

## THE SOCIO-POLITICAL BASES OF CONFESSIONALLY FOCUSED PRACTICES OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN RUSSIAN EDUCATION

### Abstract

The article is devoted to the theoretical analysis of the socio-political bases of development of confessionally focused education practice in post-Soviet Russia. The specifics of the corresponding educational innovation in its comparison with secular theological and confessional education are revealed. The author proves the consistency of prior development of confessionally (orthodox) focused approach to an educational reflection on religion with a positional correlation of three main strategic subjects of Russian education: states, Russian Orthodox Church and public.

**Key Words:** education, religious culture, reflection, secular culture, tradition

It is known that the end of the 1990s in Russia became the time of emergence of one of the most disputable educational innovations, namely “confessionally focused education”<sup>2</sup>. An especially fierce and long public debate was caused by development and active introduction of its Orthodox Christian version to the Russian school. Supporters and lobbyists of such practices defined reintegration of religion into school as a way out of spiritual and moral crisis for the Russian society<sup>3</sup>, whereas their opponents viewed it extremely negatively, as a violation of the principle of secular education and, finally, a threat of a regress in pupils’ thinking and the public relations<sup>4</sup>.

Today, after more than 15 years from the first known attempts of introduction of “Bases of orthodox culture” and their analogs at secondary schools in certain Russian regions, it is possible to note that this project was viable. Despite the disputable status of teaching of these subjects in terms of the Russian legisla-

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1 E-mail: serg\_ka2001-dar@mail.ru

2 Reutov N.N., *Sociocultural practices of integration of secular and religious education*, Publishing house of BGTU named by V.G. Shukhov, Belgorod, 2009, p. 31.

3 Nikandrov N., Orthodox traditions, family and school in modern Russia, [http://www.portalus.ru/modules/shkola/rus\\_readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1193319731&archive=1196814959&start\\_from=&ucat=&](http://www.portalus.ru/modules/shkola/rus_readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1193319731&archive=1196814959&start_from=&ucat=&). (accessed May 2015)

4 Toshchenko Zh.T., Delayed-action mine, *Philosophical sciences*, No. 8, 2010, pp. 6-21.

tion, imperfection of its educational and methodical support and practical implementation, despite the active and passive resistance of considerable part of society, forecasts of experts<sup>5</sup> that this aspect will develop actively further on had the confirmation. General introduction of the subject “Bases of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” to secondary schools in Russia since the autumn 2012 marked the full official legitimation of confessionally focused practice of education at the Russian school<sup>6</sup>.

The task of this article is to justify the thesis that this state of affairs is natural from the point of view of balance of interests of the main Russian socio-political subjects - “players” in the field of education, and under current conditions it could hardly be different.

The concept of confessionally focused education emerged as one of generalizing models of an educational reflection on religion. It occurred in the second half of the 1990s – the first half of the 2000s when positive and negative experience saved up by subjects of Russian education of “getting back the religion to school” allowed differentiating the reply of post-Soviet school to a religious call of time.

During the specified period there were designated three alternative directions of studying religion in Russian education which found further a tendency to stability and functional specialization. The first of them can be defined as “purely secular”, assuming strengthening of a theological component of educational knowledge in secular educational institutions alongside with keeping its values and world outlook distant from faiths. “The subject matter of school religious studies is the religion in its various forms and expressions, connections with other phenomena of culture (morals, art, law, politics, social contacts, popular culture, etc.) and, as a rule, out of a certain communication with any religious organization or particular religious faith”<sup>7</sup>. This variant in the Russian educational practice was presented by the “Bases of World Religions” project<sup>8</sup> assuming introduction to school educational communication of a separate special subject, which presents the religion from secular objectivistic positions. Here it is possible to speak about “reductive” approach of a reflection of religion in education when the interpretation of the religious phenomena is reduced to categories of secular culture, and religious subjects are separated from teaching and educational process.

On the analogy, the second direction can be called “purely religious”. It assumes teaching of doctrine and cult practices in confessional educational institutions and in secular educational institutions out of the main program in

5 Kanevsky K., Relationship of secular school and religious associations: legal aspect, *Religion and law*, No. 2, 2005, p. 31.

