

## How to Train a Teacher of Spiritual and Moral Education

By A. Y. Grigorenko

The future of any nation depends on how the younger generation learns and keeps spiritual and moral values and traditions. For modern Russia, which is going through a complicated phase in its development, this is all the more true. Nowadays, Russian society, and especially the younger generation, are still in a deep spiritual and moral crisis. The age of the initial use of drugs is declining, from 18 to 14 years of age on average. Our country has one of the world's highest suicide rates among adolescents, number of abortions among girls under 19 years of age, and among the highest the levels of consumption of drugs and alcohol. As is clear from opinion polls, about 55% of young people have expressed willingness to violate perceived moral norms in order to achieve personal success<sup>1</sup>. In short, there is a moral crisis taking place, as manifested through these phenomena.

Many perceive the current situation in Russian society as a threat to national security and express the need for urgent action to ensure the spiritual and moral education of youth. Increasingly, educators and community and political leaders are beginning to understand that “the initiation of children and youth to cultural traditions on the basis of global and domestic cultural values — [is] one of the most important tasks of the Russian state and society,” as noted in the report of the Minister of Education and Science A. Fursenko<sup>1</sup>.

On July 21, 2009, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stressed the relevance of the “spiritual and moral education of the younger generation” and declared his decision to support “the idea of teaching in Russian schools foundations of religious culture and secular ethics” during a meeting with leaders of traditional Russian religions. He also touched on details of the practical implementation of this idea in Russian schools. First, he noted variability in interpreting these disciplines:

First, it can be the fundamentals of Orthodox culture, the foundations of the Muslim culture, the foundations of Judaism, Buddhism. That is to say, [sic] on these matters both students and their parents will be able to make a decision. If there are students (or their families) who want to explore the diversity of Russian religious life, these students can take a general course on the history on the major traditional religions of our country.

Second, all of these topics could be combined into a single course to be taught with the same textbook. Finally, a third option: those who do not have certain religious beliefs should be allowed to study the foundations of secular ethics. Thus, we embrace all those who have different ideas about what needs to study, conforming with the ideas, of course, of their parents.

Thus, the President articulated the right of students and parents on an ideological choice and stated the impermissibility of compelling students to study the given subject. The President repeatedly returned to the principle of voluntariness of the ideological choice of students and their parents in his speeches: “A choice for students and their parents, of course, must be entirely voluntary... Any coercion on this issue is not only illegal, but will be absolutely counterproductive.”

The President, at the meeting with religious leaders in Russia, was supported by the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (hereinafter ROC) Kirill, who on this occasion said: “Then [before 1917], all studied the Law of God, and then walked file down crosses. As a result of choice [of students and their parents], all the concerns will be removed.”

Among other notable elements of the July 21, 2009 meeting, the President spoke out against those who suggested that introducing spiritual and moral education to the younger generation stood in violation of the secular nature of the school, as stipulated in the Basic Law of Russia. He unequivocally stated, “Secular teachers will teach these subjects.” Heads of all traditional religions of our country, present at the meeting, were unanimously in agreement with the President. Their assent was expressed by the ROC Patriarch Cyril: “That's right, that all these subjects will be taught by secular teachers, because no law is subject to strain...”

Pursuant to the orders of the President (on August 2, 2009 Order № — 2009), the Russian Government decided (on August 11, 2009 in Order № VP-P44-4632) to carry out in the 19 subjects of the Russian Federation the piloting of a comprehensive training course for educational institutions, “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics.” The order of the President and the decision of the Government of the Russian Federation have been very timely for our country, in which, as indeed in other countries, there are signs of spiritual and moral crisis in society, increasing tensions in the ethnic, religious and cultural relations. In this sense, we are going to “keep up” with the world community, stand up, so to speak, to the “European way”: globalization, migration, the growth of intolerance — all of this pushed Western Europe towards the implementation of previously unexpected and unprecedented steps.

In 2007, in San Marino, the Council of Europe adopted a declaration on religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, and in April 2008 in Strasbourg a landmark meeting on the subject was held: secular leaders together with representatives of various religious organizations discussed the place of religion in secondary schools. Participants in the meeting included representatives from Russia, and in large measure the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 2006, the development of the Toledo Guiding Principles on training matters of religion and belief in public schools was initiated. The Spanish city of Toledo was chosen as the historic symbol of the intersection of cultures and religions in Europe: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. One of the developers of the working documents of the meeting, Professor Silvio Ferrari of the University of Milan, said of the reasons for the meeting: as a result of considerable migration, “a sudden sharp rise of pluralism in the field of culture and religion” has occurred; “people of other religions and cultures came to be perceived as ‘others,’ ‘foreign,’ which often leads to inter-religious tension”. So, explains the professor, teaching of religion has become a matter not only for religious communities, but also a matter for the government. Among the Toledo Principles are listed: scientific principles of teaching, respect for human rights, the binding commitment of teachers to the idea of religious freedom.

The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Alvaro Gil Robles, explained during a visit to Russia: (May 2005)<sup>1</sup>

We are talking about the study of religions and not religious education. Now in European countries, including Russia, the so-called White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue — ‘We live together as equals,’ which was recently adopted by the Council of Europe, is widely presented. The book says that in public schools, religion should be taught as secular knowledge.

