Religious Education in the Russian Federation: The Interpretive approach to ‘Spiritual & Moral’ Education in St. Petersburg

Fedor Kozyrev

Fedor Kozyrev outlines a hermeneutical approach to spiritual and moral education developed in St. Petersburg, utilising concepts from Robert Jackson’s interpretive approach, combining these with ideas from Trevor Cooling, Michael Grimmitt and John Hull, together with Kozyrev’s own contribution.

In 2006 the Concept of National Educational Policy in Russia made public the State’s new priorities with an emphasis on the ethical and social function of education as well as on the task of ‘spiritual consolidation of the multi-ethnic Russian population into one political nation’. This shift in national policy brought a new subject area into the school curriculum called ‘Basics of Spiritual & Moral Culture of the Peoples of Russia’. In April 2010, a federal experiment of introducing the new subject area into school practice was launched in 19 selected regions of Russia. School children of 9-11 years old (grades 4 and 5 in the Russian school system) are offered a choice of 6 subject units: Basics of Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish or Buddhist cultures, World Religions and Secular Ethics. 34 hours are allocated for the whole teaching course, notionally divided between the last semester of grade 4 (last grade of primary school) and the first semester of grade 5. The first and the last lessons of all 6 units are to be delivered to the joint group of pupils and committed to the topics of ‘Russia is our common home’ and ‘Love for the Fatherland’.

The federally assigned approach to ‘Spiritual & Moral Education’ is supposed to be non-confessional regarding teacher competences, assessment and teaching methods. Yet it is not sufficiently clear how far religious institutions will contribute to teacher training and syllabus design. The experiment revealed two major problems with the tested approach. First, it seems unrealistic to provide all 6 options in every school, so it is more likely that only the dominant religious culture (Orthodoxy or Islam in some regions) and Secular Ethics as an alternative will be provided in the majority of schools. This situation is charged with potential protests from religious minorities. Second, there is a definite lack of competence on the part of the teachers, especially in the case of the ‘World Religions’ unit. Short courses of post-diploma training provided by federal and local experts in the regions are not enough to compensate for the profound lack of religious knowledge in those who graduated from state schools and universities where religion was never taught. The desire of the federal authorities to keep the system of education tightly centralized creates also a tendency to ignore the existing experience with religion in education accumulated in the regions, and thus actually causes a retreat in the development of pedagogy of religious education and in the diversification of the educational system. One might add that the issue of using religion for ideological purposes that has been a hot topic of public debates and public concern during last two decades remains unresolved within the official approach.

Facing these new opportunities and challenges, the Institute of Religious Pedagogy at the Russian Christian Academy for Humanities developed its own syllabus for the new area and called it ‘Spiritual & Moral Talks’. St Petersburg is not among the 19 regions selected for the experiment. However, the St. Petersburg Committee of Education supported our initiative and granted the status of ‘city lab’ to one of the state gymnasiums to test and to elaborate our model. Three other state schools joint the experiment and the number of schools participating is expected to grow.
Our approach is distinct from the federal one in at least two respects. First, it is an integrative one, based on the idea of ‘RE for all’ as formulated by Wolfram Weisse at the University of Hamburg. The subject consists of 3 sequential thematic units of study: ‘Gospel Parables’, ‘The Wisdom of the East’ (presenting traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism and Islam) and ‘The Pearls of Virtue’. The first two units are based on the study of scriptural texts, and the third one presents life stories of outstanding people, including well-known figures from Russian and World history and from different religious and non-religious traditions. Second, we consider our approach to be a contextual adaptation and development of the idea of developmental RE or ‘learning from religion’(Grimmitt) as well as of John Hull’s ‘Gift to the Child’. We call our pedagogy ‘Religion as a gift’ as distinct from ‘Religion as the law’ on one hand and ‘Religion as a fact’ on the other. Historical and philosophical grounds for this pedagogy are presented in a recent book (Kozyrev 2010).

