

Religious Component in Higher Education Programs and the Formation of Intercultural Competences

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Abstract – This article is devoted to the study of methods of forming the students' rational scientific approach to religious phenomena. Religious component is present at all levels of the Russian educational system. The religious component is included in the educational programs of secondary and higher education of different directions and levels of training in the form of an individual discipline, a structural component in social and humanitarian courses, or as an independent area of training. Religious training of students is part of the process of formation of professional competences of a university graduate. The result of religious studies is the student's ability and willingness to use the acquired knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics in professional activities, in the communication on religious issues and in the analysis of events and processes occurring in the religious sphere. Graduates with intercultural competences will be less likely to use discriminatory and exclusionary practices in their professional activities. In a global sense, the development of intercultural competences in students will contribute to the transformation of social institutions, whose activities will also be subject to the principles of inclusion, recognition of the diversity of traditions, and respect for human dignity.

Keywords – education system, religion, religious studies component, conflict, intercultural competences

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 20th century, the religious situation in Russia has been characterized, on the one hand, by the steady development of traditional religions, and, on the other hand, by the continuous emergence of new religious trends and associations. This fact actualizes the study of religious component in the education system as a method of forming students' rational scientific approach to religious phenomena,

which contributes to prevention and resolution of ethnic conflicts under the influence of religious factors.

The purpose of the article is to study methods of forming the students' rational scientific approach to religious phenomena by incorporating the religious component into higher education programs aimed at the development of intercultural competences.

In order to understand many modern processes, it is necessary to take into account the influence of religion, to have the necessary religious knowledge to critically evaluate religious phenomena, as well as to understand the place and role of religion in society and the meaning of actions performed for religious reasons. Religious knowledge is necessary in the professional activities of people working in the field of communications. Dialogue competencies are important in this area, since they are the basis for constructive interaction, understanding and tolerant communication between people of different nationalities, religions, and social status. Therefore, one of the tasks of education is to provide students with religious knowledge as an integral component of humanitarian knowledge in accordance with the requirements of the Federal state educational standards, which contributes to the formation of the students' rational scientific approach to religious phenomena.

The article is devoted to the following issues: firstly, consideration of inclusion of the religious component in higher education programs; secondly, study of the significance of the "religious component" in social inclusion and the formation of intercultural competences, which contributes to the prevention and resolution of interethnic and interfaith conflicts.

The conceptual and methodological basis of the study includes the following: principles of historicism, consistency, and integrity; the leading role of social being in relation to social consciousness; integrated interdisciplinary systems approach; comparative religious approach; axiological approach.

II. "RELIGIOUS COMPONENT" IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The main criterion for the separation of religious knowledge from other humanitarian disciplines is the fact that religious studies explore a religious phenomenon exclusively, thus increasing the level of humanitarian training of students. Religious studies also contribute to mastering of methods of intercultural communication and ideological dialogue in a polyethnic society [1–5].

The tendency to appeal to religious values in the modern system of international education can be studied as part of religious education [6–9]. In Russia, religious studies are taught at philosophical, historical, culturological, and humanitarian departments in accordance with the Federal state educational standards of higher education.

The inclusion of religious studies in educational programs of higher education is aimed at the spread of scientific knowledge about religion as a social phenomenon, as well as at teaching scientific methods of studying religion, fostering religious and national tolerance, and affirming moral values and tolerance as ethical virtues. Considering religious studies in the ethno-cultural aspect, we note that the subject issues do not focus on the extreme versions (theological or atheistic). Religion is studied along with other areas of society (politics, law, economics, etc.) as part of the culture, in its relationship and interaction with other areas of human life and activity.

The authors define religious training of students as the process of formation of professional competencies of a university graduate, which results in his ability and willingness to use the acquired knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics in professional activities, in the communication on religious issues and in the analysis of events and processes occurring in the religious sphere.

Let us consider the inclusion of religious studies on the example of the educational program "Religious Studies", the training direction 47.03.03 "Religious Studies" (bachelor's degree), at the Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin. The educational program has a modular structure. Thus, disciplines "History and theory of religious studies", "History of Russian and international religious studies", "History of religious philosophy and religious culture", "Modern philosophy of religion", included in the module "History and theory of religious studies", are aimed at the formation of such competences as:

- ability to use basic knowledge in the field of history of religion, anthropology of religion;
- ability to interpret and clarify the content and specific features of the religious complex from the perspective of history of religion, anthropology of religion;

- preparation of information materials on religious topics for educational activities in institutions engaged in the collection, study, storage and display of religious items;
- ability to engage in research activities as part of research teams whose work includes religious issues.

