

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOL

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Abstract: In order to be a moral person, of outstanding character, a person must pass through the natural stages of education. As its primary functions, religious education focuses on the building of the character, and the fulfillment of personalities in love and holiness. This is the ideal goal of religious education. Religious, moral education represents that dimension of education which seeks the building and development of the conscience and moral conduct of a person's character. Especially, religion teachers make it their mission to propose to students, especially through personal example, a type of lifestyle. The true model for the Christian educator is Our Savior Jesus Christ. Religion is not a science in the conventional meaning of the word. It is much more. It is knowledge and experience. Religion is defined as a spiritual phenomenon, pure and universal, based on an innate predisposition inside man. It is confessed through experience and a religious life, supported by love, faith, and the grace of God.

Keywords: school, religious education, religious life, personal character, faith.

An active-creative education requires a tenacious and continuous focus of the teachers, implementing the most efficient teaching strategies designed to ensure high results in education, and, in this way, facilitating the process of education and development for young students, now and in the future. In order to be a moral person, of outstanding character, a person must pass through the natural stages of education. This objective can only be achieved through education. In the Christian tradition, education represents the initiation in the Christian life and teaching, a school of faith and grace, conscientiousness and virtue, love and work, solidarity and moral responsibility¹.

The educator is not only an employee, but also a person who acknowledges that in education, he has a vocation and a mission. Their aim is not only to train students, but also focuses on their moral character, challenging them to lead an authentic life by the example they give. The genuine teacher can never be replaced by a computer, no matter its high performance and great programming. The main reason for this is that a computer, itself, cannot constitute a true model. It can impart informative, but not formative messages.²

As its primary functions, religious education focuses on the building of the character, and the fulfillment of personalities in love and holiness. This is the ideal goal of religious education.

Ilarion V. Felea mentions that Johan Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), the great Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer, urges educators to develop students in such a way as to

¹ Ilarion V. FELEA, *Religia culturii (The religion of culture)*, (Arad: Episcopia Ortodoxa Română a Aradului, 1994), 254.

² Liviu ANTONESCU, *Paideia-Fundamentele culturale ale educației (Paideia-cultural foundations of education)*, (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 1996), 63.

identify God in their own fulfillment, in the conviction that perfect law is the law of moral ennoblement and purity. He places feelings at the foundation of moral education because, in time, they become beliefs, as morality is learned through habits rather than words.³

Johann Paul Richter, teacher of love, claims that to prepare students for the future, we must invigorate them with three forces: will, love and religion, and the forces of will and love harmonize through religion, and, that is why, religion should be cultivate in the soul at the age of innocence.⁴

Especially, religion teachers make it their mission to propose to students, especially through personal example, a type of lifestyle. First, they should make them disciples of faith in Christ through the Gospel. Then, they should make them really practice faith and bear personal witness through participation in the church's life, through true connection to the Church, and, in this way, imparting the glory of faith both in personal life, as well as in the community.

Religious, moral education represents that dimension of education which seeks the building and development of the conscience and moral conduct of a person's character. Its essence lies in "the assurance of an adequate framework for the internal components of social morality in a child's construction of personal morality, elaborating and establishing their moral profile according to social imperatives."⁵

The true model for the Christian educator is Our Savior Jesus Christ. For teaching and spreading the word of His Evangel, the Supreme Pedagogue used an education method that people will never surpass. The fundamentals of teaching His Evangel were faith and love, spiritual resources that do not only illumine the mind, but also warm the heart, and spur the deed.

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As a discipline of study, religion has the role of "the bridge between who have lost or have not had God."⁶ It must be coextensive and complementary to the other disciplines of study. Studying religion, students will better understand man's purpose in the world. Religion is important for children as a feeling, and as a logical explanation of the world. Religious children, even if they have only limited knowledge and few relations with the world, can be very serious, and have a wide perspective, and a sense of the health of the soul which comes precisely from the fact that they found their natural way of being.⁷

³ FELEA, *Religia culturii (The religion of culture)*, 249.

⁴ J.P. RICHTER, *Levana*, apud G.G. ANTONESCU, V.P. NICOLAU, *Antologie pedagogic (Pedagogical Anthology)*, vol. II, (Bucharest: Cultura Românească Publishing House, 1939), 218.

