soviet period (Clay, 2015).

In 1961, the new Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was adopted with the "Moral Code of the Builder of Communism" as its integral part. The "Moral Code" was aimed at the moral improvement of the Soviet people; it included the values of the devotion to the cause of communism; love of the socialist Motherland; conscientious labour; high sense of public duty; collectivism and comradely mutual assistance; humane relations and mutual respect; honesty and truthfulness; moral purity; unpretentiousness and modesty in social and private life; mutual respect in the family; irreconcilability toward injustice; and friendship and brotherhood among peoples. Because of the ideological needs of the time, late Soviet ethical theory was supposed to prove the ultimate truth of the communist morality as the highest form achieved through historical stages of the development of morality, and to elaborate the normative ethical programme based on the "Moral Code". Interestingly, today there is a general discourse, reproduced by both believers and non-believers, that Russia has always been Orthodox, and "The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism" is nothing else but a disguised Ten Commandments.

One of the consequences of the introduction of the "Moral Code" was the shift from former "militant" atheism to "scientific" one, which served the purpose of not only criticising religion but also stressing the positive aspects of atheism as part of

the materialist worldview and the source of the elaboration of everyday values. Since 1964, Scientific Atheism as a part of the state's system of "moral upbringing" became a compulsory course in the departments of humanities and social sciences at higher educational institutions in the Soviet Union.

Post-Soviet Changes

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the religious situation in Russia changed dramatically. Today, the importance of the cultural-historical and ethical role of religion, especially Russian Orthodoxy, is highly acknowledged by the state. The 1994 Constitution declared Russia as a secular state; nevertheless, in 1997, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in various spheres of social life, including education, further increased with the adoption of the Federal Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. Although this law reinforced the secular character of education, it also contained a specific regulation on church-state relations in its Preamble. The Law recognises the special role of the ROC in "the history of Russia, the formation and development of its spirituality and culture", as well as the importance of other religions like Islam, Buddhism or Judaism in Russian history. As a result, these four religions, with Christianity limited to the Orthodox denomination, were officially recognised as so-called "traditional" religions of Russia that later shaped the system of Religious Education in state schools (Blinkova & Vermeer, 2018). Russian Orthodoxy recently experienced its "rebirth" as some 70% of ethnic Russians claim Orthodoxy as their religion (Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe, 2017). However, these figures should be considered with caution, as they include people with extremely diverse degrees of religious knowledge and commitment (Ładykowska, 2012).

Religious Education in Higher Education Institutions

Since the mid-1990s, Religious Studies (RS) in one form or another gradually replaced Scientific Atheism in higher education institutions. RS is no longer a compulsory subject in the humanities and social sciences; rather, it is a specialty aimed at preparing teachers, researchers, and PR specialists among others. Presently, the 30 higher educational institutions offer bachelor's degree programmes in RS, while 5 of them also offer master's degrees specialising in RS. The curriculum for both the bachelor's and master's programmes includes Philosophy of Religion; Sociology of Religion; Phenomenology of Religion; Science and Religion; Religious Arts; New Religious Movements; Religious Ethics; Anthropology of Religion; Psychology of Religion; History of Religion; Freedom of Conscience; and History of Freethinking and Atheism.

Today, RS is an institutionalised scholarly discipline that has become an integral part of the Russian higher education structure. It is represented by a number of research centers, professional associations, and specialised periodicals. At the same time, the Russian RS community is highly fragmented and poorly integrated

into the global scholarly community. The origins of RS in Russia is disputed by researchers; some trace the tradition to scientific atheism, while others adopt a critical stance towards the Soviet legacy, citing its high susceptibility to ideological bias and the lack of a developed methodological basis. Apart from the history of RS, the meta-theoretical discourse also focuses on at least three contiguous areas, namely, (1) the issue of demarcation from other disciplines, primarily Theology and Philosophy, (2) the issues of the subject matter of RS, as well as the number and interrelations of the sub-disciplines, and (3) the question of a specificity of the RS methodology (Karpov & Malevich, 2015).