Theoretical part of the module's disciplines forms the system of scientific ideas and concepts about the phenomenon of religion and its role in society. It also introduces students to a plurality of religious paradigms and the issues of building interfaith dialogue in the context of modern information and communication space.

Constructive communication on a wide range of issues related to religion is a necessary condition for civil and interethnic accord, which is built on the understanding that any religion is based on universally recognized moral, ethical, and spiritual values. Constructive interaction should be aimed at preventing interethnic and interfaith conflicts, eliminating causes contributing to the emergence and spread of religious extremism, increasing interfaith understanding, forming tolerance between ethno-confessional associations [10–13] and creating a supportive environment for human development and life [14–17].

In our opinion, religious studies, as a separate discipline and as a training direction, play a significant role in preventing and overcoming religious conflicts. In the conditions of dynamic development of communication methods, especially communications in the virtual space, religious studies play an important role in destruction of the isolation of confessions and ethnic groups, as well as in expanding the sphere of their interaction and interdependence.

III. "RELIGIOUS COMPONENT" IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PROBLEM OF PREVENTING RELIGIOUS AND INTERETHNICAL CONFLICTS

Interethnic conflicts are particularly acute and irreconcilable when they are expressed in contradiction of interests, mutual dislike, emotional enmity and contradictory states and actions of ethnic groups in relation to one another on religious grounds. Such conflicts are the most complex and intractable. An analysis of interethnic conflicts gives us reason to believe that the role of the religious factor in the clash of conflicting parties is significant. As a rule, contradictions of interests of different social groups arise due to the difference of beliefs, value systems, and world views. Ethnic conflicts are often caused by inconsistent interests of different faiths.

There are many works devoted to the study of religious conflicts in modern scientific literature [18, 19]. Analysis of the structure of a religious conflict shows that nations (ethnic groups), religious groups and organizations, as well as individuals that support a particular religion can act as the subjects of a conflict. The common feature of a religious conflict is their explosive nature, since religion touches the most essential and deeply "emotionally immersed" aspects of the believer's life. This leads to a rapid escalation and the use of all available means and methods of fighting. Consequences of religious conflicts of the last century introduce a new

feature of religious conflicts, that is the internationalization of confessional religious conflicts, when external active forces are involved in the internal confessional conflict.

Political conflicts are expressed as the absence of sovereign statehood or as a political and legal inferiority of national autonomies and ethnic minorities with an inherent faith in states based on the principles of ethnic nationalism. Economic conflicts are manifested in the form of the fight of religious groups for the “natural right” to possess economic resources and property. Socio-cultural conflicts are usually associated with racial, ethnic or religious discrimination, with cultural and civilizational differences. Development of the legal component as a social regulator of public relations plays an important role in conflict prevention [10, 18].

Russian scientists studied many different aspects of religious conflicts. However, the processes of management and prevention of religious conflicts on the territory of the Russian Federation require clarification and justification of solving the problem of the relationship between religion and state, as well as the influence of interfaith relations on the process of the state modernization.

Let us consider a number of factors contributing to the exacerbation of religious conflicts.

Incitement to violence or justification of its use is easy to find in the sacred texts of different religions. A lot depends on the interpretation of specific texts, on the ideological position of interpreters.

Religion is very sensitive to all encroachments on what it considers to be sacred or valuable. Religious organizations and believers are ready to protect it with aggression. They are especially prone to black-and-white perception of the world in critical situations, dividing everyone into “us” and “aliens”.

There are also directly contradictory statements in the sacred texts of various religions that condemn violence, preach love, forgiveness and mercy. And in this respect, the Quran is no different from the Bible (New Testament). Therefore, the fight against extremism and terrorism implies maximum reliance on religion and the clergy of all denominations.

Modern ethnoreligious conflicts are mainly clashes of two world cultures – Islam and Christianity, if we understand them as the distribution areas of certain civilizations. This is a clash of two mentalities, two world views, two attitudes towards life and life “after death”.

The next factor is xenophobia. The word “xenophobia” has a Greek origin and comes from two words – “xenos” and “phobos”. “Xenos” means “other”, “alien”, and “phobos” – “fear”. But this is not the type of fear that makes people hide, or paralyzes their will. This is the fear that causes aggression aimed at the one who caused this fear. This condition is most fully revealed in the concept of “hatred” – unwillingness to see “others”, desire to make them cease to exist. This is the reason why xenophobia is destructive.

