

EEIA-2018
**2018 International Conference "Education Environment for
the Information Age"**

**ON TEACHING OF “HISTORIC FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN
FAITH” IN RUSSIAN PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITIES**

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Abstract

The paper describes the experience of presenting the “Historic Foundation of Christian Faith” course to Pedagogical audiences in universities and Teachers’ Continuing Education Centers in Russia as a rational basis for the teachers and pedagogical university students to present the moral and theological claims of Christianity in the classroom. It provides a socio-political and cultural context in which this training has been taking place in the course of the last decade and argues for its benefits especially for public educators charged with the task of teaching classes of Introduction to Orthodox Culture and other humanities in Russia. Historical background of the implementation of the Introduction to Religious Culture and Secular Ethics course in Russian public schools is also reviewed in order to put the above mentioned process into historic perspective and to point out certain stumbling blocks it encountered on its way. The paper also describes the advantages of the historic approach to the introduction of Christian faith and Orthodox culture in the classroom against some other common methods and paradigms as it opens the student to their very unique nature of being based on the facts of ancient history, supported by both internal (manuscripts) and external (archeology) evidence and not simply on traditional views or ideological dogmas.

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Keywords: Religion, Christianity, Rational foundation, History, Archeology, Bible.

“...Therefore, before you accept Jesus Christ you should do the following... Carefully test the foundation of Christianity that is the very book of the Holy Scripture that our Orthodox faith is base on: learn where they came from, who and when wrote them, how did they survive and were passed to us, and why are they called Divine and Holy, etc.” (Veniaminov, 2014)



1. Introduction

It is hard to overestimate the significance of the recent turn in the orientation of public secondary educational system in Russia in regards to the spiritual and moral education (Voskresensky, 2013). After two decades of persistent resistance to direct inculcation of moral values in the hearts and minds of young men and women that led to almost complete absence of these important aspects of human life in federal educational standards the society seems to be gradually coming to realization of their importance in the life of a civilized society that does not want to fall into a primeval state surrounded by its more sagacious neighbours (Shakhnovitch, 2017).

This turn, however, was met with much suspicion and even resistance by both educators and society at large (Yensen, 2016). Cautious position of the Russian educational system is, however, very understandable if one remembers how tired they all were after three quarters of a century long period of completely fake ideological “party line” forced over it under the disguise of nurturing a truly “harmonic person” [garmonichnaya lichnost]. Secondly, it is easy to remember how bitterly the Russian population was disappointed once it was liberated from that ideology and hurriedly rushed to try on the whole variety of moral “dresses” that flooded the country from all over the world after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Tagunova, 2012). For a number of years now the educational system has been showing extreme caution towards any kind of outside moral pressure towards the young person. The new and the politically correct “party line” seemed to become: information, data, scientific facts and knowledge will naturally, by themselves, lead to developing in the next generation the moral norms and values and will lead it to a more responsible and charitable way of life. If, for some reason, this was still not happening the answer was: not enough knowledge and information was pumped into the young minds and not enough sources opened and resources provided to them for their research, learning and academic advancement. By some estimates (used as a rule of thumb by Russian pre-college tutors and coaches) a Russian high school graduate is now two years ahead of their European and American peers in terms of the sum of knowledge. This is how long it usually takes for a Western student to prepare for an entrance exam in a Russian university apart from learning the language (Russia..., 2015). However, the miracle was not happening and the new generation was not getting any more morally and ethically advanced, and not even more kind and polite (Vulfson, 2008).

Apparently, the hope for the omnipotent and immanent goodness of knowledge was falling short of everyone’s expectation – just as it already did once, three hundred years ago when the Enlightenment era freed humankind from the “bonds” of Christian morality and opened wide the perspectives of natural sciences, research and exploration. The miracle just didn’t happen. Again. The values that the Church and religious culture were carefully developing, testing, collecting and preserving were not showing up in humans by themselves, evolutionary and “naturally”.

2. Problem Statement

Apparently, the country of Russia was facing the necessity of reaching out to this collective experience of humankind and introducing it to the state educational system for the purpose of direct instruction in developing practical social skills in kindness, love, freedom, responsibility, etc. (Kozyrev, 2002). On August 2, 2009, a new subject was introduced in all grade schools of the country –

“Introduction to Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” (IRCSE) – with the idea of bringing in the moral and ethical values of the world religions into the classroom via the medium of culture and arts (Clay, 2015).

