

Teaching Religion in Ulyanovsk's Public Schools

By Sergei Gogin, Ulyanovsk

Abstract

Russian leaders need a way to bond the various peoples and groups of their country together. To solve this problem, they have turned to the idea of teaching religion and ethics in schools. However, each region and school is implementing this directive in a different way. The question of how best to instill spirituality and morality—thereby unifying the people living in the Russian Federation—is being hotly debated.

Uniting a Country of Diverse Peoples

By unleashing political and economic pluralism, Gorbachev's Perestroika released the country from the ideological strictures which once bound the Soviet Union together. Shaken by the 1991 coup, the various peoples in the country quickly separated themselves into their own national homes and traditional cultures. The new, post-Soviet Russia did not have adequate ideological slogans (beyond the appeal to "Enrich yourself!") capable of consolidating the nation.

The consequence of economic reforms in the absence of established civil society institutions was social-economic polarization. People from various social layers, residing in one country, actually live in different Russias which do not intersect with each other and it is difficult to describe Russian citizens as a united people. There are several of these Russias, which have almost nothing in common except for their language.

In order to maintain control of Russia, its leaders have introduced a series of manipulable symbols into the social consciousness, such as "managed democracy," "state interests," "the vertical of power," "stability," etc.¹ The effort to define a national idea showed that these concepts either had no real basis in society or quickly went out of style. Of all the various slogans, the only one that currently ties together the collective subconscious is: "At least there is no war." But the recent experience of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa shows that authoritarian stability is deceptive and fragile. The situation at home is also alarming: the unending conflict in the North Caucasus, terrorist acts, skin-heads, the murder of emigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, military hazing, corruption, and "werewolves in epaulets [policemen seeking bribes]."

Against this background, religious leaders raised their voice. We must go into the schools, they said, because the only thing that will save us is spiritual and moral education among the new generation. Secular political leaders, who now are regularly visible at holiday services, quickly grasped at this straw. "The rela-

tionship between the state and religious organization in the sphere of education and up-bringing is extremely important," President Medvedev noted. They affect the most significant questions of forming one's world view, the system of values of any person, and, of course, in the most serious way influence the shaping of an individual citizen of the Russian Federation's personality.² The authorities spoke of their citizens' world view and a general system of values and, apparently, consciously gave the national idea religious coloring.

In August 2009, the president issued a directive about introducing spiritual-moral content into schools. On October 29, 2010, the Russian government confirmed a plan for pilot testing a course on "The Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics." The explanation issued along with the course noted that its goal is to "inspire in young people an understanding of moral behavior based on knowledge and respect for the cultures and religious traditions of the multinational peoples of Russia and a dialogue with representatives of other cultures and world views."

An Experiment in Religious Education

The three-year experiment in teaching the comprehensive course, "The Basics of Religious Culture and Secular Ethics" began in April 2010 in the fourth and fifth courses of Russia's middle schools. At the end of the three years, a decision will be taken whether to introduce the course into the federal curriculum. The course has six modules, examining the fundamentals of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, world religious cultures, and secular ethics. Typically, the classes are taught by history, literature, and art teachers. By the beginning of 2011, 240,000 Russian school children in 21 regions were involved. The parents and their students decide which of the six modules they will pursue. These choices are influenced by objective factors, such as the religion of a given region, and subjective factors, such as the level of activity among local religious organizations, the personal convictions of bureaucrats, and

1 Georgij Satarov. «Nedovarennaya lapsha na razvesistykh ushakh. Manipulyatsii-2». «Ezhednevnyi zhurnal», 19 January 2011 <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=10742>

2 Remarks by President Dmitri Medvedev during a meeting with representatives of Russia's leading faiths at Barvikha, Moscow region, 21 July 2009, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/4864>

the nature of the relations between the local authorities and religious leaders.

The authorities did not introduce this idea out of the blue: it also reflected some requests from below. Discussions about studying Orthodox Christian culture in Russia's schools began in the beginnings of the 2000s, if not earlier. They were led by enthusiasts, such as Russian language and literature teacher at Ulyanovsk Gymnasium no. 33 Irina Petrishcheva. For ten years she sought to introduce such classes for second graders. She said that she taught the kids the basics of the Bible in line with traditional Orthodox Church teachings.

Although Ulyanovsk was not among the regions where the experiment was conducted, Governor Sergei Morozov independently introduced the courses into the region's schools. Now 10,000 students in the vast majority of the region's schools study these topics. This is Morozov's management style: to track federal tendencies and introduce in advance what the federal leaders consider among the top priorities at the moment. Today's federal tendency is to turn the state toward the church. In his January 2011 Christmas greeting, the governor spoke of a "sacral vertical" as a moral buckle binding the people, discussed the concept of "spiritual security," described the church as an engine of modernization, and thanked the local church for adopting a "state-centered approach to the problem of up-bringing."

Liberal analysts speak about the clericalization of the state and the statization of the church as important processes that are now combining in Russia. Church representatives reject any clericalization of secular life, declaring that they come only when they are called. "The state is searching," according to Archpriest Dmitry Savelev from the Vladimir Church in Ulyanovsk. "Lacking ideological and spiritual supports, it is seeking a basis for the unity of the people and grabs at all possibilities. They remembered that Orthodoxy is a state-forming church and now the president and local authorities are appealing to the Russian Orthodox Church in a more positive manner. This is correct. They suppressed us for decades and now the state is partially trying to apologize for what has been destroyed and compensate for it."