Besides the introduction of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Religious Studies, 39 higher educational institutions also offer bachelor's and master's degrees in Theology. Some of them are departments at state universities while others are sponsored by religious institutions (mostly by the ROC). Theology as an optional discipline is taught in 51 higher educational institutions. In 2015, issuing of the academic degrees (Candidate and Doctor of Science) in Theological Studies by state educational and research institutions was approved by the state authorities upon the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church and strong public intervention by Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill. Theology was legalised by the Ministry of Education not as a branch of history or philosophy, but as a specific discipline. Olga Vasil'eva, the Head of the Ministry, stressed that there was a need to "make every effort to prepare specialists" in the theological field (Rozanskij, 2017). Many secular academics and RS teachers estimate the implementation of Theology (which in reality is the Russian Orthodox one) as an attempt to replace methodologically neutral RS with a confessional subject. They see the reform as the desire of the ROC to indoctrinate and ideologically mould the country. On the contrary, the ROC representatives refer to theology as "a church science" and consider "spiritual experience" as a precondition for the study of theology.

Religious Education in the State School Curriculum

The implementation of Religious Education in state school curriculum has passed several stages. In 1992, a new Law on Education was passed claiming that "the activity of religious movements and organisations (unions) in state schools is prohibited", thus, strengthening the secular character of education. At the same time, there was a great deal of societal interest in religion and considerable interest by different religious communities, especially the ROC, which wanted to be involved in state schools. Nevertheless, setting the agenda on the curriculum of Religious Education was not an easy task for a long time, and the ROC's calls for the introduction of a compulsory Religion Education (RE) class were not heard on the federal level. Few regions introduced compulsory classes on Orthodox Christianity in state schools in 2006; in some other regions, it was introduced as an optional subject. This gave rise to considerable protest by religious minority groups, atheists and intellectuals complaining about the "clericalization of education" (Köllner, 2016).

Eventually in 2012, a one-year course called “Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” (FRCSE) was introduced in state schools as a compulsory subject. Schoolchildren and their parents have to select one of six modules – Fundamentals of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Orthodox Christianity, World Religious Cultures, or Secular Ethics, – that the learners would study in their fourth and fifth years of school (10–11 year olds). The purpose of FRCSE, as stated in official documents, was to understand the significance of moral norms and values and to behave in accordance with these principles; to strive for moral perfection and spiritual development; to develop primary knowledge about traditional religions of the Russian population (Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism), its roles in culture, history and the contemporary world as well as in the formation of the Russian state and Russian secular ethics and with regard to the questions of moral choice, to act according to one’s conscience (POOP, 2015). According to 2016–17 statistics, Foundations of Secular Ethics was chosen by 40.5% of students; Orthodox Culture 38.5%; Foundations of the World Religious Cultures 16.5%; Islam 4%; and Buddhism and Judaism less than 1% (ORKSE, 2016–17).

The course remains a rather controversial issue in public perception. On the one hand, Russian officials explain that it would help children to develop their ethnic identity, moral sense and tolerance. Sceptics, on the other hand, point out that the choice of subjects is incompatible with tolerance from the beginning, particularly since the study of Christianity includes only one branch, namely, Russian Orthodoxy; as well as the content of “secular ethics” remains obscure. In general, the introduction of FRCSE was a compromise between the state and the ROC. The state wanted to introduce a non-confessional RE course for all students without dividing them into “groups of interest”, but such a course was rejected by the ROC authorities since they surmised that it might educate children into moral relativism and indifference. However, confessional RE provided and funded by the state is against the Law and the Constitution. Therefore, the state and the ROC reached the compromise that RE, that is, FRCSE, consists of six optional modules (Blinkova & Vermeer, 2016).

The FRCSE should also be seen not only as a source of RE, but in the broader sense as a part of the moral upbringing of citizens through the system of public education, which remains the subject of special concern for the state. Substantial evidence of the continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet concepts of moral upbringing can be found in the document titled *Koncepcija dukhovno-nravstvennogo razvitiija i vospitanija lichnosti grazdanina Rossii* (Conception of the Spiritual-Moral Upbringing and Education of the Personality of the Russian Citizen), adopted by the Russian Ministry of Education as a key standard for public schools (Daniljuk et al., 2009). The document negatively characterises the 1990s as a period of damage toward the spiritual unity of the nation, the appraisal of the type of individual alien to national traditions and values, and uncritically copying the Western style of life. This document regarded religion as the main agent of the spiritual-moral upbringing in Russia prior to the October Revolution of 1917. In Soviet times, the state eliminated the church’s influence over public and private life, and pretended to be a “new ecumenical church”, reducing the meaning of life to the belief in communism (Daniljuk et al.,