“Religious component” in higher education programs helps to prevent religious and interethnic conflicts. Dialogue with the public is an important component. Representatives of municipal administrations, public organizations and the clergy

practicing traditional Islam and traditional Christianity should be involved in it. The role of real, not “protocol”, cooperation is very important here, as is the cooperation of confessions in solving social problems, helping people of different confessions.

Residents of regions and districts, especially young people, should study the history of interethnic and interfaith relations in the region (with the help of “ethnographic dictations”, lectures, meetings; publication of stories about people of different nationalities performing good and heroic acts).

IV. “RELIGIOUS COMPONENT” IN HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF MIGRANTS

Projects of the socio-cultural adaptation of migrants should be developed with the participation of volunteers (these projects should affect both young people and other age groups to prevent xenophobia).

Statements, attitudes, appearances of pupils and students should be constantly monitored. Thus, thematic religious blocks in the structure of specific disciplines, or the religious disciplines in the structure of educational programs at different levels of education contribute to the formation of a culture of tolerance and social inclusion. This is due to maintaining the idea of multicultural reality, which includes everyone, regardless of which culture or religion they belong to.

The principle of inclusion is currently the basic principle not only of the social policy of any modern social state, but also of the education system and education as a social institution, since social inclusion begins with educational inclusion [20–23].

Modern society is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, and diversity trends are intensifying [24–27]. At the same time, today’s cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in various local societies and territories can lead to social tension, social conflicts, social exclusion of minority religious groups, etc. In other words, diversity, which is currently growing in social reality, creates a number of serious challenges which can lead to negative social phenomena and undesirable consequences.

Social relations are filled with various manifestations of exclusion. Exclusion practices are present in education, in social institutions, in the labor market. They can also be observed in the professional competences of a modern graduate of an educational institution. These practices then become the norm for a graduate in his professional activity.

The idea of inclusion involves sharing certain common human values:

- respect for human rights,
- principles of openness to diversity,
- participation,
- mutual learning through intercultural dialogue.

These principles of inclusion are enshrined in international legal acts, such as:

- at the UN level – The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965),
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006);
- at the Council of Europe level – The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995).

Diversity can be viewed in three aspects: cultural, linguistic, and religious. This diversity is based on cultural and religious traditions.

The “religious” component at all levels of education contributes to the promotion of mutual understanding and acceptance of cultural and religious diversity.

Thus, the development of intercultural competences that contribute to the prevention of possible social tension arising from the growing cultural and religious diversity is based on religious studies material, which illustrates the diversity of existing religions. In this case, religious knowledge promotes intercultural mediation and dialogue and prevents the marginalization of members of ethnic and religious minorities.

Intercultural competences are becoming a practical tool for social inclusion in the modern world. “They help to reach a common understanding of a particular problem and to appreciate the qualities and capabilities of the ‘Others’” [28]. Intercultural competences make it possible to understand the “Others”, to foster openness, empathy, respect for their personal choices and ways of self-expression. In other words, intercultural competences formed by religious knowledge contribute to the establishment of a pluralistic social order [29–31].

In this social order other cultures or religions do not cause fears or concerns, they are not considered “alien”. As a result, the rights of representatives of other cultures and religions are not violated. People of different cultures and religions are fully involved in social connections, social institutions and social reality itself [16, 32–34]. This is an anti-discriminatory effect of religious knowledge and intercultural competences.

V. CONCLUSION

The practical importance of religious knowledge at any level of education also lies in the fact that, due to the formed intercultural competences, the education system contributes to the prevention of conflicts at the level of cultural and religious norms and values, as well as to the removal of intercultural and interfaith tension.

Due to the competences formed during the mastering of the “Religious studies” educational program, specialists consider each specific interethnic conflict as unique and do not exclude the possibility of comparative research, which could lead to finding some (relatively) general trends in the development of interethnic conflicts. This will facilitate the search for solutions.

Practical importance of inclusion of the religious component in the education system lies in the formation and development of intercultural competences of students. This contributes to the prevention of conflicts at the level of cultural and religious norms and values, as well as to the removal of intercultural and interfaith tension.

Intercultural communication, which is essential in the modern pluralistic world, is based on the recognition of the diversity of cultures and religions. Graduates with intercultural competences will be less likely to use discriminatory and exclusionary practices in their professional activities. In a global sense, the presence of intercultural competences will contribute to the transformation of social institutions, whose activities will also be subject to the principles of inclusion, recognition of the diversity, and respect for human dignity.

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