

The Secular in the Religious and the Religious in the Secular: Humanities School Education in Pre-Revolutionary Russia and Nowadays

Anton V. Yermoshin^a, Nataliya G. Nikolaeva^{b*}

* Corresponding author: Nataliya G. Nikolaeva, natalia.nikolaeva@kazangmu.ru

^aKazan Orthodox Theological Seminary, Tschelyuskina 31a, Kazan 420036, Russia, antoniy_v@mail.ru

^bKazan State Medical University / Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Butlerova 49, Kazan 420012, Russia, natalia.nikolaeva@kazangmu.ru

Abstract

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The key research problem lies in the substantiation of the interdisciplinary method necessity in religion teaching in secular school as well as in religious higher education. The problem bases in the fact that the religion as a subject came back in secular educational system, and that causes a lot of questions because of the loss of tradition and leak of professional educated staff. These questions are of great importance in the general context of relationship between the state and the Orthodox Church of which intense formation we are evidenced right now. In this connection, we find it important to research the experience of religion teaching in the pre-revolutionary period in Russia and to compare it with modern experiences. As a purpose of this research, we consider the analysis of facts of the past of Russian school secular education and of the present of religious higher education nowadays directed to enunciate some recommendations for the modern school in the matter of religion teaching. The conclusions made are following. The interdisciplinary approach concerning humanities may show itself as very useful also in secular school education. Under the circumstances of coming back of religion component in the secular education, it seems to be reasonable to teach the essentials of orthodoxy on examples from Russian literature, which is very rich on this point. It can also be harmonized with the actual discussion on the school literature canon.

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Keywords: School education; religion as a school subject; interdisciplinary methods and means; upbringing of personality.

1. Introduction

Nowadays we are witnessing examples of escalating interaction between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state. Very distinctly, this interaction shows itself in the field of education. In elementary school there is introduction of the subject “Bases of Orthodox Culture”, meanwhile it was



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only in the 4th grade; but the proposal is actually discussed to make this subject obligatory up to the final year of high school. Recently, the “Society of Russian language and literature” was founded in Russia, the head which became the Patriarch. The society sees its purpose in the definition of the concept of teaching the Humanities, especially Russian language and literature, in schools and universities and formulates its objectives as follows: “Consolidation of efforts of scientists, teachers, artists, the public for maintaining the leading role of the Russian language and literature in the education of the younger generation, strengthening of identical cultural and educational space, development of the best traditions of Russian education in the Humanities, cultural and educational activities” (Obshchestvo, 2016). At the awarding ceremony of Patriarch literature prize his Highness underlined: “I am deeply convinced that the teaching of the Russian language and literature at modern school today is an experiment”. He noted that “experiments replaced one another, and the hours allocated to language and literature in the school course become less and less, and our children and young people read less and less.” “And literature becomes less and less a factor of cultural influence on the identity of our contemporaries, especially young people”, said the Patriarch (Kirill, 2016).

On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore a number of issues that arise in the educational environment in connection with the return of the religious component in the curriculum. The main problems we see are of two types: first, the loss of pedagogical traditions in this area and the lack of qualified personnel to teach the new subject (“Bases of Orthodox culture”); secondly, the unwillingness of most students to perceive such information in the absence of family traditions (even if formal affiliation of their parents to the Orthodoxy).

In this regard it seemed to us expedient to study the experience of teaching the Religion (“Zakon Bozhii”) in Russian schools in pre-revolutionary period and the experience of teaching theological disciplines in modern higher theological schools, in order to present some recommendations for the modern school in the sphere of teaching religion.

1.1 Problem statement and research questions

The key research problem lies in the substantiation of the interdisciplinary method necessity in religion teaching in secular school as well as in religious higher education. The problem bases in the fact that the religion as a subject came back in secular educational system, and that causes a lot of questions because of the loss of tradition and leak of professional educated staff. These questions are of great importance in the general context of relationship between the state and the Orthodox Church in which intense formation we are evidenced right now. In this connection, we find it important to research the experience of religion teaching in the pre-revolutionary period in Russia and to compare it with modern experiences.

1.2 Purpose of the study

As a purpose of this research we consider the analysis of facts of the past of Russian school secular education and of the present of religious higher education nowadays directed to enunciate some recommendations for the modern school in the matter of religion teaching. In reaching this proposed purpose we rely on the definite source base, including educational programs and handbooks of the

beginning of the twentieth century, discussions on the subject in the contemporary mass media, proceedings and journals of Church conferences as well as educational issue of nowadays reflected in documents and discussions.

