Religious Education in Russian Schools: Plans, Pains, Practices

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ABSTRACT

Since 2012 the compulsory course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" has been taught in all public schools of Russia. The introduction of the course compelled Russian scholars to engage in comparative research on the development of normative framework and teaching practice in religious education. Despite the importance of global trends and international debates, it is crucial to observe the local dynamics and discover how particular conceptualizations of religion, education goals, principles and teaching practices affect religious education and its development. In our research, we focus on the case of religious education in Sverdlovsk region with the view to discover how successful are the plans which originated in the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church to gain entry to public schools, but were moderated by the resistance of educational and academic community. How effective are the practices? What unforeseen issues transpired in its implementation? Intending to highlight some major characteristics of the emerging model of religious education in Russian Federation we conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with the representatives of major groups involved in teaching (public authorities; established religious organizations; education officials; educators; parents whose children attend the course modules and, finally, academic community in Religious Studies) and on its basis we conclude that religious education at Russian schools today rests on a discrepancy between the alleged goals of the course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics", which emphasize multicultural education, and its implementation, which stems from practical constraints and local agendas.

Introduction

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, the compulsory course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" (FRCSE) has been taught to fourth-year students (aged 10–11) and includes six elective modules. Four modules represent religions "traditional"[1] for Russia such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism; the fifth module purports to provide an overview of world religions; and the sixth module should enlighten students about secular ethics. Parents (and schoolchildren) are supposed to choose which module to study. There is no exam or grades for this course. There is a variety of textbooks and teacher manuals, ranging from deeply confessional to "culturological" approaches in dealing with study materials (Blinkova & Vermeer, 2018/2019; Ozhiganova, 2017; Shnirelman, 2017).

The introduction of the course in Russia compelled Russian Religious Studies scholars to join in the international debate on the religious education in schools and to engage in comparative research on the development of normative framework and teaching practice in religious education. In 2017, the special issue "Religion and School in the 21st Century: The Experience of Russia and Europe" appeared in a leading national academic journal *Gosudarstvo, Religiia, Tser'kov' v Rossii i za Rubezhom* ("State, Religion, Church in Russia and Worldwide", No. 4(35), 2017), covering current debates and trends in the European context as well as analyzing the regional cases of Scandinavia, Tatarstan, Tambov, and Russian national textbooks for the course. In 2018, another special issue "The Politics and Pedagogy of Religion Education" appeared in the journal *Changing Societies & Personalities* (Vol. 2, No. 3, 2018[2]) offering a more diverse perspective with analyses of such cases as India, Zambia, South Africa, UK and Russia.

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[1] "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". In the preamble, the special role of Orthodox Christianity in the history of Russia, and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture, is recognized; the respect toward Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism as religions constituting an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia is expressed (On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, 1997).

[2] https://changing-sp.com/ojs/index.php/csp/issue/view/7

The concept of postsecularity underpins the discussions and analyses as it allows to account for the revitalization of religion in the public sphere and highlights the entanglements of secular and religious dimensions in political and cultural life of contemporary societies (Uzlaner, 2013; see also Uzlaner, 2019). In contrast, though, with some occasionally alarmist conclusions about the "return of religion", it is important to note that in regard to the introduction of religious education in public schools, the dynamics of postsecularity is far from straightforward, but rather, as Tim Jensen argues,

> there have been some changes to RE (Religious Education – *O. I., A. M.*) as a reflection of and response to the changes taking place in society and in the world at large as regards religion, but […] some of the responses and changes to RE seem to be changes and responses meant to counter, if not stop, the changes that have to do with religion, the role of religion in society at large and the meaning (or not) of religion for individuals" (Jensen, 2017a, p. 50).

Thus, the educationalist slogan of "religious literacy" can have quite a variety of meanings and serve different pragmatics in local contexts. In the next part, we offer an outline of approaches to religious education with the view to highlight the diversity of its possible conceptualizations.

