

The “Foundations of Orthodox Culture” - A New Subject in Russian State Schools

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Abstract

Since September 2012 “Foundations of Orthodox culture” is taught in all Russian state schools for children in 4th and partially 5th grade. The new subject is one of the six modules being offered under the general title “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics” among which pupils and/or parents have to choose. The article shows the main tendencies of the public debates connected with the Russian Orthodox Church’s attempt of “culture building” through its influence on the state school system. The first part of the article presents the main phases of the controversial debates on religious education; the second part analyses some textbooks of the new subject “Foundations of Orthodox culture”; and the third part discusses the relation of the Church’s understanding of Orthodox culture and culturology.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, State-Church relations in Russia, Religious education, Civil society, Culturology, Orthodox culture, textbooks of culturology and Orthodox culture

In September 2012 “Foundations of Orthodox culture” (*Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul'tury*)* became a mandatory subject in all Russian state schools for children in the 4th and (partially) 5th grade. It took the Russian Orthodox Church about two decades to reach this goal. In what follows, I would like to show some of the main tendencies of the public debates connected with the Russian Orthodox Church’s attempt of “culture building” through its influence on the state school system.

I am not a specialist either in the Russian Orthodox Church or in pedagogical learning processes in schools. My interest in discussions about religion, education and politics in Russia, which arose around the “Foundations of Orthodox culture”, is part of my larger research on the identity construction process of post-communist Russia in which the Russian Orthodox Church plays a significant role. In this context, I am also interested in the politics of rewriting Russian history, which includes textbooks and curriculum materials. In my book on *kul'turologija* (here translated as culturology) I analyzed the textbooks of this

* The transliteration in this article follows the system used by European Slavic studies which is slightly different from the Anglo-American one.

mandatory subject introduced in 1992 as an obligatory general education course for all first year university students in every discipline, and two years later as part of the senior-grade curriculum in all state high schools.¹ The new subject was intended to reorient the post-communist Russian youth by filling the ideological vacuum left after the disintegration of the Soviet system. Cultural values and norms, searched for in long time ignored pre-revolutionary traditions of Russian history and culture, were reevaluated as a new source of meaning and as a tool which would help to construct a post-Soviet identity and a usable past. Orthodox religion and spirituality were presented as the main source of Russian culture and mentality.

The new methodological paradigm of the so called civilisational approach to history (*civilizacionnyj podkhod k istorii*), which was directly inspired by *kul'turologija*, sees in religions the foundations of civilisations (in opposition to the socio-economical formations of historical materialism). Danilevskij, Spengler and Toynbee with their theories of cycles and, more recently, Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations" were integrated into *kul'turologija*, which during its first years was exclusively taught by former professors and lecturers of Marxism-Leninism, scientific atheism, historical materialism, etc. They were also the authors of the first textbooks of *kul'turologija* still in use today. The "cultural/civilizational turn" made the new culturologists discover the Russian Orthodox Christianity and Russian religious thinkers such as Solov'ev, Berdjaev, Bulgakov, Florenskij and others as a major component of Russian culture or civilization (here the terms are used interchangeably). The fact that the pre-revolutionary Russian Orthodox Church was utterly critical of the religious philosophers and their "lay theology" (*Laientheologie*)² is totally ignored by the authors of these textbooks on *kul'turologija*.

My interest in *kul'turologija* led me to the subject of *Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul'tury* (Foundations of Orthodox culture) which the Russian Orthodox Church proposed to introduce into all state and municipal schools of the Russian Federation as a mandatory subject. What understanding of "Orthodox culture" is this subject intended to transmit to ten to eleven-year old young pupils all over the

¹ For a detailed analysis of culturology see Jutta Scherrer, *Kulturologie. Russland auf der Suche nach einer zivilisatorischen Identität* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003). See also Jutta Scherrer "Kul'turologija i učebniki po kul'turologii v Rossii glazami zapadnogo istorika", *Vestnik instituta Kennana v Rossii*, no. 4, 2004, 20-31 and "The 'cultural/civilizational turn' in post-Soviet identity building", in: P.A. Bodin, S. Hedlund, E. Namli (editors), *Power and Legitimacy – Challenges from Russia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 152-168.

² The expression was created by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk in his outstanding book on Russian historical and religious philosophy: *Russland und Europa. Studien über die geistigen Strömungen in Russland* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1913).



country? What is the general understanding of culture that the Church's hierarchy wants to convey to the young generation? Why does the Church use the new discipline *kul'turologija* to introduce its own subject into the school curriculum? Why does the Church benefit from the accepted position of *kul'turologija*? Is this just a strategy to realize its main goal of *vocerkovlenie* (churchizing) of the Russian youth by means of confessional, catechetical instruction under the guise of "Orthodox culture"? Is the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" a kind of *kul'turologija* for children, as some critics imply?

I am not going to discuss here the Church's public and political actions against certain manifestations of modern art such as the exhibitions in the Moscow Sakharov Center for Human Rights "Attention, religion!" ("*Ostorožno religija*") organized by Jurij Samodurov in 2003 or "Forbidden Art" organized by Andrei Yerofeev in 2007 or its more recent condemnation of the Pussy Riot (which show the heavy influence of the fundamentalist current inside the Church). My point is not to discuss the "*Kulturkampf*" of the Church (or its fundamentalists) but rather to analyze its understanding of "Orthodox culture" in the case of its proposal (and defense) of the course "Foundations of Orthodox culture".

I. Debates on "Foundations of Orthodox culture"

Before discussing some textbooks for teaching "Foundations of Orthodox culture", I want to recall the main phases of the controversial debates on religious education which have been going on in Russia for over two decades. They reflect the ambivalent character of Church-State relations in post-Soviet Russia and at the same time the interests and dynamics of a nascent civil society. In fact, the ongoing debates around the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" are as revealing as the textbooks themselves regarding the choice between teaching the history of religion and transmitting the Orthodox faith.

