


3-2016

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Joseph Loya

Tatiana Kravchuk

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Recommended Citation

Loya, Joseph and Kravchuk, Tatiana (2016) "Russian Orthodox Religious Education Initiatives in Post-Soviet Russia: Update and Commentary," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol36/iss2/3>

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RUSSIAN ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS EDUCATION INITIATIVES IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: UPDATE AND COMMENTARY

By Joseph Loya, O.S.A. and Tatiana Kravchuk

Joseph Loya, O.S.A. is an Associate Professor, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Villanova University. He is a member of the Advisory Board of Editors of OPREE and a former contributor of articles to this publication.

Tatiana Kravchuk is a native of Moscow, Russia, where she earned a BA in Linguistics and Translation. She resides in the Philadelphia, PA, area during semester periods while pursuing a Master of Theology degree in Villanova University's Graduate Program.

The following review and updating with commentary is offered in conjunction with previous studies of religious education initiatives in post-Soviet Russia published in this journal to date.¹

I. THE CONTINUING “SAGA” OF THE COURSE, “FOUNDATIONS OF ORTHODOX CULTURE”: REVIEW, UPDATE. (J. Loya, O.S.A.)

Any overview of the controlling issues that test the socio-political program of the “New Russia” regarding the area of state-sponsored education include the following: What should be learned from the schooling models of other democratic countries? How should the state draw the distinction between freedom of religion and freedom from religion? What constitutes a unique and appropriate Russian pedagogy? The Russian Orthodox Church asserts its status as a major

¹ Joseph A. Loya, “Religion Classes in State Institutions in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Religion in Eastern Europe* 26(1), 2006. 52-66; Loya, “Religious Education Initiatives in Russia: Update,” *Religion in Eastern Europe*, 28(2), 2008. 18-27.

formative factor at the core of Russian national identity: how effective is the Church's employment of its "culture card"?

At the turn of the millennium the Moscow Patriarchate, in concert with the Ministry of Education and Science, proposed the systematic introduction of an optional "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" course (hereafter, FOC – Russian, *OPK*) into Russian public school systems. Debate on this issue consistently revealed a deep divide in public and professional opinion. Patriarch Alexei II of Moscow and All-Rus called for expanding the teaching of FOC to all state schools in Russia in his introductory address at the Tenth International Christmas Readings (January 2002). In October, Education Minister Vladimir Filippov released a thirty-page description of an optional Orthodox Culture course that could be taught in public schools as a part of the basic curriculum if regional education officials or a school's principal so decided. This document was a vast catalogue of themes, including biblical subjects, Orthodox traditions, asceticism, liturgy, literature, and art. By the end of the course, a student could be asked to write a paper on one of 64 subjects, such as "Faith and Science," "Moscow as the Third Rome," or "Orthodox Understanding of Freedom." On other fronts, the course was subjected to intense criticism as a *de facto* course in Divine Law, and was not an education in Orthodox culture at all. It was asserted that the basic points of the contents of the curriculum virtually coincided with courses that were being taught in Orthodox ecclesiastical seminaries. Thus, under the guise of a secular Religious Studies discipline, children would receive a purely confessional theological education.

Some contemporary social activists and commentators assumed international perspectives. Igor Ponkin remarked on the widespread stereotype of Russian education as

assumedly burdened with obligatory atheist (antireligious) or nonreligious (agnostic) orientations. He continued:

When one analyzes the legal contents of the secular character of education in state and municipal educational institutions in the Russian federation it is useful to turn attention to the experience of France on this matter Several years ago the state and society in France came to a paradoxical conclusion about degrading tendencies in the development of the national system of education. Society was faced with a situation where pupils in private Catholic and Protestant colleges graduated much better prepared for life in French society and culturally more developed than pupils of state schools Today in France both high governmental workers and prominent French scholars speak of the necessity of implementing in state schools the principle of culture-conforming education (educational contents that correspond to the national culture), including using the teaching of humanistic subjects on the basis of the spiritual and moral traditions and values The basic idea of expanding and deepening the teaching of subjects dealing with religion in secular schools consists not in replacing secular education with religious education, giving the latter some special status, but in giving pupils of state educational institutions the possibility of becoming civilized persons educated in their own national culture Considering that our countries have much in common, the analysis of the French experience of cooperation between the state and religious associations in the sphere of education undoubtedly can and should be used in improving the national system of education in Russia.²