Conceptualization of Religious Education

In contemporary Religious Studies, a typology has gained currency, which distinguishes between (1) "learning into religion" (mono-religious model), (2) "learning about religion" (multireligious model), and (3) "learning from religion" (interreligious model) (Jackson, 2014/2019). If a particular religious tradition is prevalent in a society and its teachings are regarded as the moral foundation of communal life, the educational system tends to foster certain confessional identity and leans towards "learning into religion". It would tolerate minority religions, but approach to other religions would be primarily critical. In contrast with mono-religious situation, secular societies with sizable religious minorities may encourage "learning about religion(s)" in a comparative and neutral way because it is assumed to be conducive to developing tolerant attitudes, communication skills and respect for diversity as well as shared civic identity for a pluralist society. Finally, a focus on personal development may lead to an educational preference for philosophical and moral resources which religious traditions can provide to students. Therefore, religions are approached as different sources of spiritual growth and one can draw from any of them looking for one's own truth in the interreligious dialogue by "learning from religion(s)". It is evident that each model is rooted in certain historical and social context and is based on specific normative arguments and teaching practices (Arweck & Jackson, 2014; Berglund et al., 2016; Jensen, 2017b; Shakhnovich, 2017; Hvithamar & Stepanova, 2011; Stepanova, 2011). Tim Jensen, on the other hand, develops this typology in greater detail with respect to the European context. Jensen identifies (1) confessional; (2) interreligious (intercultural or multicultural); (3) non-confessional religious education. Also, he points

out *Ethics, Ethics and Values, and Philosophy* as alternatives to confessional RE, and describes *Citizenship Education* as another possible response to contemporary social challenges, pluralism in particular (Jensen, 2017a). In what follows, we present our version of the typology of religious education (see also Menshikov & Iakimova, 2017).

In discussions of religious education at schools, it is crucial in each situation to disentangle what is understood by the notion of "religion"; what goals school education in general and religious education in particular are intended to serve; which form the teaching of religious education can take in specific national or local context; who are the major stakeholders that push forward religious education; and what overarching moral or philosophical principle justifies the introduction of religious education and guides the practice of teaching it.

In the discussions about religious education, we can discern at least four different meanings of what "religion" implies for different parties. Religion can be understood as (1) a religious doctrine ("credo" and dogmatics); (2) a religious worldview (philosophical foundations and moral orientations associated with a certain religion); (3) a religious way of life and cultural practices (ranging from dietary and clothing preferences to calendar); and (4) a historical-cultural artefact (cultural heritage, historical tradition). It is apparent that these possible meanings are not mutually exclusive and often overlap, but it is also clear that teaching religion will be different as a result of the implied understanding of "religion". In teaching, one can focus either on indoctrination and religious precepts, or on dialogue with moral and philosophical insights inherent in religion(s), or on "lived religion" and its today's relevance for orientation in the contemporary world, or on universal erudition and detached knowledge of religious mythologies, arts, theologies, customs, etc.

The educational goals can vary with respect to religious education from (1) outright catechization to (2) developing an attitude for dialogue in multicultural modern society, or, to (3) fostering national or civic identity and patriotism, or, finally, to (4) disseminating neutral research-based knowledge. It is again obvious that these goals are not mutually exclusive. They can actually be mutually supportive in different combinations. They all include both cognitive and moral elements, too. However, one can see that the dominant "loyalty" transmitted through education will be significantly different: there can be a focus on loyalty (1) to a religious community, (2) to a wider civil society, (3) to a nation-state, or (4) to a cosmopolitan "*République des Lettres*".

