

# SEEKING BYZANTIUM, AND ENCOUNTERING WAYS TO WISDOM

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As an historian of education I suspect that a marginalization of the spiritual in education, leads to an unfortunate misrepresentation of our educational past and to a disconnection from the tradition of thought leading from ancient contexts to contemporary ones. It is tied up with our loss of wisdom as a virtue, pedagogical and social. In my work, I have sought to understand the context we now refer to as Byzantium, where, I believe, a greater integration of rational and spiritual ways of knowing was deemed essential.

A few thoughts on Byzantium for the uninitiated, beginning with one stated boldly. Our contemporary history of education textbooks, which state that the Roman empire fell in 476 when the city of Rome was captured by Gothic tribes, lie. Rome had already ceased to be the capital of the Roman world following the foundation of Constantinople upon the site that had been inhabited since ancient times by the city of Byzantium, and the Roman Empire persisted for another millennium, less twenty-three days. The teaching materials used in teacher education to teach the history of education omit Byzantium entirely. Throughout the 1,123 year history of Byzantium (330-1453) – or, the Eastern, Christian, Greek Roman Empire, if you will – scholarship in the classics persisted, particularly in religious circles. At times, free public education for children was complemented by free higher education. At all times, the classics – which were later reintroduced into Western Europe via Greek scholars and teachers leaving Constantinople (sparking what we refer to as the Renaissance) – were being read, copied, translated, and adapted according to contemporary realities. This was particularly the case amongst monastic and clerical communities.

Byzantine writers on education are a bridge between the classical world and the Renaissance traditions of thought, as well as our own. Byzantine education, whether secular or monastic, did not abandon the Greeks and Romans, although these were lost to much of Europe during a period we refer to through two other labels, the Medieval or Dark ages; rather they made them relevant to their own context, preserving both the language and the ideas in diverse settings for teaching and learning. I learned much travelling to and conducting research in monastic libraries scattered upon the monastic peninsula of Mount Athos, where no fewer than twenty monasteries founded during the Byzantine period house and preserve manuscripts that are many hundreds of years old. Beside copies of the Christian bible, I encountered treatises on Aristotle, commentaries on Demosthenes, and copies of Plutarch. For the monastic's spiritual and general education, each of these was relevant. Each offered grist for the mill.

It is rather easy to see why classical philosophy, predominantly the work of Plato and Aristotle, remained central to education throughout the Byzantine context. Rather than being antithetical to religious themes in education, they are woven of

the same yarn. In principle, both classical philosophy and early Christianity were means of living a good, virtuous life. Both are cultures concerned primarily with wisdom. Plato pointed to Socrates as an example of wisdom and, likewise, religious educators pointed to Christ and to the Saints as examples of the same. Seminal figures in Byzantine society, such as John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople, had a classical education that used ancient Greek and Roman sources as a curriculum for the cultivation of wisdom.

The cultivation of wisdom requires exercise. Students work through mathematical exercises in their textbooks to develop mastery of operations. Mantras, which developed in the Vedic tradition of India, are spiritual exercises in the Hindu faith. Likewise, in the Orthodox faith, the Jesus Prayer is intimately woven with the breathing patterns of the person praying, and the faithful, whether on Mount Athos or in rural New Brunswick, practice this prayer throughout the day, exercising Saint Paul's invocation to pray ceaselessly. We have, perhaps, lost sight of wisdom. It has skipped over the horizon, obfuscated by other aims: riches, celebrity, and an elusive concept of happiness. When we do consider wisdom, we falsely conflate it with a sense of knowing. The wise are not those amongst us who know, they are the people who live well. Learning to live well requires great discipline, rational as well as spiritual.

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