In July 2003 Minister Filippov issued guidelines on how and under what circumstances religion courses may be conducted on state properties outside normal school time. The guidelines emphasized student consent, parental initiative toward the local education authorities, and clear identification labeling of instructional materials and equipment by the sponsoring religious bodies. He again defended FOC as serious culturological study rather than being a mere catechetical exercise, and recommended that corresponding courses in the Fundamentals of Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism—the so-called “traditional faiths” of Russia—should be developed in regions where those religions hold sway. Also in 2003 Russia committed itself to the international Bologna Accords that seek to insure comparable and compatible educational

² Igor Ponkin, “Is Religion Necessary in Secular Schools: In Deciding This Question Russia Could Use France's Experience,” (<http://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/0208a.html>)

standards throughout Europe, a development that minimized regional autonomy and authority, to the detriment of the locally-instituted FOC initiative.

In May 2004 the Interreligious Council of Russia called for new Minister of Education Andrei Fursenko to provide school children with the possibility of studying religious culture from the point of view of religious organizations to inhibit the possibility of teaching fragmentary, tendentious, and distorted information. Fursenko had already begun to assert his intention to completely replace FOC with a strictly secular course on the history of world religions. In June 2005 Alla Borodina published a spirited defense of her Church-approved FOC textbook, portraying critics as uncultured bureaucrats harboring a deep sense of religious intolerance that rendered them deaf to the demands of society. In 2006 the program called “Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” (FRCSE), comprising dedicated foundation courses for the traditional faiths of Russia, Secular Ethics and Fundamentals of World Religions, was mandated by the state for grade four in four regions (more on FRCSE below).

Vladimir Putin’s plans to bring education under federal control and the Duma’s move in November 2007 to phase out the regional component seemed to indicate that FOC would be discontinued as of September 2009. This changed, however, in July 2009 after high-ranking representatives from Russia’s traditional religious organizations had a meeting with then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev during which they lobbied for an expansion of religious education. Medvedev’s response was to stipulate that schools test FRCSE between fall 2009 to summer 2011 in grades four and five, for a total of 35 hours per year, in nineteen regions.³ In theory, students and their parents were to enjoy complete freedom in opting for one of the six FRCSE offerings. This, in fact, did not prove to be uniformly the case: “. . . students or their parents

³ Katja Richters, “The ROC’s Approach to Other Religious Associations: From Traditional and National Identity to ‘Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture,’” *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (London: Routledge, 2013). 46.

chose a specific model under pressure or were not informed about the right to choose between the modules."⁴ My co-author's younger sister was indeed subjected to a curtailment of options. Through this trial period the Moscow Patriarchate was developing and submitting for review a new textbook composed under the direction of Protodeacon Andrei Kuraev. FRCSE achieved nation-wide compulsory status for the 2012-2013 school year. This new Orthodox culture course employing Kuraev's textbook for the Orthodox option can be understood as an evolved iteration of the "old" FOC.⁵

Is FOC a confessional or a nonconfessional subject? Lutheran education scholar Joachim Willems avers that, on one hand, the answer can be, "the latter," based on the following counts: FOC is designed for a (potentially) religiously heterogeneous group of students. Its teachers are not necessarily Orthodox and they do not require church sanction. FOC educational goals are not explicitly ordered to the strengthening personal belief or conversion to Orthodoxy, and its intention is to provide a kind of civic education fostering patriotic and other positive attitudes. On the other hand, FOC shares some aspects of a confessional subject to the extent that its textbook is written by a church representative and licensed by the Patriarch. (The church compiles other teaching materials as well, although its representatives did not endorse the teacher handbook.) Also, acculturation of students to this particular religious tradition is conditioned by contents that are presented from an (explicitly indicated) Orthodox theological perspective. On a regional level, the church coordinates the implementation of FRCSE.⁶ Willems concludes: "A comparison of the FOC and FSE textbooks shows that the risk of indoctrination is not specific to

⁴ Joachim Willems, "'Foundations in Orthodox Culture' in Russia: Confessional or Non-Confessional Education?" *European Education* 44 (2), Summer, 2012. 29.

