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**Theology in Secular and Denominational Universities
in Contemporary Russia:
Problems and Prospects for the Development of Religious Education ¹**

The Russian Federation is a multi-cultural and multi-religious nation, so it is both beneficial and important for examining problems and prospects for the development of Islamic education in Russia, both in terms of the experience of cooperation between governmental institutions, civil society, and European or American Islamic religious organizations, as well as in the general context of secular and religious education in Russia. Such are the conditions that determine the present report's subject and content, which is primarily directed at the current experience of traditional Christian denominations in Russia, which possess further developed systems for the preparation of clergy and ministers than Muslim devotional associations. In this respect, the experience of St. Petersburg is interesting. As a city of 5 million, which enjoys the status of constituent territory of the Russian Federation, historically, St. Petersburg (which, like Vienna, was built as an imperial capital) was not only a centre of economy, science and education, but also a "crossroads of religions and cultures." That said, by unofficial measures, between 500 thousand and one million unregistered migrants live in the city and its environs. Most position themselves as professing Islam. It is evident that problems of social and cultural adaptation cannot be examined separately from problems of education, which, however, fall beyond the religious context.

Currently, serious discussions are being held at various levels, concerning the place of religion in Russian education and the possibility and feasibility of integrating religious education (primary, secondary, graduate, and post-graduate) into the federal system in a manner that satisfies current standards and accreditation requirements.

An examination of this topic raises a whole series of interconnected issues. Amongst them it is possible to delineate the following: problems of maintaining national standards for professional theological education and their conformity with the very meaning of theology; problems of substantive changes in the content of theological education in ecclesiastical universities, in the event of their transition to national educational standards; problems of ecclesiastical universities' licensing and accreditation; prospects for the training of specialists in social and humanitarian and pedagogical areas, in faith-based educational institutions; and issues concerning the teaching of denominational theologies in secular (governmental and non-governmental) universities.

Holding such discussions assumes a uniform approach to basic concepts and terms. Precisely for this reason, it is vital to examine the theoretical, or more accurately, the terminological aspect of the use of the term "religious education" in the Russian language. There are a whole series of "adjectives for education:"

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secular, religious, (non-denominational religious), spiritual, ecclesiastical, ecclesiastical-civil, denominational, doctrinal (theological), etc. However, upon further inspection, we discover that the majority of these, despite their frequent usage, necessitate at least some further elaboration.

To begin with, let us turn our attention to the traditional separation between secular and religious education. Secular education is usually understood to be secularized, civil (and often military) education, which falls under social control and the legal guardianship of the state. The main distinguishing characteristic of secular education is the absence of ecclesiastical control and religious, doctrinal focus in its content.

The term religious education, which it would seem should indicate the opposite of secular, turns out to be ambiguous in practice. It is used to indicate diverse phenomena. Traditionally, throughout a number of Western countries, religious education (Religious Education in English or Religionsunterricht in German) refers to non-denominational, educational programs, of a theological-culturological format, which proceed from modern society's principle of multiculturalism and are called on, through students' familiarisation with the religions' general core moral values and denominational peculiarities, to foster tolerance and respect for diverse religious and ethnic cultures. There exist other approaches to the study of religion, a systematic description of which – just as the variations in the use of the terms Religious studies, Religious instruction, Religious education, etc. in various parts of the Old and New World – lie beyond our current purview.

In our opinion, the term religious education has a much greater weight and deeper meaning, if we use it to signify the phenomenon of educational models and systems developed over the course of many centuries and founded upon different forms of theological worldview. The content of religious education comprises – along with general education and professional components – doctrinal teaching, and the entire educational process is based on the corresponding principles of instruction and training of the given religion, for example Islam. In this case, the regulatory status of educational institutions (their belonging to the state, a specific denomination, or private institutions and persons) also plays a vital role.

Let us clarify once again: the dividing line between the religious and the theological-culturological is firstly a matter of worldview and secondly institutional-denominational. If in the educational model the core worldview has a religious (denominational) character, then the conversation turns to religious education – education from the position of a religious worldview and religious-intellectual and spiritual culture. If it does not, then we are dealing with one of the variants of secular education.

It is vital to understand this when analyzing the processes of Islamic, as well as Christian, education.

