

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
89 (4), pp. 122-133, 2021

Paradigms and Principles of Religious Education Highlighted in the Holy Gospels. Their Relevance, Perspectives and Challenges in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

This study, *Paradigms and Principles of the Religious Education Highlighted in the Holy Gospels. Their Relevance, Perspectives and Challenges of the Contemporary Society*, aims at bringing into focus the necessity and relevance of paradigms and principles of religious education in response to the challenges posed by contemporary society.

Religious education has always played an important role in the complex process of shaping and completing a person's character. If school systematically prepares the individual intellectually and civically, religious education is a complimentary component in the continuity of the educational process, relying on moral teachings in the shaping of ethical consciousness and behavior.

In the process of acquiring an honest character, religious education is absolutely necessary. Moreover, it completes the informational sphere on a broader scale and thus offers the possibility of shaping a complex cultural personality.

It is a religious education which opens the path to dialogue and interdisciplinary, interethnic, and interreligious connection, to become a unifying force, the bond in interhuman and intercultural relationships. It is the community well and the shared communion among people, opening new perspectives and new bridges in interhuman relationships.

Keywords:

Principles, religious education, relevance, perspectives, challenges.

I. Rationale

Human beings, dichotomous beings, are born, then develop and afterwards live out their lives in cultural environments which posit paradigms, principles, hierarchies of values, attitudes or other such attestations. In the Romanian society, so shattered that all values are desacralized, the issue of religious education must be approached since it is so relevant¹.

In the context of the secularized contemporary society, when principles and traditional values are diminished and considered outdated, when education is subject to constant changes of paradigm, humanity feels the need to anchor in the truths of faith and of the education developed, since the very beginning, by the Church and the School and kept throughout time until contemporaneity.

An individual may, only through appropriate guidance and the promotion of paradigms of an authentic life, be able to distinguish between the true perspective and the current challenges of the society.

As contemporary society is regrettably and obviously confronted with a profound crisis of ideals, of spiritual guidance and of the promotion of moral and spiritual values, religious education must be a priority.

Therefore, the educational approach is inseparable from a thorough spiritual and cultural study, this because the evolution of society also bears a strong religious mark.

II. References, principles and paradigms of religious education in the Old and the New Testament

The first feature of a human being is the exploration of the unknown, the desire for education and for knowledge representing a permanent drive towards fulfilment. In their itinerary towards fulfilment, human beings look for paradigms and principles to which they can relate and which may chart their path in life.

¹ Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, *Between the "Return to the Fathers" and the need for a Modern Orthodox Theology: The Theological Agenda of the Volos Academy*, in: *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 54 (2001) 1, 2001, p. 5.

Etymologically, the noun *paradigm* expresses a model, an example, a teaching, and the term *principle* comes from the Latin *principium* and translates as beginning, origin, foundation, norm, fundamental thesis, law or rule that guides a process in a flexible and creative manner².

Extrapolated to theology, religious education has represented a permanent and necessary preoccupation of the human being, both from the perspective of this life, but also from that of eternity, since salvation also implies knowledge, as Jesus Christ the Savior himself said: *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.* (John 17, 3). The stress on knowledge and learning is even greater when the disciples are sent to preach: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (...) teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.* (Matthew 28, 19).

From these two scriptural passages we may understand that religious education has represented, from the very beginning, a necessary, significant and urgent human preoccupation without which the effective operation of a civilized society would be unconceivable.

Seen through a wider lens, education is a designed, orderly process aimed at shaping the individual's personality. When we refer to education as a means of developing a person, we consider both thoughts and actions.

In this sense, we contend that education is a complex process which has as main goal the qualitative improvement of people in full accordance with the values which they have chosen and within which they carry out their lives.

The educational process sets out to develop all of a person's capabilities, their dynamic connection to the reality in which they live. This educational process implies references, paradigms, principles, methods and goals, all of them working towards the ideal education³.

The focus on the educational process was a constant preoccupation in the history of the biblical people, manifest in the Holy Scripture.

For example, in the books of the Old Testament we come across legal acts referring to the obligation of educating the children and the youths

² *Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române*, 2nd edition revised and with completions, the Romanian Academy, the Linguistic Institute "Iorgu Iordan", Editura Univers Enciclopedic Gold Publishing House, 2009.

³ Vasile RĂDUȚĂ, "Educația ascetică în apoftegmele părinților din pustiu", in: *Misiune, Spiritualitate, Cultură*, Valahia University Press, Târgoviște, 2016, pp. 63-64.

according to the principles of the Law; the leading personalities of the chosen people, as well as the ancient traditions representing the paradigm.