6 Belova T.P., *Religion as an institute of civil society*, Ivanovo, 2012, p. 108.

7 Metlik I.V., *Religion and education at secular school*, Planet-2000, “Peresvet”, 2004, p. 124.

8 The biggest chapter is Orthodoxy, Interview with the academician A.O. Chubaryan, [http://www.gazeta.ru/education/2004/11/02\\_a\\_192742.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/education/2004/11/02_a_192742.shtml). (accessed March 2015)

agreement with the will of pupils and their parents. "Teaching Religion in such schools means, first, not the religion in general, but one definite religion (Orthodox, Islam, Judaism, etc.) which is considered the only truth unlike the others. Secondly, it is considered as religious assimilation, as a means to educate in religious way, Orthodox, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist education, etc."<sup>9</sup>. This approach can be defined as "maximizing the religious environment" in the world of the target subject of education when he/she is intensively involved in religious life and culture through direct active participation in teaching and educational process of religious institutions and their representatives<sup>10</sup>.

The third, confessionally focused direction of education developed as a compromise between a religious and secular theological reflection. It assumes teaching mainly extra cult content of a certain confessional culture in secular educational institutions, which is combining paradoxically the information and fact-finding and educational purposes. "The confessionally focused education", – N. N. Reutov notes, – "is being realized on a joining of two traditionally existing educational systems: secular and religious. According to a secular educational system, it is built on the basis of theological component of the socio-humanistic block of educational knowledge. According to a confessional educational system, the emphasis is placed on educational, valuable and rational effect of broadcast knowledge"<sup>11</sup>.

This educational innovation assumes integration of the religious (confessional) educational system and the secular education system defining a modern educational mainstream; "there are very powerful sociocultural bases"<sup>12</sup> for that in the country. The corresponding practices are characterized by synthesis of secular and religious components in all main aspects of educational communication. In the content-related plan within confessionally focused approach as one of its authors I.V. Metlik specifies, "the educational potential of religious culture studying at secular school isn't reduced to education only and exclusively in the field of informative scientific and philosophical or culturological religious studies. It is much deeper and is given, first of all, by the content of religious culture, its valuable fund"<sup>13</sup>. The valuable fund of religious culture "includes world outlook, ethical, art, family, cognitive and other values which can be not only 'heard' by

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9 Zuyev Yu.P., Kudrina T.A., Lopatkin R.A., Ovsyenko F.G., Trofimchuk N.A., Development of theological education in the public and municipal educational institutions of the Russian Federation (An analytical material), *Religious education: Collection of reviews and papers*, ISSS of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2002, p. 33.

10 Adamsky A., Religion became an innovative project. Whether religious schools are necessary, <http://www.inauka.ru/education/article40596/print.html> (accessed May 2015)

11 Reutov N.N., *Sociocultural practices of integration of secular and religious education*, Belgorod: publishing house of BGTU named by V.G. Shukhov, 2000, pp. 31-32.

12 Sukhorukov V.V., Religious factor of transformation of Russian education, *Sociology of religion in the society of the Late Modernist style*, materials of the Russian scientific conference with the international participation, editor S.D. Lebedev. – Belgorod: publishing house of "BSU", 2011, p. 96.

13 Metlik I.V., *Religion and education at secular school*, p. 67.

pupils as rational information, but also is to some extent personally perceived by them"<sup>14</sup>. In the organizational plan it uses a theological segment of education at secular school. In the subjective plan it gives priority to secular subjects of education, but expands the presence of religious institutions in it.

Respectively, such communication is carried out mainly at the level of the secondary school, being focused on the solution of a number of diverse educational tasks. One group of tasks is directed on pupils' systematic acquaintance with (mainly extra cult) content of orthodox religious culture; the second group is focused on strengthening at the level of their individual consciousness of several of the most vital and rare in terms of present-day secular culture value systems and paradigms, functionally aimed at strengthening of social solidarity: first of all, civic-minded and patriotic, tolerant and moral<sup>15</sup>. It is possible to say that it claims as autonomous secular value confession (in this case orthodox) culture itself, providing the source of additional legitimation of a certain set of secular value priorities through its secondary status symbolization.