Here it should be highlighted that we do not presume to assert that each notion of religion or preference for certain learning outcomes exclusively belongs to a specific party or stakeholder such as (1) religious organizations, (2) state agencies, (3) NGOs or (4) academic and teaching community. Each faction always encompasses a variety of attitudes and views. For instance, many Orthodox Christians are wary of the prospect of the compulsory course at schools and fear it might repel children's genuine interest in religion. Many ethnonationalists, too, are less concerned with Christian message and are keener on promoting patriotism – too often understood as servility to the state, or even more specifically present incumbents, – and "traditional" identity and values. Moreover, the diversity of meanings is a resource rather than a problem because in polemics conceptual indeterminacy can be very valuable as it

allows to shift the ground and manipulate the opponents, and occasionally "troll" the discussants. Therefore, each party in religious education discussions can navigate between these meanings and appeal to different interpretations in different contexts while pursuing their strategic agenda. The variety of notions of religion, goals, forms and stakeholders of education, and justificatory principles are summarized in the following table. However, we would like to emphasize that it is a spectrum rather than a classification and various combinations might be possible. In the European context, on the other hand, the overarching tendency is a move from "educating into religion" towards "educating about religion" (Table 1).

Table 1. *Characteristics of different types of religious education*

| Criteria | Types of religious education | | | |
	Confessional	Life orientation	Civic education	Religious studies
Religion understood as	Religious doctrine	Religious world view	Specific way of life and cultural practice	Religion as a cultural-historical artefact
Goals of education	Catechization	Development of cognitive and communicative skills for the life in multicultural society ("aptitude for dialogue")	Fostering of civic identity and patriotism	Neutral research-based knowledge
Teaching	Confessionally trained instructors; separative education	Secular instructors; intercultural dialogue; compulsory integrative education	Secular instructors; national tradition and civic values; opt-out possibility	Secular university-trained instructors in Religious Studies; compulsory
Principle	(Mono) confessionalism	Inclusivism and individual autonomy	Human rights and/or civic virtues (depending on national context)	Secularism and pluralism (neutrality to and equality of religions); no confessional education in public schools
Actors	Religious communities and organizations	NGOs	State agencies	Academic and teaching community

(Left margin: Educating into religion; Right margin: Educating about religion)

Thus, despite the importance of global trends and international debates, it is crucial to observe the local dynamics and discover how particular conceptualizations of religion, education goals, principles and teaching practices affect religious education and its development. In our research, we focus on religious education in Sverdlovsk region with the view to discover how successful are the plans which originated in the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church to gain entry to public schools, but were

moderated by the resistance of educational and academic community. How effective are the practices? What unforeseen issues transpired in its implementation? Further, on this basis, we intend to highlight some major characteristics of the emerging model of religious education in Russian Federation.

Research Design: Sampling and Methods

For the empirical part of our research, we selected a case of religious education in Sverdlovsk region[3] and, in particular, Yekaterinburg. The city of Yekaterinburg has often been named the "third capital of Russia" since it ranks third in the size of its economy exceeded only by Moscow and St. Petersburg. Its estimated population is approximately 1,500,000 citizens. The city is one of the largest educational centers in the country with 164 educational institutions and about 173,000 students (secondary schools and universities taken together). Although it is generally assumed that the predominant religion is Christianity, mostly represented by adherents of the Russian Orthodox Church, the city also has a large community of Muslims. Other religions practiced in Yekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk region include Judaism, Buddhism, Old Believers, Armenian Apostolic Church, Roman Catholic Church, various Protestant denominations, and several NRM (New Religious Movements) groups.

Since the 1990s, the role of religion in the public life in Russia increased and the courses on religious education appeared in the schools of Sverdlovsk region (as in many other Russian schools) as a part of the regional component of the syllabus. These were mostly the courses on Orthodox culture and ethics because what was seen as Orthodox culture and morality were regarded "traditional" and essential for Russian identity. In 2010, Russia adopted a new Federal Educational Standard; in 2012, an academic course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" was officially introduced on the national level, and it was declared compulsory for all public schools. During the period of transition (2010–2012), several regions had been selected for this course to be introduced on a compulsory basis two years earlier than in all other Russian schools. Sverdlovsk region was in this experimental group.

