Religious Education between Aspirations and Reality

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Abstract

The events of 1989 caught the Church on the wrong foot in what its didactic mission was concerned. On the one hand, the religious education was carried out along the lines of a scholastic method, on the other hand, the introduction of the subject Religion, first in primary and secondary schools, then in high schools, did not receive the best response from the decision-makers in the Church institution. Due to the lack of expertise, the curriculum was not drafted with clear, precise and necessary objectives. Even today, it seems to be incapable of establishing and reaching the main aim of Religion – that of making the students good Christians. The scholastic method has been preserved, the aspect of gaining knowledge is emphasised, whereas a better approach should, rather, aim at developing the skills and the character of a good Christian.

Keywords: Religion, student, teacher, curriculum, syllabus, discipline

1. Introduction

One cannot speak of education in general and religious education in particular without defining the terms. Looking in the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, the 2009 edition (henceforth, DEX), one reads: EDUCĂŢIE [EDUCATION], f. n. 1. Fundamental social phenomenon of transmitting the adult generations’ life experience and culture to the generations of children and youth, with an aim at supporting their social integration; 2. Knowledge of manners and social behaviour in accordance with these manners; ◊ verbal phrase: a face educatie cuiva = to educate someone; ◊ physical education – complex of physical exercises practised in schools and universities, meant to improve the physical well-being of the body; [Variant: [obsolete] educațiune, f. n.. < Fr. éducation, Latin educatio, -onis. The previous edition of DEX, published in 1998, provided a different definition for

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education: EDUCĂȚIE, educații [EDUCATION, educations] Systematically applied measures in view of forming and developing children’s and young people’s (adult people’s and society’s) intellectual, moral or physical skills; the result of this pedagogical activity; behaviour, civil manners; physical education – measures with an aim at ensuring the shapely development of the human body, the formation and development of the motion knowledge, skills and abilities, necessary both for work and sports activities; [Variant: obsolete] educațiune, f. n. < Fr. éducation, Latin educatio, -onis. The perspective is clearly different from that expressed in a dictionary published before 1989. Thus, in the edition of the 1986 Dictionary of neologisms, one reads: EDUCĂȚIE f. n. [EDUCATION] – systematic and conscientious influencing the development of children’s and young people’s intellectual, moral and physical abilities; totality of means applied for this purpose; culturalization, systematic raise of the ideological, cultural and professional level; the act of developing one person’s or one people’s moral, intellectual and physical skills, etc. Physical education – balanced development of the body through gymnastics; [Genitive -iei, variant educațiune f. n. / cf. Fr. éducation, It. educazione, Lat. educatio].

In 1939, August Scriban, author of a Romanian Language Dictionary, defined education as follows: Educațiune f. (<Lat. Educatio,-onis). Upbringing; the act of educating, of developing physical, intellectual and moral skills: acest om are o bună educațiune [this man has a good education]; the skills and practice of social conventions: acest om are o educațiune de salon, dar carte multă nu știe [this man is mannered, but he is not very cultured]. We have provided all these references on purpose, so that we can be aware of our own subjectivity when defining things. Although the things are unique, it is difficult to grasp their core and to define their various nuances as a whole. On the other hand, we cannot refrain from noticing the differences from one edition to the next of the most important source: DEX.

Some nuances may be inferred from these definitions. Thus, according to its most recent definition (2009), education is, primarily, a fundamental social phenomenon of transmitting the adult generations’ life experience and culture to the generations of children and youth with an aim at supporting their social integration. A decade ago, education was considered an ensemble of systematically applied measures in view of forming and developing children’s and young people’s (adult people’s and society’s) intellectual, moral or physical skills. In times of materialist-dialectic ideology, education was understood as the systematic and conscientious influence on the development of children’s and young people’s intellectual, moral and physical abilities; totality of means applied for this purpose; culturalization, systematic raise of the ideological, cultural and professional level; the act of developing one person’s or one people’s moral, intellectual and physical skills. We must note that the views on education as fundamental social phenomenon, or as an ensemble of systematically applied measures, but especially as systematic and conscientious influence on the development of intellectual skills present exteriority nuances. This is the reason why we have chosen a definition from the interwar period, in which education was defined in a different manner: upbringing; the act of educating, of developing physical, intellectual and moral skills. Neither is this definition completely satisfactory, but it emphasises an essential aspect, which all the others fail to mention, the fact that education is upbringing, guidance of the child to maturity, man’s advancement to completeness, and this complete man’s advancement to eternity. Of course, this is our point of view, which we confess and support, it is what we believe. And here is the reason why: Christianity, par excellence, is a way of living, discovered by the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in which God invites us to a love partnership with Him. This life is an invitation, not an obligation, although it may acquire the latter nuance after one has accepted it. Yet, as anything on this Earth, once having assumed an existence, a permanent upbringing is brought onto it through learning. Because the purpose of human existence is to reach resemblance to the Creator, Christ’s way of living, once internalized and followed, gives one certainty that one will eventually reach their aims. When God created Man, He blessed him and said onto him: “Grow and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis I, 28). The verb αυξάω – used in the imperative mood, has the meaning of an increase in understanding, dignity and honour, of strengthening of knowledge. (Henri Estienne, Schneider, Pasow, 1895; Praiseworthy Metropolitan Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, 2011).