The most important phases in the evolution of these debates were the following:

- The millennium of the Christianization of Russia (or better: "the Rus'") in 1988, which brought the Orthodox Church back to public attention.
- From 1990 on religious education began to be discussed in Russia.
- A rather liberal law "On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" was adopted under Gorbachev in 1990. By allowing all religious communities to exercise their rights, it reflected a sort of religious pluralism.
- In 1997 this law was revised under considerable pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church and "opened the possibility to consider the

significance of Orthodoxy as dominant among the four 'traditional religions of Russia' – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism," since in Russia by now "Orthodoxy occupied the place of Christianity."³

- The preamble of this law recognizes the "special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the establishment and development of its spirituality (*dukhovnost'*) and culture," as well as the "special contribution of Orthodoxy to the formation of the Russian state".

President Boris Yeltsin proclaimed in numerous discourses the "spiritual and moral renaissance (*vozroždenie*) of Russia" and the "consolidation of inner peace between the state and society," which could not be realized without the Church's active role.

- Notwithstanding a long period of atheistic education imposed by the Soviet system, from 1991 on, according to several surveys, more than 60 % of the respondents from all age groups said that they have a positive attitude towards religion and that the Russian Orthodox Church is the institution in which they have most confidence.⁴

Educational reforms in the 1990's under Yeltsin (which included the creation of *kul'turologija*) encouraged the Church hierarchy to establish religious education and theology in state schools and state universities. In some state schools, especially in those regions where governors were sympathetic to the Orthodox Church, Orthodox priests were teaching the "Zakon Božij" (God's law) on a voluntary basis. The "Zakon Božij" was traditionally the instruction in catechism which was mandatory in Russian schools before 1917. The materials used by the priests in the early nineties came exclusively from pre-revolutionary times and obviously did not correspond to the post-Soviet reality. But in 1994 the Ministry of Education and Science banned religious education from state schools as a violation of the separation of Church and state anchored in the constitution. As a consequence, the Church hierarchy tried to overturn the ban and declared its catechism course a culturological topic (*kul'turologičeskij predmet*), which referred to the mandatory subject of culturology, and named it "Foundations of Orthodox culture" (*Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul'tury*). However, in the Church's understanding, this newly labelled course continued to be identical to "Foundations of Orthodox belief".

³ Valerij Ovcinnikov, "O pravoslavnom obrazovanii v Rossii", *Pravoslavnaia cerkov' pri novom patriarkhe*, edited by A. Malašenko and S. Filatov, (Moskva: Carnegie Center, 2012), 298.

⁴ For more empirical data concerning Russians' attitude to religion see Dmitrij Furman, Kimmo Kaariainen /Kääriäinen/, "Religioznost' v Rossii v 90-e gody XX-nacala XXI veka" in Kimmo Kaariainen /Kääriäinen/, Dmitrij Furman (eds.), *Starye cerkvi, novye verujuščie. Religija v massovom soznanii postsovetskoj Rossii* (Moskva/St.Petersburg: Letnij grustno, 2000).



In 1997 the Minister of Education and Science, Vladimir Filippov, recognized “Foundations of Orthodox culture” as an optional course with the restriction that it could not be taught by persons without a pedagogical formation. Priests were no longer allowed to teach in public schools. But no unified coherent program for teaching the “Foundations of Orthodox culture” was implemented, so that the catechism-based version continued to be used. As the discussions among the Church hierarchy show, the Church was well aware of the necessity to change pre-revolutionary textbooks on the “Law of God”. Already in 1996 at the Christmas Readings (an annual conference organized in Moscow by the Church’s Department for Religious Education and Catechisation), Patriarch Aleksej II offered to provide the Ministry of Education with a textbook on the “Foundations of Orthodox **belief**” (*vera*), which would correspond to the goals of the new era: “Both believers and nonbelievers should receive from it the life-giving force of Orthodoxy and the heights of its ideals.”⁵

Subsequently, different groups in Russian society, among them also educators, protested against the course “Foundations of Orthodox culture”. In 1999 Patriarch Alexej II responded to these protests by giving the following instruction to regional bishops: “If there are difficulties in teaching ‘Foundations of Orthodox dogma’ (*Osnovy pravoslavnogo veroučenija*), then they should call the course ‘Foundations of Orthodox culture’ (*Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul’tury*), since this will not raise objections from pedagogues and directors of secular schools who were educated as atheists”.⁶ On October 22, 2002, Minister of Education Filippov sent a letter to all regional educational authorities, recommending that “Foundations of Orthodox culture” be taught one hour per week in the first grades and two hours per week in the higher grades. He emphasized that this optional course corresponded both to the constitution and the educational law of the Russian Federation.

The letter of the Minister of Education provoked a backlash from Russian media and society who interpreted the introduction of the “Foundations of Orthodox culture” as an act of “desecularization” or “countersecularization”. Their main arguments were as follows. *First*, Russia is a secular state where no religion may be an official or obligatory ideology. *Secondly*, Russia is a state of many religions and many nationalities, and dividing people into groups according to their religion may actually provoke national and religious hatred. The proposed course was perceived as stressing the ethnic uniqueness and exclusiveness of Russian-Orthodox pupils. Jurij Afanas’ev, rector of the RGGU in Moscow,

⁵ Irina Papkova, “Contentious Conversation: Framing the ‘Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture’ in Russia”, *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 37, No. 3, September 2009, 296.