In our case study of religious education in Yekaterinburg, we planned, firstly, to find out: (1) Is it possible to demonstrate distinctive preference of modules in certain regions of Russia? (2) Are there specific, regional trends in the selection of FRCSE modules? To answer these questions, we used the relevant data collected by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation[4] from 2012 to 2018

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[3] Sverdlovsk region is one of the largest and most developed in Russia. Its total area is about 195,000 sq. km and the population is approximately 4,300,000 inhabitants (84 percent are urban dwellers). Historically, the region has been ethnically and religiously diverse. About 90 percent of the people are ethnically Russian, although this would imply all kinds of Slavic origins (Ukrainians, Belarusians); Sverdlovsk region also includes substantial numbers of Tatars and Bashkirs. Since economic development has gained momentum the region attracts substantial inflows of labour immigrants from the former Soviet Central Asian republics such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The administrative center of Sverdlovsk region is Yekaterinburg. Geographically, the city is situated between Central Russia and Siberia, making it a transport hub between the Western and the Eastern parts of Russia.

[4] Since 2018, it has been divided into the Ministry of Education (*Prosveschenie*) and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

(Monitoring of the FRCSE course in RF). For the evaluation of this data we employed cross-tabulation analysis.

Secondly, we aimed to analyze religious education practice in public schools and conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with the representatives of major groups involved in teaching. We distinguished six groups of stakeholders depending on the role they played in the educational process: (1) public authorities and (2) established religious organizations (these two groups exist at the institutional macro-level); (3) education officials and (4) educators (meso-level); (5) parents whose children attend the course modules (micro-level); and, finally, (6) academic community in Religious and Cultural Studies (independent expertise, the expert-level).

The guide for expert interviews comprised the following sections of questions:

(1) The variety of ways religion enters the educational process. In this part, we gauged opinions in what forms religion's presence in contemporary schools is considered acceptable or not acceptable for religion to be present in contemporary school, for example, religion as a personal identity, a religious practice, a religious organization, a subject of study, etc.;

(2) The practice of teaching the FRCSE at school. Here, issues related to the educational process were explored, such as the procedure for choosing modules and instruction resources (course regulations and guidelines, teaching methodologies, teacher manuals, textbooks, teachers training, etc.);

(3) The evaluation of principles, objectives, strengths and problems of religious education in Russian public schools in general.
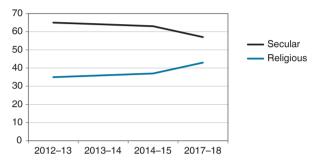
In 2018 (from June to December), we conducted twelve interviews with representatives of all groups (two experts from each group), all from Yekaterinburg. Our interlocutors were people from the Administration of the Governor of Sverdlovsk region; the Ministry of Education of Sverdlovsk region; teachers and parents from secondary schools; representatives of the Orthodox Metropolitan Diocese in Yekaterinburg; academics from the Ural Federal University specializing in Religious Studies.

"Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics": The Structure and Dynamics of Selection of Modules (within Russian Federation)

The analysis of the structure of module selection and its dynamics over the time provides us with some interesting findings. Firstly, the so-called "secular" modules, which include "Secular Ethics" and "Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures", are more popular among students (and parents) than those related to religious cultures. Graph 1 shows that "secular" subjects were chosen for more than a half of 4th graders – 65 percent in 2012 and 57 percent in 2018 respectively.

According to the data in Table 2, "Secular Ethics" is more than twice as preferable in schools as is the "Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures". For example, during the academic year of 2017–18, about 41 percent of 4th graders studied ethics and only about 17 percent chose world religious cultures in general.

Secondly, although modules related to particular religious cultures have been less popular, as we can see in Graph 1, they show an upward trend. The number of those who chose to study specific religious cultures has increased by 8 percent in the last six years. Moreover, the data in Table 3 specifies that it was the course "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture" that was favored. In 2012, only one third of the parents decided that their children should study Orthodox culture, but in 2018 almost half of them did so (about 40 percent).

