

Religion and Ideology in Modern Russia

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“Hmm . . . then maybe you’re a member of the
Communist Party, Holy Father?”

“Maybe I am!

(Ilf and Petrov 1928, *The Twelve chairs*)¹

The first loudspeaker: Orthodoxy, comrades!

The crowd: Hurray!

The second loudspeaker: Communism, comrades!

The crowd: Hurray!

(Dmitry Prigov 1979, *Revolution: Radio-tragedy for
Two Loudspeakers*)

The process of liberalization that began in the Soviet Union with what is known as “perestroika” brought religion back into the public sphere for the first time since the October Revolution of 1917. For seventy years, religion had been denounced as a “holdover from the old regime” and as a pursuit of fringe dissidents and illiterate old women; in Soviet times, it could only be justified by reference to the monuments of church art.² Then, by contrast, religion gained an opportunity to play a prominent role in the field of ideology, and it thus became an integral argument in political debate, used to support views of all kinds, ranging from liberal to nationalist. Furthermore, the leaders of the so-called traditional religions³ often adduce theological arguments proper along with an appeal to national values and to the interests of the state. For example, Rabbi Zinovi Kogan proclaimed at a certain interreligious meeting that “our common religion is our Russia.”

This paper offers a survey of the forms and modes of interaction between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the field of ideology. The first section analyzes the religious policy of modern Russia and the interplay between church and state, while the second section examines cooperation between religious organizations and the state in the sphere of

¹ Translated from the Russian by John Richardson.

² The celebrations of “The 1000th Anniversary of the Baptism of Rus” in 1988 commenced with an exhibition at the Academy of Arts entitled “1000 Years of Russian Art.”

³ Namely, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism—the four religions mentioned in the preamble to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (1997).

education, since both the Church and the rulers of the country consider education to be the principal means of ideological upbringing.

Part I. Religion and State: From Confrontation to Mutually Beneficial Cooperation

The process that is taking place in Russia does not fit into the classical paradigm of secularization that forces religion into the private domain. It can be more adequately described by the term “deprivatization,” meaning that “religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role that theories of modernity and theories of secularization have reserved for them.... Religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere and arenas of political contestation not only to defend their traditional turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and set modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, etc.”⁴ J. Casanova, however, believes that “the core of the theory of secularization, the thesis of differentiation and emancipation of the secular sphere from religious institutions and norms, remains valid,”⁵ which is not quite so in Russia. Despite the obvious tendency to view Russia in public discourse as part of Western European civilization, there has been no demand whatsoever for the experience of European secularization that implies absolute religious neutrality. Moreover, many religious and public figures deem this experience as totally inapplicable in Russia. The official position of the ROC, declared in the name of Patriarch Alexy II and in the name of Metropolitan, then Patriarch, Kirill on numerous occasions, can be roughly summarized as follows: nowadays, the world consists of a number of civilizations that differ, above all, in terms of religion. These civilizations ought to preserve their uniqueness in the face of the secular West. As regards Russia, it has to keep to the traditional values (that is, to the values of Orthodox Christianity).⁶ Thus, in a recent speech addressed to the people of Karelia, Patriarch Kirill said: “I dream that all our children, our youth, who are often confused, perplexed, and taken captive by alien stereotypes, alien thinking, and alien modes of behavior that are being inflicted upon our society not without evil intent—I dream that these young people will also be able at some point to shake themselves free of this temptation; of course there are quite a few spiritually mature and strong people among the young, and we definitely associate our homeland’s future with such people.”⁷

The influence of the “traditional” religions on society and the state is directly proportional to their number of adherents. The Russian Orthodox Church is most influential, and its impact on various spheres of life is becoming more and more noticeable (for example, resistance to the gay

⁴ Casanova, J., *Public religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 5-6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ For more details, see *Верховский А.* Российское политическое православие: понятие и пути развития // Пути несвободы. – М.: Центр «Сова», 2005. – С. 48-80. [Verkhovsky, A., “Russian Political Orthodoxy: Notion and Course of Development,” *Courses of Unfreedom*]

⁷ Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Московского и всея Руси Кирилла на встрече с общественностью Карелии // Седмица.Ru. 03.06.2010. [“His Holiness, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia Speech Addressed to the People of Karelia,” *Sedmitza.ru*, URL: <http://www.sedmitza.ru/news/1217886.html>]

parade in Moscow; cancellation of the modern art exhibition called “Beware of Religion”; protests against TV programs containing “immoral” (from their viewpoint) material. The state usually takes into consideration the opinion of Muslim leaders, too. It can be explained both by the significant number of Muslims and by the fact that certain territories densely populated by Muslims are zones of instability and conflict (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia). Religious factors are extremely important in the course of these conflicts. That is why state authorities seek the loyalty of Muslim leaders. As for Buddhist and Jewish communities, their influence at state level is rather limited. Thus, the arrival of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists, in Russia was postponed several times due to problems with Russian-Chinese relations, and the visits that followed were complicated by numerous restrictions.