A confessionally focused approach to religious studying seems prior to us in up-to-date prospect, and with a high probability of its dominating in the near-term historical outlook of Russian education. In favor of this point of view it is possible to put forward two main arguments.

Firstly, as the prerequisite for confessionally focused education dominating in the near future is the fact that this approach corresponds mostly to the attitude prevailing today in Orthodox culture. "The ritualization of symbolical policy" of the authorities, characteristic for the 2000<sup>th</sup>, expressed in pedaling of symbolics of non-competitive unity, a memorization and a mediatization of collective identity of the nation<sup>16</sup> prepossess secular social institutes and secular culture in favor of unilateral demonstrative and symbolical communications with religious institutes and cultures. Such communications are expressed in selective borrowing of symbolical elements of religion for realization of secular requirements and the purposes. Thus, due to a special historical role and the related organizational and symbolical capitals, the priority among traditional faiths is given to the orthodox Christianity presented by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy.

Secondly, the immediate cause of domination of confessionally (orthodox) focused approach to an educational reflection of religion over other approaches lies in the fact that this approach displays most adequately the balance of strategic interests of the main (institutional) subjects of education in modern Russian

14 Ibid.

15 Nikandrov N., Orthodox traditions, family and school in modern Russia, [http://www.portalus.ru/modules/shkola/rus\\_readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1193319731&archive=1196814959&start\\_from=&ucat=&](http://www.portalus.ru/modules/shkola/rus_readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1193319731&archive=1196814959&start_from=&ucat=&) (accessed May 2015)

16 Dubin B.V., Hypocritical power and ceremonial policy. About political culture of modern Russia, *The Russian Public Opinion Herald*, No. 1, Vol. 81, 2006, p. 18.

society. Such generalized strategic institutional subjects, interested in integration of Orthodox religious components in the system of the Russian secular education, are:

- First, the religious organizations of the relevant faith (in this case the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy), that is the main initiator of these educational innovations;
- Second, the government institutions, interested in their own legitimation, strengthening of their vertical power structure and stabilization of a socio-political situation in the society, acting as a “holder” of a defining segment of a national education system;
- Third, the public, that is the forming protostructures of civil society interested in overcoming of prolonged sociocultural crisis and in the establishment of constructive and effective life-purpose guiding lines in the society, expressing will of ultimate consumers of “educational product”.

We will consider each of these subjects from positions of its interests in a problem context “religion and education”.

1. The Russian Orthodox Church as a religious organization, is objectively interested in expansion of its social base, in consolidating its position within Russian society, and, indirectly in the world community; in expansion of its spiritual, cultural, public, and also in an instrumental sense, its political and administrative influence; in the setting up and strengthening of its authority as main representative of the largest and “the most traditional” among the Russian religions and faiths. Educational communication is that channel for it which potentially promotes the solution of the corresponding tasks in mass scale and in long-term (strategic) historical prospect.

At the same time the Church obviously lacks its own educational resources due to their small number, specialized character and objectively developed sociocultural separation from the mainstream of the national education system. So, according to the statistical data provided by K. Kanevsky, “in 1999 religious education was completed by 30% of people aged over 60, 21% of people aged 50-59, and only 10-12% of younger age groups. Thus, religious education in confessional educational institutions isn’t a serious source of churching for Russian Orthodox Church. At its best it is capable of providing preservation of already available small group of active believers. Getting the opportunity of introduction of religious disciplines at secular school will allow the Russian Orthodox Church to break a negative tendency of churching sources weakening”<sup>17</sup>. Respectively, from positions of church interests, the mass (secular) school represents a potentially influential missionary channel specializing on the group of children and teenagers, with almost 100% coverage of the corresponding category of the population and demanding the minimum costs of realization.

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17 Kanevsky K., Relationship of secular school and religious associations: legal aspect, *Religion and law*, No. 2, 2005, p. 28.