Education is a gift to humankind out of God's goodness and love for His people, He Himself carried out the educational act out of love for mankind: *For whom the Lord loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights.* (Proverbs 3, 12).

The first principles of education would be conveyed by the mother who, until the children were five, was in charge with their upbringing and education. After that, the boys were instructed by the father or by an educator. Instruction would entail reading and writing so that they could read the Law and the holy books, and thus acquire wisdom. The main purpose of education was learning the Law and its application⁴.

In the times of the Old Testament, education took place in public schools (beth midrash) as well, and included knowledge acquisition related to mathematical calculation, and to public and private law⁵.

In line with the educational process of the Old Testament, but also with the current one, we find the educational process which is fulfilled by our Savior Jesus Christ, as highlighted in the Holy Gospels. He, also called the *Great Educator*, accomplished this act as an unsurpassable master who worked the plot of the soul like a gardener does, knowing all the mysteries of this plot⁶.

Education is of divine origin, since people enjoy a chosen education, made by the Word (Jesus Christ) through His untaintedness, through His living⁷. The word I am referring to, as employed by the Church Fathers and Writers of the early centuries, is the Educator. Being an Educator, He provides people with education, making them better, positing paradigms, principles and advice for a life of wisdom.

In the New Testament, education is found to originate in the faith in God, it is the teaching on how to serve God and people, it is the instruction towards the knowledge of truth.

⁴ Gheorghios METALLINOS, *Parohia-Hristos în mijlocul nostru*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2014, p. 124.

⁵ Dumitru ABRUDAN, Emilian CORNÎTESCU, *Arheologie Biblică*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1994, p. 129.

⁶ Dumitru CĂLUGĂR, *Catehetica*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, pp. 16-17.

⁷ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Pedagogul – Cartea I*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 4*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1982, p. 194.

In the Holy Gospels, the presence of youths is noted, youths who are willing to have an education following from the moral principles presented and preached by the Savior Jesus Christ. The most suggestive example is to be found in the dialogue between Christ the Lord and the young rich man interested in and thirsty for redemptive knowledge. From this conversation it follows that the young man was aware of the main principles of education, being instructed in the knowledge of, and respect for the Law (Mark 10, 17-27).

Applying the method of narrative pedagogy, the dialogue between Jesus and the young man highlights the standards of Christian education in an episode which describes the relationship between teacher and disciple, a relationship based on a series of questions put by the disciple and, obviously, answered by the teacher. The necessity of this dialogue does not indicate something in the order of the mundane, but an existential crisis, something of real significance on which not only the young man's serenity depends, but also his entire future.

The man in question is seeking new teachings, new paradigms that could help him achieve eternal life.

In ancient times, these dialogues were frequent, the youths followed their path to knowledge moving from one teacher to another, from one philosophical trend to another, from one religion to another, until they discovered the doctrine, the knowledge and the environment fit for learning⁸. Coming back to the literary tools specific to dialogue, Jesus advises the young man to observe the teachings of the Ten Commandments: *You know the commandments (...)* (Mark 10, 19).

Saying this, Jesus, the Great Educator, seeks to uncover the spiritual path and to understand the level of knowledge the young man had.

The Ten Commandments, the essence of the principles to be found in the Law of Moses, was the paradigm given to the chosen people in their relation to God, but also to fellow human beings. Nonetheless, the young man sought to meet Jesus, since probably he felt profound discontent stopping him from ascension towards the redemptive teachings⁹.

Used pedagogically, the scriptural account highlights the concept of educating the youth, but also the need for permanent education. This

⁸ Pierre HADOT, *Ce este filosofia antică*, transl. George Bondor and Claudiu Tipuriță, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1997, pp. 116-120.

⁹ Cristian BĂDILĂ, *Noul Testament – Evanghelia după Marcu*, Bilingual edition, 2nd edition, Editura Vreamea, Bucharest, 2015, pp. 341-342.

continuity of instruction would later constitute a fundamental principle in approaching and designing contemporary education.

From a humanist perspective, this parable from the New Testament already reflects an education focused on the individual, on the principles of instructing-educating the person. In the nurturing He shows to children and youth, Jesus, the Great Educator, seeks to provide assistance and educational support so that they can reach the redemptive ideals.

The necessity of permanent education as a social activity for the youth is also highlighted in another prominent personality from the New Testament, Saint Paul the Apostle.