Religion and national identity

The idea of an inseparable bond between religion and nationality is rather popular in certain segments of Russian society. Religious statistics published by religious organizations are in many respects based on this assumption, and testify to the special claims that religious figures, politicians, and national leaders who adhere to the principle of “one people - one confession” lay with the authorities and society. The exclusive role of the ROC in public life is justified in their opinion by the fact that the largest part of the Russian population indeed proves to be Orthodox by birth, irrespective of the level of their actual involvement with the Church.⁸ Alexander Dugin, one of the leading theorists of the special “Eurasian” Russian way, declares that “in the spiritual realm, in culture, in social life, in matters of morals, even in politics, in the state system, and in lawmaking, we must plainly and fearlessly say: “Orthodoxy is our solution.”⁹ One cannot help calling to mind a conversation between Levsha (or Lefty),¹⁰ the main character of a story by Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895), and some Englishmen: “Our Russian faith is the true faith; our ancestors believed in it and so must we.” “But you don't know our faith,” said the Englishmen, “we have the same Christian beliefs and we have the same Gospel.” “The Gospel is truly the same for all,” said Lefty, “only our books are thicker than yours and our faith is fuller.”¹¹

At the heart of Eurasianism lies the idea of Russia's messianic mission, first expressed in the 1920s-1930s by a number of Russian thinkers, such as Piotr Savitsky, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Nikolai

⁸ “Orthodoxy is claimed to be the ethnical religion of the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Byelorussians, the Chuvash, the Moldovans, the Karelians, the Komi, the Ossetians, of part of the Udmurts and of the Mari, and so on. Owing to this method of calculation, the latest all-Russian population census (2002) numbers around 120 million Orthodox people (among them, almost 116 million are Russian, 3 million are Ukrainian, more than 1.5 million are Chuvash, around 900 thousand are Moldovan, 800 thousand are Byelorussian, etc.)” Filatov, S., Lunkin, R., “The Statistics of the Russian Religiosity: The Magic of Numbers and a Complex Reality,” *Religion and Mass Media*, URL: http://www.religare.ru/2_20662.html. See also the results of the all-Russian survey provided by Public Opinion Research Center in *attachment 1*.

⁹ Дугин А. Православие – наше решение // Информационно-аналитический портал “ЕВРАЗИЯ.org.” [Dugin, A., “Orthodoxy is Our Solution,” *Eurasia Foundation*, URL: <http://www.evrazia.org/article/1303>.]

¹⁰ That is, a left-handed person. The full title of the story is *The Tale of Cross-eyed Lefty from Tula and the Steel Flea*, first published in 1881.

¹¹ Translated from the Russian by George H. Hanna. URL: <http://home.freeuk.com/russica2/>.

Alexeev, and Georges Florovsky. They conceived of Russia as “a complex historical formation,” “a particular historical universe” that involves the cultures of both Europe and Asia. Interestingly enough, their attitude to Soviet Russia was not purely negative: Bolshevism is inadmissible insofar as it is the essence of the “corrupt” Western world view; the Revolution, however, could further Russia’s deliverance from the “oppression” of European culture and bring about a restoration of its Eurasian peculiarity. Proponents of this view of Russia’s mission believe that even the atheist ideology that was instilled by the Bolshevik state failed in that it led Russia astray from the country’s “specific” way for good, inasmuch as “Orthodoxy is so deep inside Russians that it cannot be knocked out of their heads even by centuries of licentious godlessness.”¹² In a sense, the Russian people simply have no choice, since belonging to “the Orthodox civilization” cannot be a matter of choice: “Religion sometimes has a strictly personal dimension. Thus, everyone is free to choose one’s way to salvation, and there can be no compulsion or violence in this case. Belonging to a civilization, on the other hand, is not a matter of choice. By various means—by language, culture, ethics, customs, symbols, habits, gestures, texts, and explicit and implicit standards of behavior—civilization forms man’s personality from childhood, laying the ground for adult life and framing the very first cultural reactions that are present in the unconscious now and then.”¹³

“One law for the rich, and another for the poor”

The formal foundation for equality of religions and for the equal distancing of all religions from state institutions was created in 1997 by the Russian Federal Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations.” The law, however, has the following preamble: “Basing itself on the fact that the Russian Federation is a secular state; recognizing the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia’s spirituality and culture; respecting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religions that constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia’s peoples; considering it important to promote the achievement of mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect in questions of freedom of conscience and freedom of creed; the Russian Federation hereby adopts this federal law.”¹⁴ Though the preamble per se is null and void, it does have deep ramifications for religious organizations, because it “brings to naught” any claim to “equality” with the Russian Orthodox Church that actually results from the law.

The idea of “symphony” (“concordance”) between church and state that is so widespread in conservative ecclesiastical and political ranks is normally renounced in official declarations; and yet it is put into practice time and again. More often than not, officials appeal to the local eparchy

¹² Шевченко М.Л. Вопросы неопыта. Православие в современном мире // Независимая газета. 13.04.1996. [Shevchenko, M., “Neophyte Questions. Orthodoxy in the Modern World,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*]

¹³ Дугин А. Наша цивилизация // Информационно-аналитический портал “ЕВРАЗИЯ.org.” [Dugin, A., “Our Civilization,” *Eurasia Foundation*, URL: <http://www.evrazia.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3554>]

¹⁴ See for example a translation of this law from Russian into English on the site of the Religion and Law Consortium, URL: <http://www.religlaw.org/document.php?DocumentID=1762>.