⁶ Ovčinnikov, *O pravoslavnom obrazovanii*, 299; N. Mitrokhin, *Russkaja pravoslavnaia cerkov’* (Moskva: 2004), 361.

claimed that the introduction of the subject was in direct contradiction to Russia's constitutional guarantees of freedom of the person and religious freedom.⁷ Human rights activists such as Sergej Kovalev and Lev Ponomarev from the group Acting Together (*Obščee dejstvie*) sent a letter in June 2003 to the Minister of Education, expressing concern over "the attempts by representatives of the Ministry of Education to use the implementation of 'religious studies' disciplines to impose a clericalist Orthodox and xenophobic ideology on state schools."⁸

Filippov's defenders responded by claiming that "Foundations of Orthodox culture" did not undermine the secular nature of education, since the course was "culturological". "Culturological" meant for them that pupils are being taught about Orthodoxy rather than being introduced to the Orthodox faith. However, a definition as vague as this was far from indicating a clear difference between the confessional (catechetical) and the culturological character of the "Foundations". Patriarch Alexej II himself underlined that he still considered "Foundations of Orthodox culture" a confessional subject when addressing himself to bishops in the regions: "If there are obstacles to teaching Orthodox religion (*veroučenie*), the course should be named 'Foundations of Orthodox Christian Culture'".⁹

Vladimir Filippov lost his job, among other reasons, as a result of the controversial debates on this topic. His successor Andrej Fursenko (Minister of Education since 2004) was against the teaching of "Foundations of Orthodox culture" at the federal level. Instead, he proposed a secular course on universal religions (*mirovye religii*), where subjects such as religious studies (*religiovedenie*) (introduced in 2000 by the educational *standarty* of the Ministry of Education), history of religion, history of world religions and history of religions in Russia would instruct pupils in a neutral way about Russia's different religions and thus play the role of an opposite pole to "Foundations of Orthodox culture".

But the Russian Orthodox Church opposed the implementation of this broad course on the history of religion. Wanting to preserve the confessional orientation of the subject "Foundations of Orthodox culture", Alexej II simply renamed it "Foundations of spiritual and ethical cultures" (*Osnovy dukhovnykh i etičeskikh kul'tur*). The adjective "Orthodox" was suppressed, but the content of the subject, recommended as compulsory, stayed the same.¹⁰

⁷ Keston Institute, <http://www.keston.org>, "Public opinion divided over tuition of Orthodox culture in state school", Keston News Service, 4 December 2002, posted 6 December 2002 on Religioscope.

⁸ Papkova, *Contentious Conversation*, 303.

⁹ Aleksej II in Nedumov, 2002, quoted in E. Lisovskaja and V. Karpov, "Orthodoxy, Islam, and the desecularization of Russia's state schools", *Politic and Religion*, 3, 2010, 290.

¹⁰ *Roždestvenskie čtenija*, January 2007.



Public disputes over the course “Foundations of Orthodox culture” continued even more sharply. In an open letter to President Putin published in *Novaja gazeta* on July 23, 2007 ten notable members of the Russian Academy of Sciences expressed concern over “the growing clericalisation of the Russian society” and the “active penetration of the Church into all spheres of public life.” The authors further asserted that a mandatory educational program, even if limited only to the “Foundations of Orthodox culture”, would be inappropriate in “a multiethnic, multiconfessional country.”¹¹ The Church’s response was swift. Patriarch Aleksey II stated that the letter was “an echo of the atheistic propaganda of the past,” while his successor Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) labelled the authors “gentlemen [who] want to see a return to the Soviet Union.”¹²

In changing the educational law in 2007, the Duma abandoned the regional component of the school curriculum concerning the conception of certain courses and the selection of teaching materials, which included the “Foundations of Orthodox culture”. From then on all courses had to be approved by federal authorities. In other words, the “Foundations of Orthodox culture” taught in quite a few regions in the previous ten years no longer had the right to exist. As a consequence, the Church developed a “clone” course for compulsory teaching called “Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” (*Osnovy religioznykh kul’tur i svetskoj etiki*), which it submitted to the Ministry of Education.

In an address to the Orthodox clergy in November 2007, Putin remarked that “Russian Orthodoxy has a particular role in our country’s history, in the formation of our statehood, culture, morals and spirituality / ... /. Today, we greatly value the /Church’s/ efforts to restore to our country’s life the ideals and values that served as our spiritual references for so many centuries/ ... /. The state and the Church have ample scope for working together to strengthen morality and educate the young generation, and of course, to preserve our country’s spiritual and cultural heritage.”¹³

A compromise between the Ministry of Education’s view and the Church’s insistence on religious and moral education was made when, in April 2010, president Medvedev introduced on an experimental basis a compulsory subject called “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics” (*Osnovy religioznykh kul’tur i svetskoj etiki*), which consisted of six optional subjects to be chosen by pupils and/or their parents. It was introduced as a pilot project into the

¹¹ Robert C. Blitt, *How to Entrench a De Facto State Church in Russia: A Guide in Progress*, 259.

¹² *Ibidem*, 261-262.

¹³ President Vladimir Putin, Speech at Meeting with Russian Orthodox Clergy to Mark the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Patriarchate’s Restoration (Nov. 20, 2007), JOHNSON’S RUSSIA LIST, 2007-#240, Nov. 20, 2007.

curriculum of pupils in the fourth and fifth grades (ten to eleven years old) in nineteen selected regions of the Russian Federation. The approved course takes thirty-four academic hours but, unlike other subjects, pupils do not receive grades. In February 2012, Putin, still Prime Minister, signed a decree introducing the “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics” as a compulsory subject in all schools of the Russian Federation.

Since September 2012, schoolchildren starting from the 4th or the 5th grade are being taught in one of six modules, or subjects, of their own (or their parents’) choice. The six modules which figure under the general title “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics” are the following: (1) “Foundations of Orthodox culture”; (2) “Foundations of Islamic culture”; (3) “Foundations of Buddhist culture”; (4) “Foundations of Jewish culture” – (in short, the four “traditional” religions recognized by Russian Federal Law). The two other modules (5) “Foundations of the cultures of World religions” and (6) “Foundations of secular ethics” are “alternative” courses, which are supposed to underline the neutral and secular character of the courses on religion. They are intended for pupils who do not want to study religion.¹⁴

Within the general course “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics,” the school class is divided into several groups, depending on the number of pupils per module. The first lesson, “Russia, our Motherland” (*rodina*), as well as the last one, “Love of our Fatherland” (*otečestvo*), is attended by all pupils together.¹⁵ The different modules do not refer to each other or to the interactions of religions and other cultures on Russian soil. Pupils of the respective modules are not supposed to hear anything about the traditions and values of the other religions taught in the other modules.