The biography of Saint Paul the Apostle is better known than that of the other Apostles, since the Acts of the Apostles, written by his disciple Luke, and the epistles we have from Paul himself give us ample information on his life, education, and works. The stage of the early Church is dominated by the impressive figure of Saint Paul the Apostle for more than two decades.

According to his own statements, Saint Paul the Apostle was born in Tarsus, Cilicia, into a Jewish family living in the diaspora, beyond the borders of Palestine, and strictly following the precepts and the teachings of the Mosaic Law. In the city of Tarsus, a series of:

“Personalities of the ancient world” came to light, “such as the Stoic Philosopher Athenodorus, teacher of Octavian Augustus, Crispus and Nestor, teacher of Cicero, and especially Hermogenes, one of the most important rhetoric teachers (*our translation*)”¹⁰.

Saul’s environment certainly had a large influence on his education, training and religious instruction. Born in a city where Greek was the official language, the young Saul learned the Hellenistic dialect which ran throughout the Roman Empire. There is no doubt that Saul listened in the squares and marketplaces of Tarsus orations on the educational, moral and religious principles of the time¹¹.

¹⁰ Constantin PREDĂ, “Saul-care se numește Pavel. Apostolul evreu al ne-evreilor”, in: *Studii Teologice*, 2, 2010, p. 39.

¹¹ Dionisie STAMATOIU, “Complexitatea unei personalități. Sfântul Apostol Pavel”, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, 1-4, 2002, p. 17.

Then, the fact that he was born into a Jewish family, more specifically Pharisee, known to be very devout people, leads us to the conclusion that Saul learned the Aramaic spoken by the Savior and the Apostles not only at the school of the synagogue, but also at home. Greek was thus his mother tongue, and Hebrew he acquired out of the wish of belonging to the Hebrews¹². Saul was deeply influenced by the Judaic component of his education and instruction.

Therefore, Saint Paul the Apostle spoke both Greek and Aramaic, something which helped him in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ across groups during the three missionary journeys he took.

With respect to Saul's education and schooling, there is no precise information that would attest to the name of such an institution in his city of birth, but out of his orations and epistles, we understand that the Apostle to the Nations was familiar with Greek literature and with some of the ideas of the Hellenic philosophers of his time (Acts 17, 28).

Despite the information gap on the school in which Saul was trained, we are tempted to believe that his religious training and education started at an early age, him receiving both the elementary religious and lay education at home, in the family, and at the synagogue. As a young man, he attended a Jewish school which also taught Greek, and then he studied in one of the lay schools of Tarsus which taught philosophy and rhetoric¹³.

It is well known that the teaching of the Torah started at a very early age with the Jewish people. When the Apostle to the Nations claims himself to be *a Pharisee, born of Pharisees* (Acts 23, 6), he reveals that his Judaic education started in early childhood. His belonging to the Pharisees would also strongly influence his later options¹⁴. In his Epistles, he uses words of Aramaic origin, albeit rarely. He left a significant number of texts in Greek and Latin, since Saul lived in a Roman city and he needed to understand the latter to manage any number of situations.

The young Saul was very devout and active in promoting and applying the educational principles of the Law, identifying himself with its religious, educational and moral ideals.

¹² NICODIM Patriarhul României, *Viața și Operile Sfântului Apostol Pavel*, translation after F. Ferrer, Publishing and printing house of the Saint Monastery of Neamțu, 1941, p. 125.

¹³ Marie-Françoise BASLEZ, *Saint Paul*, Fayard, Paris, 1991, pp. 32-36; Marie-Françoise BASLEZ, *Sfântul Pavel*, transl. Anca-Maria Christodorescu, Editura Compania, Bucharest, 2001, pp. 32-36.

¹⁴ Ioan MİRCEA, *Dicționar al Noului Testament*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1996, p. 168.

The instructive-educational spirit is a gift Saul was born with and in this spirit, he would approach his numerous actions and works, starting with his education and ending in his martyrdom.

Besides the education and the instruction received in the family, Saul would benefit from the acquisition of Old Testament knowledge (II Timothy 3, 14) and knowledge of the Aramaic language (Acts 22, 2) at the synagogal school, an important institution where the Pharisees eagerly welcomed new followers¹⁵.

But, since the parents wanted Saul to become a rabbi, they sent him to Jerusalem to improve his knowledge at the school of the famous Gamaliel¹⁶.

Saul would thus study more in depth in Jerusalem, but it is not known exactly at what age he got there. Saint Luke the Evangelist writes that he got there when he was “very young”.