(diocese) for expert examination in cases when a certain religious organization is declared to be “a dangerous sect,” when they have to approve of the construction of a prayer house by some protestant congregation, and so on. In May 2010, for example, the Kemerovo Orthodox Eparchy conducted an expert examination of the documents of an association of Jehovah’s Witnesses on the request of the Main Department of Internal Affairs, and it came to the conclusion that “the Jehovah’s Witnesses organization has no religious character, no biblical basis for its views; it cannot be numbered among the Christian confessions, and it bears the marks of a commercial cult.”¹⁵

The ROC authorities assert that the Church upholds the secular state and the separation of church and state, but, as a matter of fact, the Russian Orthodox Church has an exclusive relationship with the state: it enters into joint operation agreements with various ministries, such as the Ministry of Social Security and Labor, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, etc. More specifically, the treaty with the Ministry of Defense stipulates the “development of interaction in restoring the Orthodox traditions of the Russian army and the navy, as well as fostering soldiers’ moral motivation for military service, their commitment, and acts of bravery for the benefit of Russia.”¹⁶ For instance, various corps of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation got “patron saints”: Great-Martyr Barbara is the patron of the Strategic Missile Forces; the epic Russian hero and saint Ilya Muromets (Elijah of Murom) is the patron of the Border Forces; Elijah the Prophet, who, according to the biblical narrative, ascended into heaven in a whirlwind on a chariot of fire, is the patron of the Airborne Forces, etc. The State Fire Fighting Service distributes posters calling for responsible fire management along with posters showing a fireman standing next to The “Burning Bush” icon and summoning the people to “Honor the Burning Bush and the Fire Emergency Service.”¹⁷

Anatoly Shatalov, vice-chairman of the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law-Enforcement, said to the press that, by entering into agreements with power-wielding agencies, the ROC is attempting to “fill an ideological vacuum.” He points out that “today, the notion of a ‘moral factor’ that determines fighting readiness and capacity remains valid for power structures.... This moral factor has to be invested with certain ideology. Previously, Marxism-Leninism served the purpose, but since it has gone and the moral factor remains, we have come close today to realizing what exactly will create spiritual and moral foundations. Commanding officers understand that religion only, and no other ideology, can be such a foundation nowadays.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Кулешова Е.А. Религиоведческая оценка “Устава местной религиозной организации Свидетелей Иеговы «ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ, КЕМЕРОВО»” // Информационно-консультационный центр Св. Иринея Лионского. 24.05.10. [Kuleshova, E. A., *Scientific Religious Evaluation of “The Statutes of the Local Religious Organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses”* «TSENTRALNAYA, KEMEROVO», St. Irenaeus of Lyon Information and Consulting Center, URL: <http://iriney.ru/sects/witness/news094.htm>]

¹⁶ Соглашение о сотрудничестве // Сайт “Научный атеизм” [“Cooperation Agreement,” *Scientific Atheism* site, URL: <http://www.atheism.ru/archive/archive.phtml?id=24.>]

¹⁷ Literally, “Почитай Неопалимую купину и службу 01.”

¹⁸ Коробов П. Боеугодное дело: Подписан договор о сотрудничестве между РПЦ и МВД // Газета «Коммерсантъ». №216 (3055). 18.11.2004. [Korobov, P., “God Pleasing/Military Pleasing Deed: A Treaty on

Faith instead of ideology

According to the Church authorities, in view of the sheer absence of ideology of any kind, let alone in view of “the impossibility” of ideology that has been substituted by trendy lifestyles and behavior patterns fashioned by TV and commercials, the Church remains the only power that is capable of forming an essential mindset. Sooner or later, one is disillusioned with ideology; popular culture is always superficial and does not give answers to the fundamental questions of the human being, whereas the Church speaks to the heart. “No ideology in the history of the human race has existed for more than three or four generations. The first generation struggles for enforcement of an ideology. They murder their like; they say that humanity has finally found the solution to all problems, and that as soon as those who disagree are compelled to exercise these postulates, there will be heaven on earth. The second generation continues the fight, though oftentimes they are not as committed; the third generation utters all the clichés, but begin living their own life; and by the fourth generation, the ideology loses all power.”¹⁹

In spite of opposing faith and ideology, Church leaders have been eager “to arm” themselves with Soviet patterns of ideological mass events. To wit, the 2007 celebration of the Day of Slavic Literature and Culture comprised more than twenty stage shows, singing of “Gimn Slovu,”²⁰ fireworks, and singing of “Podmoskovnye Vechera” (“Moscow Nights”), a most popular post-war Soviet song. At the same time, “the official Church rhetoric, as a rule, makes no reference to either the Gospels or God; the state and the national clearly suppress the religious both in style and content, and Christianity turns into Caesarianity.”²¹ Lately, the Church has begun to encourage the establishment of Orthodox youth organizations analogous to the Pioneer and Komsomol organizations of the Soviet period. In May 2010, Hegumen Ioasaph (Poluyanov), head of the Patriarchal Center for the Spiritual Development of Children and Youth under the Danilov Monastery (St. Daniel Monastery), held a briefing for reporters in order to announce the center’s new program for training young church leaders. He explained that the program was modeled on “the training of young commanding officers in wartime.”²²

