



# REVISTA INCLUSIONES

ESPACIO Y TIEMPO EN EL SIGLO XXI

Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales

Volumen 7 . Número Especial

Octubre / Diciembre

2020

ISSN 0719-4706

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**RELIGION IN THE MODERN RUSSIAN EDUCATIONAL SPACE:  
GENESIS, PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS**

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**Fecha de Recepción:** 19 de agosto de 2020 – **Fecha Revisión:** 27 de agosto de 2020

**Fecha de Aceptación:** 26 septiembre de 2020 – **Fecha de Publicación:** 01 de octubre de 2020

**Abstract**

The article analyzes the experience accumulated in Russia in the 1990s and 2010s on organizing the study of religion in a secular school. The author substantiates the relevance of addressing the topic of the presence of knowledge of religion in the modern educational space and the need to study international and Russian practice of teaching knowledge of religion. The genesis of knowledge about religion in Russian schools that have survived a long period of dominance of atheistic ideology is revealed, the importance of regional initiative in the formation of religious education courses is shown. Conclusions about the appropriateness of using the most frequently declared approaches to the study of religion in the future are made taking into account the most frequently expressed provisions of the ongoing discussion on methodological and conceptual approaches to the study of religion, methodological, personnel, legal support and the critical discourse existing in the scientific field regarding the situation in Russia.

**Keywords**

Study of religion – Education system – Russian school – Regional practice

**Para Citar este Artículo:**

Pigoreva, Olga Vladimirovna. Religion in the modern russian educational space: genesis, problems, prospects. Revista Inclusiones Vol: 7 num Especial (2020): 55-64.

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DR. OLGA VLADIMIROVNA PIGOREVA



## Introduction

The increasing role of the religious factor in the 21st century is a global trend, although international and Russian processes that determined the growth of interest in religion developed along different vectors. In the Western Christian (post-Christian) world, the secularization of public consciousness dominated in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The events of September 11, 2001, demonstrating to the whole world the threat of religious extremism, resulted in increased attention to the "religious" issue.<sup>2</sup>

A different scenario took place in Russia: after experiencing a 70-year period of atheism, Russian society in the 1990s saw in religion the possibility of returning to its roots and the enormous potential for the revival of the centuries-old cultural stratum lost in the Soviet years. A sharp increase in the religiosity of the population, the lifting of bans on religious subjects, and changes in legislation led to the development of religious pluralism in the country. The lack of knowledge of religion in a significant part of society, the uncontrolled activities in Russia of numerous foreign sects turned the variety of choice that arose in Russian society into religious chaos. In the late 1990s, Russian legislation enshrined the concept of "traditional religions", streamlined the activities of religious organizations.<sup>3</sup> However, the understanding of the role of religion in a significant part of believers was lost or, at best, was considered in the context of historical retrospective mysticism; diverse ceremonies for many Russian citizens began to be considered as faith.

The approaches to organizing the study of religion in schools turned out to be different in international and Russian practice. Significant experience with such work has been accumulated in the West, which was not interrupted for decades by a change in state ideological approaches, but needed updating and adjustment at the end of the 20th century due to changes in sociocultural conditions.<sup>4</sup> Russian schools in the early 1990s were in a difficult situation: the education system was oriented towards fulfilling a social order and could not stay away from the growing needs of religious studies in society, but it did not have legislatively formulated, methodically developed solutions. Regional practice formed the conceptual, methodological, legal and ethical approaches to the organization of the study of religion in a secular school. A variety of accumulated experience, regional specifics, and the expansion of modern scientific discourse on this issue require updating and generalization of the material. The purpose of this article is a historical analysis of the experience of studying religion that took shape in the Russian educational space in the 1990s and 2010s, taking into account critical observations and recognized positive results.

## The theoretical basis

The theoretical basis of the study is based on the achievements of modern science, taking into account the significance of the spiritual-value factor in the study of reality. The value-based approach to teaching knowledge on the history and culture of religions evaluates the study of traditional religious culture as a way of transmitting the cultural and

<sup>1</sup> L. Elias John, "The Return of Spirituality: Contrasting Interpretations", *Religious Education* Vol: 86 num 3 (1991): 455-466.