⁵ A version for Grade 5 is being piloted in thirty Moscow educational complexes during the 2015-2016 school term. Besides the study of Orthodoxy within the framework of the academic curriculum, school children will participate in various creative competitions: "Hegumen of the Russian Land," devoted to St. Sergius of Radonezh; "Journey in Ancient Rus," devoted to a more profound study of history; and also creative events in the unit "St. Vladimir—Baptizer of Rus." (<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/81296.htm>)

⁶ Joachim Willems, "'The Foundations of Orthodox Culture' in Russia," 37- 38.

a religious course. The specific Christian perspective of FOC even runs partially counter to the nationalistic direction of FRCSE. As a consequence, one should ask not only whether the participation of a religious body endangers students' liberties, but also whether a certain educational policy can do so. It would be naive to think that nonconfessional courses, in contrast to confessional ones, are always neutral.”⁷

Marc Wisnosky (Carnegie Mellon University) remarked on the FOC story to 2012:

This case should be of interest for educators in the West. Despite more than a century of debate, we still argue about the merits and problems of moral education, with no resolution that is satisfactory to all sides. This Russian example stands as just another part of the overall debate. In fact, it allows us to see a struggle taking place in moral education that has never been seen before: between a former state-sanctioned religion trying to make a come-back and a former state-sanctioned atheism trying to continue. How this matter is finally resolved will shed light on church-state relations in public education not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the West, where many countries still have a (at least *de facto*) state religion.⁸

Katja Richters, in her history of FOC, asserts that from its inception, “[the] Moscow Patriarchate seemed unable to conceive of non-confessional religious instruction.”⁹ This author subscribes to the truth of this conjecture as of this present writing.

II. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION. (T. Kravchuk)

A. Religious Culture Education

Controlling questions for this historical survey include the following: How has the Russian educational system evolved through the course of time? Were these changes positive or negative for Russian youth? Could Russian students with religious educational backgrounds represent the Russian Federation competitively in the global academic arena? What type of

⁷ Willems, 38.

⁸ Marc Wisnosky, “Secular Russia’s Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture: History, Curriculum, Textbook, and Controversy,” *International Studies in Education* 13, Spring, 2012, (Selections on Eastern European Education). 41.

⁹ Katja Richters, “The ROC’s Approach to Other Religious Associations,” 49.

Christian theological education best suits the current situation in Russia? To what degree has the Russian government supported religious education in Russia through the recent decade? I, being an Orthodox Christian, will focus primarily on educational developments pertaining to Orthodoxy.

Before 2006 there was no mandatory religious education in the Russian Federation. For a student attending a state school or university, it was almost impossible to matriculate in Religious Studies or Theology. [Note: This presentation assumes the classical distinction between Religious Studies as an objective discipline on one hand, and Theology as faith seeking understanding (*credo ut intelligam*) on the other.¹⁰] In 2006 the program entitled “Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” (FRCSE) comprising the six optional units, “Foundations of Orthodox Christian/Islamic/Jewish/Buddhist cultures,” “Foundations of World Religions” and “Foundations of Secular Ethics” was required for grade 4 in four regions: Belgorodskaya, Bryanskaya, Kalugskaya and Smolenskaya. Which class would be the most favored among the majority of parents? A cross-country survey yielded the following results: 47% -Secular Ethics; 28.7% - Foundations of Orthodox Christian Culture; 20.3% - World Religions; 5.6% -Islam; 1.2% - Buddhism; 0.1% - Judaism. Owing to the fact that almost half of Russians preferred “Foundations of Secular Ethics,” some representatives of the various different confessions began contemplating the unification of all their foundational offerings, suggesting that this could be a prime opportunity to educate children to mutually respect plurality in race, ethnicity, cultures, and traditions.¹¹ Not all representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate could abide such a move.¹²

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1. In the Orthodox Church and Tradition, Theology is a gift from God, a fruit of the interior purity of the Christian’s spiritual life. Theology is identified with the vision of God and with the personal experience of the Transfiguration of creation by uncreated grace. In this way, Theology is not a theory of the world or a metaphysical system, but an expression of the formulation of the Church’s experience of an experiential participation; it is a communion. Ancient Faith Radio, “What is Theology?” (<http://www.pravmir.com/Theology/>)

¹¹ Ivan Gladilin, “The Teaching of Religious Culture in School: The Time for Dispute has Passed,”