Cooperation between the ROC and MIA Has Been Signed,” *Kommersant*, URL: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=525786&ThemesID=1011>]

¹⁹ “Религиозное воспитание в эпоху постмодерна.” Выступление председателя Отдела внешних церковных связей Московского Патриархата митрополита Смоленского и Калининградского Кирилла на XV Рождественских чтениях // Патриархия.ру. Официальный сайт Русской Православной Церкви. 30.01.2007. [“Religious Education in the Postmodern Era,” speech of Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, head of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, at the XV Christmas Readings, official site of the Russian Orthodox Church, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/189897.html>]

²⁰ A hymn to the “Word” or to the “Tale” based on *Slovo o polku Igoreve* [The Tale of Igor’s Campaign], an anonymous epic poem written in the Old Slavic language.

²¹ *Волкова Е.* Религия и художественная культура: худой мир лучше доброй ссоры // Двадцать лет религиозной свободы в России. М.: РОССПЭН, 2009. С. 209. [Volkova, E., “Religion and Arts: Better a Lean Peace than a Fat Victory,” *20 Years of Religious Liberty in Russia*]

²² *Солдатов А.* Гвардия Патриарха идет на мушкетеров Кремля? Создание многотысячных молодежных отрядов – серьезная заявка на борьбу за власть // НОВАЯ ГАЗЕТА. №60. 07.06.2010. [Soldatov, A., “Will the Patriarch’s Guards Attack the Kremlin Musketeers? Creation of Youth Troops of Many Thousands is a Strong Claim to Power Struggle,” *Novaya Gazeta*, URL: <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2010/060/19.html>]

Evidently, the country's leaders badly need to fill the ideological vacuum and are about to delegate the task to the ROC. One modern analyst reckons that the state "does this by way of experiment, and the outcome of the experiment is not apparent. As Nikolai Berdyaev rightfully mentioned, we live in an era of 'the New Middle Ages'; nevertheless, this does not imply that for some reason Orthodoxy, which had been natural for the Middle Ages but lost its actual social impact in the eighteenth century, should bounce back in the twenty-first century, even in the shape of the 'modern' rhetoric of Patriarch Kirill."²³

It must be said, however, that further development of the situation can take different and even unexpected twists. On the face of it, Patriarch Kirill is engaged in efficient cooperation with the authorities. On the other hand, certain tensions within the patriarch-president alliance are quite possible. First of all, as shown by the recent experiment of introducing the "basics of Orthodox culture" into the school curriculum, the ability of the Church to manipulate public opinion proves to be rather stretched. Secondly, the media have exposed surprising hypotheses concerning the political ambitions of Patriarch Kirill, who seems to be a powerful player with public charisma and considerable financial capacity. Alas, he is already at the top of his church career—he is patriarch. It follows that the only real alternative for him is to become chief of state. One may appreciate how appealing this idea is: patriarch and president being one person is the highest possible realization of the "symphony" principle. After all, it would be a sin to bury such a remarkable political talent—the patriarch's admirers believe God gave Kirill the gift of producing political, social, and economic doctrines and concepts instead of the gift of praying in a monastic cell. Indeed, Kirill's speeches resemble those of a political leader rather than the lowly and spiritual sermons of a clergyman of fervent prayer.²⁴ Though such projects cannot be taken seriously (despite the "Cyprus precedent"²⁵), it is clear that a greater self-dependence of the present patriarch, as compared to his predecessor, might sooner or later provoke the displeasure of the country's rulers.

To sum up, whereas various political forces complain about the lack of ideology after the defeat of Communism, religion (represented mainly by the Russian Orthodox Church) aspires to

²³ Черняев А.В. Патриарх Кирилл как новый Никон. Заметки к годовщине интронизации // ИГ Религии. 03.02.2010. Режим доступа: http://religion.ng.ru/politic/2010-02-03/4_kirill.html [Chernyaev, A. V., "Patriarch Kirill as a New Patriarch Nikon: Notes on the First Anniversary of the Enthronement," *NG Religii*, URL: http://religion.ng.ru/politic/2010-02-03/4_kirill.html]

One can observe that the public utterances of the patriarch often break the traditional practice of the ROC. Take, for example, his statement regarding sexual relations, made at the III Candlemas Readings of Orthodox Youth: "The God-given instinct of procreation is closely associated with the spiritual life of man. There cannot be real love, family love, without carnal pleasures. This is a great gift of God given to man not only for the sake of procreation, but also for abundant life and the fullness of joy" (*Interfax-Religion*, 16.02.2009, URL: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=28852>). Public utterances of the hierarchs on the subject are so rare that Patriarch Kirill's declaration was seen as "a breakthrough."