⁵ Daniela CREȚU, *Psihopedagogie. Elemente de formare a profesorilor (Psihopedagogie. Elements of teacher training)*, (Sibiu: Imago Publishing House, 1999), 56.

⁶ Sebastian ȘEBU, *Metodica predării religiei (The Methods of religion teaching)*, (Alba Iulia; Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2000), 19.

⁷ Vasile BÂNCILĂ, *Inițierea religioasă a copilului (The religious initiation of the child)*, (Bucharest: Anastasia Publishing House, 1996), 25.

Religious education is one of the pillars of education, along with intellectual, physical, and civic education. Given the fact that the highest ideal that every man has is to become a complete human being, religious education is crucial to achieving it. Religious education stages the way, day by day, which leads to a harmony between reason, feeling and will; between mind, heart and hand; between physical life, and the spiritual one.⁸

In schools, religion does not wish to turn students into science men or scholars specializing in the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, but it wants to develop a person—a person who wants to do good, who seeks the truth, who is honest and fair, who loves their neighbor and wishes for peace. Religion wants to bring God to the souls of students⁹, and to strengthen the connection between school and the Church.

The necessity of religious education is brought on by the necessity of religion in a person's life. It is human nature to long for happiness and fulfillment and only religion can answer human existence's final questions. It leads man to the ultimate purpose of existence: living in communion with God. Arriving at faith in God, revealed through our Lord Jesus Christ, man is reborn unto a new life.

Religious education is important from the moral point of view, as well as the cultural¹⁰, socio-psychological, historical, ecumenical¹¹ and pedagogical.

Religion actively influences all components of education and the instruction of students intellectually, emotionally and behaviorally, within a close interdependence. All of man's great pedagogues, in their systems of education and instruction, assign the most importance on the place and role of religion, considering it "the classical school of developing moral character and spiritual perfection within the human being, as well as within human society."¹²

J.A. Comenius, in his major work, *Didactica Magna*, confirms that the ideal of education is to prepare the soul for eternal life and that religion is the means through which we achieve self-improvement, the fulfillment of societies and eternal joy in communion with God. All of his pedagogical values are grounded in significant biblical passages.¹³ To educate, according to Comenius, means to reveal and to represent God's perfect image in the life of man. In this way, he claims: "in the Holy Scriptures we have the Word of God, in the world we have His doings, and in us we have His inspiration."¹⁴

The right age to start religious education

⁸ Dumitru CĂLUGĂR, *Catehetica (The catechetical)*, (Cluj-Napoc: Renașterea Publishing House, 2002), 167.

⁹ Ana DANCIU, *Metodica predării Religiei în școlile primare, gimnazii și licee (Methods of the religion teaching in primary schools, gymnasiums and lyceums)*, (Bucharest: Anastasia Publishing House, 1999), 249.

¹⁰ Teodor M. POPESCU, *Biserica și cultura (The Church and the culture)*, (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 1996), 220.

¹¹ Religious training helps better understand the others. To the extent in which "students integrate the specific values and experiment their own faith, they reach that empathic capacity necessary to understand the other's faith", Constantin CUCOȘ, *Educația religioasă, repere teoretice și metodice (Religious education, theoretic and methodical)*, (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 1999), 52.

¹² FELEA, *Religia culturii (The religion of culture)*, 246.

¹³ Dorin OPRIȘ, *Dimensiuni creștine ale pedagogiei moderne (Christian dimensions of modern pedagogy)*, (Bucharest: Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing House, 2012), 277, 279.

¹⁴ OPRIȘ, *Dimensiuni creștine ale pedagogiei moderne (Christian dimensions of modern pedagogy)*, 247

A child's religious education is considered to begin before their birth, through the parents' spiritual maturity. Parents bear the responsibility of having children. The spiritual capital accumulated by the parents will have a positive impact on the religious development of the child.

There are various correlations between the image of the parents and that of the divine paternity. Children treated in the respect of parental authority pass easily onto the respect towards the divine authority.