The methodology of ‘Spiritual & Moral Talks’ is basically dialogical and interpretive, so that interpretation, search for meaning and participating in discussions are core activities of the learner. We try to minimize indoctrinating and ideological influences that an encounter with religious values may produce in the child, and to ensure a certain distance that helps children to bridge their spiritual experience with religious traditions, and not endangering privacy their personal religious life. We regard our learners as researchers interested in understanding and engaging with what they are introduced to, but not necessarily adopting it. Compared to purely informational approaches, these prerequisites tend to give what Robert Jackson calls ‘...a looser, more personal and organic picture of religious traditions’ (Jackson 1997, 109). In accordance with this main idea, textbooks written for use in the classroom consist of 6 main structural elements:

1) pieces of scriptural texts for study (sometimes complemented with an adapted version easier for children to understand)
2) new words for the learner’s vocabulary and questions for clarification
3) historical and cultural reference information
4) examples of traditional exegesis
5) masterpieces of art inspired by the text under study
6) tasks for classroom exercises and homework. The textbooks contain free space for the learner’s own notes.

Following the framework of the Warwick interpretive approach (Jackson 1997, 2000, 2011), we distinguish 3 phases of the educational process: representation, interpretation and reflection/edification. The micro-cycle formed by these phases recurs each time with a new topic, first within a lesson and then on a bigger scale when a sequence of topically connected lessons ends with a special ‘summing-up’ lesson closing a subject sub-unit. An example is ‘religions of ancient civilizations’, which includes Chinese and Indian traditions.

Two pedagogical ideas from other English sources were found by us most useful in practical terms. The first concerns issues of representation. The proper way of representation is a major task for syllabus makers, textbook authors and teachers in relation to lesson planning. The practicality of John Hull’s concept of ‘boot-strapping’ as presented in his ‘Gift to the Child’ approach (Hull 2000, 116) became evident for us in the course of selecting Gospel parables for our subject. Indeed, some parables, while successfully translating the core message of Christianity and thus satisfying the ‘phenomenological criteria’ for selection, were found not to satisfy ‘experiential criteria’ in being too difficult or confusing for children of the specified age. The focus on the ethical dimension of religious traditions made us slightly change priorities and select parables based not on phenomenological but rather on ethical criteria of representation. Thus we chose parables delivering some clear moral message and avoid parables concerning
mysteries of the Kingdom. We also found two straps not enough for our boot! The criterion of coherence was added as soon as we realized that the sequence of parables may serve as a ‘stairway’ to Christian ethics, starting with more simple and basic imperatives and ascending to more sophisticated ones. Some parables, beautiful from other points of view, did not meet this criterion and so had to give way to less impressive parables which were able to ‘fill up the gap’ in the sequence. An additional criterion for selection was a cultural one, as we tended to choose, if possible, parables introducing concepts, images and ideas so deeply rooted in our everyday culture that their religious origin may be unclear for children (such as the concept of talents).

The second idea to be mentioned regards interpretation. The difficult situation of an ordinary 45 minutes lesson in a class with some 20-30 pupils, tired during the school day, brings limitations to discussion and sometimes makes unrealistic expectations about children’s receptivity and activity. There is a need in this situation not only ‘to unpack the range of concepts but also to select one or two of these to be the focus of attention in this particular unit of work’, as underlined by Trevor Cooling in his description of the Concept Cracking model (Cooling 2000, 157). Another common point with our vision is Cooling’s understanding of hermeneutical process as ‘the interaction between the horizon of the student and the horizon of the text’ (Cooling 2000, 161), though I would prefer to talk about the horizon of previous readers including both representatives of canonical exegetics and representatives of secular literature and arts creatively using the text. In any case, purposeful broadening of students’ horizons works very well as the guiding idea to help the teacher not to lose orientation during spontaneous dialogical classroom interaction and to balance different pedagogical tasks.

When the ethical dimension of religious life is central for the subject, the final stage of the cycle quite naturally takes the form of edification, a term introduced by Robert Jackson (1997, 130-134). It is at this stage that the task of bridging religious tradition with the personal experience of the child, as shared and expressed by all the theorists mentioned above, becomes the teacher’s main concern. Edification is essentially the part of the story pupils should find and formulate themselves. Our textbooks do not contain any ‘prepared’ conclusions of the lessons. Instead every lesson ends with main questions to be answered and with an invitation for pupils to draw their conclusion themselves. The second round of reflection takes place at home when children do their homework. These exercises are designed with an agenda of making links between parables. Results of these second round reflections and interpretations are discussed during summing-up lessons.

References


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**Dr Fedor Kozyrev is Professor at the Institute of Religious Pedagogy at the Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, St. Petersburg, and was a contributor to the European Commission REDCo Project. His publications in English include:**


*He can be contacted on: fkozyrev@yahoo.co.uk*