In the academic year 2012-2013, after an extensive period of meticulous vetting by standards officials, teachers, and parents, plus the development of instructional resource materials and guidance manuals, FRCSE was made compulsory in all Russian schools. All religious textbooks were approved by appropriate religious specialists. In order to control the process of religious education at state and private schools, the new position of Director of Spiritual and Moral Upbringing and Education was instituted. Metropolitan Mercury of Rostov and Cherkasy, while harboring regret about what he considered to be the inadequate number of hours devoted to religious perspectives, hailed the opportunity afforded students to acquire knowledge and respect for their own traditional religious cultures and to identify with the religion of their own families.¹³ Even given the FRCSE options, the demand for “faith schools” (a term employed by the popular press) has been increasing, and teachers in Orthodox schools note a significant increase in appreciation of their work.¹⁴

B. Religious Studies

Church-state discussions addressing the elimination of religious illiteracy among Russians commenced at the dawn of the present millennium. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, religious education was not included (and is still not) in the standards for Russian educational programs in classes at the high school level, thus greatly stunting the desire among

(<http://www.km.ru/v-rossii/2012/03/20/prepodavanie-osnov-religii-v-rossiiskikh-shkolakh/prepodavanie-religioznoi-kultu>)

¹² “We shouldn’t ‘mess’ with children’s heads,” said Moscow Patriarchate Vladimir Vigilyansky Gladilin, “The Teaching of Religious Culture in School.”

¹³ Larissa Ionova, “Hour of Faith: 30 hours of Training to Learn the Basics of Religious Culture is Impossible,” (<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/smi/55039.htm>)

¹⁴ For Mikhail Tishkov (Director of the Orthodox school "Radonezh"), parents felt that in public schools it was impossible to get a moral and spiritual education for their children. The main goal of such ecclesiastical schools is to give a child religious education together with high-quality secular one. “Modern Orthodox schools have a platform, outlook and values which is a great basis upon which to engage children in education,” said Tishkov. (<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/jurnal/45400.htm>)

Russian youth to pursue Religious Studies in higher education. By 2011 it was clear that the lack of prior study opportunities in the field, plus serious deficiencies in state program funding necessitating American-level tuition costs—particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg—greatly disadvantaged Religious Studies in comparison to more practical and lucrative career fields such as Chemical Engineering and Law.¹⁵ In addition, funds were lacking to promote post-graduation career development support, forcing prospective graduates to undertake self-guided job searches. A teaching assistant in Religious Studies could expect to make only the equivalent of about 300 dollars per month.¹⁶

The Russian educational system forthrightly confronted the lack of qualified Religious Studies specialists who could be able to teach the newly mandated FRCSA. The Dean of the faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the Russian Orthodox University (ROU), Yuriy Kimelev, asserted the following:

. . . The need for Religious Studies specialists is great in Russia. State administrations on all levels are dealing with religious organizations. In addition, mayors' offices should always be able to find a common language and understanding with Orthodox parishes, communities of Muslims, Buddhists and so on. Now it is a serious problem, because personnel without special religious training have no idea with whom and about what to speak; they do not know how to make contact with representatives of different religious organizations because they do not know the specifics of their religions. At the same time almost no university in Russia prepares such specialists.¹⁷

State educational reforms and serious application of the Bologna process energized conversations about the positive effects of Religious Studies on youth and the practical application of its content within a post-atheistic social-political context, thus allowing for a serious commitment to the creation of religion-oriented educational standards for state

¹⁵ See Andrei Melnikov's published interview with Professor Vladimir Mironov, Dean of the Philosophy Faculty, Moscow State University. (<http://religiopolis.org/publications/3187-religioved-vsegda-filosof.html>)

¹⁶ Melnikov, (<http://religiopolis.org/publications/3187-religioved-vsegda-filosof.html>)

¹⁷ Yuriy Kimelev, "There is a Permanent Quest for Religious Studies Specialists in Russian Modern Society," *Orthodox Education*, 2(12), 2015. 85.