²⁴ Солдатов А. "Подумай о будущем России!" Действительно ли Патриарх Кирилл имеет президентские амбиции, или Немного о лозунгах "патриаршего шествия" 24 мая 2010 г. // Портал-Credo.Ru. [Soldatov, A., "'Think of the Future of Russia!' Does Patriarch Kirill Really Have Presidential Ambitions? or a Glimpse of the Slogans of 'the Patriarchal Procession,' on May 24, 2010" *Credo.Ru*, URL: <http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=77910&type=view>]

²⁵ In the years 1960–1977, archbishop and ethnarch of the autocephalous Cypriot Orthodox Church Makarios III was at the same time president of the Republic of Cyprus.

function as ideology. Contemporary Russian authorities deem the official ideology as the “cement” that holds society together and consider it “the only way to guarantee order both in minds and in society.”²⁶ The Church, on its part, is willing to offer society and the state a “national cause” (hereby avoiding the term “ideology”), but it expects state support and exclusive forms of interrelation with state agencies in return. In recent decades, the ROC insisted on cooperation in the field of education most diligently, arguing that the younger generation is in need of moral instruction. The following section of the article presents an analysis of the recent developments in the field of religious education in Russia.

Part II. Religious Education in Modern Russia

In July 2009, the president of Russia Dmitry Medvedev said that he supported the idea of including religious studies into the curriculum of Russian schools, assuming that schoolchildren and their parents would select the subject themselves. They may choose from the so-called basics of Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist cultures. If preferred, one can choose a course describing at once a number of basic religions represented in Russia or one can study secular ethics. Secular teachers, and not priests, are supposed to teach these subjects, in order to secure impartial instruction in the basics of any religious tradition.

The experiment introducing the spiritual/ethical component into the secondary education system started in 2010 in eighteen regions belonging to six federal districts. About 256 thousand pupils and 44 thousand teachers took part in the experiment.

The choice of only the four given religious traditions for teaching at school has been determined by factors other than their dissemination. Orthodoxy and Islam are the two major religions in Russia. The number of Buddhists (550 thousand) and the number of Jews (50 thousand) is, however, comparable to the number of Protestants and Catholics, but the latter confessions are not taught at school.

As already mentioned, it happened so that Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism came to be considered as “traditional” Russian religions. The legally insignificant distinction gave the Orthodox, the Jews, the Muslims, and the Buddhists the right to lay claim to some privileged attitude of the state.

Advocates and opponents

The president’s decision put an end to a long-lasting dispute about the feasibility of introducing religious studies or confessional subjects into the school curriculum. It also provided an answer to the recent “Address of the Leaders of Traditional Religious Communities regarding Issues of Teaching Religious Culture at School,” signed by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of

²⁶ Agadjanian A., “Public Religions and the Quest for National Ideology: Russia’s Media Discourse,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religions* 40, no. 3 (September 2001), p. 363.

Moscow and All Russia, by Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin, chairman of Russia's Mufti Council, by Russia's chief rabbi Berl Lazar, and by Damba Ajusheev, chairman of the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia. The address says: "We believe that schoolchildren should be acquainted not only with masterpieces of world and Russian literature and art, but should also, first of all, acquire strong moral goals and adopt basic norms of decent social life. Nobody can become a true citizen of the state and a member of society without knowledge of the fact that the commandments of God, such as "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not steal," and others should be observed by both believers and by unbelievers. That's why we ask you as head of state, when adopting new standards of general education, to promote the introduction of a basic course on the history and culture of traditional religions."²⁷

The Russian Orthodox Church has for long been lobbying for a course on the basics of Orthodox culture, positioning it as a course in culture. Attempts to introduce priests and other Orthodox spokesmen to school began as early as in the 1990s, but at that time, the Ministry of Education strictly adhered to secular principles, and so in 1993, it banned any religious lessons on the grounds that they were a violation of the constitution. At the same time, Orthodox activists organized non-state Orthodox schools, but extreme clericalism at such educational institutions resulted in a very low level of churching, insomuch that in 2003, a secret Komsomol cell was uncovered in one of these schools.²⁸

In 1997, a new version of the Law on Freedom of Conscience was passed. It emphasized the role of the four "traditional" religions, and after its enactment, the process of introducing Orthodox subjects into the educational system was resumed.

In 1999, Patriarch Alexy II sent a letter to all eparchies ordering the introduction of basic Orthodox courses in all regions of Russia. The courses were to be called "Basics of Orthodox Culture" (instead of "Orthodox Doctrine," for example) to avoid objections from teachers who had been "brought up in an atheistic tradition."²⁹

In 2002, 10 thousand copies of the textbook *Basics of Orthodox Culture* were published. The textbook was written by Alla Borodina, deputy principal in one of the Moscow schools. This time, due to explicitly confessional content and intolerant attacks against other "traditional" religions, attempts at teaching Orthodoxy at school were rebuffed by some religious organizations, scientists, and spokesmen. Nevertheless, the "Basics of Orthodox Culture" course was taught as an optional course in many regions of Russia, and the press frequently reported that Muslim children were forced by their teachers to attend these lessons, too.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, in the year 2009, the basics of Orthodox and Orthodoxy-related subjects were taught to 430 thousand

²⁷ Обращение лидеров традиционных религиозных общин РФ к президенту России Дмитрию Медведеву по вопросу о преподавании религиозной культуры в школах // Интерфакс-Религия. 20.07.2009. ["Address of the Leaders of Traditional Religious Communities of the Russian Federation to the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev in Matters of Teaching Religious Culture at Schools," *Interfax-Religion*, URL: <https://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=documents&div=907>]

²⁸ Mitrokhin, N. A., *Clericalisation of Education in Russia* (Moscow, 2005), p.16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

schoolchildren in thirty-nine regions, that is, to the 70 percent of all schoolchildren in Russia. Very few schoolchildren studied the basics of Islam, of Buddhism, or of Judaism.