However, as it often happens when a good and practical matter is given to a powerful but cumbersome governmental agency – its implementation in real life turned into its complete opposite and even a caricature (Knyaginina, Jankiewicz, 2017). It almost looks like the very idea of moral education was intentionally discredited for the sake of such popular slogans as “political correctness”, “religious tolerance” and “separation of state and church”. One should however stay away from any suspicion of inner sabotage by the bureaucratic state and educational functionaries because they also live in the same country and have children and grandchildren of their own. It is just that they seem to take anything “cultural” to be by its very nature temporary and optional and, consequently, not as something that should or even could be foundational for one’s morality and ethics. Many Russians superstitiously consider themselves to be “Orthodox Christians” simply by virtue of being born in Russia or by being ethnically Russian. Laying, therefore, a firm foundation of history and real life experience of Orthodox Christian faith is of critical importance for the Russian schools’ educators and, more broadly, educational community and academia (Shmonin, 2014).

3. Research Questions

The question, therefore, can be very simply formulated as follows: what would make both teachers and their students consider the claims of Christianity seriously? Or, what would move the matters of religious faith from the peripheral and marginal realm of “good-old” fairytale into the place it deserves – a foundational basis of one’s worldview and decision-making? Living in the “information age”, what kind of evidence and reasoning will enable a teacher to present his or her case for the moral and aesthetic value of Orthodox culture in the classroom?

4. Purpose of the Study

The course on “Historic Foundation of Christian Faith” (Bierle, 2016) has been offered in state universities and teachers’ continuing education centres all over Russia (and also in Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Belarus and Poland) in the last ten years. By now, every fourth high school in Russia has at least one teacher who was trained in and equipped with this curriculum. The course provides the teachers with the training, material and media they can then use in their classrooms while teaching classes in History, Literature, Visual Arts, and “Introduction to Orthodox Culture” and “Introduction to World Religions” (two of six modules within the IRCSE) with confidence and professionalism. Each teacher trained in this curriculum also receives a full PowerPoint® presentation for download and further individual research and continuing personal or small group study.

5. Research Methods

The data from the audience’s feedback remarks, commentaries and questions was recorded, analyzed in a peer review settings and later implemented back to the presentation content and format. Some initial assumptions (e.g., expectation of the teachers’ and university students’ familiarity with at

least basic theological terminology) were discarded. Many additional supplemental and illustrational items (e.g., historic background, maps and other visuals and media objects) developed and added.

The newly discovered and constantly updated historic material includes the data of archaeology, palaeography (manuscripts) and Biblical textual criticism presenting the life of Christ as a real life account experienced, recorded and carefully documented by the Early Church – not just as a myth or a religious doctrine developed by some spiritual leader or a pious community. Teachers are encouraged to take advantage of the digital format of the material and to adopt it to the particular needs of their classes – different school curricula topics, different age groups, different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, etc., etc. Integrated into their school curricula, this material enables the teachers to present to their students a deeper and more profound understanding in the respective fields of science, knowledge and experience. Events of World History begin to make sense and to fall into more logical sequence once this most and key event – life of Christ – has taken its proper place in the course of human history. Symbolic and spiritual meaning of pieces of literature, music and visual arts regain their original, authorial significance and profundity. Discoveries and laws of hard sciences begin to paint a more harmonic and complete picture of the universe.

6. Findings

Not every teacher and not every student, of course, is necessarily becoming a devout believer in God Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour but every one of them is given a fair chance to weigh on the objective scientific evidence for the New Testament story's credibility and integrity of the Bible (Bibliya, 2012) text. Most of the audiences receive the training with great interest and appreciation of its content and format. Feedback commentaries and Q&A sessions at the end of the training prove the material to be well understood, appropriate and allowing the teachers to present the Orthodox Culture and Christian values in the context of the IRCSE course in a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive way. Knowing objective historic evidence for the Orthodox Christian faith enables the teacher to teach the material with confidence and professionalism, thus avoiding many tension points that often appear if it is presented as only based on individual feelings, abstract doctrinal statements or local traditions and customs (Zdanov, 2016).

7. Conclusion

Needless to say that the training provides only the most basic and foundational evidence and that audiences are always encouraged to continue and to deepen their own quest for truth applying the tools and research methods they've just been given. However, even the limited scale of introducing the course to about three thousand public school teachers and pedagogical university students per year is already making a difference in the overall atmosphere around the issue of teaching religion in schools as more and more students and their parents see how the matters of Christian faith and Orthodox culture could be, first, reasonable and, second, beneficial for their whole livelihood. The fact is that once it was taught in a certain city or town for the first time the invitation to present it to a wider audience and to do it on a regular basis usually follows.

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