universities. By 2013 thirty-two Russian universities were home to departments of Religious Studies. At this time, however, Religious Studies specialists began registering concerns about a proposed reformed official listing of scientific and educational specialties by which their discipline would be attached to an extended grouping of scientific disciplines designated “Philosophy, Ethics and Religious Studies.” According to Pavel Kostylev, a senior researcher in the Philosophy faculty at Moscow State University and the chief editor of the journal *Religious Studies*, the introduction of a new enlarged discipline would have a negative effect on the status of Religious Studies in university settings. From his point of view, Religious Studies stood to be overshadowed by the other disciplines.¹⁸ The situation where the subject of Religious Studies is identified with the philosophical field could be explained in part as a hangover from previously prevailing ideological ideals. Kostylev was of the opinion that “. . . if current the Russian government is trying to come closer to the international educational standards, it will be more logical to unite the subjects of Theology and Religious Studies into a separate aggregated group of religious disciplines.”¹⁹

Russian Religious Studies in 2015 is a continuing “start-up.”²⁰ Currently, young students and researchers are just beginning to qualitatively and competitively approach international standards. The absence of such an education conditioned the present lack of methodological expertise and research acumen. Alina Bagrina, organizer of the Religious Studies Research Competition, "Faith and Religion in Modern Russia," lamented that submissions were handicapped by the lack of a credible citation and evaluative ratings culture for data collection:

¹⁸ P. Kostylev, S. Kolotvin, “Joining Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies will Lead to a Decline in Domestic Humanities,” (<http://www.pravmir.ru/prisoedinenie-k-filosofii-teologii-i-religiovedeniya-privedet-k-upadku-techestvennoj-gumanitarnoj-nauki/>)

¹⁹ Kostylev and Kolotvin, “Joining Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies.”

²⁰ Denis Grishkov, “Russian Religious Studies Education in 2015 is a Continuing “Start-up,” (<http://www.pravmir.ru/religiovedenie-v-rossii-eto-neprekrashhayushhiysya-start-up/>).

for example, she noted young researchers writing in the style of quantitative sociology to register bold hypotheses based on extensive conclusions after interviewing only a modest number of non-specialists.²¹

C. Theological Education

The following is a historical overview of the subject “Theology” in its advance in status from an occasional course offered before the new millennium, to the one deemed worthy of an expanding list of teaching standards, to an independent meta-area, to a fully recognized scholarly specialty warranting the grant of a Ph.D. degree.

Theology was registered on 2 March 2000 by the Russian Ministry of Education as a teachable academic discipline in both private and secular institutions. Interest for this subject started rising significantly through the ensuing decade. Members of Russia’s Orthodox majority cultivated and expressed a more unified sense of their historical ethnocultural identity, rooted deeply as it is in the Tradition. Svetlana Gusova, an official at the Directorate for Education Programs and the maintenance of teaching standards at higher and secondary educational establishments, told Keston News Service in early March 2000 that a state Theology course had been developed by specialists from the Orthodox St. Tikhon Theological Institute in Moscow and is based on Orthodox Theology, although it can be adapted to other denominations if required.²²

²¹ In Bagrina’s opinion, presently in Russia there is no governmental demand for Religious Studies. The government lives a totally separate life from the Russian Orthodox Church. Business organizations in the Russian market have a fear of the true religion, which is not a “consumer religion” but a real faith that makes mortals spiritual and requires transcendent goals. (<http://www.pravmir.ru/vera-religiya-i-molodye-uchenye-menya-poschitali/>)

²² Tatiana Titova, “Orthodoxy to Dominate Theology in Russian State-Run Higher Education,” (<http://www.keston.org.uk/kns/miscnew/kns%20orthodoxy%20to%20dominate%20Theology%20in%20russian%20state-run%20high.html>)

Despite the fact that Putin supported the introduction of Theology in a number of secular universities, as of 2011 the subject still lacked full status in the list of state scientific disciplines of the Russian State Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles. Students could acquire bachelor's and master's degrees in Theology, but their dissertations for a Ph.D. had to be submitted within another field that enjoyed the status of being an officially recognized scientific specialty. There was no lack of criticism of this situation. Archpriest Vladimir Vorobiev, the Principal of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University of Humanities expressed his ire through the application of an analogy: "If the top of the tree is cut down, it becomes ugly or crooked - so it is here. If we take away the opportunity to study in graduate school to defend the dissertation, then we will not have growth points, no theologians with academic degrees. . . . Our specialty cannot develop, and without the possibility of growth will become unattractive. . . . Is it logical to have an academic discipline 'Theology' and not allow people to write a doctoral dissertation in this field?"²³

