

Russia backs choice of religion class in schools: Debate began over Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture class

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Russian president Dmitry Medvedev has given the green light to efforts by religious leaders to introduce religion into schools.

“Their implementation will help strengthen the moral and spiritual foundations of our society, as well as strengthen the unity of our multiethnic and multireligious country,” he said July 21 at a meeting with religious leaders outside Moscow.

Medvedev was responding to an appeal by Russia’s Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Orthodox leaders, whose faiths are officially referred to as the country’s “traditional” religions.

There has been debate for several years about the teaching of a course called Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture in schools. Critics said that it would impose Russian Orthodoxy on secular schoolchildren and that it is inappropriate for a country with several other religions.

Earlier in the month, Patriarch Kirill I of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has the most adherents of any faith in the country, formed an editorial board to write a new textbook for the course.

Medvedev said religion classes would be tested in 18 regions across Russia, but stressed that they must take into account the country’s multireligious character.

“Students and their parents will have to choose the subject of study,” Medvedev said. “Firstly, it could be the fundamentals of Orthodox culture, the fundamentals of Muslim culture, the fundamentals of Judaism or Buddhism.”

Students could also choose a “general course on the history of our country’s traditional major faiths,” he said, or a course on the “secular basis of ethics.” All of the courses, he said, would be taught by secular teachers.

The patriarch said the voluntary nature of the courses is essential to their success. “Experience shows that only the voluntary comprehension of such religious ideas can be useful to people,” Kirill said, according to the RIA Novosti news agency. - *Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*