Special training courses for “secular” school teachers of the new subjects began in January 2010, and in February 2012 additional courses were offered. In general, however, the experiment was badly prepared: the modules were hastily conceived and methodological educational materials were lacking. There were too few trained teachers, and most of them had no other information about their topic than the textbook itself. Due to the lack of teachers and means, most schools could not organize more than one module. The majority of schools chose the module on secular ethics because it did not require teachers to have special preparation¹⁶ or because parents did not want their children to be educated in

¹⁴ Ovčinnikov does not exclude that other modules will be introduced such as on christianity in general including catholicism and protestantism and the Old Believers; Ovčinnikov, *O pravoslavnom obrazovanii v Rossii*, 301.

¹⁵ Some sources indicate that also the last class is common for all pupils.

¹⁶ Ovčinnikov, *O pravoslavnom obrazovanii v Rossii*, 301.



religion.¹⁷ Nevertheless, there were also cases where the whole class was taught the module “Orthodox culture”.¹⁸ The Moscow office for human rights, which analyzed the different modules of the new subject “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics,” concluded already in 2010 that all the textbooks of the different confessions were “definitely catechetical,” contrary to the assurances of the publishing house *Prosvěšćenie* that the textbooks were “purely culturological”. For the Moscow office for human rights, the textbooks on “Orthodox culture” were more appropriate for classes on religion in Sunday schools.¹⁹

It is still too early to know if the implementation of these modules will lead to religious pluralism. At the present time, one does not know precisely how many pupils (or parents) are choosing which kind of module. In a conference in mid-January 2013 Patriarch Kirill expressed his “concern about the low number of students in schools in the capital who take lessons in the ‘Foundations of Orthodox culture’”. The patriarch claimed 23,4% of the students in the Diocese of Moscow had chosen “Orthodox culture”. Students and/or parents tend to choose more “neutral” modules such as “Foundations of secular ethics” or “Basics of religious cultures in the world”.²⁰ According to data from the Ministry of Education and Science reported in January 2013, 47% of pupils at the national level chose the course on “Foundations of secular ethics”, 28,7% “Foundations of Orthodox culture” and 20,3% “Foundations of world religions and cultures” (Islamic culture 5,6%, Buddhist culture 1,2%, Jewish culture 0,1%).²¹ Russian Internet sources reflect the ongoing struggle of parents against the imposition of “Foundations of Orthodox culture” in numerous schools all over the country. Representatives of the Muslim and Jewish organizations are protesting that their rights are not respected. Representatives of other Christian denominations are claiming their integration into the general course of “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics”. Medias as well as parents also discuss the very young age of pupils being introduced into religion.

¹⁷ Viktor A. Shnirelman, “Russian Orthodox culture or Russian Orthodox teaching? Reflections on the textbooks in religious education in contemporary Russia”, *British Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 3, no. 3, September 2012, 275.

¹⁸ Joachim Williams, “Foundations of Orthodox Culture”, *Russia, European Education*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer 1912), 29.

¹⁹ www.portal-credo.ru. 14 January-2 April 2010.

²⁰ Nina Akhmatova, “Patriarch warns: too few pupils studying Orthodox religion in school”, January 29, 2013, *AsiaNews.it*.

²¹ *Ibidem*. Slightly different numbers are quoted by Ovcinnikov, *O pravoslavnom obrazovanii v Rossii*, 301.

II. Textbooks on "Foundations of Orthodox culture"

The first and for several years the only existing textbook on "Foundations of Orthodox culture" was written by Alla Borodina in 2002 and was reissued many times.²² Borodina had defended her doctoral dissertation (*kandidatskaja*) "Byzantinism as formative of Russian culture" in culturology in 2001 at the RGGU in Moscow. Her textbook was written for pupils of the 6th grade. The larger Russian public learned about it only as the result of a legal procedure against Borodina initiated by human rights defenders on the grounds of alleged anti-Semitic and racist passages in her textbook. According to the movement's director, Lev Ponomarev, the book incites "national and religious hatred," by, for example, asking pupils: "Why did the Jews crucify Christ? What prevented them from understanding the spiritual meaning of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven?" However, the few revisions undertaken by Borodina did not address any of the reproaches levelled against her. The sixth edition (2011), which I was able to consult, is recommended by the Coordination Council for cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the Moscow Patriarchate and also by the Patriarchate's section of religious education and catechisation, but still contains anti-Semitic remarks on the Jews for having killed Christ.²³ Borodina is actually one of the ideological leaders of the ultranationalist political movement *Narodnyj Sobor*, whose stated mission is to "unite around the idea of Russian civilization, protect it against external and internal enemies" and install it as the "state ideology".²⁴

The five chapters of the textbook are devoted to the following subjects:

(1) What do we know about Orthodoxy?, (2) The Holy Bible, (3) The Temple (*khram*), House of God, (4) Religious Art, (5) Hagiography. For Borodina, Orthodoxy is the traditional and culture-building (*kul'turoobrazujuščaja*) religion on the Russian soil *per se*. She claims that since the 10th century Orthodoxy formed the spiritual and moral core of Russian society, the worldview and character of the Russian people, its cultural traditions, its ethical norms and aesthetical ideals. Over the centuries, Christian ethics have defined human relations in families, in the way of life (*byt'*) both at work and in society, and in the relationship of Russians (*rossijane*) to the state. Legislation and international relations developed under the strong influence of the Orthodox Church. Art,

²² A.V. Borodina, *Istorija religioznoj kul'tury: Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul'tury* (Moskva: 2002).

²³ A.V. Borodina, *Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul'tury* (Moskva: Soft Izdat, 2011), 114. Borodina's teaching materials, published in 2004 and 2006 and approved by the Church, were not available to me.