In 2011 the Russian Education and Science Ministry recognized the Ph.D. in Theology of foreign students in fulfilment of the Russian Federation's commitment to the Bologna process. (Previously, the foreign student was accorded "candidate" status until gaining confirmation in a Russian university according to Russian requirements.) Vorobiev noted the discrepancy in theological educational practices, but asserted his personal confidence for a justified bright future for Theology as a credible discipline in the Russian Federation, contending all along that Theology is as much a knowledge—a science – about revelation as Philosophy is regarding wisdom and Philology regarding meaning.²⁴

²³Video: "Incredible Adventures of Theology in Russia," (<http://www.pravmir.ru/video-neveroyatnye-priklyucheniya-teologii-v-rossii/>)

²⁴Video: "Incredible Adventures of Theology in Russia."

In 2012 Russian Orthodox Church continued to promote theological education in national secular universities. At this point, about fifty secular universities in Russia had chairs or departments of Theology. During this year the department of Theology opened in the Moscow Institute of Nuclear Research. Just prior to this move Patriarch Kirill had put himself on record:

Introducing Theology in universities in no way runs counter to Russia's laws. . . I believe that this step fully meets the demands of our time. Theology should not be some exotic subject for a narrow circle of experts or amateurs. Introducing it in universities is not somebody's caprice and not an attempt of the Church to impose the religious world outlook on everyone. It is absolutely incorrect to say that Theology is introduced in educational institutions as an alternative to physics or biology, like some atheists are trying to depict the situation. I believe that in a country where the majority of people were deprived of an opportunity to learn much about religion within many decades, introducing Theology in universities is a demand of time . . . some of these opponents even looked at this situation as an attempt to make Christianity the official Russian ideology.²⁵

In a practical vein, the head of the History Department of Moscow's Lomonosov State University, Sergey Karpov, pointed out that Russia needed more experts in Theology: "Like any subject [FRCSE] shouldn't be taught by dilettantes. Thus, more opportunities should be given to people to receive good theological education. I also believe that Russians should know more about their own history and culture—and Russian culture has been based on Orthodox Christianity for many centuries."²⁶

The Federal Education Law from December 29, 2012, contained a wide range of regulations relating to theological education and affecting the interests of Orthodox educational institutions. This so-called "Government's response" to a wide variety of inquiries from the Patriarchate included the following major points:

1. On the secular nature of education: In comparison to the previous Federal Education Law from 1992, the list of educational institutions that have rights to sponsor theological classes was

²⁵ Milena Faustova, "Theology in Secular Universities – Pros and Cons," (<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/print57869.htm>)

²⁶ Milena Faustova, "Theology in Secular Universities – Pros and Cons."

widely expanded. Now, not only state universities but also other municipal organizations engaged in educational activities, such as orphan houses or health care institutions as well as private universities have a chance to provide theological education for their students.

2. On the accreditation of theological educational programs: It is obligatory to provide confessional examination of exemplary educational programs and instructors of all theological courses.

3. On Theology degrees and titles: Before 2012 there were no legal guarantees for the recognition of theological degrees and titles of professors from theological academies and seminaries during the state accreditation of educational institutions. However, owing to a subsequent amendment by State Deputy Chairman Alexander Zhukov, during the licensing and state accreditation processes of religious educational institutions the government must recognize the academic degrees and titles of the instructors. (Note: This should encourage more Russian youth to choose theological education in their native country.)

Prior to the passing of this bill, Abbot Peter Ereemeev, Rector of Russian Orthodox University and founder of an independent Theology faculty at his institution, spoke to the need of bolstering theological educational standards for Theology as a means to achieve qualitatively sound research in the study of religious cultures and traditions, given the fact that “the religious factor in public life is growing significantly.”²⁷ However, the Assistant Professor of the Archiving Faculty at Russian State University for the Humanities, Sergey Seregichev, remains convinced that while theologians are necessary theological majors should exist only at parochial schools and universities. In holding this view, he asserts the following: The Church’s attempt to insert itself into the public education system is a very dubious move; Theology is a science only for

²⁷ Alice Orlova, “Theology in the Universities: The Reality and Fear,” (<http://www.pravmir.ru/teologiya-v-vuzax-realnost-i-opaseniya/>).

