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Humanitarian Religious Education: A Concept for Russian Schools

Fedor Kozyrev stellt die fortgeschrittene Diskussion um den Religionsunterricht in russischen Schulen differenziert dar – in einer Weise, die Grundprobleme sichtbar macht für alle Regionen, in denen religiöse Erziehung neu als Teil des schulischen Auftrags eingeführt werden soll.

Die Gegensätze einer säkular-laizistischen Ablehnung von Religionsunterricht als Teil der Schule und einer traditionell-konfessorischen Auffassung, die in vielen Diskussionen immer noch aufbrechen, lassen sich überbrücken durch das Konzept eines „humanitären Religionsunterrichts“: In ihm wird möglichst authentisch informiert und nicht indoktriniert. Aber die religiösen Traditionen sollen doch auch als Sinnangebot und möglicher Weg einer Lebensorientierung und –hilfe in den Blick kommen und damit zur Bildung der Persönlichkeit der Schülerinnen und Schüler beitragen.

Das Defizit bleibt vorerst die noch weithin fehlende Infrastruktur mit akzeptierten Lehrplänen und entsprechend ausgebildeten Lehrerinnen und Lehrern. Daran ist konsequent zu arbeiten.

Three years ago, I finished my presentation here by saying that the question of establishing religious education in state schools in new democratic Russia was still open. Today, I may begin by saying the same. But it does not mean that nothing has happened between then and now. Situation is not static but highly dynamic. Among last year's events of principal importance was a recklessly bold step on the part of the Ministry of Education. They tried to include "The Basics of Christian Orthodox Culture" in curricula for general education schools. However loud protests from part of our society, did not allow Ministry to realise its plans so they led to no practical result. To illustrate how high was and still is the temperature of public debates concerning this project I just mention that two members of a human right organisation (Ponomarev and Ichlov) made an attempt to initiate criminal investigation against the author of the schoolbook "The Basics of Christian Orthodox Culture" A. Borodina. They accused her of anti-Semitism. Then the chief of another organisation – a Public Committee for Human Rights (Kvitkovskaya) appealed to authorities to take actions against these two gentlemen and to arrest them immediately otherwise the international relationships in our country can be destabilised. About ten court sessions already took place in Moscow concerning this matters.

In the end of the last year discussions about teaching religion at school occupied first pages of our newspapers and most popular talk shows on TV. For example one of the most popular of St. Petersburg newspapers "Chas pick" published a short appeal to

public opinion signed by 8 members of Russian Academy of Science. A little quotation from it: "Collaboration of school and Church ... threaten to lead our country to full cultural degradation and collapse of all infrastructure of science and education". One can think that there is something odd in the situation when learning the basics of the religion which definitely shaped cultural identity of the nation and formed its state can lead to cultural collapse. But these are our realities and they have certain historical and political reasons.

Besides public polemics endless professional debates and discussions among pedagogues, scientists and state officials take place. Regrettably the participants of these annually recurring sessions have equally recurring *deja-vu* spells. The reason is that the scenarios of these debates are all about the same. They begin with the statements to the effect that the system of school education is handicapped in the absence of religious subjects in curricula. Then somebody reminds that we live in a democratic country where the principle of the separation of religion from state is the law and that teaching religion in school is unconstitutional. This is followed by a common agreement that such teaching is permissible if it remains neutral, purely informative and based on science. The participants then go home happy only to meet again in a short while for a replay. Nothing happens because this kind of decision making decides nothing and satisfy nobody.

To get out of this vicious circle we should admit that these debates are not at all about the admissibility of information about religion in school. It is about the admissibility of religion in the forming of a set of values in secular schools and about whether or not confessional ethics and world views are acceptable in the educational process; whether or not the principle of the freedom of conscience allows educators rely upon religious ideals. These are the questions and there is no unity in Russia's society as concerns answers to them. Instead of a compromise, extreme views directly opposing each other remain dominating.

While I and my colleagues do not share the view according to which the Orthodox are acceptable as components of the educational processes of the world of values in teaching of religion in ae of the separation Christian system of values must become the basis of moral education in school as it was before the revolution we are definitely all for the inclusion of religious components in school curricula – yet on one rather important condition. *Religious education must be based on common pedagogical principles.*

What does this mean? First of all, we believe that some principles should be developed defining what religious education in state school *must not be like*. Looking toward overcoming the vestiges of totalitarianism and state-sponsored atheism in education and noting the increasing tendency toward the ideologisation and politicisation of religion, we insist that some forms of RE must be treated as inadmissible in state school system. They are

- the use of the religious giftedness of a child in the interests of politics, ideology or nationalism and the subordinating religious education to interests not directly connected with the common pedagogical objective,

- school education in the form of indoctrination
- intrusion into the private lives and the personal beliefs of students and psychologically pressuring them while abusing their religious feelings;
- attributing to religious (or spiritual and moral) education in school the function of interdisciplinary, ideological or spiritual control, school censorship of a kind, with the right of correcting, as based on non-professional criteria, the teaching of other subjects.

