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GEORGIA: Voluntary 'Religion and Culture' classes compulsory, parents complain

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Parents of children in Georgian schools have complained to Forum 18 News Service that voluntary "Religion and Culture" school classes are confessionally Orthodox in nature and are compulsory. However Zurab Tsokhvrebadze, of the Orthodox Patriarchate, denied that religious education is confessional Orthodox. "Schools are state-run and religious education is general Christian education," he told Forum 18. "Teachers have to follow the state syllabus. It is impossible for teachers to propagandise for any one faith, including Orthodoxy." Tamaz Papuashvili, of the State Chancellery, is critical of the system. "It is only compulsory in that teachers give pupils the lowest possible mark if they don't go." and said that pupils are sometimes required to pray. "I haven't visited these classes, but parents tell me this," he told Forum 18. "Some think it's good, others think it's bad. I believe prayer should be in church, not in school."

Parents of schoolchildren have complained that "Religion and Culture" classes, which are supposed to give information only, are confessionally Orthodox in nature and are not voluntary but compulsory. Forum 18 News Service has learnt of several cases where non-Orthodox children have been subjected to ridicule and abuse by fellow-pupils for refusing to take part in Orthodox rituals with the rest of their class. "There is open propaganda of Orthodoxy and recruitment of young people," Agit Mirzoev, a leading member of Tbilisi's Yezidi Kurdish community, told Forum 18. "It is very difficult to convince people the classes are voluntary. Parents have to put up with them otherwise their children will get bad marks."

Zurab Tsokhvrebadze, chief spokesman for the Orthodox Patriarchate, denied that religious education is confessional Orthodox. "Schools are state-run and religious education is general Christian education," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 19 November. "Teachers have to follow the state syllabus. It is impossible for teachers to propagandise for any one faith, including Orthodoxy."

He denied that any school pupils faced pressure to attend religion classes "except in so far as there is pressure to attend other subjects, such as maths". Told that Forum 18 had heard concerns from numerous parents Tsokhvrebadze declared: "I don't know why parents are worried. Many other faiths have an interest in discrediting the Orthodox Church and maybe what they claim does not match reality." Admitting that he had not spoken to any parents from other faiths, he conceded there might be "individual cases" where "things happened that should not be allowed to happen".

"Religion classes only take place in schools when parents request it and even then such classes are voluntary," an Education Ministry official, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 6 November. However, Forum 18 discovered that for many children there was nothing voluntary about the classes, regardless of whether they were studying in state-run or private schools.

"All religion books are approved by the Patriarchate and children are never taken on outings to non-Patriarchate churches," one Tbilisi-based expert who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. "The books are written as if other faiths didn't exist." The expert, who has visited about 40 schools in towns across the country, said all of them had lessons on Orthodoxy and all were compulsory. The expert has not visited schools in mainly Muslim or Armenian areas.

Tsokhvrebadze denied that the Patriarchate drew up the religion syllabus or the textbooks used. "They're prepared by scholars. The Patriarchate doesn't even have the right to check them." He claimed children only visited Orthodox churches with their parents' consent. "This is the position of the Patriarchate."

Although some sources maintained that schools their children attend have had religion classes for the past five years or so, the creeping enforced Orthodox education has dated back to the end of last year. Some date the change to the concordat signed between the government and the Orthodox Patriarchate in October 2002.

"Teaching of the subject of the Orthodox Faith is an elective part of the curriculum in educational institutions," Article 5 of the concordat declared. "Approval and changing of teaching curricula, and appointment and dismissal of teachers takes place upon submission by the Church."

Nevertheless, Tsokhvrebadze denied that the Patriarchate nominates or approves religion teachers. "There are many points in the concordat that have not yet been put into force." Asked what the Patriarchate would think if a religion teacher were, say, a Baptist or a Jehovah's Witness he declared: "As long as they didn't overstep their duty, that would not be a problem, but if they propagated their faith, we would be against." He declined to answer when asked about any Orthodox teacher that propagated his or her faith.

Officials stress that the classes are supposed to be informational, but admit that in practice many of them are openly Orthodox. "We know these lessons shouldn't just cover Orthodox history, but all religions, but we were forced to do this," deputy education minister Rusudan Gorgiladze told a meeting at the ombudsman's office in Tbilisi last spring. Asked who had pressured them she responded: "The Patriarchate."

Tamaz Papuashvili, head of the Religion and National Development Department of the State Chancellery, is critical of the system. "The education ministry hasn't officially adopted a syllabus for the subject – it's all done arbitrarily," he complained to Forum 18 on 6 November. "It is only compulsory in that teachers give pupils the lowest possible mark if they don't go." He claimed that members of non-Orthodox faiths can have their own classes in minority schools, a reference to Azeri- and Armenian-language schools in areas where these minorities live.

Papuashvili admitted that sometimes pupils are required to pray. "I haven't visited these classes, but parents tell me this," he told Forum 18. "Some think it's good, others think it's bad. I believe prayer should be in church, not in school."

He insisted that the concordat with the Orthodox Church did not make religion lessons compulsory. "If parents have concerns about this they should take the text of the concordat along to the director and prove the classes are not compulsory." He said that if parents are forced to send their children to such classes they can go to court.

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

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