true believers; It should not be surprising that the Russian Orthodox Church, in moving to integrate into the secular educational system, risks generating powerful waves of protest, unintended though they may be (witness the reaction ignited by a Department of Theology being founded at the Moscow science institute) – “We do not open in the monasteries a Department of Analytical Geometry!”; Educational standards are based on scientific principles, and though the exact listing of these principles may be subject to debate, not one principle is faith-based; From the theoretical point of view it could be assumed that there will be graduate students with theology degrees who don’t truly believe in God; Theological education at colleges and universities creates many unanswered questions such as “How is this discipline going to be taught in classes where there are people of different confessions?” and “Are there enough qualified professors in our country, especially in the provinces, who are able to teach this discipline correctly?”²⁸

On October 14, 2013, Russia’s Minister of Education and Science registered Order No. 1061, “On Approval of the List of Chief Subjects and Areas in Higher Education Training.” Theology was singled out as a separate extended group subject to higher education standards in the training of bachelors, masters and post-graduates. However, before the Order was registered, energetic discussions transpired concerning the place Theology can have on this list. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk described and commented on the discussion process:

As soon as we were given an opportunity to formulate our position, we held a comprehensive discussion on this problem in the church milieu. This theme was put on the agenda of the Supreme Church Council in summer 2013. We received a great deal of responses from the academic community and experts of various levels. With the blessing of the Supreme Church Authority, the work was entrusted to the Russian Orthodox Church’s inter-departmental coordinating group for teaching Theology in universities, established by the Holy Synod. Contributions to this work were made by the Academic-Methodological Council on Theology, the Academic-Methodological Association on Classical University Education as well as St. Tikhon’s Orthodox Humanities University.

²⁸ Alice Orlova, “Theology in the Universities: The Reality and Fear.”

At every stage we maintained direct contacts with specialists in the Ministry of Education and Science. Initially, not all the specialists always treated our position with due understanding. Some proposed that we should set up an extended group of subjects under the general designation “Philosophy, Ethics, Religious Studies, Theology.” But we could not agree to it since Theology as science is fundamentally different from the other disciplines enumerated including Religious Studies which represent a study of religion often from atheistic perspectives.

The constructive dialogue with the Ministry of Education and Science has brought forth its fruits, and today we have a situation which enables us to develop Theology as an area in the secular education space. . . . This work to return Theology to the secular educational field, however, is not over. The next stage is to create conditions for the state recognition of academic degrees awarded for theses on Theology, as is the case throughout the world....²⁹

Through 2014 a dissertation in Theology was still not possible. “A dissertation in Theology was a fact of the private life of the scholar, and was not accepted by State Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles.... [Theology] remains a ‘disfranchised discipline,’” said Archpriest Vorobiev. Scholarly pursuits in Theology on the master’s level had to be channeled into Religious Studies, History, or Philology.³⁰

2015 started with a new chapter in the further development of Theology as an academic discipline in Russia. On January 23, 2015, the State Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles initiated the process of approving the science of Theology as a titled separate scientific meta-area comprising scholarly investigation in such areas as biblical studies, historical liturgy, church history, church archeology, ecclesiastical art, patrology, Christian ethics, Christian philosophy, and canon law. By October 2015 the fulfillment of the approving process established the reality of a Ph.D. in Theology.³¹ Professor S.D. Lebedev, of Belgorod State University,

²⁹ “Metropolitan Hilarion Comments on Changes in Teaching Theology in Universities,” the Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, 10 October, 2013, (<https://mospat.ru/en/2013/10/25/news93332/>)

³⁰ “Theology Still Confounded in the Russian Educational System – Orthodox Priest,” Religion *Interfax*, 16 October, 2014. (<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=56783>)

³¹ *Одобен президиумом Высшей аттестационной комиссии при Министерстве образования и науки Российской Федерации, протокол президиума от 25 сентября 2015 г. № 24, рекомендация № 24/555*