Graph 1. *The dynamics of selection of modules (persent)*

Table 2. *The dynamics of students' module selection (2012–2018) in Russia (percent)*

Modules	Time intervals			
	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2017–18
Secular Ethics	44.8	45.8	44.6	40.6
World Religious Cultures	20.6	18.8	18.4	16.5
Orthodox Culture	30.4	31.2	32.9	38.5
Islamic Culture	3.8	–	3.6	3.9
Buddhist Culture	0.4	–	0.4	0.3
Judaic Culture	0.02	–	0.02	0.06

Table 3. *Distribution of module selection within federal districts in Russia in 2017–18 academic year (percent)*

Modules	Federal districts							
	Central	Volga	Far Eastern	Ural	North Western	Southern	North Caucasian	Siberian
Secular Ethics	33	40	51	56	48	30	23	55
World Religious Cultures	11	19	16	23	18	8	23	20
Orthodox Culture	55	41	32	20	34	61	15	23
Islamic Culture	.2	.8	.05	1	.07	1	39	.22
Buddhist Culture	.02	.002	.01	.002	.01	1	0	1
Judaic Culture	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.002	.01	.33

Note: Since the beginning of the new millennium, the country has been divided into eight federal districts: (1) Central Federal District; (2) Volga Federal District; (3) Southern Federal District; (4) North Caucasian Federal District; (5) Northwestern Federal District; (6) Ural Federal District; (7) Siberian Federal District; and (8) Far Eastern Federal District. In 2014, the ninth – Crimean Federal District – was added.

To place Sverdlovsk region in the national Russian context it is important to assess the distribution of data over the territory of Russia.

The distribution of data in Table 3 shows that studying "Orthodox Culture" prevails in Central and Southern Federal districts: 55 percent and 61 percent of choices respectively. In Volga Federal District, the number of 4th graders who studied "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture" is also significant: 41 percent, which is approximately equal to the number of those who preferred secular ethics (40 percent). If we relate this data with the percentage of schools (Table 4), we can notice that Central and Volga federal districts are those territories where almost a half of all schools in Russia are situated (44 percent in total). If we add the Southern Federal District with its 9 percent of schools, we have a territory that contains 53 percent of Russian schools and where the "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture" are chosen.

Table 4. Distribution of schools in the federal districts of Russia

#	Federal district	Number of schools	%
1	Central	8,909	21
2	Volga	9,775	23
3	Southern	3,632	9
4	North Caucasian	3,286	8
5	Northwestern	3,066	7
6	Ural	3,337	8
7	Siberian	7,227	17
8	Far Eastern	2,226	5
9	Crimean	626	2

The preference for the module "Secular Ethics", in its turn, is more characteristic of the Eastern part of Russia. Geographically, this cluster contains Ural, Siberian and Far Eastern Federal Districts. In each of these districts, more than a half of 4th grade students chose to study "Secular Ethics" in the school year 2017–18. It is interesting that the Urals and Siberia appeared to be the most secular oriented parts of the country: 79 percent of elementary school children in the Urals and 75 percent in Siberia studied secular modules in 2017–18 school year. One of our experts explained this as follows:

> In our case, the situation can be explained by the fact that historically, the region is a multinational territory (female, an education official in the Ministry of Education of Sverdlovsk region).

Although, as has been mentioned, this choice can hardly be explained by the reference to ethnic and religious diversity because the majority are ethnically Russian, similar to the European part where the number of students opting for the course "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture" increases.

To summarize, the statistical data reveal that preferences for one or the other module of the course FRCSE differ in administrative and geographical territories of Russia and do not solely depend on ethnic origins or assumed ethno-religious belonging, which is often invoked by religious leaders who are prone to claim, for

instance, that all Russians are Orthodox and constitute their flock by the very fact of being ethnically Russian.

Practices and Problems (the Case of Sverdlovsk Region)

In principle, the declared goals of the course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" conform with "Toledo Principles"[5] and seek to promote better understanding of religious diversity of the contemporary world. Nevertheless, despite the important idea underlying the introduction of the course, its implementation prompted strong criticism from the academic community, who highlighted the dangers of confessional indoctrination and emphasized the fact that this form of religious education is separative.