²⁴ Irina Papkova, "Contentious Conversation: Framing the 'Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture' in Russia", *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 37, no. 3, September 2009, 300. For a detailed critical analysis of Borodina's textbook see V.A. Shnirelman, *Russian Orthodox culture*, 264-268.



literature, philosophy reflect symbols of Orthodox values. The Orthodox Church united and still unites the Russian people, whether in sadness or in happiness, in war and in victory. The basic message of the textbook and the goal of teaching the course on “Orthodox culture” is summarized in the following sentence: “The understanding of ‘Russian’ and ‘Orthodox’ in the *Rus*’ until the 20th century meant one and the same, namely to belong to the Russian Orthodox culture.”²⁵

The textbook suggests that Orthodoxy is the normative way of viewing the world and the true and the most perfect religion. The Orthodox worldview is accepted, not questioned. Religious issues are not problematized, nor are the life experiences of pupils thematized. To non-Orthodox pupils, Borodina’s approach transmits the “fact” that Orthodoxy is the only objectively right and good religion or worldview, in which one can *believe*, but from which nothing can be learned. Nothing is said about other Christian denominations or religions in Russia. Since Borodina’s textbook proceeds from the thesis that it was Orthodoxy which had founded culture on Orthodox=Russian soil, other Orthodox peoples and cultures in other “Orthodox countries” are absent from her account. There is no doubt that Borodina’s textbook treats “Foundations of Orthodox culture” as a confessional subject and instrumentalizes religion for a missionary purpose.

The textbook “Foundations of Orthodox Culture” by deacon Andrej Kuraev was commissioned by the Patriarchate and conceived for the fourth and fifth grade. On December 29, 2009, the new Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) announced the Church’s support of Kuraev’s textbook because of its catechetical content.²⁶ Kuraev is one of the most important and influential younger scholar-priests in the Church. While on good terms with the Patriarchy, he nonetheless sometimes defends independent views. He finished his studies in history and scientific atheism in 1984 at the Moscow State University and in the 1990’s became professor at the Moscow Theological Academy and *docent* in religious studies (*religiovedenie*) and religious philosophy at the philosophical faculty of Moscow State University.²⁷

In 2007 Kuraev had already published a book entitled *Culturology of Orthodoxy: Is the school prepared for a new subject?*²⁸ Its introduction was written by the renowned Russian filmmaker and president of the Russian Cultural Fund Nikita Mikhalkov, who had praised the “Foundations of Orthodox culture” in

²⁵ Borodina, *Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul'tury*, 20.

²⁶ www.portal-credo.ru, January 14-April 2, 2010-OS “Streit um Lehrmittel zum Fach ‘Grundlagen der Orthodoxen Kultur’”, May 20, 2010, 3.37 p.m.

²⁷ In January 2014 Kuraev was relieved from his teaching position at the Theological Academy because of his criticism of homosexuality among Russian Orthodox priests.

²⁸ A. Kuraev, *Kul'turologija pravoslavija. Gotova li skola k novomu predmetu?* (Moskva: Grifon, 2007).

different public debates as an eminently culturological subject. Significantly, Kuraev's book appeared in the same year when Patriarch Alexej II urged the Minister of Education Andrej Fursenko to recognize the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" as a "culturological subject" (but, as mentioned above, without success). In this book, Kuraev defends culturology in very positive terms, since it allows the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" to introduce schoolchildren "scientifically and methodologically" to the religion of Orthodoxy and its world without conveying a "religious confession".²⁹ The subject of "Foundations of Orthodox culture" is not God, but man and his world – the world of Orthodoxy. Therefore, Kuraev argues, that a non-Orthodox specialist would be able to teach this subject.³⁰

Another argument for teaching the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" as a culturological topic advanced by Kuraev is that decades of the Church's intellectual poverty do not permit it to mount its own teaching program of the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" on its own.³¹ Since Orthodox culture represents the culture of the majority of the inhabitants of Russia, while the Orthodox faith is only the faith of the minority of Russia's inhabitants, it is in Kuraev's eyes totally legitimate to teach the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" as an independent subject in state schools. He insists that "as a minority, the state is obliged to help the preservation of a unique, but already small (*maločislennyj*) culture".³²

Over 100,000 copies of Kuraev's textbook "Foundations of Orthodox culture" circulated within three months of its appearance. Licensed by the patriarch and promoted by the publishing house *Prosvěšćenie* as "culturological" (to avoid the reproach of being catechetical), it remains up to the present the standard work for the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" course. In seventeen lessons the author provides an introduction to, if not induction into, the Orthodox faith and instructions on how to live in Orthodoxy. The unique center of his system of

²⁹ Ibidem, 13 and 28.

³⁰ Ibidem, 23.

³¹ Ibidem, 27. A similar point is made by Ovčinnikov who underlines that the Russian Orthodox Church does not have the necessary means nor the strength to exercise its influence on society and education of children without the help of the state; Ovčinnikov, op. cit., p. 297-298. Irina Kosals also underlines that because of financial and organizational reasons the Russian Orthodox Church is not capable to organize courses on Orthodox religion independently from the state; I. Kosals, "Streitobjekt zwischen Kirche, Staat und Gesellschaft. Orthodoxer Religionsunterricht in der Schule", *Kultura*, April 2, 2009, 17.

³² Ibidem, 42. In his conclusion Kuraev argues that because of the importance of Orthodox culture for the understanding of Russia's history and life the school subject of Orthodox culture corresponds entirely to article 14 of the Federal Law "On Education"; Kuraev, *Kul'turologija pravoslavija*, 264.



references is the Orthodox world. Some of the lessons (in particular lessons 5-8 on the Bible and Christ) would fit perfectly in an Orthodox catechism. Other lessons have a definitely missionary character. Like Borodina, Kuraev links moral and spiritual norms exclusively to Orthodoxy and to no other religion, as if other religions had no such norms. Nothing is said about the existence of other Christian denominations, such as Catholicism, Protestantism, the Old Believers, the Uniates or the new Christian movements. Nowhere does Kuraev indicate that the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, the Ten Commandments or concepts like mercy, charity and so forth are not uniquely “Orthodox”, but also exist in other Christian denominations. Though this could be expected from a textbook which defines itself as “culturological”, pupils do not learn anything about other religions in Russia. Culture is only understood in its relation to Orthodox religion. The existence of other religions in Russia is only mentioned in those parts of Kuraev’s textbook where the Russian state is characterized as “multinational” and “multiethnic” and where the pupils’ loyalty towards the state is addressed. Entire chapters of Kuraev’s and other textbooks and teaching materials which I found on the Internet can be read as a kind of *obščestvovedenie* or civic education. Patriotism, commitment to the fatherland and the state, and moral education are closely linked to confessional elements in the form of a basic knowledge about Orthodox Christianity within Russian culture, but without any critical reflection on these criteria.