In post-Soviet Russia, the first educational standard for theology was established in 1992. This ushered in the opportunity to begin training theologians for various denominations. Orthodox theological education began to develop the fastest. Among state universities, classical (Omsk, Altai and others) and pedagogical (Nizhny Novgorod) universities initiated education in this direction. New Orthodox, faith-based educational institutions appeared: St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Institute (presently, University) and St. Philaret's Christian Orthodox

Institute in Moscow, the Institute for Theology and Philosophy in St. Petersburg (presently, a part of the Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, as well as a host of others.

Muslim faith-based educational institutions appeared in Moscow (Moscow Islamic University), Kazan (Russian Islamic University), Nizhny Novgorod (Nizhny Novgorod Islamic Institute), and in the North-Caucasus territory (Ciscaucasian Centre for Islamic Education and Science in Makhachkala). Over the last two decades these educational institutions traversed a difficult path of foundation and development. In 2010, the leading Islamic universities established a non-profit organization called the Council for Islamic Education, which included more than twenty educational institutions belonging to various spiritual directorates and Muslim organizations. Since the Council has asserted itself as an effective coordinating body, there is hope that it will be able to resolve problems concerning the formation of an unified field for Islamic education in Russia, with its own standards, programmes, universal textbooks, academic exchanges, etc. It is especially important that Islamic education be included in the pan-Russian secular and religious educational space.

It is worth mentioning that Russian state authorities recognize the necessity to support Islamic education and its integration into one unified educational space. There is a programme for the support of Islamic education, financed by the Russian government. Islamic educational institutions have partners from among the major universities (St. Petersburg State University, Kazan Federal University, Moscow State Linguistic University). The current objective is to prepare specialists with profound cultural knowledge of Islam, who could fill the ranks of Muslim clergy and become teachers in universities and schools – which is especially vital for those regions of Russia where the Muslim population predominates.

We note parenthetically that for a variety of reasons, St. Petersburg has no institution for Islamic higher education to suit the status and challenges of this metropolis. The Muslim spiritual directorate for St. Petersburg and the north-western region of Russia has only plans for an Islamic university, the traces and scholarly activities of which are barely discernible. And this serves as illustration for the fact that, against a background of organizational disunity – which we do not address herein – among Muslim spiritual directorates and councils, a fairly serious problem turns out to be the lack of qualified specialists in the area of Islamic studies, who could simultaneously act as spiritual leaders of the ummah. Here, it is necessary to point out that, in this sense, the situation of Islamic education in Russia resembles the situation among Christian denominations, the evaluation of which strikes us as constructive.

And so, as we noted above, starting in 1992, Bachelor's programmes in theology began to be implemented in state and new, non-state (denominational and private) universities. Since it became instantly apparent that "non-denominational" theology was impossible, the standard was broadened with subjects that had to be taught in all universities (philosophy, sociology, foreign languages, etc.), as well as professional subjects that were general for all denominations (history of world religions, ethics, law, etc.), and denominational disciplines, the contents of which had to be approved by representatives of the corresponding denomination's leadership. In 1999, the Master's standard was added to the Bachelor's standard. The issue of higher education levels remains

unresolved to this day: the list of academic degrees that are subject to conferment or confirmation by the State Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles, does not include theology. In this manner, the academic degrees "Candidate of Theology" and "Doctor of Theology," both of which are conferred in faith-based universities, are not officially recognized by the state, despite being taken into account, more or less, when the university undergoes procedures for licensing (the right to conduct educational activities) and accreditation (the power to confer degrees that are recognized by the state).

Orthodox theology is taught not only in new, aforementioned, educational institutions, but also in traditional ecclesiastical institutions – ecclesiastical academies (there are two in Russia: in Moscow and in St. Petersburg; both offer Bachelor's, Master's, and Candidate's programmes), as well as in a series of theological seminaries (Bachelor's) throughout the major regional centres. The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill adopted a fairly active position, demanding that the Church's educational institutions strive for integration within the secular, state system of education. In doing so, the Church hopes to attract secular professors, as well as ease the path towards licensing and accreditation.

Christian educational institutions of other Christian denominations either renewed their work or were organized for the first time. The High Catholic Theological Seminary "Mary – Queen of the Apostles" has been operating in Moscow since 1993 and in St. Petersburg since 1995. There are also Lutheran educational institutions operating in St. Petersburg – the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria. In St. Petersburg there is a Christian Baptist University, in Moscow a Theological Institute for Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostal). Each of these theological schools, and each of the ecclesiastical institutions that stand behind them, have a different outlook on their future development and their educational and scientific-theological activities. A myriad of difficult challenges face Orthodox universities – concerning, on one hand, their growing closeness with the Russian secular education system, and on the other, the preservation of the traditions of faith-based schools.