With respect to the phrase “very young”, from the point of view of the tradition defining the rabbinic stages, the chronology is as follows: “at five, the young Jew starts studying the Bible, at ten he is initiated in the Mishnah¹⁷, at thirteen he is instructed in practicing the ten commandments, at fifteen he studies the Talmud, at eighteen he gets married”¹⁸. In the logic of these prescriptions of the Old Testament, Saul must have been eighteen when he got to Jerusalem.

The necessity of permanent education also appears in the Letters of Saint Paul the Apostle. Timothy and Titus, two of the young disciples to the Apostle to the Nations, are advised to carry out their tasks with maturity and responsibility. Among the responsibilities the Apostle refers to are the maintenance and transmission of healthy teachings.

In the New Testament, education is perceived as a continuous presence in a person’s evolution. Equally, education must be considered a dimension of the entire life, an existential continuity which overlays life itself for its whole duration, and which is not to have temporal or spatial limits.

The forms of Christian education observed in the period of the New Testament and transmitted ever since underscore the idea that a permanent education represents a specific response to existential dynamism.

¹⁵ Jerome MURPHY-O’CONNOR, *Histoire de Paul de Tars. Le Voyageur du Christ*, Cerf, Paris, 2004, p. 22.

¹⁶ Sabin VERZAN, *Sfântul Apostol Pavel. Istoria propovăduirii Evangheliei și organizării Bisericii în epoca apostolică*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1996, p. 18.

¹⁷ Dumitru ABRUDAN, Emilian CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie Biblică*, pp. 47- 48.

¹⁸ Alain DECAUX, *Viața Sfântului Apostol Pavel*, Editura Humanitas, Bucharest, 2007, p. 31.

Also of major significance are the opinions of Apostolic Fathers and early Christian writers on the principles and the need for permanent education. Specifically, these include the opinions of the great teachers of the Christian catechetical schools from Caesarea and Alexandria. They indicated the permanent character of education, as they believed that for each person life is a school.

Likewise, Saint John Chrysostom writes the following on education: “For he that hath this art, ought to be more exactly observant than any painter and any sculptor.” The painter and the sculptor create only lifeless figures, whereas the educator creates a living face. Looking at it, both people and God rejoice. In parallel with the notion of *education*, the Blessed Father also talks about *self-teaching*, since he claims that anyone can be a teacher, if not for the others, then at least for themselves. The one who is educated is like a lighted candle which can give live to thousands of other candles¹⁹.

In this way, religious education must represent a priority and be transmitted to people even since childhood, because today’s child will be tomorrow’s adult. Moreover, the brain, which is the holder of a person’s intellectual faculties, is the last organ that becomes mature from an anatomic point of view²⁰.

Psychology studies a person’s mental evolution and the development of behaviors up to adolescence, a stage which represents the person’s social inclusion in adult society. That is why the goals of continuous education cannot be separated from the goals of education in general. All these dimensions of the educational activity prioritize the goals and contents which permanent education values and conveys to the young generation.

III. Perspectives and challenges of religious education

As previously stated, education is a continuous process, a permanent evolution towards a specific destination. Through permanent education, a

¹⁹ SF. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, “Cugetări despre educație”, in: *Lumină din lumină. Cugetări din operele Sfinților Părinți*, Editura Aevila, 1998, p. 29.

²⁰ Daniel GOLEMAN, *Creierul și inteligența emoțională: noi perspective*, transl. Gabriela Alexandra Bănică, Curtea Veche Publishing, Bucharest, 2018, p. 106.

person's skills of social adaptation and integration improve. That is why the principle of permanent education has to be adopted and applied in direct relation with individual and social progress.

For an individual, permanent education is essential to approaching reconstruction and harmonization. Education plays a defining role in shaping a person, given its universal and democratic character and its foundations in culture and tradition.

Regrettably, contemporary society and the contemporary social context tend to alienate people from traditional values, exiling them in their private spaces and estranging them from their spiritual and cultural past.

The current society's evolution is marked by secularization and, at the same time, is overshadowed by the crisis of values. This crisis is felt in relation to education in general as, on the one hand, the new social challenges require new solutions and a modern approach, and, on the other, the negation of traditional values, among which faith is central, leads to significant tendency to deny the usefulness and necessity of religious education.

Religious education focuses on the spiritual aspect of the human being and facilitates interdisciplinary connections with other aspects, in an effort to sustain a moral and social balance, useful and necessary to the community, to the person, and to the family²¹.