This is the reason why we believe that the grounds of education should be sought for in God’s advice to the first men, to permanently the raise their understanding of the meaning of everything in creation. Having discovered these plasticized reasons of things, as St. Maximus the Confessor names them, it is impossible for man not to
discover his own rationale and, then, to discover the Reason above all reasons, that is God. Christianity is life *par excellence*, but a conscious, aware life, not simply biology, but spirited biology Constantin Noica (1981) noted the most significant difference between any creature of the universe and the human being while saying that not only is man capable of thinking, which is a biological function, but also capable of thinking upon thinking. Or, in this sense, education cannot be a social phenomenon, an ensemble of measures or a systematic influence, but it should represent an activation factor, an increase of the God-given capabilities.

2. Discussions

Unfortunately, during the totalitarian era, education was purely biological; moral was replaced with ethics, with norms and principles of the social community. If the moral man relates everything to divinity, attempting to live without losing the reach of his resemblance with God, ethics teaches him to relate everything to principles and norms for a good cohabitation in society. It is a difference in meaning: whilst in moral man is tied to eternity and relates vertically to God, in ethics man ties himself to society and relates horizontally to ephemeral norms and principles, perfectly good for a period and despicable for another.

It would be difficult to outline a complete radiography of Romanian education after December 1989. We only attempt to present what happened with one discipline, Religion, taught at the pre-university level in all classes.

The first aspect we need to state is that we, who were educated during the years of communism, have our limitations. The former regime wanted to transform theologians in mere officiants and it succeeded in doing so, for the most part. It drowned one of the most important vocations of the Christian life: the mission. The Apostles were mandated by Messiah to preach the New Testament to all peoples (*The Holy Bible*, 1994), as a covenant of God’s sacrificed love in history:

“*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Amen*” (Matthew, 28: 19-20).

The zeal in preaching the truth of the death and resurrection of Messiah, as warrant for the love partnership between man and God, was the most faithful expression of their mission. Preaching the new way of life, or the love partnership between man and God, concluded through Messiah Jesus Christ, was the essence of the apostolic existence. Christianity came into prominence through their exemplary kindness, through their invitation to this love partnership, proven by their own sacrifice. They understood that the martyrdom vocation of Christianity is of the essence in proving its authenticity. This is why they accepted to answer through sacrifice, like their Master Teacher, to the hatred and malevolence of the pagans. This awareness, this permanent state of sacrifice for the Truth, was confiscated by communists, and the apostolic zeal which should be an attribute of any true Christian, all the more of a servant of Christ, was drowned, with the desire to turn these servants into mere officiants, as already mentioned. Christianity was supposed to gradually become a ritualism and formalism easy to defeat.

The special level of appreciation which the Church received from the population after 1989 was not properly capitalized, and the huge amount of trust which the nation granted it has gradually decreased, although in a hierarchy of people’s trust, the Church is still at the highest level. If during the totalitarian age the Church was forced to be content to provide religious services, its mission being officially forbidden for the simple reason that it was in opposition with the materialist-dialectical ideology and with the communist philosophy of life, the things have changed after that bloody December: the Church was called again to begin its mission of spreading the Christian ways among the Romanian people, of renewing the invitation to the love partnership with God, a partnership proven by the love for the peers and by social balance, as warrants for the love communion with God. The communist ghetto had fallen – the Church had limitless actions at hand for its mission. It had to set its own limits. And thus the Church entered hospitals and penitentiaries, but also army bases and schools.