1.3 Research methods

The methodology of our research combines theoretical and practical means. On the one side, we use historical, historiographical methods, methods of the retrospective analysis and analogy. On the other side, we apply empirical methods of observation, conversation and debate. The comparison as an analysis instrument let us reveal the similarity in educational paradigms of the present and the past concerning the problem of religion teaching.

2. Findings

2.1. Situation in the educational system in pre-revolutionary Russia

Studying the history of secondary education in pre-revolutionary Russia, every researcher is faced with a considerable number of negative evaluations, including excessive overload of training programs, combined with their extreme boredom and low levels of teaching methods. Often as an example in this regard the discipline “Religion” is provided (“Zakon Bozhiy”), a mandatory element of curricula of secondary schools in pre-revolutionary Russia. In the teaching practice, it was sometimes reduced to reading boring and obscure lectures, totally incomprehensible for students, and to requirements to memorize large pieces of texts by heart. One of consequences of this style of religion teaching is the decline of interest in the subject by the students, which, coupled with a number of other socio-cultural factors characteristic of post-reform Russia, have led in the last decades of the 19th – early 20th centuries to the spread of negative attitudes towards the subject by students, parents, secular teachers, intellectuals (Mustafina & Yermoshin, 2015).

At the same time in the specified period, motivated and engaged teachers undertook gradually attempts to rectify the situation, to diversify the teaching of Religion, to make it more interesting for children under the motto: “If you want to raise in children a living religious feeling, don’t retell them abstract dogmas of faith – clothe the truths of religion in the live images. Do not neglect, moreover, as often as possible appeal to poetry of faith and love” (Rozhdestvin, 1900).

One of the congresses of Religion teachers was held by order of the Holy Synod in 1913 in Kazan. In the reports and the decisions of this congress there are very interesting, even innovative for the early XXth century ideas. Among them is the necessity of use of literature, visual and musical arts in the teaching of Religion in gymnasiums and other secondary schools.

Of these learning tools, the paintings were, of course, the first ones that appeared on the lessons of the Religion. They were educational illustrations for lessons in the Sacred History of the Old and New Testaments, Church history and Liturgy. But, being only the works of “academic” painting particularly illustrative in their nature, they did not have any considerable influence on the aesthetic sense of students. The Congress also made a suggestion to use as illustrative material the masterpieces of outstanding Russian and Western painters and sculptors – that of religious subjects: Raphael, Leonardo

da Vinci, Kramskoy, Makovskiy, Vasnetsov, Nesterov, and others. It was considered as very valuable “to acquaint students through a projection lantern with the great artistic creations and with the images of archeology, for example, the catacombs, excavations, and to add also with the paintings of great artists, concerning the Church's great events” (Protokoly, 1913: 16-17). Moreover, the acquaintance with them was intended not only for the sake of illustration of educational material, but also to discuss the moral-psychological component of the story and its characters. “Works of art offer healthy foods for various ages: they are interesting in very early youth, and the old age may think about them, and these works, religious in nature, can affect the person with the best hand”, so they should be considered as “strong supporting educational means” (Protokoly, 1913: 51).

As another important aesthetic tool for religious training and education fiction was defined. Thus, according to one of the priests and religion teachers, “for children, it would be very useful to find in a good book live examples of the performance of the Christian ideal,” but, he urged, “choose such books, that purity of their content would combine artistry of presentation” (Protokoly, 1913: 16).

One of the speakers of the mentioned Kazan congress of religion teachers confirmed the validity and justification of this idea with concrete examples: Some high schools in Kazan held in the period from 1908 till 1913 literature and musical soirees of religious character. According to him, “the program for these evenings consisted of poems of famous secular writers on moral and religious subjects: Pushkin, Lermontov, Nikitin, Al. Tolstoy, Baratynskiy, Khomyakov, Maykov, Pleshcheyev, Rosenheim, Apukhtin, K. R. (Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov), Polonskiy, Nadson, May, Zhukovskiy, Koltsov, Kozlov, Yazykov and others”. The speaker noted that such events were always successful. They made a deep impression on schoolboys and schoolgirls, not in the least because “when from the lips of these writers, “familiar” for profane people, they hear preaching of faith in God and love for man, it gives a strong impression, enhanced by the artistry of the sermon. “In our rich literature really there are also such things, and how it is that we haven’t yet noticed it?” – those are some confessions after such evenings.” (Protokoly, 1913, 21).

Another important component of these educational tools was the music, in the case of teaching the Religion, which also insisted one of the members of the mentioned congress of 1913. In the course of these literature and musical soirees “student choirs and individual students performed religious musical works by Tchaikovsky, Gounod, Grechaninov, Turchaninov, Bortnianskiy, Smolenskiy, Chesnokov and others” (Protokoly, 1913, 22).