While we are trying to achieve an unity of opinions as to what religious education *must not be like*, we admit pluralism and the existence of fundamental differences as concerns *what it should be like*. I represent the approach developed by our Centre Of Religious Pedagogy in cooperation with the Russian Christian Institute for Humanities (RCHGI). We call it the concept of *humanitarian religious education*. This name emphasises two things: 1. the idea that religion as a school subject is a part of humanities and 2. that humanism must be given priority in the system of the values of modern school. There is something in common between the two meanings. It is belief in the value and academic productiveness of individual perception and creativity.

The central idea of this concept is very simple, while, at the same time, it is very unusual for our society. Essentially, it means that religious education in school becomes equal among the other components of educational process, playing the same role as the other subjects and submitted to the common pedagogical principles as formulated in the Russian National law “On Education”. These principles are the humanistic character of education, the priority of common human values, the life and health of the people, the free development of a person, the instilling of civic consciousness, freedom and pluralism in education, etc. (Article 2 of the law).

One example may help us to catch the idea. If we ask in geography or history classes, for example, what country Paris is situated in or when did the Waterloo battle take place - it is possible to expect only two types of answers: correct and incorrect. From a pedagogical point of view the dialogue between teacher and pupil on this occasion scarcely would encourage a teacher to revise his position when the mismatch of opinions occurs. But humanities deal with moral and aesthetic evaluation, associations and insights, producing general visions, studying personal impressions, religious experience, etc. None of these fall neatly into two categories. They can be poor and rich, mature and unripe, sound and unhealthy, credible and improbable, but all of these qualities are comparative. It means that the dialogue between teacher and pupil in this case is essentially open, allowing the student to disagree with a teacher and still not be wrong. And it is a fundamental characteristic to distinguish humanities from positive science as well as our approach to RE from catechetical one or from religious instruction.

Professor John Hull counts the development of the conceptions about the nature and purpose of religious education in school among the four factors determining the dominating approach to the study of religion within the system of state schools. When

looking from Russia, the appropriateness of this view becomes very obvious. In our country, despite the fact that our domestic pedagogy is famous for being represented by a whole gallery of outstanding theoreticians and because of the obvious historical circumstances, the organisation of religious education in secular schools has so far remained totally undeveloped. This absence of academic tradition and the culture of teaching is now becoming the most serious detrimental factor as concerns the development of theory and methods. For instance, pedagogues still lack mutual understanding as to the very term “religious education”. Usually the term is perceived as a synonym for “learning religion” or “Christian nurture” and this confusion puts a substantial obstacle in the way of developing non-confessional educational models. Sometimes definitions borrowed from Soviet reference literature are found in both academic works and legislative acts where religious education is defined as “the preparation of ministers of religion”. Very obviously, while using such definitions, it is very easy to set forth arguments against admitting religious education to school. Because of this, making a definition of the difference between secular and confessional religious education becomes very urgent.

Another unresolved urgent task still remains the division of jurisdictions, as concerns religious education, between the state educational agencies and religious associations. Our approach is nonconfessional. That means first of all that the development of the philosophy, theory, and methods of non-confessional religious education on which practical work in school must be based, the creation of domestic religious pedagogy itself, are the most important objective of Russia's educational system. It means also that the teachers dealing with religion at schools are proposed to be trained not in Theological Academies, but at the pedagogical departments of State Universities. As concerns jurisdictions, our concept is based on the existing, also acknowledged in the federal Law “On Education”, high degree of autonomy granted to schools, as concerns selecting, hiring and assigning tasks to pedagogues (item 32.2 g). Due to a number of reasons, which have been formed by our history, we believe that, at this time, placing religious education in the direct jurisdiction of religious associations would be incorrect.

That is about principles of organisation. Now about the content of teaching. The methods of teaching religion in school depend much upon the purpose. As concerns the setting of goals, our concept rests on the *principle of enculturation* in its wider sense as the assimilation of the students to the cultural and historical setting they have to live in. Actually, this task of enculturation is formulated in the Article 14 of the Law “On Education“. The law says that “the content of education must assure ... the integration of an individual into the system of the world and national cultures“. When understood in this wider sense, the enculturation of the growing generation pursues the reproduction of the national culture, identity and traditions on the one hand as well as the integration of Russia into the world's cultural and economic setting, participating in world's development on the global scale, on the other.

The principle of enculturation does not mean focusing on the *cultural aspect* of religion, that is, religious art and everything else lying on the periphery of the phenomenon of religion. We believe that the “depth of immersion” into the subject should not be limited.

And especially teachers must not be prohibited from touching, during their classes, upon vital religious problems having to do with the “ultimate questions of being” or avoid the existentialistic immersion of students in the world of religious experiences. Of course, such knowledge may become very psychologically effective and change a student’s outlook irreversibly. Yet the same may happen during the lessons of literature or history. Importantly, such influences must be produced by the content itself and not by the pressure of the teacher’s will. The influence must be spiritual and never administrative.