According to a sociological survey held in September 2009, 25 percent of Russian citizens approve of the introduction of the course, 44 percent have no objection, 13 percent disapprove, 6 percent are against it, and 11 percent have no definite opinion.³⁰

Seemingly, the new option suggested by the president took into consideration the interests of the representatives of all religions, as well as those of unbelievers who are offered a course on secular ethics for their children. But it failed in practice. Besides the four religions termed “traditional” in the abovementioned address, there are more than four hundred centralized religious organizations, whose followers are practically refused the right to bring up their children according to their religious tradition. One of the most actively developing Christian denominations in modern Russia is the Pentecostal Church. Head of the church in Russia, Sergey Ryakhovsky, is a member of the Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations under the president of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the children of Pentecostals together with those of other Protestants will have to choose between a general course on the history of religions and a course in secular ethics, because the president’s project does not allow for a separate course on Protestantism.

Moreover, it is doubted that schoolchildren belonging to “traditional” religions will have an opportunity to study their religious teachings in the case of their belonging to a religious minority. Will two or three children count, or will they have to follow the choice of the majority? There is a danger of possible confrontation that may arise as a result of dividing the children of one grade on the basis of their confession. In August 2009, the Internet site of Russian atheists published an address in which the possibility of studying secular ethics by those who did not want to take religious classes was favorably received. At the same time, the authors of the document are worried about the proposed division of school students according to confession, as it can “result in escalation of conflict between the representatives of various confessions, as well as between believers and unbelievers. Moreover, absence of any mention of pagan beliefs, non-Orthodox Christianity, Oriental, and other religions on the list of school subjects constitutes discrimination against people of other confessions.”³¹ The authors of the document are concerned about the fact that in practice, the school authorities will make schoolchildren and their parents choose a common discipline for everyone.

Thus, a half measure, taken as an obvious concession to the ever-increasing pressure from the clerical faction, cannot and will not bring any positive changes to education. The only proper way of solving the problem is to separate school from religion and to restrict religious education to educational institutions founded by religious organizations at their own expense and on their own accord.

Archdeacon Andrey Kuraev, a professor at the Moscow Theological Academy and a member

³⁰ The survey was published by the Levada Center, URL: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2009090301.html>.

³¹ Об инициативе введения в государственных средних школах предмета “Духовно-нравственное воспитание” 04.08.2009 // Сайт “Научный атеизм” [“On the Initiative of Introducing to State Secondary Schools a Course on ‘Spiritual and Moral Upbringing,’” *Scientific Atheism* site, URL: <http://www.atheism.ru/archive/text/2234.phtml>]

of the Expert and Consulting Council on the Problems of Freedom of Conscience under the State Duma³² of the Russian Federation in matters of public and religious organizations, commented on the abovementioned statements by saying, “A significant part of the vox populi thinks that the Russian Orthodox Church is one of the Kremlin towers.... To onlookers, it seems that the Church wants to educate children only to satisfy its will to power.... This is wrong.” Kuraev is convinced that ethics but not Orthodoxy must be a compulsory subject at school: “For twenty years, Russian schooling had been reformed under the motto, ‘School must educate; it must not bring up.’”³³ It was a natural motto at the time of educational “perestroika,” when school was to be rid of excessive pro-Communist propaganda. “Today, the pedagogical community tends to think that upbringing is not the task of the family only. Children can absorb some moral values at school, too. We are witnessing the pedagogical counter-revolution that I have long awaited: new educational standards include a new obligatory area of education—‘the spiritual and moral component.’ Within this new obligation, there exists free choice, including the choice of studying the basics of Orthodox culture. I wouldn’t mind if 60 percent of children attended secular ethics classes, and only 30 percent, Orthodox ethics. Let another 10 percent take other religious classes. The main thing is that working on our conscience must come back to school.”³⁴

Position of the Jews, the Muslims, and the Buddhists in the past and in the present

Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin, chairman of Russia’s Mufti Council, said in reply to President Dmitry Medvedev’s proposal concerning religious education that introduction of the basics of religions into the school curriculum “promotes moral upbringing. Furthermore, we support your policy that is aimed at observing the democratic principles and rights of all schoolchildren, including atheists.”³⁵ It should be noted that two years earlier, the Religious Board of Muslims of Russia strongly objected to introducing the “Basics of Orthodox Culture” course into school programs. In 2007, Ravil Gainutdin defined the statement that “every Russian citizen must know both Orthodox culture and the history of Russia” as suggesting the predominance of one culture and one nation over the rest.

Until recently, the Traditional Buddhist Sangha had no definite attitude to the problem. The Buddhist spokesmen claim they keep to the principles of secular state, “but at the same time, we think that...children should be given knowledge about the basics of religion and of the Buddhist outlook.... However, actual introduction of the basics of religion into the curriculum is inappropriate. We are concerned that those who are not sufficiently skilled could start teaching this new subject and give wrong ideas of religion.”³⁶

³² The lower house of the Russian parliament.