In general, it can be said that the widely used textbooks of Borodina and Kuraev are characterized by a certain contradiction between their catechetical and culturological orientation. This reflects the ongoing lack of agreement within the Church itself over giving priority to teaching the “*Zakon Božij*” (Law of God) for pupils who were at least nominally Orthodox or providing “Foundations of Orthodox culture” to the entire student body.³³ Most probably, it was the emphasis put on traditional moral education, patriotic integration of state and society, and the formation of young moral citizens and patriots that led the state authorities to accept the need for the subject of “Foundations of Orthodox culture” and to make it compulsory within the larger context of the general subject “Foundations of religious culture and secular ethics” (*Osnovy religioznykh kul'tur i svetskoj etiki*). Here the question arises whether the state is exploiting religious education for its own goals, that is, to strengthen the patriotic spirit of young pupils and their readiness to make sacrifices for the fatherland, to create collective identity and so forth. Because of the moral and patriotic orientation of “Foundations of Orthodox culture,” state authorities have no problem in justifying the “secular

³³ More on this conflict Irina Papkova, *Contentious conversation*, 291-309.

character" of the new school subject. In its search for its own legitimacy, the state makes use of the cultural capital of religion to construct a "collective national identity". The Church, on its side, true to its commitment to patriotism as developed in its official social Doctrine (*Osnovy social'noj koncepcii Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi*), approved by the Episcopal Synod in August 2000, can cooperate with the state, notwithstanding their official separation. The patriotic elements of religious education are also underlined in the so called "Standards of the Second Generation" (*standarty vtorogo pokolenija*), which appeared under the title "Conception of the Spiritual-Moral Development and Education of the Personality of the Russian Citizen".³⁴ The main criteria which are recommended here are national values, national identity, reinforcement of belief, development of patriotism and civil society, civic and patriotic education, and respect for the tradition of Russian (*rossijskie*) religions.

The textbooks on the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" which were accessible to me are not catechisms in the strict sense of the word, as implied by some of their critics. Obviously, the aim of the new subject is threefold, as Victor Shnirel'man stressed in a recent publication: to educate pupils in religion; to foster their ethnic Russian identity; and to make them loyal to the state. In the textbooks the state, rather than society, represents a major value, along with faith in the Church. In other words, the textbooks combine an introduction to Orthodox belief with patriotism and moral education. They do not offer a history of religions, either in Russia or in the world. The major achievements of Russian culture in architecture, painting and literature are shown as exclusively connected with Orthodoxy. Aspects of culture in a broader sense than just referring to icons, Orthodox Church architecture, Orthodox Church music or saints of the Russian Orthodox Church, are totally missing. All in all, the textbooks do not propose to "study" religion but to "learn" religion, by which they mean exclusively the Orthodox faith. They do not stimulate independent thinking or critical reflections either in the main narrative or in the questions addressed to pupils at the end of each lesson/chapter.

Since the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" is promoted as a "culturological" and not a "confessional" subject, we have the right to ask about the meaning of the term "culturological" as used by the authors of the textbooks. In fact, the textbooks themselves never refer to the terms "culturological" or "culturology," whereas culture is briefly explained at the very beginning, but not used or elaborated upon in further chapters. From a culturological point of view, which implies a culture-oriented perspective, one could expect that Orthodoxy should be seen

³⁴ A.Ja. Daniljuk, A.M. Kondakov, V.A. Tyškov (eds.), *Koncepcija dukhovno-nravstvennogo razvitija i vospitanija ličnosti grazdanina Rossii* (Moskva: 2009).



from the outside and shown in comparison with other Christian denominations and other religions in Russia. In these textbooks, however, culture stands for the Orthodox tradition alone, which is understood as the basis of Russia's history and statehood. The word *culture* is almost exclusively used in connection with the adjectives "Orthodox" or "religious".

In the second lesson of Kuraev's textbook, culture is laconically described as "everything that man created in the world" and a "basis of human cohabitation". His last chapter on "Orthodox culture" defines it as the Ten Commandments, belief in God, belief in Christ's teaching, his sacrifice and resurrection, and belief in the Bible and the gospels. For Kuraev, "Orthodox culture" also includes: living according to the commandments, caring about the purity of one's soul, and caring for the well-being of the others. Borodina's textbook, addressed to older pupils, mentions in its introductory chapter some general meanings of culture, including the differentiation between spiritual and material culture. But her focus is on "religious culture," which means for her ethics and philosophy, science and morality, arts and popular traditions and all forms of life linked to religion. The basis of religious culture is, for Borodina, belief in Orthodoxy and the Orthodox tradition. For Ljudmila Sevčenko, whose textbook³⁵ was inaccessible to me, "Orthodox culture is what good, pious Orthodox people both created and lived out over many centuries with faith, hope and love because they loved the Creator of this beautiful world."³⁶

In general, the central task of "Orthodox culture" is to preserve Orthodoxy's tradition. In fact, the term *culture* is almost identical with the term *tradition*. To learn about Russian culture, to identify oneself with it and with the Russian state turned the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" into an indispensable tool in the eyes of its defenders. As bishop Kliment of Kaluga and Borovsk argued: "Orthodoxy is not a separate confession, but the axis of societal development."³⁷

Sometimes the culturological aspect of the new curriculum is briefly mentioned in commentaries on the textbooks for parental use. One of these booklets states that the general course "Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" does not have a confessional (*veroučitel'nyj*), but rather a culturological character, because "our culture is one and the same, the culture of the multiethnic people

³⁵ L.L. Shevčenko, *Pravoslavnaja kul'tura. Ekperimental'noe učebnoe posobie dlja načal'nyh klassov ob ščebrazovatel'nykh kol, liceev i gimnazij. Kniga pervaja* (Moskva: Pokrov, 2003).