Our academic experts in the field of Religious Studies argue that

under the guise of a neutral course which views religions as cultural entities, in fact, a kind of religious upbringing has been implemented in schools (female, Research Fellow in Religious Studies).

Thus, the contradiction related to this course is between its proclaimed aim (which is multicultural education) and its implementation (which entails learning a particular doctrine and separation of students on the basis of their or rather their parents' religious beliefs). Academic experts see the reason for this in the

concept of the course per se, because it tries to combine moral and patriotic upbringing with religious indoctrination (female, Associate Professor at the Ural Federal University).

Nevertheless, both academic experts and parents do not blatantly reject the course or religious education in general. They all agree that the course just needs to be better prepared, textbooks must be more interesting, and teachers should be more competent.

In fact, educators and school officials are aware of these concerns. In their view, there are two main problems with this course. Firstly, it is difficult to manage in terms of schedule:

From the perspectives of making a schedule and managing the process of education in school, for school officials it is more convenient if students choose the same module out of six. Given that we have a great deal of schools which work double shifts, it goes without saying that this issue is very sensitive for a schedule (female, schoolteacher, engaged in teaching the course FRCSE).

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[5] The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (OSCE, 2007) is an influential document in debates on teaching religion in Europe.

Secondly, not all teachers feel confident to instruct on world religions from the perspective of Cultural and Religious Studies:

> There were no barriers for teachers of history or social science to get involved into teaching this course. Yet, the way schools work does not let them do this. If we move educators of secondary school to elementary school, that would entail poaching a part of teaching hours from teachers of elementary school, from their teaching load. So, they started sending teachers of elementary school to re-training programs. And then there was an outcry from people. God knows what happened. That is, when they were introduced to the content – that was it, they had their minds totally blown (female, educational official, the Institute of the Development of Education of Sverdlovsk Region).

Thus, at the moment, most teachers who teach this course are instructors of elementary school. To teach the course on "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" they need to improve their qualifications, but the existing program of upskilling is not enough. For example, a standard upskilling program consists of 72 academic hours, only 12 hours are devoted to the content, that is, to all four world religions and two secular modules:

> Thus, the main program was a program with 72 hours, where, generally speaking, for the content of the course per se – there were only two hours per each module, that is 6 by 2 – it is 12 hours. The rest of 60 hours: approximately 8 hours – for the new federal standard of education; approximately 8 hours – for the course regulations (recommendations, official documents, the Constitution and so on, that is everything, on the basis of which we teach "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics"). You see, there are already 16 hours against 12! And the rest of the time is for teaching methods, traineeship, and project work. The main part of the upskilling program had nothing to do with religion! (female, schoolteacher, participant of the upskilling program).

The fact that each world religion is allowed only two academic hours in teacher upskilling programs shows that even the re-training and advanced qualification institutes are not ready to offer sufficient expertise on this matter. Apparently, this is the main reason why schools prefer to insist on the modules of "Secular Ethics". Their available instructors lack competences and confidence to teach religious cultures:

> After an upskilling program in Moscow, a number of people immediately said – no, we do not want to conduct this course because its content is difficult, we are not ready for it. Because you can be a perfect teacher of elementary school but after the university you have not had any concern with philosophy of religion or ethics. Frankly speaking, many of those who went to Moscow for upskilling even at university studied Marxism and Leninism but not the

history of religions or ethics. A lot of people refused to teach this course (female, educational official, the Institute of the Development of Education of Sverdlovsk region).

On the other hand, parents would prefer their children to study a general course surveying world religions:

I think it would be reasonable to tell children what makes people different, to explain them why there are people who have beliefs and follow traditions different from the beliefs and traditions of one's family. That is, a course like this must exist in any case (female, a parent to a 4th *grade girl* who just passed the course FRCSE).