So we see not only a very deep awareness of the crisis of religious education in secular high school to the early twentieth century, but also attempts to overcome it. The involvement of various aesthetic tools in the teaching of the Religion was intended to strengthen the interest of students in receiving religious knowledge, and through enhancing their general cultural horizon to promote the deepening of their religiosity and raising of their moral level.

However, for these conversations not so much time was left because soon the revolutionary upheavals put an end to religious education in high school, and many of the aforementioned ideas did not have time to produce tangible fruit. But they undoubtedly amounted to an important stage in the development of Russian pedagogical thought of the early twentieth century, the essence of which is to try to approach spiritual training and education with the general Humanities educational paradigm.

2.2 Situation in the theological education nowadays

The tradition of this approach was continued and mostly revived in theological education in our day. The curricula of higher theological educational institutions (theological academies and seminaries, etc.) include not only special subjects, but also courses in art history and history of Russian and world literature. In addition, students study a wide range of historical and philological disciplines, which, being in its content the “secular sciences”, serve in this case the reception of inherently theological knowledge not in isolation but in the general humanitarian discourse. Training of Church personnel, capable of cultural communication in today's society, is one of the priority tasks of spiritual education and upbringing nowadays.

2.3 Proposals concerning secular school education

Interdisciplinary approach in the Humanities can be applied in the secular school education, especially under the circumstances of a definite crisis in teaching the Humanities based in rapid changes in social life and relations. There is also a number of particular problems concerning definite disciplines of secondary school curricula.

For instance, Russian classical literature, unfortunately, is not properly read, from the point of view that we are inevitably withdrawing from that historical and cultural context in which it was created. It recently noted in his interview the specialist in Russian literature and writer Evgeniy Vodolazkin. Responding to a reporter's question, if the difference in thinking influence our perception of classical writers of the 19th century, Vodolazkin said: “I am afraid that we will not ever be able to understand all of these authors thoroughly. More precisely, we could, but only with great amount of effort required study the many books of the epoch. Because in order to perceive Pushkin, I must read not only him, but also Zhukovskiy, Dmitriev, literature of the 18th century and Old Russian literature. That is, to understand the context. But how many people do want to do this?” (Vodolazkin, 2016).

But if it will be read at least in the context of Orthodoxy, which at the time prevailed in the lives and minds of people more than today, and determined the views of many writers, much of it will become clearer. In this respect, the interdisciplinary connections between the course of Russian literature and the Religion lessons at school are also urgently needed, so much as between Russian literature and, for example, the discipline “Ethical Theology” at the Seminary. The lessons in “Bases of Orthodox culture” should certainly contribute to the aesthetic education of students, since it is impossible to deny the fact that the Sacred Scripture is the key to the history of European painting, without which it is impossible to understand it and to accept. Psychology of school age demands that it is important to understand what is written, shown, etc. If the object is not clear, the interest in it is lost. Thus, in the power of the teacher of the Religion is to acquaint the student to the world art heritage, or to leave him indifferent to it.

Relevant experience in the effective use of interdisciplinary connections can be gleaned from the practice of teaching in religious educational institutions. Thus, it would be useful to arrange joint conferences on exchange of experiences, including teaching.

So, despite the numerous of loss that accompanied the history of Russian education for the past century, surprisingly, paradigm of interdisciplinary connections between the disciplines of secular and

religious nature has survived in spiritual education and remains sufficiently effective, it can be applied in a secular school education, of course, with a different arrangement of accents within these paradigms to achieve the most neutral presentation of the material, which is very important in a multi-religious environment of modern Russian society.

3. Conclusions

As the result of our investigation we can ascertain not only a very deep awareness of the crisis of religious education in secular school to the beginning of the twentieth century, but also attempts to overcome it. The involvement of the different aesthetic means of religion teaching was intended to strengthen the interest of students in their receiving of religious knowledge, and through enhancing their general cultural horizon to promote the deepening of religiosity and raising their moral level. The same methodology seems to be successful in the modern religious higher education: obtaining the specialized knowledge is accompanied by learning of the history of arts and literature, what is fixed in educational standards of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, the conclusions made are: The interdisciplinary approach concerning Humanities may show itself as very useful also in secular school education. Under the circumstances of coming back of religion component in the secular education, it seems to be reasonable to teach the essentials of Orthodoxy on examples from Russian literature which is very rich on this point. It can be also harmonized with the actual discussion on the school literature canon.

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