PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

A Decade of Religious Education in Russian Schools

ADRIFT BETWEEN PLANS AND EXPERIENCES

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After nearly seven decades of official atheism, it took twenty years for Russia to introduce religious education in public schools. This decision was extremely controversial at the time and remains quite polarizing now. Since 2012, a mandatory course on world religions and secular ethics has become part of the fourth-grade curriculum in all Russian public schools. At the time, it was an extension of the worthwhile Toledo Principles[2] and offered a choice of education module based on personal beliefs. However, it has received criticism from parents, educators, and scholars for its deficiencies. For example, a particular contradiction is between its proclaimed aim to take into account the country's religious diversity resulting from its multi-ethnicity, and its implementation, which involves selecting a specific course theme and the dogma-based separation of young students. Patterns in course choice can be informative; for instance, it appears that the most secular-oriented "outlook" is in the Eastern part of the country. The program continues to have theoretical merit, but it has become fragmented, needs appraising, and should be removed or updated.

Toledo Take Root

In Russia, as in some Western countries, a public discussion on the necessity of religious education in schools arose in the 1990s. However, the contexts of those discussions were very different. While in European countries the crucial reason for introducing religion at schools was a call for diversity management linked with massive migration flows, in Russia it was an attempt to fill the supposed ideological vacuum caused by the collapse

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[2] The *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* was offered by the OSCE's Advisory Council in 2007 and based on two core principles: teaching should emphasize respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion or belief, and teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstanding and stereotypes.

of the Marxist-Leninist value system. In keeping with these objectives, the Toledo Principles, as the methodological basis for teaching religion in the West, pursue a goal of respect for human rights and reducing prejudice and stereotypes. In Russia, the course on "learning religious cultures" emphasizes essentialized national values such as patriotism, social solidarity, citizenship, family, labor, and traditional religions.

The first attempts to introduce "faith" in schools were made in the late 1990s by regional administrations. In that context, it was assumed that pupils would only study Orthodox culture. Courses on Orthodoxy—under different names—were incorporated into syllabi in fifteen regions, for instance: Basics and Values of Orthodoxy in Belgorod, Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture in Kursk, Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture and Ethics in Novosibirsk and Smolensk, and History of Orthodox Church in Voronezh and Rostov-on-Don.

From about 1990 to about 2010, the Russian Orthodox Church attempted to become a legitimate participant in the educational process, and diocesan subdivisions were enthusiastically involved in writing textbooks and conducting teacher training. A Coordination Council on Interaction between the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation and the Moscow Patriarchate was established in 1999. By this time, such councils had existed nationwide not only in each region of Russia but in every municipal unit if it has its own department of education.

One can assume that the Russian Orthodox Church has a vested interest in having a presence in schools in order to recruit young members. The number of people who consider themselves Orthodox Christians is increasing. According to the Levada Center, the number of believers has increased significantly in recent years—from 35 percent in 2014 to 53 percent in 2017, with only 13 percent saying that they did not believe in God in 2017. Yet, this does not mean that all of these people attend services or follow required, stricter, religious restrictions. According to a survey conducted by VTsIOM in 2019, out of 67 percent of Russians stating that they belong to the Orthodox Church, just 13 percent attend services at least once a month, and 70 percent do so only from time-to-time. Only 2 percent of respondents observe every fast, while 69 percent do not follow fasting restrictions. It goes without saying that the Church has an eye on such trends.

Introducing a New Subject

The practice of studying Russian Orthodoxy in school provoked heated discussions among politicians, educators, clergy, and parents. On the grounds of respecting the country's multinationalism, it was decided to introduce modules on other so-called "traditional religions" in Russia, such as Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, as well as secular courses, leading to the creation of multi-modular courses on the Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures and Fundamentals of Secular Ethics.

Until 2010 all courses on religious education were taught as parts of a regional component of the syllabus. But since 2010, Russia began shifting to a new federal educational standard where a course on World Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics became compulsory for all pupils. In 2012, an academic course called the Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics became mandatory in any school educational program. The idea was "to develop the abilities of elementary school children to communicate and to interact in multiethnic and multi-religious society on the basics of mutual respect and dialogue for the sake of social peace and cohesion."

The division into modules was aimed to provide in-depth learning of religious cultures. In this framework, pupils (or, their parents) can choose between one of six modules:

(1) Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture
(2) Fundamentals of Islamic Culture
(3) Fundamentals of Buddhist Culture
(4) Fundamentals of Jewish Culture
(5) Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures
(5) Secular Ethics

Presently, the course is given one class per week for students in the fourth grade by primary school teachers; no marks are given.

Parental Choice: What Are the Modules?

If one looks at the official statistics on the structure of module choice over the course of time, one notices that the secular modules, which include Secular Ethics and Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures, are more popular among pupils' parents than those related to religious cultures; secular subjects were chosen by more than a half of 4th graders—65 percent in 2012 and 57 percent in 2018, respectively. Secular Ethics is more than twice as popular as Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures. For example, during the 2017-18 academic year, about 41 percent of 4th graders studied ethics, and only about 17 percent studied religious cultures in general.