According to Christian pedagogy, it is necessary that a religious education starts even from childhood. Saint John Chrysostom presented education as being a main concern of man, and this process should begin in childhood: "If the tender soul is already impressed upon by good teachings, no one will be able to erase them when they become solid as a pattern in wax does."¹⁵ A child lacking education is considered to be an enemy and an agent against humanity and God, against nature, law, and social life. The beginning of education ought to be underway in the most tender years, when the soul is being molded¹⁶.

It's a commonly held fact that good habits, developed in childhood, are imprinted on a person's character for their whole life. Children are capable of religious sensations that are often times unavailable to adults, overwhelmed by their passions. A disposition to religion and the spiritual life can be cultivated and developed through a religious education. In this way, the Christian educator should, necessarily, also continuously adapt their pedagogical discourse, considering children's psycho-physical stages of development.¹⁷

The second commandment, love your neighbor as yourself, which forever sets forth to the world the personal model of the Savior, is inherent in a religious education, introduced at school, and is necessary to the student's motivation, especially for children full of exuberance and innocence¹⁸: "*If the child were not an entire religious metaphysics, how could we assign to them the idea of infinity, of God, of eternity, of holiness, since these cannot be explained in concrete ideas and we only have the bare language that can awaken, but not create. If God and religion were the parentage of mature age, religious enthusiasm and divine love would only be found in adult souls. Meanwhile, holy works are rooted exactly in the age of innocence. The clouds or the blue of the morning decide the day's glow.*"¹⁹ Childhood is considered the mirror of the state of moral perfection that adults are invited to return to for their fulfillment: "*Let the children come to me, do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*" (Matthew 19:14).²⁰

A child's early years are important, from a religious perspective, for their further development. When children make their first impressions of the world, it is best that the most

¹⁵ Maica MAGDALENA, *Sfaturi pentru o educație ortodoxă a copiilor de azi (Advice for an Orthodox education of children today)*, translated by Ioan I. Ică jr., (Sibiu: Deisis Publishing House, 2006), 108.

¹⁶ Constantin CUCOȘ, *Educația religioasă, repere teoretice și metodice (Religious education, theoretic and methodical benchmarks)*, 53.

¹⁷ CUCOȘ, *Educația religioasă, repere teoretice și metodice (Religious education, theoretic and methodical benchmarks)*, 82.

¹⁸ OPRÎȘ, *Dimensiuni creștine ale pedagogiei moderne (Christian dimensions of modern pedagogy)*, p. 99-100.

¹⁹ RICHTER, *Levana*, apud G.G. ANTONESCU, V.P. NICOLAU, *Antologie pedagogică (Pedagogical Anthology)*, vol. II, 221.

²⁰ OPRÎȘ, *Dimensiuni creștine ale pedagogiei moderne (Christian dimensions of modern pedagogy)*, p. 100

important place in their mind is occupied by God. The relationship between a child and God is very profound. Children are receptive to believing in miracles, in the supernatural: their thoughts tend to anthropomorphize not only God and the saints, but also elements belonging to the world around them.²¹

“Religious life proves that childhood purity is not sufficient at the meeting with a world that doesn’t always offer honest, positive models. Even if various spiritual milestones change throughout the course of life, the man marked by religious living in childhood maintains a nostalgia of paradise in his soul. From the educational point of view, the religious stages of life can be paired, one of the conditions being the involvement of adolescents in religious-moral activities which aims for personal development with significant spiritual support.”²²

The students’ psychophysical characteristics and their importance for correctly acquiring religious notions.

Perceiving and living religious sentiments mold the minds and souls of children according to their age and level of development.

A decisive role at the onset of a child’s spiritual-religious education, with long term effects in their later development, is played by the family, and the family environment. With this key, there are defining religious attitudes of the family members, the appearance and atmosphere of the parents’ home, as well as religious events which occur in the circle of the child’s life.²³

Then, the decisive role in promoting a child’s religious education is played by the school. Educators, regardless of the subjects taught, have the duty of taking into account the particularities of the student’s age in their educational activity. Of course, this goes the same for the religious educator.

Pupils in primary school make in depth analyses, take seriously the problems related to responsibility, salvation, and eternal life. At the age of 7-10 years old, children begin to choose their models and to relate to them. The responsibilities of the teacher grow from this perspective.