³⁶ Joachim Willems, "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture (FOC): a new subject in Russia 's schools", *British Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 29, no. 3, September 2007, 238-240.

³⁷ Joachim Willems, *Religiöse Bildung in Russlands Schulen. Orthodoxie, nationale Identität und die Positionalität des Faches "Grundlagen orthodoxer Kultur" (OPK)*, Berlin (LIT) 2006, 99.

of Russia" (*kul'tura u nas odna – kul'tura mnogonacional'nogo naroda Rossii*).³⁸ In an Internet-address to parents explaining the six modules, the culturological aspect of the general course "Religious cultures and secular ethics" is laconically explained as "Russian religious cultural tradition" (*rossijskaja religiozno-kul'turnaja tradicija*). Culturology's goal is defined as "the reinforcement of belief in Russia" (*ukreplenie very v Rossii*) and as creating identity. Russian culture is conceived as an "integral, original (*celostnyj, samobytnyj*) phenomenon of world culture".³⁹ In a response to Minister of Education Andrej Fursenko on the occasion of the 15th Christmas readings, Patriarch Alexij II differentiated the culturological from the doctrinal aspect of the proposed curriculum: "The 'Foundations of Orthodox culture' is a culturological topic: Our entire culture and our entire history are based on Orthodox values".⁴⁰ Notwithstanding this assertion, the textbooks and teaching materials of "Foundations of Orthodox culture" which are approved by the Church focus on Orthodoxy as a religion, in other words faith, and not on Orthodoxy as a cultural and social phenomenon.

A very elaborate outline for the curriculum "Foundations of Orthodox culture" (as a module of the general course "Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics"), conceived for the Orthodox high school (*pravoslavnaia gimnazija*) in Novosibirsk in August 2010, introduces the principle of *kul'turosoobraznost'* (to be translated as "in conformity with culture"), which is supposed to transmit to the pupils the interrelationship between the civil and the religious history of Russia.⁴¹ As a result of the course "Foundations of Orthodox culture," the authors⁴² evoke the values of the "spiritual-moral culture" that will turn pupils into responsible members of the Russian state (here identified with the Russian identity). The course is supposed to develop their feelings of devotion and love for their Motherland (*rodina*), its history and culture, its traditions and heritage, and to make them acquainted with the most important pages of the "holy history" (*svjaščennaja istorija*) of the Fatherland (*otečestvo*), the outstanding names in Russia's history, the sacred places on Russian soil and the most important monuments of Orthodox culture. In the first lesson "Russia – our sacrosanct

³⁸ A.Ja. Daniljuk, *Osnovy religioznykh kul'tur i svetskoj etiki. Kniga dlja roditel'ej* (Moskva: Prosveščenie, 2010), 3.

³⁹ ORKSE "Osnovy religioznykh kul'tur i svetskoj etiki": http://www.erahturschool.narod2.ru/kurs_osnovi_religioznych_kulturnykh_i_svetskoj_etiki

⁴⁰ Blagovest-Info, www.blagovest-info.ru, 30.1.2007.

⁴¹ NOU Pravoslavnaia Gimnazija vo imja Prepodobnogo Sergija Radonežskogo, *Rabočaja programma učebnogo predmeta Osnovy pravoslavnoj kul'tury dlja 4-5 klassov*, Novosibirsk 2010: orthogym.ru/opk/opk-progr.pdf.

⁴² The text is conceived by the pedagogical council of the Orthodox High School in Novosibirsk under the direction of L.P. Talyšev, professor of economics at the State University in Novosibirsk.



country” (*Rossija – svjaščennaja naša deržava*), the pupil has to learn by heart the text of the national anthem and to recognize the Russian flag and coat of arms as being “holy”. Further lessons focus on the Russian Orthodox Church’s patriotic service to Russia’s “holy pages” of history and culture and, in particular, to its victorious wars. Its role during the Great Patriotic War presents the Day of Victory in 1945 as a “holy day of remembrance”. A third of the recommended bibliography dates from the second half of the 19th century.

III. The relation of “Orthodox culture” and *kul’turologija*

Do the textbooks on “Foundations of Orthodox culture” permit us to conclude that the patriarch’s definition of this subject as “culturological” was just a strategy to benefit from the accepted position of culturology in the state educational system? As mentioned before, culturology has been compulsory since 1992 up until recently. In integrating the catechetical “Foundations of Orthodox culture” into a sort of culturology destined for young children, would it not make this subject equally compulsory and thus contribute to the Church’s basic goal of *vocerkovlenie* (“churchizing”) of the youth? I think that this argument is too simple. Culturology as practiced in Russia offered from the start numerous criteria which played directly into the hands of the Church. In its search for a new sense of meaning for post-Communist youth and society, it “rediscovered” the values of Orthodox tradition and Orthodox ethics in Russian culture (and sometimes also in the Russian state). Orthodox Christianity is presented by culturology as the main source of Russian culture and mentality. “Orthodox culture,” linked to the idea of the “Orthodox space” of the Russian civilization, occupies a prominent place in culturology’s own identification strategy.

Culturology’s rather vague and imprecise key words from the first to the most recent textbooks are: *samobytnost’* of Russian culture and/or civilization (specificity, self-sufficiency), *sobornost’* (communal spirit), *dukhovnost’* (spirituality), *celostnost’* (wholeness), *rusškaia ideja* (Russian idea), *rusškii put’* (Russian way), *svjataja Rus’* (holy Rus), *Moskva tret’ij Rim* (Moscow the third Rome), and most of all *rusškost’* (Russianness). Presented as specifically Russian values, they are often opposed to Western materialism and individualism. The same keywords/concepts are employed in the discourses of the Church’s hierarchy on culture and also on politics.