It is worth noting that representatives of religious communities argue for a more developed module structure of the course, which would be extended and include successively various religions:

Selection of a module based on parents' choice should be canceled. There are four official religious cultures in Russia, and all of them can be studied by students successively for four years. As for "Secular Ethics", they have it anyway from the first to eleventh grade because all school life is connected with it (male, Orthodox priest, the Yekaterinburg Diocese).

"Four official religious cultures" here refers to recognition of Christianity (Russian Orthodoxy, in particular), Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism as "traditional" religions that made the greatest contribution to Russian history and culture.

To summarize: officially the course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" has a module structure and is based on Cultural and Religious Studies approach. It is also supposed to foster the responsible choice of parents and children in accord with their beliefs and values. The practice of teaching this course in Sverdlovsk region proves that:

When we evaluate why a particular module was chosen, we need to take at least three parameters into account: (1) the number of educators qualified enough to teach all these modules – because teachers have their rights, too, – if, for example, Muslim culture is close to them, they teach it; (2) unwillingness of parents to separate their kids on the basis of religion; (3) the number of available textbooks on the module. These parameters are very important and, surely, they bring a lot of effort to nothing (female, education official, the Institute of the Development of Education of Sverdlovsk region).

Thus, in fact, freedom to opt for a preferable module exists formally but no major group of stakeholders is interested in ensuring the diversity of modules. Educators are not willing to deliver the optional modules because diversity is always difficult

to manage and it means trouble with a schedule, expenses on purchasing a full set of textbooks for each elected module and on upskilling and re-training of teachers. Parents do not wish to separate children and thereby to risk potential conflicts caused by religious affiliations. Finally, religious community representatives favor a non-competitive and more extended course of study that would include all major religions traditional for Russia (starting with and showcasing Russian Orthodoxy), and prefer to exclude secular ethics altogether.

Conclusion

The introduction of religious education to Russian schools was regarded by many commentators as a success for the Russian Orthodox Church, which managed to introduce covert catechization into the public educational system. The declarations of "culturological" approach in the course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics", and the right to choose the module – among the modules on "traditional" religious cultures of Russia, overview module on religious cultures, or secular ethics module – did not abate the misgivings. The experts of the Institute of Philosophy (Russian Academy of Sciences), for instance, were outspoken in their assessment of the offered selection:

> Ethics can be taught at schools as a separate subject, but not as an artificial appendix to religious modules, as a poor show of imitating political correctness. The very title "Secular Ethics" demonstrates unprofessionalism and servility of those who stand behind the whole affair. Briefly, neither the title, nor the position of the module in the course are acceptable (Zubets).

The ideologues and state officials, on the other hand, expected that religious education, more specifically, "traditional" religious education, would foster "patriotic" development of young children (and their parents) and ensure "moral and spiritual consolidation of Russian society, its unity in the face of external and internal challenges, its strong social solidarity, confidence in Russia, in its citizens, society, state, the present and the future of our country" (Daniliuk, Kondakov & Tishkov, 2009, p. 5). The resulting compromise – separative confessional[6] ethno-nationally biased[7] civic education – is, however, at odds with the resources of schools, competences of teachers, and orientations of parents. The schools lack the capacity to satisfy the diversity of formally proclaimed selection and insist on the uniformity (due to the demands of the existing timetable, affordability of textbook sets, and teaching load distribution). The teachers lack the confidence and competence to teach and instruct on certain or all modules and seek to push for one module for all (either secular modules or confessional module of their personal preference). The parents

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[6] As most of the experts on textbooks and content of the course demonstrate (see the references in the Introduction).

[7] This implies that in the design and content of the course the underlying understanding of citizenship is based on the ethnic origin(s) and "tradition".

fear that the separative confessional education will foment religious conflicts among the students and will hinder the development of children's communicative skills in a pluralistic society. It remains to be seen what actual learning outcomes this experiment will result in.

Thus, our findings show that religious education at Russian schools today rests on a discrepancy between the alleged goals of the course "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics", which emphasize multicultural education, and its implementation, which stems from practical constraints and local agendas.

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