It is clear that the new course is contradictory and causes confusion: Is it primarily focused on education or is it aimed at providing a moral upbringing? The majority of the Ulyanovsk teachers who agreed to be interviewed, regardless of their religious convictions, believe that the course is moral and even "rehabilitational."

Choosing a Topic of Study

The contradictions in the course also cause confusion among the parents who must choose which of the six topics their children will study. The preferences vary from

region to region. In Ulyanovsk, the parents are almost evenly divided between "The Fundamentals of Christian Orthodoxy," "Secular Ethics," and "World Religions," with a small preference for ethics. The choice depends on what the parents expect the result of the course to be. Those who support a dialogue of cultures in order to promote agreement chose to study world religions; those who want a moral upbringing and the study of traditional religion, choose Orthodoxy or a different religion; those who feel that the children's primary goal in school is to study pick ethics. Parents who fear that the teachers will try to convince the children of their personal beliefs also choose ethics.

If you recognize that spirituality is an attribute exclusively of religious knowledge, as priests and church-oriented pedagogues believe, and morality is the product of secular learning, then everything becomes complicated. In this case fourth graders and their parents have to decide one of the basic questions of philosophy: between spirituality and morality. Thus a focus on world religions is often the best choice for people interested in pure knowledge. It is possible to make secular ethics a part of a moral upbringing, but not the history of world religions, according to Sociologist Natalya Zakharova.

Both church and secular authorities agree on the need to incorporate spiritual-moral education in the humanitarian topics of the school program. Vasilii Dronov, a teacher and religious studies expert and a member of the missionary department of the Simbirsk and Melekes Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, is convinced that the best way to teach Orthodox culture is through a correct understanding of Russian history and literature. Margarita Lukyanova, head of the department of pedagogy and psychology at the Ulyanovsk Institute for Continuing Education, notes that questions of ethics and religion are part of courses on history, world art, literature and it is necessary only to know how to discuss them. "Instead what we have is dividing the questions into separate courses making additional work and complicated problems—the same holds for secular ethics—we are ripping these topics out of their organic context."

These arguments call into question the whole idea of the new courses. They make clear that the state, church, and teachers went down a simple path: It seems that it is easier to introduce into schools spiritual-moral upbringing as a separate topic, hand out textbooks and syllabi, force teachers to take week-long training sessions rather than it is to competently include the spiritual-moral problem in history and literature lessons, which would require of the teachers a qualitatively different level of skill and knowledge.

Picking the Right Age

Generally, teachers say that the best age to start education in religious cultures is in the younger grades and the earlier the better. By the fifth grade, the kids already have a “character.” By contrast, it is possible to talk to young people about God in simple words. In these cases, however, one gets the feeling that the teachers would prefer teaching kids at a younger age because they fear “adult” questions which they cannot answer because of insufficient religious and methodological preparation. According to the Ulyanovsk Pedagogical University’s Lyubov Guryleva, at a younger age, the teacher is still an unquestioned authority and teaching spiritual culture possibly will be more effective. On the other hand, this involves a certain amount of force, with the imposition of values, including religious ones, because the child at this age is defenseless before adults and not prepared to make a conscious choice.

Many specialists think that the age chosen for the courses was not the best possible. The children who have finished elementary school are adapting to a new situation at middle school where they have a different teacher for each subject. Second, at age 10–11 children are going through a crucial middle period and are becoming more

“critical.” Information from adults is often received with great doubt. Children can only understand the abstract concept of God when they are nearer the higher classes, when they are more self-aware. Shame appears in children when they are 8–9 years old, specifically when a child knows that he did something wrong and is afraid that someone else will find out about it. Only at the age of 15–16 do (a minority of) children start to develop a conscience, when they are embarrassed in front of themselves regardless of whether anyone else knows about it. At this moment, they start on the path of autonomous morality and this is the source of genuine religiosity. Smart Orthodox priests and psychologists understand that helping a person develop faith, one can only operate on what is already in the person and not on what might eventually be there.

When I visited the second grade at a private gymnasium, I conducted a series of short interviews with the children. They said things like: “We learned a lot of interesting things, what happened before our era and after.” “We learned about icons and churches, what happened long ago. I learned about God and how to read Orthodox Christian books.” Only one boy said that the topic was difficult, boring, and not interesting to him.

About the Author

Sergei Gogin is an independent journalist and a regional correspondent for Radio Liberty. He has published additional material on this topic at the following site: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2011/3/go12.html>.

ANALYSIS

Siberian Regionalism Today

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Abstract

With a long history reaching to the 19th century, neo-regionalist ideas continue to carry weight in Siberia. But the movement as a whole has had little success attracting support among the political and business elite or ambitious young people. Accordingly, neo-regionalist promoters are continuing to try to increase the popularity of their ideas.

Classical Regionalism

The precursor of contemporary separatist (or regionalist) ideas in Siberia and a model that the ideologists of Siberian independence often refer to is the social political movement of the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century that was known as Siberian Oblastnichestvo (Siberian Regionalism). Among the representatives of this movement were such prominent social activists as Nikolai Yadrintsev and Grigorii

Potanin. The basic ideas of the movement were laid out in Yadrintsev’s book *Siberia as a Colony* (1882), which became the “Bible of *Oblastnichestvo*.”

Yadrintsev’s ideas can be summarized as follows: under current conditions, Siberia is a colony. Necessary reforms, aimed at improving this situation, include, in particular, ending the use of Siberia as a place to send criminals from the European parts of Russia; developing a system of measures allowing the growth of Sibe-