Although modules related to particular religious cultures have been less popular so far, they show an upward trend: the number of those who chose to study specific religious cultures has increased by 8 percent over the last six years. This trend can be explained mainly because of the rising popularity of the course Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture. In 2012 only one-third of the parents decided that their children would study Orthodox culture, but in 2018 the figure had risen to 40 percent. Meanwhile, the number of students who study Islamic culture remains stable: about 4 percent in 2012 and 2018.

The distribution of choices over the territory of Russia reveals interesting regional dynamics. For the 2017-18 academic year, the course on Islamic culture was chosen by

parents predominantly in North Caucasian federal district[3]—39 percent compared to 1 or .5 percent as a choice in other Russian regions. The course Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture was particularly strong in the Central and Southern federal districts, drawing 55 percent and 61 percent of the choices, respectively. In the Volga federal district, the proportion of 4th graders who studied Orthodox culture is also significant, at 41 percent, which is approximately equal to the number of those who preferred secular ethics (40 percent). If we relate these data to the percentage of schools, we find that in 53 percent of all Russia's schools in the Central, Volga, and Southern federal districts, the learning of Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture predominates.

But the study of Secular Ethics dominates in the Eastern part of the country, in the Ural, Siberian, and Far Eastern federal districts. In each of them, more than half of all 4th grade pupils chose to study Secular Ethics (2017-18 academic year). The Ural and Siberian regions seem to be the most secular-oriented part of the country: 79 percent of elementary school children in the Ural region and 75 percent in Siberia studied secular modules in the 2017-18 academic year.

The difference between territories can be partly explained by historical factors. Central federal district groups, for instance, Russia's "golden ring" of old towns/cities and the Southern federal district, are commonly associated with Cossacks and where Orthodoxy is a strong cultural marker regionwide. Yet, the choice of a module cannot be explained by ethnic factors because the regions where students and their parents select secular topics are also mostly populated by ethnic Russians.

Why Does It Not Work Properly?

In principle, the declared goal of the course Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics conforms to the Toledo Principles and seeks to promote a better understanding of the religious diversity of the contemporary world. Nevertheless, despite this claim, the implementation of the course prompted strong criticism from academics and analysts, who stress the dangers of confessional indoctrination and emphasize that this form of religious education is likely to be divisive.[4]

Russian researchers in the field of religious studies argue that under the guise of a neutral course that views religions as cultural entities, in fact, a kind of religious upbringing had been implemented in schools. They point to the contradiction between the course's proclaimed aim (a multicultural education) and its implementation (which entails learning a particular doctrine and separation of pupils on the basis of their religious

[3] Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Northern Ossetia, Chechnya, and Stavropol Territory.
[4] See, for example, articles (in Russian) at www.religion.ranepa.ru by Oanna Ozhiganova (2017) and Victor Shnirelman (2017).

beliefs). They also trace this problem to a basic concept of the course, which attempts to combine moral and patriotic upbringing with religious indoctrination.

Nevertheless, few academic experts and parents totally reject the course. They generally argue that the course needs to be better taught, with more interesting textbooks, and more competent teachers. Educators and school officials are aware of these issues. From the school's perspective, there are two main problems. Firstly, it is difficult to manage the schedule. Given that a great deal of schools in Russia work in double shifts, it is more convenient for school management if pupils select the same module (out of six). Secondly, not every teacher feels confident discussing world religions—at present, most who conduct the course are elementary/primary school teachers. To properly teach the courses, they need to upskill, but training programs have been insufficient.

Moreover, a standard training program consists of 72 academic hours, but only 12 hours are devoted to the content (four world religions and two secular modules).[5] That means that each religion can be discussed for only two academic hours, which is far from adequate. This is one of the important reasons why schools prefer to provide courses on Secular Ethics—because educators find teaching ethics issues easier. Conversely, many parents would prefer having their children study a survey course on world religions. Meanwhile, the confessional community (Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish clergy/representatives) promotes a module structure of the course but in an extended version in which all "Traditional religions"[6] (Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism) are successively studied from the 4th to 9th grade.

Conclusion

Theoretically, the course on Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics has a modular structure that welcomes a free choice in accordance with personal beliefs and values. In fact, this free choice is only "on paper" because none of the parties involved is interested in sectional diversity or free choice. For the educators, diversity is difficult to manage and requires learning extensive new material; it complicates their schedule, and they must pay substantial sums to purchase new textbooks (often a set for each pupil). Parents who are against the course do not want emphasis placed on the cultural differences between their children and their friends. The religious community looks for the non-competitive study of conventional Russian religious traditions (showcasing Orthodoxy) over several years while excluding discussions on secular ethics. Taken together, religious education in Russian schools today rests on a discrepancy between the alleged goals of the "fundamentals" course, which emphasizes multicultural education,

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[5] The other hours are devoted mostly to teaching general methods/methodology.

[6] "Traditional religions" is a term attributed to the religions mentioned in the preamble to the Russian Federation 1997 Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" where respect is expressed toward Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism as religions constituting an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia.

and its realization/implementation, which stems from practical constraints and "parochial" agendas.

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