2. The state which has experienced deep crisis of legitimacy after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and disavowal of communist ideology, from the very beginning viewed the Church represented by Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy as a significant source of its legitimation. The reliability of this source (the Church is the only national institute which has kept historical succession since ancient times), its high social and cultural authority, and also active positioning of the Russian Orthodox Church as that, in combination with absence of comparable organizations of the same size and symbolic capital, in a rising pro-religious and pro-church social environment led to the formation of a “block” of the government and church positions on a number of the major questions of public life at the level of central and regional authorities.

It is necessary to recognize that to some extent the interest of post-Soviet governmental institutions in cooperation with the most influential religious organization in society is defined by need of joint opposition to tendencies of a social anomy and the cultural degradation, which overwhelmed Russian society during the post-Soviet period. The main and immediate driving force of practical interest of the state to Church lies in the fact that it “continues to play an exclusive role in reproduction of such political resources, as authority, influence, image that makes the church an important participant of federal significance in struggle for accumulation, deduction and distribution of power”<sup>18</sup>. For this reason the state subjects are interested in certain educational concessions to church structures (in limited and controlled scales) with control preserved over the main contents and education forms.

3. At last, the position of the general public on the issue of introduction of religious innovations in system of mass secular education should be defined as ambiguous. Nevertheless, the tendency of public support of the relevant church initiatives is rather noticeable and is recognized not only by their supporters. So, the group of leading experts at the Russian Presidential Academy of public service noted “the system of religious education, arisen practically from scratch and including today all known steps: from kindergarten to the highest religious educational institutions, convincingly testifies the activity level of public opinion in the field of religious and theological education in the last 5–7 years”<sup>19</sup>. As for the question of introduction of confessionally focused subjects in secular educational communication, according to data of some all-Russian sociological researches, the introduction of the subject “Bases of Orthodox Culture” to the Russian schools in 2006 was approved by 61% of respondents (18% from them approved its teaching within the obligatory program)<sup>20</sup>. According to the

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18 Zaychenko A., Authority as a political resource of church, *Religion and law*, No. 4, 2003, p. 6.

19 Development of theological education in the public and municipal educational institutions of the Russian Federation (An analytical material) p. 33.

20 Whether “Bases of orthodox culture” are necessary in modern school? <http://www.superjob.ru/research/articles/420/nuzhny-li-osnovy-pravoslavnoj-kultury-sovremennoj-shkole/> (accessed May 2015)



research of the Institute of Socio-Political Research under the Russian Academy of Sciences (ISPR RAS) in 2010 (the central region of Russia, №. = 601), carried out with the assistance of the author, the "Bases of Orthodox Culture" module in a training course "Bases of religious cultures and secular ethics" would be chosen for their child by 49.1% of respondents.

The third main subject is the generalized potential target subject of Russian education presented by the public (public opinion), in its considerable part inclines to support the educational initiatives of Church and the state. M.P. Mchedlov noted, "it is promoted by many factors, including public instability, long moral and social crisis, absence of understood and accepted by the people secular concepts of a way out of it, people's historical memory of patriotic activity of church during the most difficult critical periods, faiths action for protecting the rights and dignity of the deprived people, ordinary nationals against the extended negative phenomena: inspirituality, cynicism, corruption, drug addiction, etc."<sup>21</sup>. Respectively, confessionally focused subjects are supported by the public in that measure in which the public opinion connects them with overcoming of a situation of a macrosocial disaster and the related "emergency" quality of life. Another vital factor of pro-orthodox educational initiatives support by the part of the Russian population can be remaining high level of trust to church institutions. Even in 2012, after well-known media scandals, as noted by J.Yu. Sinelina, the trust of the population in the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy continued to remain strong<sup>22</sup>. By M. M. Mchedlova's estimation of the same period, "trust level to institute of the Church steadily raises" that she claims to be connected with distribution of church influence on irreligious part of society, and also with performance of stabilization function of political system by the religious organizations<sup>23</sup>.

It should be noted that in this connection statements of some researchers<sup>24</sup>, completely excluding pupils and their parents from among supporters of confessionally focused theological subjects at schools and ranking them as a whole to the opponents of the confessionally focused version of education, are represented as sociologically incorrect, either because of lack of sufficient empirical justification of such conclusions, or because the similar conclusions differ from data of other researches<sup>25</sup>. From our point of view, similar radical estimations

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21 Mchedlov M., About features of believers' outlook in post-Soviet Russia, *Religion and law*, No. 1, 2002, p. 16.