As the practice of the didactic act had been denied to the Church for half a century, it was difficult to reinitiate it. The decision-makers at the time scraped together a curriculum, and the first Religion teachers were us, the priests – whose formative years had been during communism. Two shortcomings at a time: firstly, those who
drafted the curriculum were marked by the scholasticism which had characterized the theological education in communism; secondly, as they did not have any didactic expertise, they omitted the most important aspect: the primary objective of the discipline in the curriculum. The former shortcoming was apparent in drafting the curriculum, as a logical consequence of the latter. Thus, failing to acknowledge the objectives of the new discipline, they drafted the learning plans by merely copying the table of contents or the contents of learning from the disciplines taught in Theological Seminaries during the totalitarian years. The two shortcomings have triggered other two serious problems: firstly, they have caused trouble to the priests who got involved in teaching without specific training. It would be difficult to assess the consequences but, unfortunately, there appeared certain aversion to Religion, as a result of the lack of teaching skills in the case of many priests. Preaching catechism in the church to believers was one thing, teaching children was another, although certain common grounds between the two forms of transmitting contents may be, indeed, identified. The lack of method and didactic skills co-operated, unfortunately, to compromise the invitation to a new way of life, to the embracement of divine love as a way of manifestation of the human being on Earth, and to make out of Religion a subject like any other.

This is the reason why Religion has never become (save for a few exceptions) the most desired and beloved subject. Secondly, the shortcomings have also created trouble to students, as the decision-makers who drafted the learning plans did not pay much attention to the main objectives of the discipline, to what they intended to attain through teaching Religion. The learning contents comprised in the curriculum aimed at producing theologians, seminary students. Transferred to the pre-university system, they had their objectives transferred as well. However, we believe that the objective of the discipline Religion in the pre-university curriculum has been – and will always remain the same, irrespective of ideology or social organization at a given time, that of helping children become true Christians, living after Christ’s model. The curriculum should have been drafted in view of attaining this objective, and not in view of transforming the children in seminary students.

We are positive that only a radical change of the curricula of Religion is able to substantially enrich the education act, as well as the perception on the discipline. Thus, just the way children in primary school acquire minimal competences (basic arithmetics, reading, and writing), Religion must help them acquire a basic Christian behavior, it must teach them basic liturgical skills: to know how to pray and why, to know how to respect and love their parents, to learn respect towards the human being and everything in creation, etc. The children are autonomous; they freely manifest initiative, spontaneity and inexhaustible imagination. (Barna, I., 2013)

During secondary school, a teacher of Religion may approach the history of human kind redemption and, according to age-stages, may tackle the two Testaments, the Old and the New, emphasizing the latter. At the end of this cycle, students should be capable to discern what is the most important: that being a Christian means being in a love partnership with God, but also that this partnership begins from here and must be proven by loving one’s peers. The main objective of the discipline must be that of acquiring skills and behaviors that spring from knowledge and from inner states, and not simply some knowledge of religious facts. For example, lighting a candle should not be a habit, but an externalization and materialization of the faith in Christ as Light, warming and enlightening all who live their lives by his percepts. Whoever lives in and with Christ’s Love cannot be in darkness. Thus, lighting a candle is a liturgical act of faith, but also a prayer to Lord Jesus Christ to light up your life towards eternal resurrection, from good to better, from light to more light. And another example: the marking with the sign of the Holy Cross is an externalization and materialization of our faith in the triumph of good over evil, of our calling towards and endless and eternal elation of the spirit. As the Holy Cross is the sacrificial altar of Messiah Jesus Christ, it is the place where the absolute evil of mankind met with the love of God, but it, at the same time, a permanent invitation to remember that we need to raise towards God (the vertical axis), and that we will also encounter hindrance in our endeavor (the horizontal axis). When we mark ourselves with the sign of the Holy Cross, we materialize this profound theology.

Finally, at the high school level, a teacher may tackle the Christian way of life more thoroughly, both in comparison with other religions and by emphasizing its confessional particularities. A positive approach would be that of discussing the models provided by the ecclesiastic history (it is recommended to propose case studies for the most important saints or important clerics). It is only at this level where a comparative approach to religions may be pursued, without contempt, but, on the contrary, teaching students to respect any religion, but to understand, cherish,
assume and live true Christianity – the way of life God revealed through His Son, Jesus Christ, as love partnership between men.