³³ Interview with Archdeacon Andrey Kuraev, URL: <http://diak-kuraev.livejournal.com/33152.html?page=3>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See *Религия и общество [Religion and Society]: NEWSru.com*, 21.07.2009, URL: <http://www.newsru.com/religy/21jul2009/soveshchanie.html>

³⁶ *Махачкеев А.* Момент школьной истины // Информ Полис (Улан-Удэ). № 12 (598). 24.03.2004 [Makhachkeev, A., “The Moment of School Truth,” *Inform Polis* (Ulan-Ude), URL: <http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act>

Head of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, Rabbi Berl Lazar, who supported the idea of compulsory teaching of the basics of all religions, was satisfied with the suggested solution to the problem: “A specific feature of Russia is that our religious leaders are friends, and religious communities help each other. There is mutual respect among traditional religions.... Schoolchildren must know that Russia is a multinational country, and that each nation has its traditions. I’m deeply thankful to the Ministry of Education for a decision that respects the spirituality of every child and every family.”³⁷

“Sidelined” religions

The leaders of the “traditional” religions are satisfied with the status quo that they enjoy. However, the decision is in discord with the opinion of atheists and with the position of religious organizations that are not considered “traditional” and, as a consequence, are not included in the school curriculum. It should be noted that Protestantism came to Russia as far back as the sixteenth century. No one can deny its influence upon Russian culture. The fact that it served as a template for the reformation of the Russian Church that took place in the eighteenth century by the Russian emperor, Peter the Great, speaks for itself. The Pentecostals, whose belief has not been listed among the traditional religions, consider the decision on the separate teaching of each religion to be a grave misunderstanding, if not an overt provocation, and wonder if such pedagogical novelties will result in an increase of interconfessional tension. Bishop Konstantin Bendas said, “Hundreds of millions of rubles from the federal budget will have been wasted by the time everything reaches absurdity and fails. But, what is more important, students’ souls will be crippled. This situation will lead to escalation of inter-religious tensions.”³⁸

“Brother Konstantin would forget all his arguments if not only Orthodox Christianity but also Protestantism were included in the school curriculum as a possible alternative,” retorted Archdeacon Andrey Kuraev.³⁹ He thinks that teaching such a subject as the basics of religious studies, suggested by the Protestants, will hardly be efficient. Along those lines, Kuraev is opposed to the teaching of the basics of Protestantism and Catholicism, explaining it in the following way: “We agree with the Protestant doctrine, but we can’t agree with the things it rejects in our religion (icons, infant baptism, etc.). Since criticism of other religions is inadmissible in our textbook, so a Protestant teacher cannot criticize Orthodoxy, either. But what will we get if we exclude criticism of Orthodoxy from Protestantism? We’ll get the fundamentals of Orthodox Christianity.... As for the Catholics, they accept the Orthodox doctrine as a whole. But we don’t agree with their dogmas of Purgatory and the Pope. However, I suppose a Catholic family or a parish can add these ‘flavors’ to the ‘common Christian bread’ by themselves. And what we will say about Orthodox

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³⁷ See *Jewish.ru*, 21.07.2009, URL: <http://www.jewish.ru/news/cis/2009/07/news994276316.php>

³⁸ Мoшкнн М. Духовные разночтения // Время новостей. №136. 31.07.2009. [Moshkin, M., “Spiritual Disagreements,” *Vremya Novostey*. URL: <http://www.vremya.ru/print/234234.html>]

³⁹ Ibid.

Christianity will not be in discord with Catholic ethics.”⁴⁰

Alongside the Protestants and the Catholics, some other representatives of ecclesiastical Christianity that appeared as far back as the eighteenth century found themselves out of favor. Among them were the Old Believers, Shamanism followers, traditional pagans and, of course, new religious movements.

The authors of the open address to the president of Russia Dmitry Medvedev are against making school overly clerical. They do not want to divide religions into “traditional” and “non-traditional”; they insist on observing the constitutional principles of secular education, on equality of all confessions before the law, and on the necessity of state cooperation with all public organizations in Russia, including religious ones, in creating civil society in our country. Instead of numerous subjects of confessional orientation, the authors of the address propose to introduce a general course in religious studies, which unveils the history of various religions, analyzes each religion and the conformity of its dogmas to scientific facts, and explains the atheistic position on the matter. Of course, “sidelined” religious organizations can educate children at their Sunday schools and higher confessional institutions. Even in this case, however, “non-traditional” religions have no place, since the Russian Orthodox Church actively strives for the right to issue state-approved diplomas in theology to graduates of its higher educational institutions. Institutions teaching “non-traditional” religions will hardly gain this right.⁴¹

Conclusion

In most Western countries, the state managed to separate itself from the church in a civilized way. In Russia, a *sui generis* separation between church and state took place after the October Revolution of 1917 in a wild way. With the coming of “perestroika,” the militant atheism that had been the dominant ideology for seventy years yielded to an idealistic understanding of religion as a source of ethical values that endows its followers with high moral character. Religious leaders came to insist that the confinement of religion within the sphere of personal emotions results in moral crisis, and so it is necessary to restore belief to its previous position in society by building it into education. Religious activists claim that most disciplines pertaining to the humanities, from ethics and psychology to political science, are of religious origin.