The “political” parallel between the introduction of culturology at the beginning of the 1990s and the “Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” in 2012 as mandatory subjects is revealing. Both subjects justified their existence by referring to a crisis in Russian society that would make these courses essential: the profane culturology was intended to fill the ideological vacuum of

the immediate post-Soviet society by cultural values taken from prerevolutionary Russia and the Russian emigration after 1917; while the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" course was meant to fill the existing moral vacuum of Russian society and counter the threat of secularism⁴³ and globalization⁴⁴ by the patriotic or ethical means of Orthodoxy. For both subjects, the transmission of knowledge serves to orient or direct (*orientirovat'*) young pupils/students towards national interests, to conceive their mission in terms of identity construction and Russia's new political culture. Finally, both subjects are complementary: while culturology introduces and embeds the pupil/student into Russian culture and the Russian state, as an Orthodox version of culturology, the "Foundations of Orthodox culture" has a similar function: since Orthodoxy is considered as the basis of Russian culture, the integration into this culture presupposes the introduction into Orthodoxy.

The discourses of patriarch Alexij II and his successor Kirill (enthroned on February 1st, 2009) provide a clear picture of the Church's broader understanding of Russian culture and its link to patriotism.⁴⁵ Russian morals and ethics are seen in opposition to the "secular humanism" of the West, which leads to a more or less outspoken anti-Occidentalism. Human rights of the liberal West are opposed to the Russian Orthodoxy's conception of human rights; the Russian canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate, covering the territorial, cultural and religious space of the former tsarist empire as well as that of the Soviet Union, stands in opposition to globalization, defined as the dangerous unification of national cultures and religions in an universal space.⁴⁶

The most important document for the Church's understanding of culture and education is to be found in its Social Doctrine dating from 2000. Here, in chapter 14, the authors (the most important of them was Metropolitan Kirill, the current patriarch) refer to the etymology of the word "culture", derived from the Latin *cultura*, which itself derived from *cultus*, meaning veneration, worship, cult. "This points to the religious roots of culture. Having created man, God put him in paradise and ordered him to cultivate and keep His creation. Culture as the preservation of the world around man while caring for it is a God-commanded

⁴³ Metropolit Kirill quoted by Brill, note 237.

⁴⁴ Aleksij patriarkh, "Doklad na Arkhieirejskom sobore Russkoj pravoslavnoj cerkvi 2004 g.," *Zurnal Moskovskoj patriarkhii*, 10, 2004, 34.

⁴⁵ For patriotism see in particular Alexij II's discourses on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Russian victory in World War II and the national unity day on November 4 in memory of the victory over Catholic Poles in Moscow in 1612.

⁴⁶ Aleksij patriarkh, "Stoletie tragedij, stoletie nadežd", *Pravoslavie i dukhovnoe vozroždenie Rossii* (Ekaterinburg: 2003), 11-24.



duty of man.”⁴⁷ In principle, the authors argue, the Church must have a positive attitude towards culture “if a creative work contributes to the moral and spiritual transformation of the personality”. But if “culture puts itself in opposition to God, becoming antireligious and anti-human and turning into anti-culture, the Church opposes it.” Following the argumentation of the German theologian specialized in religious education Joachim Willems,⁴⁸ to whom this article owes important insights, the Church demonstrates here that “it does not accept any autonomy of the arts and literature as spheres of society outside of institutionalized religion.” On the contrary, the Church points out that “human creativity in its ‘churchizing’ (*vocerkovlenie*) returns to its original religious roots” and that “the Church helps culture to cross the boundaries of a purely earthly pursuit”.⁴⁹ From this, Willems rightly concludes that “if this definition of culture is accepted, it means that it is unavoidably the aim of any culturological instruction to teach how to distinguish between ‘culture’ and ‘anticulture’ in the sense of the social doctrine. Orthodox ‘culturology’ then has a normative base as defined by the Russian Orthodox Church.”

In conclusion, I want to ask if the briefly described debates in Russia follow the pattern of debates in other European and post-communist countries as to how ‘learning religion’, ‘learning from religion’ and ‘learning about religion’ should relate to each other. In quite a few Western European countries, politicians, teachers, education specialists, students and parents argue about whether religious education should introduce students to a particular faith from a confessional viewpoint or whether the subject should teach them in an objective manner about the existence of different religions in order to foster their orientation in a multicultural society. In fact, the relationship between secularism and the assertion of religious identity is actually one of the most heavily discussed issues in Western societies. Here the question of religious education touches on fundamental questions of liberty and human rights. If taught inadequately, religious education lessons can violate the freedom of, or the freedom from, belief.⁵⁰ A comparison of the Russian discourses and practices with the ones on confessional or non-confessional religious education in other post-communist

⁴⁷ Osnovy social’noj koncepcii Russkoj pravoslavnoj cerkvi. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov jubilejnogo Arkhierejskogo sobora Russkoj pravoslavnoj cerkvi, Nižnij Novgorod 2000, p. 238-242.

⁴⁸ Joachim Willems, “Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture (FOC): a new subject in Russia’s schools”, in: *British Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 29, no. 3, September 2007, 11-24, here quoted from 234-235.

⁴⁹ *Osnovy social’noj koncepcii*.

⁵⁰ Joachim Willems, “Foundations of Orthodox culture’ in Russia. Confessional or Nonconfessional Religious Education ?”, *European Education*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 24.

and Western societies would certainly be of great interest and importance. The more so because, with the enlargement of the European Union, Orthodox Christianity has become a significant religious component along with other Christian confessions in Europe: Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus have an Orthodox majority, while Orthodox Christians form a significant minority in countries like Finland and in the diaspora communities of quite a few other Western European countries.