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GEORGIA: Religious minorities concerned by "voluntary" 'Religion and Culture' classes

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Leaders of the Yezidi, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostal, True Orthodox, Latin-rite Catholic, and Assyrian Chaldean Catholic communities have all told Forum 18 News Service of their concerns about school "Religion and Culture" classes being compulsory and confessionally Orthodox, not voluntary and informational. Forum 18 found only one school in Tbilisi offering non-Orthodox religion classes, Rabbi Avimelech Rosenblath of the capital's synagogue describing a state school offering Jewish classes, and some Russian-language schools in the city do not have religion classes. Catholic Bishop Pasotto told Forum 18 that some schools in southern Georgia offer Catholic religion classes. Surprisingly, unregistered Baptists have not complained about the Orthodox classes.

Leaders of religious minorities and human rights groups are concerned that "Religion and Culture" school classes, are not voluntary and informational only, but are in fact confessionally Orthodox in nature and compulsory, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. (See F18 News 19 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=188). Agit Mirzoev, a leading member of the Tbilisi (T'bilisi) Yezidi Kurdish community, told Forum 18 that "our children are not well-formed in their worldview at that age, yet Orthodoxy is forced on them. Textbooks propagandise for the Orthodox Church."

Mirzoev refuses to allow his son to attend the Orthodoxy classes at his private school. He went to the director asking his son to be excused from the lessons and the director agreed. Although there are several Armenian children in the class, all the rest attend the lessons. "Once I have given him my own basis in faith then he could study other faiths - but not through the prism of another faith," Mirzoev told Forum 18.

His fellow Yezidi Dmitri Pirbari cited the example of an Orthodox nun who teaches the lesson in another Tbilisi school and regularly takes the class to an Orthodox church. "If the child refuses to go the nun asks where he is going to wait while the class is at the church and insists that he goes with the others," he told Forum 18.

"Jehovah's Witness children are very unhappy because the religion teacher insists they cross themselves and pray," Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. "Some children don't go to the classes, others go and just sit there quietly, but there is great pressure from teachers." He said children are threatened that if they refuse to take part in Orthodox rituals they will get bad marks. He cited the case of ten Jehovah's Witness children in the town of Bolnisi who were given bad marks for more than two years for refusing to take part in Orthodox rituals.

"School directors say they received a special instruction from the Education Ministry that classes are compulsory, but no-one will ever show the text to us." Tsimintia said the parents in Bolnisi complained to the ombudsman Nana Devdariani during the summer. However, the reply came from the school director: "We all know that Orthodoxy is the state religion and all must respect this." The Education Ministry also wrote to one Bolnisi parent declaring that the religion classes were "running smoothly", that Jehovah's Witnesses were taking part and therefore it made "no sense" for them to "thwart the process and disrupt the consensus".

"Although it is not government policy, officials are forcing and encouraging Orthodoxy as a compulsory subject," Tsimintia declared.

Georgi Chitadze, pastor of the Word of Life Pentecostal church in the town of Gori, said his children's school introduced the class after the concordat was signed. "The whole class knows I am a Protestant pastor and they laugh at them and put pressure on them," he told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. "My children are very upset after each lesson."

The class - which lasts one or two hours per week - is taken by an Orthodox teacher subject to the authority of the local Orthodox priest. Twice each year the children are taken to the Orthodox church, although not while services are underway. Mothers are expected to accompany them, as is traditional with school outings. "The lessons do not just provide information - they teach them how to pray in the Orthodox way. There is no opt-out."

Chitadze said some parents tried to prevent the school from forcing children to attend. A Jehovah's Witness mother spoke up at a parents' meeting, but faced great pressure both at the meeting and since. Her child has been forced to attend. Chitadze's wife also spoke up publicly.

Mamuka Jebisashvili, pastor of the Tbilisi Word of Life congregation, says his older daughter, who has just begun the third class, has had to attend the religion class from this academic year. The school has had a religion class for the past five years, but training of teachers has intensified since the concordat. "Teachers didn't know what to teach," he told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. "There wasn't pressure to attend before. But every day the atmosphere is getting worse."

Chitadze reports that the Education Ministry representative in Gori frequently meets Orthodox priests to discuss education issues. He believes that in the current intolerant religious climate the religion classes only "stir up hatred" between children.

Fr Gela Aroshvili of the True Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston said one of his children - in the seventh class - is required to attend weekly classes taken by teachers named by the Patriarchate. "If my daughter leaves the class she is insulted by the teachers, the school director and the other children," he told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. "They accuse her of being a sectarian - it's a great trauma for her."

He says other children tell their parents which fellow-pupils refuse to attend the lessons, adding to the pressure. His daughter is the only one of 40 not to attend. He said the children in his daughter's class all know that the True Orthodox refuse to pray with members of the Patriarchate and other faiths, whom they regard as heretics.

Fr Aroshvili said the class - which always begins with an Orthodox prayer - has been compulsory since the concordat. "Classes existed before then, but they didn't have a legal basis." By contrast his son - who is in the eighth grade - is in a private school where the class is only voluntary.

Latin-rite Catholic Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto believes the classes should be informational only. "Study is one thing, but Orthodox study is another," he told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 4 November. "If religion lessons were to stir up problems with other faiths and give inaccurate ideas about other faiths that would be wrong." He said teachers sometimes insult pupils of other faiths. "Parents often tell their children to pretend to be Orthodox," he admitted. "I don't approve of this, but realise there is no other way."

Human rights groups have also complained about compulsory teaching of Orthodoxy to children. Levan Ramishvili, director of the Liberty Institute, cited the case of Kutaisi's school no. 14, where children were forced to pray. "The attitude is always that those who don't follow the traditional faith are excluded from the community," he told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 6 November. "Teachers blame the children."

Forum 18 found only one school in the capital that offered non-Orthodox religion classes. Rabbi Avimelech Rosenblath of Tbilisi's synagogue told Forum 18 on 3 November that there is one state school that has offered Jewish classes since 1991. Bishop Pasotto said that in some Catholic villages near Akhaltsikhe (Akhalts'ikhe) in the south, schools offer Catholic religion classes, sometimes taken by nuns. He said local Catholic priests work together with the religion teachers on the classes.

Parents of different faiths whose children are forced to attend try to avoid compromising their faith. "Our children attend, but they wouldn't pray or light a candle. We explain this to teachers," Teimuri Chakhava, a lay member of the Novozybkov Old Believers, told Forum 18.

"I'm only worried that the religion classes are compulsory," Fr Benny Yadgar, priest of Tbilisi's Assyrian Chaldean Catholic parish, told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 4 November. "You should pass on faith not by force but by love." He believed the lessons should be made explicitly voluntary.

Arguing that the Orthodox Church should organise its own Sunday school classes in pupils' own time on church property was Papuashvili of the State Chancellery, a point also made by Bishop Pasotto.

Perhaps surprisingly, unregistered Baptists have not complained about the Orthodox classes. Members of the Tbilisi congregation told Forum 18 on 5 November that several Russian-language schools in the city do not have religion classes at all. Pastor Sergei Osipov told Forum 18 that one church member's son in a Georgian school even got top marks for being able to answer questions about the Bible well. "His parents told the boy only not to cross himself and not to light candles when they went to the Orthodox church." (END).

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at

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

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