<sup>2</sup> M.-R. Jalali, "History of development of terrorism, case criminology of the fourth wave", *Amazonia Investiga* Vol: 7 num 14 (2018): 179-186.

<sup>3</sup> Russian Newspaper "On freedom of conscience and on religious associations: Federal Law of the Russian Federation of September 26, 1997 No. 125-Φ3". Russian Newspaper, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> A. Meijer Wilna, "Religious Education and Personal Identity: A Problem for the Humanities", *British Journal of Religious Education* Vol: 13 num 2 (1991): 89-93.

historical heritage of a country and region and forming axiological worldviews among young people. The theory of cultural-historical types of mankind developed by N.Ya. Danilevsky, was essential in determining the methodological foundations of the study, which became the basis of the civilizational method of studying the historical process. The dialectic method was used to study the problem from the standpoint of dialectical contradiction, which allowed us to study state policy in the field of education and regional practice on the use of knowledge of religion in their unity and opposite, to identify contradictions and conclude that regional practice on the use of knowledge of religion in the educational work of schools in the 1990s and early 2000s was ahead of state policy.

## Methodology

In our opinion, the organization of the study of religion in a secular school has been a debatable topic for more than a quarter of a century; therefore, it requires the use of special historical approaches, including the historical genetic one, with the help of which causal relationships and patterns of the appearance in the Russian regions of factors of the school's conversion to religious subjects are studied. The analysis of historical material within the framework of the problem-chronological method focuses on the study of the problem in chronological sequence, which contributes to the disclosure of the dynamics of the studied process. The historical-systemic method makes it possible to study the change in state policy in the field of education regarding the use of knowledge of religion in the educational space of the Russian regions as a social phenomenon that interacted with other processes that developed as a result of changes in state policy: socio-political and economic transformation, changes in state-church relations, etc. The historical and legal approach makes it possible to trace the change in legislation in educational and religious spheres, which is necessary to study the legal support for teaching courses on the history and culture of religions in state and municipal educational institutions.

## Results

First of all, factors determining the emergence of knowledge about religion in the Soviet - Russian educational space require study. The inclusion of knowledge of religion in the educational work of schools outside the atheistic context became possible during the transition from the USSR to Russia.<sup>5</sup> At the last stage of perestroika, which entailed a number of cardinal changes in the life of the state, the education system from a strict state-party leadership passed to the democratization of school life. The output of the book M.S. Gorbachev's "Perestroika and New Thinking for Our Country and for the World," which proclaimed the recognition in the USSR of the priority of universal values over class values, acted as a catalyst for incorporating religious values as part of universal values in various spheres of cultural life, paving the way for the use of religious knowledge in the new educational space. Adopted in 1992, the Law of the Russian Federation "On Education" secured the importance of the formation of universal values as one of the main principles of state policy in the field of education, which contributed to the expansion of the practice of studying religion in schools.

Amendment of Soviet legislation on religion after the entry into force in October 1990 of the USSR Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" (granted

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<sup>5</sup> O. V. Pigoreva, and Z. D. Ilyina, "The formation of a new educational space and the "religious question" during the period of "perestroika"". Scientific reports of Belgorod State University, Series: History. Political science Vol: 15 num 158 (2013): 140-146.

religious organizations the right to create educational institutions and groups for religious education of children and adults, to conduct training in other forms, using for this premises owned or provided by them for use) allowed teaching religion in schools at the request of parents optionally, outside the school curriculum.<sup>6</sup> New opportunities were reflected in school practice: The law that allowed the start of religious education (not studying what the secular education system implies, namely religious education!) was perceived as permission to use religious knowledge in secular schools in late Soviet society.

The methodological crisis of school teaching that arose in the early 1990s as a result of a change in state ideology, the depoliticization and deideologization of the educational process determined the development of a worldview vacuum in the new educational space. In the early 1990s, when teachers were given freedom to organize teaching activities and implement innovative ideas, and the regions were significantly independent from the center, separate initiatives arose to organize the study of religion in schools. The work experience was varied and was implemented in the absence of federal regulatory documents, programs and textbooks. Each region regulated such activities in accordance with its normative acts, developed textbooks, and organized the training of teachers.