2009). At the same time, the Soviet state created a supreme pedagogical ideal – the upbringing of “all-round personality” – which maintained its significance in post-Soviet times as well (Zwahlen, 2015). The document formulated the overall aim of the moral education as the formation of morality through personal recognition of behaviour based on the socially accepted notion of good and evil, exercising of the moral self-control, and accepting national moral values derived from the multinational people of Russia, civil society, labour, art, science, religion, nature, and humankind. The basic national moral values included patriotism, social solidarity, justice, dignity, freedom of conscience, loyalty to family, care of elderly and youth, creativity, tolerance, peace, social progress, respect to traditional Russian religions, scientific knowledge, art and literature, ecology, diversity of cultures and nations, and so on (Daniljuk et al., 2009).

Conclusion

After the breakdown of the Soviet system and collapse of socialist ideals, education, which under socialism was highly respected and intended for the creation of the “new socialist human being”, had lost most of its previous prestige. The fall of the Soviet Union, including its socialist ideals and educational prerogatives, led to uncertainty and confusion in the educational sector. The formerly coherent curriculum gave way to a plethora of different and sometimes conflicting approaches. Today, however, Religious Education is becoming increasingly important, with its widespread introduction in state schools and new efforts to re-ideologise it by drawing on so-called traditional religions in Russia, namely, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Religious Education in state schools has the potential to reinforce the importance of education in general and to bring back the prominent position, which it had under socialism (Ładykowska, 2016). By introducing FRCSE in public schools and Theology in higher education institutions, the Russian Federation has asserted the state’s vested interest in ensuring the moral and spiritual development of its citizens. The paradox though is that, at the official level, the state declares its devotion to the freedom of conscience as a fundamental principle of human rights.

References

Blinkova, A., & Vermeer, P. (2016). Religious Education in Russia: A Comparative and Critical Analysis. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40(2), 194–206. DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2016.1190687](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2016.1190687)

Clay, E. (2015). Multiculturalism and Religious Education in the Russian Federation: The Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics. *State, Religion and Church*, 2(1), 44–74.

Daniljuk, A., Kondakov, A., & Tishkov V. (Eds.). (2009). *Koncepcija dukhovno-nravstvennogo razvitija i vospitanija lichnosti grazdanina Rossii* [The Concept of Spiritual-Moral Upbringing and Education of Russian Citizen’s Personality]. Moscow: Prosveschenie.

Ładykowska, A. (2012). The Role of Religious Higher Education in the Training of Teachers of Russian “Orthodox Culture”. *European Journal of Education*, 47(1), 92–103.

Ładykowska, A. (2016). *Orthodox Atheists: Religion, Morality, and Education in Postsocialist Russia*. (PhD thesis). Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.

Karpov, K., & Malevich, T. (2015). Philosophy of Religion and Religious Studies in Modern-Day Russia. *Studies in East European Thought*, 66(3–4), 227–244. DOI: [10.1007/s11212-014-9211-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-014-9211-4)

Köllner, T. (2016). Patriotism, Orthodox Religion and Education: Empirical Findings from Contemporary Russia. *Religion, State and Society*, 44(4), 366–386. DOI: [10.1080/09637494.2016.1246852](https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2016.1246852)

POOP. (2015). *Primernaya osnovnaya obrazovatel'naya programma nachalnogo obshhego obrazovaniya* [Suggested Basic Curriculum of Primary General Education]. Moscow: Ministry of Education and Science.

ORKSE. (2016–17). Retrieved from <http://orkce.apkpro.ru/doc/Vybor%20modulia%20ORKSE%20v%202017-2018%20gg.pdf>

Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe. (2017, May 10). *Religion and Public Life*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

Rozanskij, V. (2017, June 15). Theology Returns to Russian Universities. *AsiaNews.it*. Retrieved from <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Theology-returns-to-Russian-universities-41022.html>

Zwahlen, R. (2015). The Lack of Moral Autonomy in the Russian Concept of Personality: A Case of Continuity across the Pre-Revolutionary, Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods? *State, Religion and Church*, 2(1), 19–43.