Mention should be made that, regardless of age or learning cycle, one should aim at moulding characters through any information one passes to students, at consolidating the affective-behavioral skills, at the understanding of the dignity of humankind. In this respect, we are of the opinion that the case studies analyzing important men from the History of the Romanian Orthodox Church or from World’s Ecclesiastic History may represent a useful tool in the correct understanding and enhancement of acquired knowledge.

Up till now, the curricula have been scholastic (Opriş, D., Opriş, M., 2011) primarily aiming at passing information, and not at forming Christian behavioral skills. It may be an explanation for students’ difficulty to assimilate a new pack of information, in addition to the multitude of data required for them to learn for other disciplines. The primary objective of Religion at pre-university level will be always to form the youth following the example of our Messiah, Jesus Christ, who “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death...” (Philippians, 2: 8) and who took the misfortunes of the world upon him, praying for those who crucified Him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23: 34); to help the students embrace the Christian virtues, feeding from the sacrificed love of God in history – Jesus Christ. The teacher of Religion must be aware that any information transmitted to students should aim at moulding their character, their behaviour, at helping them love all their peers in order to prove that they also have love for God. (Cucoş, C., 1999). In this respect, maybe the words of St. John Chrysostom, who advised the upbringing of children in humility in his work, Omişii şi cuvântări despre educaţia copiilor [Homilies and Sermons on Children’s Education], the first writing of Christian pedagogy, are as up-to-date today as they used to be 1,600 years ago: “for a rich man is not he who desires great riches, and is encircled with great riches; but the man who has need of nothing. Discipline your son in this, teach him this. This is the greatest riches. Seek not how to give him reputation and high character in outward learning, but consider deeply how you shall teach him to despise the glory that belongs to this present life”. (St. John Chrysostom, Homily XXI on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Ephesians, 2005)

The great patriarch maintained that education meant taking care of children and young people in what purity and propriety were concerned, and rearing them according to the moral principles, so that they become righteous, devout and intelligent people, athletes of Christ. At the same time, he stressed the power of the personal example coming from parents, teacher, or friends, examples that would educate the child’s soul. It is easy to observe the differences between the educational ideal of the Romanian school as a whole and the primary objective of Religion as a discipline. And we maintain this because the educational ideal of the Romanian education system aims at acquiring “the free, whole and balanced development of the human individual, formation of the autonomous and creative personality of students” (Curriculum of educational activities, 1995) whereas the ideal or the primary objective of Religion is to form a man possessed only by the love of God, an interlocutor of God onto love. The goal of religion is to help the child become a saint. It is important to note that Panayotis Nellas is aware of the shortcomings of the autonomy in the formation of an autonomous personality when he writes: “while studying the anthropological dimension of sin, I could see how autonomy is the source and content of sin, because it is a corruption of man’s truth, an amputation and his lock in biology”. (Panayotis, N., 1994)

3. Conclusions

Nevertheless, man is not only biology, but, as Religion is meant to discover within him, is also spirituality. This is the reason why our lines are not aimed at criticizing something or somebody in any way, but only at underlining the mismatch between the general objectives of the national education system, on the one hand, and the instructive-educational objective of Religion and its curriculum, on the other hand. The lack of correlation leads to a false construction of the discrete components of the curriculum. This is why we believe it better to clearly establish the goal to attain at the end of the thirteen years of teaching Religion at pre-university level: seminary students or good Christians? If the acquisition of the skills of a seminary student is sought, the curriculum is good as it is now, but if the aim is represented by the qualities of a good Christian, then, the curriculum must be modified and updated.
At the same time, we believe that, in attaining these objectives, the teachers of Religion must have a call. On the one hand because Religion is not a discipline aiming at providing information, but at forming the character and the affective behavior of the youth, helping them understand and cherish the meaning of creation, the sacred gift of life, but also the fact that, in the end, any creature born is invited and may become a candidate to sanctity. I am positive that the youth supported in their acknowledgement of the primary objective of Religion “will become the next apostles of the salvation of the humankind” (Cassian, C., 2012).

References

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