Smolensk, Kursk, Belgorod regions were among the first territories that began to organize the study of religion in schools. So, the optional course "Orthodox Ethics and Culture" has been taught in schools in the Smolensk region since 1991. In 1997, the course "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture" was introduced at 300 schools in the Kursk region. In the Belgorod Region, the first experience in studying Orthodox culture took place in 1996, starting in 2006, the discipline "Orthodox culture" was introduced in all 750 schools in the region from grades 2 to 11 as part of the regional component.<sup>7</sup> The above facts are given on the example of provincial regions of the center of Russia, where Orthodoxy is the traditional and most popular religion of the inhabitants. A similar situation in the study of the history and culture of religions traditional for the regions took place throughout the Russian Federation. The regional experience that emerged at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s can be assessed as activities to preserve the cultural and national identity in the context of a state-political transformation.

In the early 2000s, the impact of globalization was aggravated by the contradiction between state education policies aimed at integrating into global processes and regional practices aimed at preserving traditional national values, which in the educational space of the regions was expressed in expanding the practice of studying the history and culture of religions. Such a situation, determined, on the one hand, by the needs of society and, on the other hand, by the diversity that was formed, required streamlining by the federal center.

At the suggestion of the Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, monitoring was carried out to study the historical and cultural foundations of traditional religions and to observe the principles of freedom of conscience and religion in

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<sup>6</sup> Vedomosti of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR and the Supreme Council of the USSR (1990) – On freedom of conscience and religious organizations: Law of the USSR of 01.10.1990. Vedomosti of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR and the Supreme Council of the USSR. No. 41. Pp. 991–999, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> O.V. Pigoreva, "Formation of a regional system of spiritual and moral education in the axiological categories of Orthodox culture at the turn of the 20th – 21st centuries (on the example of Belgorod, Kursk and Smolensk regions)", Scientific statements of Belgorod State University. Series "History. Political science" Vol: 34 num 7 (204), (2015): 152-158.

2007, the results of which showed an increase in the study of the history and culture of religions.<sup>8</sup> In most Russian subjects, the study of traditional religious culture was carried out as part of the subject of the regional basic curriculum, less often as an optional course. The regional legislation was varied, defining the format for incorporating knowledge of religion in the educational space: regional laws, orders of regional departments of education, regional ministries of education.

The problem of streamlining the established practice with the aim of institutionalizing the study of religion in schools was so complex that it required the intervention of the President of the Russian Federation. The new training course “Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” (FRCSE) was tested following a meeting of the President in July 2009 with leaders of leading religious faiths in Russia in 21 Russian regions in 2009-2011. Parents of students (their representatives) could choose one of the training modules: “Fundamentals of secular ethics”, “Fundamentals of world religious cultures”, “Fundamentals of Orthodox culture”, “Fundamentals of Muslim culture”, “Fundamentals of Jewish culture”, “Fundamentals of Buddhist culture”. The Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation estimates the results of the experiment as follows: “The new subject was useful to children, understandable to teachers and parents, regardless of religious beliefs. 98% of teachers reacted positively to this course. 81% of students expressed a desire to continue studying the course. More than half of the parents surveyed are confident that its study has a positive impact on the moral state of their children, forms their culture of interethnic and interfaith communication, and a respectful attitude to the cultural and religious traditions of the peoples of Russia”.<sup>9</sup>

Positive results of the experiment made it possible to begin teaching FRCSE in all Russian schools on September 1, 2012. Teaching was introduced in the fourth grade; the number of hours is 34 hours (1 lesson per week). The concept of constructing the modules of the FRCSE course, the comprehensive coverage of the historical, cultural and moral aspects of each religion and ethics are based on the principle of the general educational, secular nature of the course. As noted in the letter of the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia No. 03-831 dated April 30, 2010 “On Testing the Comprehensive Training Course of the FRCSE”, the goal of the new discipline is “the formation of the student (younger teenager) motivations for conscious moral behavior based on knowledge and respect for cultural and religious traditions of the multinational people of Russia, as well as dialogue with representatives of other cultures and worldviews. ” The following tasks were set for younger students at the FRCSE course: to know / understand the basic concepts of religious cultures, their history of origin, the history of development in the history of Russia; to be able to establish a relationship between religious culture and human behavior; to correlate moral norms of behavior with the norms of religious culture, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> Commission on Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. Preliminary results of monitoring compliance with the principles of freedom of conscience and religion when studying courses on the history and culture of religions in state and municipal educational institutions in the regions of the Russian Federation, prepared by the Commission on Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. April 24, 2007. Available at: <http://www.oprf.ru/structure/comissions2006/11/materials/1896>, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Bulletin of Education of Russia. “Extract from the report of M.V. Dulinov, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, at the opening of the XX International Christmas Educational Readings”, Bulletin of Education of Russia num 3 (2012): 79-80.