In middle school, concerns and interests determine the extent and amplification of religiosity. The relation to the biblical norms results in the child resolving certain moral problems. Participating in religious services is considered a necessity, and the relationship with God is perceived with more awareness.

In puberty, between 12 and 14 years old, the main personality and character traits become prominent, and the religion teacher should draw students towards religion with great subtlety and patience. Children are then ready for performing more deepening religious notions.

²¹ Constantin CUCOȘ, *Educația religioasă, conținut și forme de realizare (Religious education, content and embodiment)*, (Bucharest: Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing House, 1996), 136.

²² Dorin OPRIȘ, *Didactica religiei (The didactic of religion)*, (București: Matrix Rom, 2013), 18.

²³ CĂLUGĂR, *Catehetica (The catehetical)*, 122.

In preadolescence, young people are focused on forging their careers, and on their own spiritual fulfillment. At this time, some forms of rationalization appear, of introspection, and young people begin asking questions about existence, and immortality. Some young ones are apt to understand issues related to doctrine and liturgy, but are less stable than adults. Preadolescents can and do communicate, do believe in others and do confess, and from this we should be mindful of who they choose as friends. A relationship to the divine gives them a chance to resolve certain problems.

In adolescence, it is recommended to have an open dialogue, that the teacher respect the students' point of view. "Adolescents are invited to self-reflection... catechetical reflection to seek to be multidisciplinary."²⁴ Moralistic and critical discourses should be avoided. The authority of the teacher must be imposed discreetly, as a form of protection rather than dictatorial control.²⁵ M. Dubesse considers that: "this is the moment that faith is usually lost, won or acquired. Religion becomes a way of life, whose outmost most expression is vocation."²⁶ In this way, education is catered to different age groups, and it cannot be done in leaps and bounds. In his work, *Pampaedia*, J.A. Comenius says that "the whole world is mankind's school, life is every person's school from the cradle to the grave, because the wise Creator distributed His image in parts and in grades (infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, maturity, old age), and every age has a school."²⁷

The need to respect the aspects of age, both biologically and spiritually²⁸, is masterfully underscored by the Apostle of the Gentiles: "Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready." (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). Saint John Cassian says: "To master any art or teaching, one must begin with the most basic knowledge, and from the easiest efforts because the mind, fed from this milk, develops little by little and gradually rises from the lowest, to the highest achievements of mind. Once one has understood the basic elements and, moving forward, somehow opens the doors of the confession of faith, the mind can arrive unchallenged at mysteries and summits of fulfillment."²⁹

The transition from one stage of development to another cannot be done without a certain crisis. It's possible that, at one point, the student rejects an element of a religious event, and in this case, the religion teacher's recourse should keep in mind the aspects of each psychogenetic stage of development. There are thus some elements the Christian educator should take into account and, in this way, we are aware of the complexity of the teacher's

²⁴ Maurice BAUMANN, *Jésus à 15 ans*, (Geneve : Labor et Fides, 1993), 21.

²⁵ OPRİȘ, *Didactica religiei (The didactic of religion)*, 20.

²⁶ Maurice DUBESSE, *Etapele educației (The stages of education)*, translation by Magdalena Chelsoi, (Bucharest: Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing House, 1981), 107.

²⁷ Dan STOICESCU, "Școala și planificarea la Comenius" (*The School and planning at Comenius*), in "Revista de pedagogie", 1-6, (1996): 137.

²⁸ For each person there are certain stages of the spiritual age characterized by the intensity of the religious feeling and the direct knowledge of God out of concrete circumstances of life. Baptism marks the beginning of man's life in Christ. Alexandre SCHMEMANN, *Din apă și din duh (Of Water and the Spirit)*, (Bucharest: Symbol Publishing House, 1992), 8.

²⁹ SAINT JOHN CASSIAN, "Convorbiri duhovnicești" (*The spiritual conversations*), translation Vasile Cojocaru and David Popescu, in *PSB*, vol. 57, (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1990), 481.

preparation, in general, and specifically that of the religion teacher. In religious education, the teacher-student relationship has a set of all specific connotations, given fact that its model was established through the relationship between the Savior and His disciples.³⁰ The exemplary model which should be followed in religious education, to attain and fulfill the ultimate goals of religious education, forever remains the supreme Pedagogue, Jesus Christ: "Christians ought to be trained after His example, enlightened in spirit, holy in devotion of conscience and strong in their deeds (each according to their vocation). Only then will our schools be truly Christian, when we develop most like Christ."³¹ For the implementation of an effective religious education, the religion teacher can also use the conclusions of studies carried out by researchers in the psycho-pedagogical area³², referring to how to respect the psycho-physical aspects of the students.