As enculturation continues, religion is supposed to open to students a new source of inspiration, inner growth and understanding, help them to find correct orientations as concerns complicated ethical matters, find their true identities, and make their feelings noble. Their partiality to the world of religion must give them everything they find in fine arts and the creative heritage of humanity, without forcing them to change their outlooks or ways of life immediately or accept views, which, while being traditional for some or other religious community, are not an organic part of the students’ living environment, be it in their families or among themselves.

Such approach to teaching religion, focused on enculturation, has a large number of advantages as compared with that based on either the moral and legal aspects of teaching or a scientific analysis. First of all Russia is the multi-confessional and poly-ethnic country and this makes it not easy to develop unified school curricula on a federal level. Many educators fairly argue that bringing confessional education in Russian state schools would inevitably lead to artificial separation of the young on a confessional ground. Then there is a problem of so to say proportion of different religions in the curricula. The principle of enculturation allows remove this problem from the sensitive sphere of inter-confessional relationships and ethical and legal matters connected with them and use cultural criteria instead, the same as for other humanities. Certainly, religious education, just like other humanities (language, history) is to be nationally oriented, that is to pay more attention to religions, which are traditional for the country. In Russia this is Christian Orthodoxy. However, if a certain school makes an emphasis on the study of, for instance, West European culture, it is only natural if it pays more attention to the study of Catholicism and Protestantism, regardless of how many students there belong to these confessional traditions. Similar corrections must be made, considering the demographic factor, in the areas where non-Orthodox population is prevalent.

Then again, In Russia, there is a wide gap between the secular and the spiritual traditions. This factor much contributed to the dramatic development of the country after Peter the Great. It was great German philosopher Leybnitz who was the father of

Russian science... Theologians and scientists always lived in different houses in a literal and metaphysical sense: religion and culture belonged to different sectors of social life. Humanitarian religious upbringing, in which religious culture and religious ways are viewed not as a preferable alternative to the secular way of life but are considered from the standpoint of the participation of the given religion in the forming of the historical types of spirituality and the modern cultural environment is expected to help to eliminate this gap. In a sense, we may say that this approach contributes to the enculturation of not just students but of the whole religious life of Russia.

Further, to a considerable degree, the wariness of the Russian society against religious education is due to the negative experiences of totalitarianism. Many parents are afraid that a new form of ideological control may enter schools under the guise of religious education and their children, once again, will be roughly taught what is allowed and what is not. The consistency of humanitarian approach and the fundamental view of religious education as an organic and equal component of humanitarian education allows alleviating these apprehensions.

Finally, the most fundamental and not theoretical but, this time, factual advantage of the proposed approach is the fact that a wide-scale consensus is now forming in the society around the idea of the acculturating teaching of religion in state schools. The most active opponents of the admission of the basics of Christian Orthodox spirituality into school curricular, most often representing artistic and scientific intelligentsia, admit the need for overcoming the deepest ignorance and lack of culture among school children as concerns religious life. The most significant event that occurred “on the other side of the barricade” was the abandoning by the Moscow Patriarchy of their plans to restore the teaching of God’s Law in schools and, instead, the new emphasis they make on developing a program of the study of Christian Orthodox culture. This is to say that the idea of acculturating teaching is the only thing all the opponents now have in common.

I would like to draw attention again once to the document issued by the Ministry of Education that created stormy and so different reactions in our society. It is entitled “The Possible Content of the Study of Christian Orthodox Culture”. There have been many justified critiques about it. I would say that it consists of a quite adequate and attractive cover and a bad staff within it. But the cover might be concerned at the same time as a basement of the approach. And from this perspective and regardless of how much some of the further statements of the document agree with its initially proclaimed principles, we consider the appearance of it an important step on the way to the forming of non-confessional religious pedagogy in Russia.

Here are several quotations from the document.

- the purpose of the programme is “shaping students’ outlook in accordance with the modern system of knowledge” (Article 5);
- it is based on the principles of freedom and pluralism and “excludes the forcible unification of the aspects of education, while promoting creativity in teachers and development of students’ identity”;

- it affirms “the autonomy of schools as concerns developing and implementing educational programmes” (Article 6);
- it also affirms the secular and humanistic nature of education, which, as concerns this subject, is guaranteed by, for instance, “the acculturating and free of indoctrination manner of the teaching and the corresponding methods of the study of Christian Orthodox culture” (Article 8).
- it makes clear that “the teaching of Christian Orthodox culture in state and municipal schools is not accompanied by any religious rituals, does not require that students or their parents identify in whatever way with the Christian Orthodox religion, does not impede their free search for identity as followers of any systems of views or religious denominations, does not require their participation in any religious services and does not pursue, as any of its objectives, attracting students or their parents into any religious organisation” (Article 8).

The principal inadequacy of the project is that the study of the basics of the other religious confessions’ histories and cultures is included into the subject and so they are considered from the traditional Orthodox instead of a neutral or authentic viewpoint. According to the principle of enculturation, the course of World Religious Culture should be taught in parallel with Christian Orthodox Culture. But this kind of inadequacies can be corrected in a course of development and what is more important is that today we have even more hope to find a common ground for fruitful cooperation of state authorities, pedagogues, scientists and theologians in the introducing religion in Russian schools.