Continuation of the study of FRCSE is implemented at the level of basic general education (grades 5–9) within the framework of the subject field “Fundamentals of the spiritual and moral culture of the peoples of Russia”. A letter from the Federal Ministry of Education and Science recommended conducting educational subjects that take into account regional, national and ethnocultural characteristics of the peoples of the Russian Federation when implementing this subject area. However, the lack of a recommended list of disciplines and the content of education leads to uncontrolled diversity, which does not allow achieving continuity with FRCSE.

In our opinion, among the priority tasks that need to be solved is the determination of the conceptual and methodological foundations of teaching, which is closely related to the solution of the question of the possibility of observing the principle of neutrality in the teaching process. The study of religion can be implemented from the standpoint of religious studies, cultural studies, theology, philosophy of religion, and can be considered as the basis of spiritual and moral education. Teaching from a neutral perspective (which, presumably, can be implemented in the context of cultural or religious studies approaches) for most Russian citizens remains almost the most attractive option for organizing the study of religion in school. However, as practice shows, declared neutrality is a practically impossible phenomenon in practice. Will neutrality lead to the teaching of atheism? This has already taken place in Soviet education, the experience of which must be taken into account. If we take the path of implementing the principle of humanism and universal values in the process of teaching knowledge about religion, then there is a high probability that the formal slogan, which has become a conductor of religious values, in the new educational space at the stage of transition from the USSR to Russia, will become an established narrative that will entail a diverse and uncontrolled practice.

The study of religion is connected with the question of the identity of teachers, students, parents, society (region, a specific locality, school, etc.). Even if it is possible to achieve a neutral presentation of content through a textbook, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the teacher is largely focused on personal experience, his own worldview position, value orientations, and local history context. In addition, there is a danger that neutrality in the teaching of religious culture will primarily contribute to the formation of a secular liberal worldview, and not to develop among students motivation “to conscious moral behavior based on knowledge and respect for the cultural and religious traditions of the multinational people of Russia”, as indicated in the goal setting of the course. We believe, and many colleagues will agree with this, the teaching of FRCSE (and the disciplines that continue this course at the next stage of training) should not indicate the definition of faith in the category of life values as the main goal. The education system is aimed primarily at the formation of civic identity, and civic and religious values are not identical. Of course, secular education should strive to avoid the risk of ideological incorporation, but it is advisable to do without immersing students in philosophical discourse in the process of studying courses on the history and culture of religions.

There are enough criticisms regarding the organization of religious studies in a secular school; many of them are not unfounded and fair. However, it is unacceptable that the practice formed by the enormous efforts of the participants in the educational process, determined by the existing needs in society for the study of religion, be curtailed; or that the lessons formally remain in the grid of hours, but in fact become a marginal addition to the learning process. We agree with the statement of Professor D.V. Shmonin that religion “really” returns “to education both as an object and as an actor. These processes, which we attribute to a new, emerging educational paradigm, should not be “ideologically”

opposed. On the contrary, it is necessary... to provide them with organizational, scientific, methodological support, legal regulation".<sup>10</sup>