To put it into a question, what should Christians do, young or old, with their faith acquired from family, from Church and, by way of religious education, in school? Of course, they have a moral duty to give witness through their deeds, first of all. Then, true faith ought to be publicly confessed by each of us. Otherwise, a religious education, regardless of the contributing factors of its formation, has not reached its ultimate goal.

Instead of conclusions, I would urge the faithful to bear public witness and bear witness through their deeds. In the circumstances of modern society being so outraged, so secularized and assaulted, sometimes aggressively, by all kinds of exotic doctrines, some connected to Christianity and others with no connection whatsoever to true faith, I consider that witness from the pulpit alone is no longer sufficient. It is all our duty to bear witness to the true faith.

Similarly, I would urge our teachers that during the religion class they make intensive use of the Bible. Children must be familiar with the biblical text, with reading or even memorizing it, they should achieve some kind of skill in handling the Bible. The Bible cannot be replaced by anything in the religion class. We don't know how many students read the Bible at home. The religion class can create the appropriate framework for them to do so.

We should always be thinking of the student's capabilities, of stimulating their creativity in a positive way and to emphasize developmental characteristic of religious education.

It has been always said that the religion class hasn't resolved, or it doesn't resolve criminality or bad behavior among the youth. I don't think these problems can ever be completely eradicated. This matter has much more to do with man's will, which, as it is known, is completely free. Everything depends on how every person uses their free will.³³ Adversaries of the religion class should ask about how large would the phenomenon of

³⁰ OPRIS, *Dimensiuni creștine ale pedagogiei moderne (Christian dimensions of modern pedagogy)*, 99-101.

³¹ J.A. COMENIUS, *Didactica magna*, trad.de Iosif Antohi, (Bucharest: Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing House, 1970), 43.

³² Monica OPRIS, "Etape în înțelegerea și trăirea credinței sau drumul de la Botez spre maturitate" (*Steps in the understanding and the living of faith or the road from baptismal to adulthood*) in *Altarul Reîntregirii* 1, (2011): 129-151.

³³ Teofan MADA, *Omul și educația în opera Sfântului Vasile cel Mare (The Man and the education in the work of St. Basil the Great)*, (Cluj-Napoca: Vremi Publishing House, 2009), 66-71

criminality grow in schools or in society without the religion class?! Religion classes always turn on the light of Christian morality and try to keep it on, and Christian morality, like any other moral system, cannot be *imposed* by force; at most, it may be *proposed*. The rest is done through will and, this may be cultivated through religious education. The role of a dynamic pedagogy enters here, whereby the characteristics of the face of God in man can be developed, educated. This dynamic concept about man introduces a new and fundamental dimension, of the divine origins and of man's place in eternity. This dimension is not discernible to the extent that it is obscured by disbelief.³⁴ The ultimate purpose in life and education is seen by the philosopher Plato as being "as much like God as possible."³⁵

If attendance of the religion class is obligatory, nobody can be obliged to go to Church. The religion teacher can give the students advice in this direction, but cannot oblige them. At most, he can take students to the place of worship for practical, class demonstrations, according to the school curriculum, or, if the students wish it, to confess and get the communion in the fasting periods of the church year. But, once the knowledge of the essential elements of our Christian faith begin in religion classes, there is a good chance for those interested to see how worship manifests publicly. From this interest, a wish may be born to frequent the Church more regularly and, as such, to set off the longing for God in the soul of a youth. All of this shows the decisive role of a religious education in school.

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³⁴ MADA, *Om și educația în opera Sfântului Vasile cel Mare (The Man and the education in the work of St. Basil the Great)*, p. 18.

³⁵ PLATON, *Teetitos*, 176 b, apud MADA, *Om și educația în opera Sfântului Vasile cel Mare (The Man and the education in the work of St. Basil the Great)*, 18.

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