Religious education works to avoid the appearance or the perpetuation of social inequalities or personal imbalance²². A society like the current one is permanently confronted with recurring challenges. That is why religious education is absolutely necessary: to prevent deep gaps among individuals and in society.

Contemporary society is such that people need to get their bearings and free themselves from the slavery of any type of consumerist ideology. Our apparent freedom to do anything without taking into account the principles of religious education leads us down the wrong path.

In order to better understand the idea of freedom, I think it is necessary to focus more on one of the aspects Saint Paul the Apostle mentioned to

²¹ Bartolomeu Valeriu ANANIA, *Apa cea vie a Ortodoxiei*, Renașterea Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 17.

²² Jenna Min SHIM, "Structuralism's Relevance in a Post-Structural Era: Revisiting Research on Multicultural Curricular Studies", in: *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43:6, 2011, pp. 739-758.

Christians in the fortress of Corinth: *I have the right to do anything, you say – but not everything is beneficial. I have the right to do anything – but I will not be mastered by anything*” (I Corinthians 6, 12). This phrase, *I have the right to do anything*, is, for a large part of contemporary society, essential in life. Avoiding such behavior requires the principles of permanent education.

It is true that, if I am free, *I have the right to do anything*, but I ought to be aware of the fact that *not everything is beneficial*. Mistakenly perceived freedom, lacking educational or moral principles, can give us the illusion of freedom which, later, has the potential to control and subjugate us²³.

Religious education is not a threat to freedom. On the contrary, religious education gives us the possibility to discover the essence of life and the power to love, to accept and respect those around us. It protects us against the so-called ephemeral fiction presented to us by modern ideologies and engineering which reach us through various channels, and which contain and promote promiscuous behavior and character²⁴.

Religious education offers a concrete moral framework and helps us avoid the traps of some vague messages. In such a situation, humankind’s spiritual purpose, namely getting to know and being in true communion with God, cannot be achieved without education, knowledge and culture²⁵.

Religious education gives an encompassing spiritual horizon; it is not enough to promote the idea of excessive professionalization while disregarding the fact that individuals have spiritual, not only material aspirations and needs.

Education, in general, and religious education, in particular, is an art as it becomes meaningful over time. In this respect, Saint John Chrysostom says: “For what is equal to training the soul, and forming the mind of one that is young? For he that hath this art, ought to be more exactly observant than any painter and any sculptor”²⁶.

²³ Alexandru OJICĂ, “Avatarurile libertății în societatea contemporană”, in: *Lumina*, <https://ziarulumina.ro>, accessed on 20.04.2021, at 13:47.

²⁴ Vasile CREȚU, “Criza educației religioase în învățământul românesc de astăzi. Cauze, provocări și perspective”, in: *Teologie și Educație la Dunărea de Jos – Fascicula XIV*, Arhiepiscopia Dunărea de Jos Publishing House, Galați, 2015, pp. 71-73.

²⁵ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Credo. Ghid istoric și teologic al crezurilor și mărturisirilor de credință în tradiția creștină*, Polirom Publishing House, București, 2010, p. 23.

²⁶ SF. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Comentariu la Evanghelia după Matei – Omilia LIX*, in: *Scrieri, partea a III-a*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* 23, transl. Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest,

In education, the main purpose is the shaping of the personality. For a young person to acquire a personality with meaningful features, with authority and prestige, he or she needs paradigms, and the absolute paradigm is Jesus Christ – our supreme model.

IV. Conclusions

Religious education is the expression of the most noble human attributes, it contributes to the creation of a healthy society, becoming the path to fundamental insights into the importance of life and the proof that these insights need to be shared.

The importance of religious education is highlighted by the fact that it offers the possibility to model and accomplish spirituality in humankind, being part of and defining its evolution. The development of habits, competencies and social-moral attitudes requires religious education. It responds to the needs of contemporary society, safeguarding spiritual richness and identity and imparting unchanging values to the young generation.

In the current context, marked by constant tensions, religious education contributes to the modelling of young characters and to the safekeeping of true values.

Therefore, I consider that contemporary society should focus more on religious education, since it offers the young generation the possibility to develop a strong personality and, thus, to cope with the strain generated by the ways of the contemporary world.

The process of shaping a person's intellectual and spiritual education is extremely relevant and complex in defining their character and evolution later on. In light of this objective, I consider the issue of religious education to be relevant, because if a nation does not invest in education, in lay and religious culture, that nation does not have a future.

1994, p. 695.