## Discussions

World experience in organizing the study of religion is widely understood by Russian scientists in the framework of pedagogical, religious studies, cultural studies<sup>11</sup>. Modern globalization processes, including in culture, the understanding of the imperfect secularization of value-worldview foundations, the awareness of the need for religious literacy in society, despite the differences in the growth factors of religiosity in Russia and the world as a whole, make scientific understanding of the historical experience of the Russian Federation in organizing the study of religion in a secular school after a long period of lack of practice of such work. The Russian practice of including religious knowledge in the educational space has been studied by domestic researchers in the subject field of pedagogical, cultural, religious studies, sociological, historical sciences.<sup>12</sup> The practice of studying religion, which has formed in the modern educational space of the Russian Federation, is not free from contradictions. A number of researchers criticize the prevailing teaching format: goal-setting, methodology, software and methodological support, teacher qualifications, organization of the choice of a training module, etc.<sup>13</sup> The current practice of studying religion in Russian schools, of course, needs to be adjusted.

## Conclusion

The education system should take into account the role of religion and religious beliefs in history and culture. The introduction of training courses on the history and culture of religions in school practice has become an important sociocultural phenomenon during

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<sup>10</sup> D. V. Shmonin, "Toledo principles" and theology in school. State, religion, Church in Russia and abroad Vol: 35 num 4 (2017): 72-88.

<sup>11</sup> F. N. Kozyrev, Religious education in a secular school. Theory and international experience in the domestic perspective (Saint Petersburg: Apostolic city. 636, 2005); A. A. Ozhiganova, "The problem of neutrality in teaching knowledge about religion in school. The case of Canada" Sociology of religion in late modern society num 7 (2018): 164-170 y M. M. Shakhnovich, "Religion in school: modern European landscape". State, religion, Church in Russia and abroad Vol: 35 num 4 (2017): 30-45.

<sup>12</sup> I. V. Metlik, Religion and education in a secular school (Moscow: Planeta-2000. 348, 2004); O. V. Pigoreva, State policy and regional practice of studying religion in the educational space of the center of Russia at the turn of the 20th – 21st centuries (Moscow: cgi "Print". 409, 2017); O. V. Rozina, Orthodox culture in school: formation and development of professional competencies of a teacher (Moscow: Moscow state regional University Publishing house. 164, 2014); O. A. Lakimova and A. S. Menshikov "Religious education in Russian schools: plans, pains, practices" Changing Societies & Personalities Vol: 3 num 4 (2019): 373-387; S. D. Lebedev, "The socio-political bases of confessionally focused practices of religious studies in Russian education", Politics and Religion Journal Vol: 10 num 1 (2016): 43-54 y T. Nadyrshin, "Religious education in Russia: factors of non-religious parents' choice". British Journal of Religious Education. 2019. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01416200.2019.1651691?journalCode=cbre20>

<sup>13</sup> A. V. Muravev and M.M. Shakhnovich, "Religion in the modern Russian school", Domestic notes num 4 (2012): 219-231; M. Yu. Smirnov, "FRCSE as a test: a teacher between religious content and secular context. FRCSE in the school education system: panorama of views: materials of the all-Russian forum "World of culture and religion: vectors of education and enlightenment"" (Perm, 26-28 Sept. 2019). (Perm: publishing house of Perm state Institute of culture. 81-94, 2019) y V. A. Shnirelman, "Religious culture or invitation to religion-what do new textbooks teach?". State, religion, Church in Russia and abroad Vol: 35 num 4 (2017): 89-118.

the period of a change in the civilizational paradigm in Russia, a positive response of the regions to a public request for the search for worldview guidelines and ways to preserve traditional national values. The study of religion in the framework of secular education is extremely important in conditions, on the one hand, of a tendency towards globalization, including culture, and, on the other, the desire of a significant part of society to restore historical and cultural continuity, for which knowledge of the history and culture of traditional religions is important.

Understanding the value factor as one of the dominants of the historical process, relying on the facts of various historical sources indicate the need to recognize the axiological categories of traditional religions in the system of modern spiritual and moral education. It is possible to rely on the following approach to organizing the study of training courses on the history and culture of religions in the general education system: value-cognitive study of traditional religious culture as part of the cultural and historical heritage of the country and region, aimed at transmitting to the younger generation the spiritual and moral values accumulated within the framework of a certain religious tradition, not involving students in religious practice, including acquaintance with the history and culture of other traditional religions.

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REVISTA DE HUMANIDADES  
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CUADERNOS DE SOFÍA  
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