Thus, it becomes clear that learning the basics of religious culture and secular ethics in public schools does not violate the right to freedom of conscience, but on the contrary — it is the manifestation and further development of ethnic, religious and intercultural tolerance, which deepens inter-ethnic, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, and provides a form of spiritual and moral grounding for youth.

## **Pedagogical Preparations**

Preparation for the experimental curriculum and its further development is not a simple. In his speech in the spring of 2009, the President of the Russian Federation set before the Ministry of Education and Science the task of preparing 40,000 teachers by the spring of 2010 and to develop appropriate curricula and teaching materials for the course on religious and secular culture and ethics.

Crucial in developing the curriculum and training the teachers will be pedagogical universities, which always trained teachers who have not only the knowledge of a particular subject, but also the competence and skills of to work effectively with students of different age groups. It is these teachers who, during the years following the communist regime, did not cease to educate their students in the spirit of humanistic values, to form moral, independent and enterprising individuals. These educational institutions include Russian State Pedagogical University, named after A.I. Herzen (hereafter Herzen University), which dates back to 1797 and has always been a forge for teachers and educators. Graduates from Herzen University do not experience significant confusion, even as many teachers do when facing the task of conducting lessons on the

basics of religious cultures, the basics of Orthodox culture, etc. Herzen University's Department of Religious Studies includes five professors in historical and philosophical sciences, each of which has been studying and teaching the foundations of a major religious culture (Orthodox, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish). They encourage teaching of the history of world's religions in different departments within the university, including physics, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy, and philology.

It should be noted that the course developed for use in public schools, in accordance with the developed at the Department of Religious Studies curriculum, did not become a history of churches (what year Christianity was divided, when and where a Christian "creed" was adopted, when Muhammad was born, when the first Ecumenical Council was held, etc.). Instead, it introduces students, primarily to the cultures spawned by other religious traditions, with their humanistic and philosophical outgrowths. Students are meant to understand that all religions share common spiritual and moral values. In addition, they are meant to discern the unique contributions of each religious tradition, as related to the different historical contexts. These are the main objectives for students in the Department of Religious Studies at Herzen University.

Courses on the history of religions and religious cultures in Herzen University contribute not only to the spiritual and moral education and upbringing of university students, but also their professional development. As future teachers of literature, history, world culture, and Russian, they are equipped to apply the themes of religion and ethics. Future teachers of ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary history will not be able to cover many topics without addressing the role of religion in the historical process. Geography teachers need knowledge of the contemporary geography of religions; natural science teachers should know not only Darwin's theory, but the religious doctrine of creationism also, in order to compare religious and scientific understandings of the world. Future teachers of physics, mathematics, chemistry and other natural sciences also need an understanding of philosophy, since the science they teach holds deep philosophical implications. Even apart from the new national emphasis on religion and ethics in public education, these benefits necessitate the incorporation of religion and ethics into courses throughout pedagogical universities such as Herzen.

The Department of Religious Studies is therefore not a typical university department. In addition to granting degrees, the Department of Religious Studies plays a significant role in the development of educational materials for teachers in secondary educational institutions and pedagogical students — future teachers and educators. For example, in 2008, a textbook for students of pedagogical universities on "Religious Studies" (512 pp.) was published by professors at Herzen. This textbook gives general knowledge about religion as a spiritual institution, and focuses on the history of different religions and cultures and their contribution to human culture. In 2009 a reference book for students "Religions of the world: a dictionary-guide" (400 pp.) was published by members of the department. This book gives detailed information on religious cultures and their traditions. A reader entitled "Sacred texts of the religions of the world: an anthology," and the illustrated encyclopedia, "Religions of the world: from A to Z," are in print now. Currently, the department's faculty is working on programs, text-books, and interpretations of the history of world religions and the foundations of religious cultures. Some of them have been completed, and in the near future entire courses based on them will be developed by the Institute for Retraining Secondary School Teachers and Teachers of Higher Educational Institutions of North-West Russia.

In the past five years, the department has also conducted an annual international conference, "The religious situation in North-West Russia and the Baltic countries," which involves both domestic and foreign scholars and government, community, and religious leaders. As a result, it has become possible to continuously analyze the religious situation in the region, including the status and level of religiosity among youth. Conference papers are published regularly: five compilations based on these conferences have been released to date. The last two were published in the program "Tolerance," by the Government of St. Petersburg.

The Herzen University team is therefore actively involved in the solution to problems related to the spiritual and moral education of young people that the President of the Russian Federation delineated at the meeting with religious leaders in the spring of 2009 and reiterated in his instructions to the government. Already on August 30, 2009, at a meeting of the Scientific Council of the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences,

Professor V.V. Barabanov, made a detailed presentation on “The potential of the University and the challenges facing its team, to build competence in the field of spiritual and moral education and the upbringing of the younger generation in the modern school.” A special program for the execution of orders from the President and the Government of the Russian Federation, on a range of university activities in the field of spiritual and moral education of youth, will continue to emerge.