Turning our attention to educational institutions of other Christian denominations, we find that these adopt a cautious attitude toward the prospective of accreditation. Each ecclesiastical educational institution, governed by the politics of its clerical hierarchy and evaluating the situation from its own, idiosyncratic position, chooses its own path for development – whether it be pursuit of accreditation or consolidation with leading foreign faith-based universities, or a focus on implementing licensed (but unaccredited under Russian rules) theological programmes. It is impossible to train pastors outside of the Church; therefore, the Directorate of the High Catholic Theological Seminary "Mary – Queen of the Apostles" in St. Petersburg, distances itself from Russian state education standards, viewing them as too secular and impersonal for the process of clerical training. The Catholic seminary is affiliated with the Pontifical Lateran University in Italy and can therefore confer upon its graduates an ecclesiastical diploma that enjoys certain recognition in the West. The directorate of the Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria is in a similar position: a license for conducting educational activities is

required, while the accreditation procedure, which in the Russian reality is riddled with significant bureaucratic components, is unnecessary.

The ongoing discussions within the Islamic education community are important in this respect. There are those who consider maximal integration within the official system to be vital, as well as those who feel that Islamic universities should be theological schools that train professional theologians, while the state abstains from involving itself in their educational process and content.

In this context, I would like to briefly acquaint my colleagues with the peculiarities of the educational model of the educational institution in which I work; that is, the Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities.

The Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities is a private, secular university, which has been operating for more than two decades now. The Academy (then still an institute) was one of the first, in the 1990s, to begin implementing educational programmes for religious studies and theology. If we are to trust the guidebook for religious studies, we have one of, if not the first, Russian faculty for religious studies. The people studying at the academy hold diverse worldviews and belong to a variety of denominations. Why is it that even in the midst of a demographic crisis, devoid of any sort of regular sponsorship, we manage to preserve what we have and go on developing? Sometimes we have difficulties answering this question ourselves. The model that we offer to all – religious scholars, theologians, philosophers, culturologists, philologists, psychologists, and pedagogues – is the values-culturological education model. It proceeds from the fact that Christian values are broader: the values of Abrahamic religions encompass a spiritual and ethical foundation for the life of modern man, howsoever he may position himself in the world.

The curricula (the form of which sometimes changes to accommodate standards) are saturated with cultural-historical content. As a result, the values that Christianity has introduced into world culture are seen by the student as interwoven into the history of the development of human civilization. The content of religious life is not introduced into the educational process through indoctrination: familiarity with religion occurs through the acquisition of knowledge about its core cultural values, since it is precisely in religion that values are revealed *sub speciaie absoluti*. That is to say that we are not talking here about spiritually oriented inculcation. This too facilitates the development of a comfortable, collegial, secular academic atmosphere and allows young people to recognize that the traditional religions unify society through a stable set of values, differing however at the level of doctrines and ritual traditions. Such is the common background of our education. And, it allows for the education of Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim students. Furthermore, such an approach is a good support for the training of specialist religious scholars. But they of course are taught more deeply because they must be professionals.

As concerns theology, the academy's is an Orthodox programme, offered by the theological faculty and complemented by our colleagues who joined us from the aforementioned Institute of Theology and Philosophy when it merged with the RCHA a few years ago. It should be noted that it was precisely at that juncture that our theological programme found its logical consummation and indispensable, professional resource. Currently, we are actively considering how best to broaden our scope. I will note that a secular, inter-denominational approach – the values-culturological model – also creates certain problems when

dealing with various (state as well as denominational) organizations: sometimes, the friend or foe identification system fails to activate. Along with this, the model also provides great opportunities and a unique position, which is inaccessible to institutions that are involved in rigid structures and directed by denominational hierarchies. This is why we have implemented the scholarly Programme "Christianity in Modern Russia" (2011–2015), through which we organize conferences and publish books. For instance, in 2012, the Russian Christian Academy for Humanities published four large volumes from the "Russian Way" series, which relate how the traditional religions influence history, modernity, and the development of the state and the culture of the Russian peoples: Eastern Orthodoxy: Pro et Contra, Catholicism: Pro et Contra, Protestantism: Pro et Contra, and Islam: Pro et Contra.

Of course, we would very much like to expand the community of members from inter-denominational, scientific and educational projects, with, among others, the representatives of Islamic universities, as well as to make the community more permanent. This strikes us as extremely important in the general context of the development of religious education in the modern world.¹

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