³¹ Olesya Suchkova, “Higher Attestation Commission Approved Theology as a New Scientific Specialty,” *Религиоведческий журнал*, 10 October 2015. (<http://religiourn.ru/stat-i/post-230/>)

acknowledged the move as a mark of a “religious renaissance” in Russia in grounding the cultural and social status of religions—Christian Orthodoxy in particular—in his country. He cautions that, in contrast to Western European countries, Russian science and education have been more radically secularized in having been developed over long period of time not only in isolation from religion, but also in opposition to religion, a condition that might inhibit a natural and favorable synergy between Theology and other socio-humanitarian discipline. Most likely, according to his prognostication, there will be a protracted “smoldering” conflict among the disciplines. Also, in foreseeable future, Theology could remain a “peripheral” area of study.³²

R. Lunkin, President of the Guild of Experts in Religion and Law, expressed ambivalence regarding this action. Russia is making progress in establishing the credibility of Theology as a respected science of international stature, but Russia still is handicapped by a lack of sufficiently respected and authoritative theological faculties that the science deserves. Furthermore, from his point of view, it is currently difficult to distinguish between Russian Theology and Religious Studies programs.³³ M.Y. Smirnov, the Head of the Philosophy Department of the Leningrad State University, also sees a clear and challenging consequence for the Theological enterprise: “Theologians will have to prove their value in front of non-theologians.”³⁴ S.V. Pahomov, Associate Professor of St. Petersburg State University, in expressing his pointedly negative reaction, underscored the complexities in teaching Theology in a multinational, multicultural, post “single ideology” country. From his point of view, it is not possible to imagine confessionally non-specific theologizing: “It is impossible to be a theologian in general.” Again

The Higher Attestation Commission of the Ministry of Education and Science (VAK, at times reported on as the “State Supreme Certification Commission”) was established to ensure a uniform state policy in the field of certification of science professionals. VAK is responsible for the awarding of academic degrees as well as the assignment of academic ranks. The full range of scientific specialties developed by expert councils of VAK are approved by order of the Ministry.

³² Olesya Suchkova, “Higher Attestation Commission Approved Theology as a New Scientific Specialty.”

³³ Olesya Suchkova, “Higher Attestation Commission.”

³⁴ Ibid.

from Pahomov, Theology faces the prospect of being received in academia as a “white crow in the modern nomenclature of the Arts”; it is at once a reanimation of a medieval discipline and a realm of scholarship having urgent need to comply with the latest scientific criteria.³⁵

To conclude: Despite residual problematic concerns such as Theology possibly being victimized by other disciplines in institutional priority scales,³⁶ the quality gap between Russia and other Western countries regarding Theological education is finally being narrowed.

D. Personal Judgments and Recommendations

Recent Russian official responsiveness in approving state laws for opportunities in religious education is to be applauded as a welcome kick-start to those Russian students who consider choosing a theological or religious studies avenue for their personal lives and future career choices. However, the question about the necessity of Theology as a university discipline is still not solved. This author discounts Seregichev’s rejection of Theology in public institutions on supposed grounds of scientific vs. (unscientific) faith “principles,” and rejects his presumption that faith and (scientific) reason are incompatible and therefore mutually exclusive. In addition, his apparent lack of confidence in the current quality and quantity of degreed professors could be prejudicially restrictive regarding opportunities to matriculate in Theology and thus prove counterproductive to the cultivation of qualified prospective teachers in the discipline.

I do not think that religious courses should be required in all majors at high levels of education, but such disciplines should be available among all courses. The Russian Orthodox Church should assist in fostering a responsive, relevant, and culturally-conscious theology that

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

addresses the complexities of national events for a heretofore theologically naïve populace handicapped by ignorance about the origin and content of native religious traditions. (In doing so, the Church would itself serve itself well in overcoming a regrettably common perception among young adults of being an officious, extrinsic, and irrelevant institution.) Contemporary Christian Theology in Russia should count among its goals edification through exposure to exemplary lives of faith, plus engendering prudence and wisdom through the inculcation of supra-scientific wonder that far transcends the mere question, “Why should people believe?”³⁷ To this end, an interdisciplinary, rigorous, and personally intelligible Scriptural exegesis is required. Today we could definitely say that Russia has embarked upon a culture-appropriate path in theological education. Now is the time to fortify Russia’s literacy in religion and knowledge of faith. It is time for complete fulfillment of high standards for theological education at schools and universities, and it is time to expand the number of bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and to create opportunities to pursue a Ph.D. in Theology or Religious Studies. Russians deserve to have clear understandings regarding the relation of faith to reason and the application of faith to life and culture.

³⁷ William P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 21.