22 Sinelina J.Yu., Church and the literate: myths and reality, *Monitoring of public opinion*, No. 4, Vol. 110, 2012, p. 86.

23 Mchedlova M.M., Modern parameters of return of religion: problem aspects, *Bulletin of Institute of Sociology*, No. 4, May 2012, p. 18.

24 Mitrokhin N., *Clericalization of education and reaction of modern Russian society, Limits of secularism: public discussion about the principle of secular state and about ways of realization of a freedom of worship*, Compiler A. Verkhovsky, "Sova" center, 2005, p.132.

25 Lebedev S.D., Bakharev V.V., Religious culture in secular education (regional aspect), *Scientific papers of BSU, Philosophy. Sociology. Law*, No. 14, Vol. 54, 2008, Issue 6, p. 119, p. 121.; Menshikov V.M., *Teaching of orthodox culture at school: experience of Kursk region, Religion and school of modern Russia: documents, materials, speeches*, Planet 2000,

are based on the identification of confessionally focused education with actually confessional education whereas fundamentally these two projects are based on essentially different approaches.

Thus, equally effective interests of three main strategic subjects of Russian education stated above logically predetermine the character of an educational mainstream of a theological reflection as compromise of the purposes of secular and religious actors of education. Due to established “balance of services” with the state, the Church and supporting public structures get officially authorized and broad access to the most mass channel of education – secondary school that greatly reduces expenses in comparison with prospect of forming “parallel” mass system of religious education and involvement of the secular majority in it. However, the transfer of the gravity center of church educational strategy on introduction of confessionally focused subjects in secular school objectively imposes considerable additional restrictions on it. Direct catechization and religious training at mass school which would optimally correspond to church interests, in reality conflict with strategic (provisions of the Constitution and the Federal legislation) and tactical solutions of the government directed at preservation of secular character of the public relations, statehood and education itself as status quo of a sociocultural situation. An equally important factor is the cultural resistance of the target subject of the education, expressed in lack of sufficient motivation to the special confessional education with the major part of school students and their parents. Due to a strong secularization of the Russian culture and the society, such initiatives have the minimum support from the major part of pupils and their parents, who hardly associate the socially attractive outer side of orthodox religion and culture with personal involvement in cult and doctrinal core. At the same time the Russian state is interested in ideological and symbolical support of church structures, and the broad public opinion as a whole sympathize the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy, Orthodoxy and the conservative values associated with them<sup>26</sup>. The specified strategic balance of interests against the background of secular character of a sociocultural mainstream causes a priority of confessionally focused approach to an educational reflection on religion in modern Russian education which, apparently, will remain in the years to come.

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2003, pp. 109-110.; Nikandrov N., Orthodox traditions, family and school in modern Russia, [http://www.portalus.ru/modules/shkola/rus\\_readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1193319731&archive=1196814959&start\\_from=&ucat=&](http://www.portalus.ru/modules/shkola/rus_readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1193319731&archive=1196814959&start_from=&ucat=&). (accessed May 2015)

26 Fuhrman D.E., Kaariaynen K., Religious stabilization. The relation to religion in modern Russia, *Svobodnaya mysl – XXI, Theoretical and political journal*, No. 7, 2003, pp. 19-20.



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**Сергеј Д. Лебедев**

## **ДРУШТВЕНО-ПОЛИТИЧКЕ ОСНОВЕ ВЕРСКЕ ПРАКСЕ РЕЛИГИОЗНИХ СТУДИЈА У РУСКОМ ОБРАЗОВАЊУ**

### **Сажетак**

Чланак је посвећен теоријској анализи друштвено-политичких основа развоја верског образовања у пост-совјетској Русији. Указује се и на специфичне едукативне иновације у поређењу са секуларним теолошким и верским образовањем. Аутор доказује конзистентност развоја верског (православног) образовног приступа у односу на религију са позитивном корелацијом у односу на три главна субјекта руског образовања: државе, Руске православне цркве и јавности.

**Кључне речи:** образовање, верска култура, рефлексије, секуларна култура, традиција

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