The experiment of introducing spiritual and moral instruction to schools is an attempt to fill the gap that appeared as a result of the collapse of the Soviet state ideology. It is hard to predict the outcome of the experiment,⁴² but it is obvious that the development of a complete and objective course on the history of religions, free of excessive influence of clerical circles, is a task for the future, when society realizes the priority of secular values and comes to an understanding that a

⁴⁰ Interview with Archdeacon Andrey Kuraev, URL: http://kuraev.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=211.

⁴¹ Nowadays in Russia, there are forty-nine Orthodox, sixty-eight Muslim, two Buddhist, two Jewish, twenty-eight Protestant, and four Catholic higher theological educational institutions.

⁴² See *attachment 2* for some immediate results of this experiment.

single confessional ideology cannot be a basis for consolidation in a multi-confessional community. Introduction of the basics of any religion into the school curriculum (even when multiple choices are given) can result in clericalization of education and in long-term consequences not only in education, but in other spheres of social life as well, first of all escalation of religious and national tension.

Attachment 1

All-Russian survey provided by Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM)

During 23-24 January, 2010, 1600 people were questioned in 140 populated areas of 42 regions of the Russian Federation. The statistical error is less than 3.4%.⁴³

What religion or world view do you follow?

(closed question, one answer)

	2005	2006	2008	2009	2010
<i>Orthodoxy</i>	72	63	73	70	75
<i>Islam</i>	7	6	6	7	5
<i>Roman Catholicism</i>	1	1	>1	>1	1
<i>Protestantism (Pentecostalism, Adventism, Lutheranism, Baptism, etc...)</i>	>1	>1	>1	>1	>1
<i>Judaism</i>	-	>1	>1	>1	>1
<i>Buddhism</i>	>1	1	>1	1	1
<i>I am religious but do not belong to any confession</i>	-	12	3	5	3
<i>Nonbeliever</i>	13	16	11	9	8
<i>I am between belief and nonbelief</i>	4	-	5	5	5
<i>Other</i>	1	1	-	>1	>1
<i>Hard to say</i>	1	1	2	2	1

Do you participate in religious ceremonies, if yes – how often?

(closed question, one answer)

	2006	2009	2010
<i>Daily</i>	4	3	4
<i>Weekly</i>	3	2	3
<i>Monthly</i>	4	3	4
<i>Only on holidays</i>	26	25	27
<i>From time to time</i>	24	26	28
<i>I do not participate in any religious ceremonies</i>	37	38	32
<i>Hard to say</i>	1	4	4

What can you personally say about the religious feelings of the people around you?

(closed question, one answer)

	1991	2010
<i>There are no changes in the religious feelings of the people around me.</i>	12	17
<i>Some time ago, the people used to hide their religious feelings, and now they do not hide them.</i>	34	21
<i>More people embrace faith.</i>	25	25
<i>People participate in religious ceremonies because it became fashionable, and it has nothing to do with real religious feelings.</i>	19	16
<i>Other</i>	1	2
<i>Hard to say</i>	10	17

⁴³ Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) press release no. 1461, URL: http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/13365.html?no_cache=1&cHash=782b2c1c4e, accessed May 5, 2010.

Were you baptized?

(closed question, one answer, % of Christians)

	1989	2001	2002	2010
Yes	89	81	83	84
No	8	16	15	14
Hard to say	3	3	2	2

Do you read the Bible?

(closed question, one answer, % from Christians)

	1993	2010
Yes	38	49
No	61	49
Hard to say	<1	2

Attachment 2
Some results of the experiment on introducing a spiritual/moral component into the educational system⁴⁴

Region	Basics of Orthodox Culture	Basics of Secular Ethics	Basics of World Religious Cultures	Basics of Muslim Culture	Basics of Jewish Culture	Basics of Buddhist Culture
Central Federal District	55 - 75 %	16 - 37 %	6-8 %	0-0.2 %	0 %	0-0.2 %
Siberian Federal District	15- 21 %	58 - 67 %	15- 21 %	1 %	0.09 %	0-0.1 %
Northwestern District						
- Jewish Autonomous Region	61.2 %	12.3 %	24 %	0.64 %	1.69 %	0 %
- Kamchatka	39 %	47 %	14 %	0.9 %	0 %	0 %
Urals Federal District						
- Kurgan Region	20 %	60 %	18 %	1 %	0.1 %	0.1 %
Volga (Privolzhsky) Federal District						
- Penza Region	0 %	60 %	38 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
- Udmurtia	16 %	52 %	27 %	2.7 %	0.3 %	0.2 %
- Chuvashia	34.8 %	30.5 %	32.8 %	1.8 %	0 %	0 %
Southern Federal District						
- Chechnya	0.36 %	-	-	99.64 %	0	0
- Karachay-Cherkessia	20 %	22.9 %	19.9 %	37 %	0	0
- Kalmykia	30 %	18 %	18 %	1 %	1 %	51 %
- Stavropol region	60 %	?	?	?	?	?

⁴⁴ These data are based on Eugeny Nasirov's article "Orthodox Faith or Secular Ethics: The Choice of Children and Their Parents" (Насыров Е. Православие или светская этика - выбор детей и их родителей), *GZT.ru*, URL:<http://www.gzt.ru/addition/-pravoslavie-ili-svetskaya-etika---vybor-detei-i-/296263.html>, accessed March 17, 2010.