

The Moral-Educational Role of Teaching Religion in School

Vasile Miron

Arhim. Prof. Ph.D. Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania
vasile1960miron@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The universe is an unbroken abyss and an immense unknown, as God cannot be known in His Being, but His presence and work in our lives can be felt and cultivated through a high knowledge and living of the teaching of faith, through liberation from passions and the practice of Christian virtues. Science offers us a partial truth, while religion opens the horizon of our spiritual perfection, communicating eternal and divine truths concerning man's life and eternal destiny, which is fulfilled only in God only. It teaches us that "the world and its lust pass away, but he that does the will of God remains forever" (1 John 2:17).

KEY WORDS: religion, science, knowledge, Christian learning, morality, spiritual living

Introduction

Before emphasizing the importance of the discipline of Religion in the didactic and educational plan of the profane education, it is good to specify, from the beginning, the fact that the Romanian school was set up and operated in the church tent, and the textbooks were the workbooks. "The history of the Church is the history of our culture. Our nation in its light has seen the light of the book and the path of salvation" (Felea 1994, 235), having the conscious awareness that "only through the religious growth of future generations, under the shield of the Church, can the world progress" ("Biserica și Școala" Magazine no. 28, 217).

Together with the family and the Church, the school plays a vital role in cultivating the religious feeling and in the spiritual ennobling of human creation. "The school is for each one a sun under whose rays one grows and warms." In its fruitful climate and under its vault of spiritual light, the young sprouts of the Church and our nation grow and develop. It is the sewer who casts into the souls of the innocent souls of children the nectar of the knowledge of God, to guide them the way of life, toward the knowledge and the living of the truths of faith. This is the purpose and mission of the hour of religion in our schools today: the uninterrupted maintenance of man's communion with God. The teaching of Religion in schools is a priority objective of forming the Christian religious-moral character.

In the current education system, each discipline has its purpose and its well-defined mission, namely to broaden and deepen the young the sphere of information in the field of culture and science, at certain levels and compartments, in order to open the horizon of knowledge and light, in this sense, the trajectory of life.

The exact sciences try to give the young man a clear picture of the material world and the surrounding nature, formulating axioms, theorems, and rules at the origin of its existence. These principles are argued on an empirical basis and experienced as laws subject to the senses.

The humanities have as their object and point the repertoire, its multimillennial history and its artistic, philosophical and literary creations. Therefore, we are not surprised that the great personalities of the Renaissance characterized man as "the model of the universe" or "the measure of all things" (Protagora, Leonardo da Vinci).

Compared to profane education, based on the results of researches developed by the human mind, religious education, without ignoring the conquests of science and technology, opens the world to another perspective, with a vertical dimension, without which the knowledge and life of mankind would be only partial and without sense. Science operates with the relative truth, and the religion with the absolute truth - God - the Supreme Good, the all-knowing, the creator and the supporter of the whole existence. "I am the Alpha and the Omega", says the Lord God, the One who is, the One who was and the One who comes, the Almighty (Revelation 1: 8).

Therefore, the great scientists and researchers, as they discovered the mysteries of the surrounding nature, realized that “this extraordinary system of the sun, the planets and the comets can only spring from the advice and mastery of an intelligent Being.... . This Being governs all things as Lord of all,” says Isaac Newton. The universe itself is an unfathomable abyss and an immense unknown, as God cannot be known in His being, but His divine presence and work can be felt and cultivated through high spiritual living, freed from passions and sins, and by practicing Christian virtues. “In order for us to see and to sweeten ourselves from here, from the unspeakable goddesses of the divine light, though not fully, but partly and as far as we can understand, as we are cleansed, we must win the broken heart, the humble mind and a heart cleansed of all the filth and filthiness of sin, through tears and repentance,” says one holy parent. Science offers us a partial truth, while religion transmits eternal truths to us concerning the fate of man, teaching us that “the world passes away, and the lust thereof, and he that does the will of God remains forever” (John 2:17). Religion presents the destiny of man and the true meaning of his earthly life, designed in the world of eternity, in the heavenly kingdom, for “we have no fortress here, but we seek what is to be” (Hebrews 13:14). Science coordinates man’s relationship with the environment, while religion directs man’s relationship with his Creator. Science opens man to the possibility of improving material life, and religion helps him to ennoble his spiritual life, by preserving the beauty of the soul in which the image of God is reflected. Science and culture highlight the value of earthly man, while religion reveals to us the original image of the despised and transfigured man, represented in the Person of God-Man, our Savior Jesus Christ-the absolute Good, the Source of holiness and perfect goodness. He is the model of moral perfection, according to the example of which we guide the steps of life, as the apostle of the Gentiles tells us: “Be followers to me, as I am a follower of Christ” (I Corinthians 4:16). Religion prepares us to enter into a free, personal, and conscious relationship with Christ and to participate in His divine life, to renew our souls from the burdens of sins and to be spiritually reborn to the new life in Christ. This is the essential object and purpose of the Christian religion. “Christianity was not a mere religion or sect, like many of those circulating in the Greco-Roman world; it was the manifestation of the great power of God in the world, in order to create a

new cosmos” (Bute 2013, 19). By obeying and learning the teaching of faith and by participating in the prayers and Secrets of the Church, accompanied by a clean and free life of passions, Christ enters into contact with us and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, penetrates us with His divine energies, with His saving grace, with His holiness and love, uniting us with Him and restoring us to His divine image. “O my children, for whom I again suffer the pains of birth, until Christ will take image in you” (Galatians 4:19), exclaims the great teacher and pedagogue of the conversion of the pagan nations, St. Paul the Apostle. This is the purpose and object of religious education: to place Christ into the innocent souls of children, of young people and old people, because, this way, the moral image of Christ will shine in every believer. We are all created after the image of Christ God (Creation I: 26), and because we have this personal gift, He calls on all of us to share in His holiness, to reach the likeness of Him, through good deeds and clean lives, having His love, humility and sacrifice, which are the fundamental features of the beauty and perfection of the soul. This imperative was drawn by Himself, through the voice of His gospel, when He said, “Learn from Me that I am gentle and humble in my heart” (Matthew 11:29). The spiritual imitation of Christ is not a mere theoretical postulate, but must become a factual and constant reality, every day, of the Orthodox moral life from all places and times. “Salvation therefore consists in following Christ”, because Christ, the Son of God incarnated, by His divine grace and by the word of the teaching of His Holy Gospel, has prepared for us all the conditions for the acquisition of salvation and the inheritance of eternal life. He “uses any means of care to call people to salvation”. He, who wants to live as a Christian must practice what he learns. “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will also enter into the kingdom of heaven, he who does My Father’s will, the One in heaven” (Matthew 7:21), said the Savior of our souls. Therefore, the purpose of the Religion class is to maintain and develop the spirit of communion with God, according to the words of the Savior who said: “Not only shall man live with bread, but with every word that comes out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4: 4), because “happy are those who obey the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:28).

The words of the divine teaching are normative, constituting the handbook and guide of our Christian life. “By what will a young man correct

his way? By keeping thy words" (Psalm 118: 9), says Psalmist David. "If the good teachings are printed in my still tender soul, no one will erase them when they will be made as hard as printing, like wax" (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 2000, 108). The word of God is edifying, full of wisdom and transformative power that enlightens and directs man to the path of truth, justice and holiness. "The Lord created man from the earth and breathed on him a breath of life. The soul and the spirit are the breath of God. We must resemble the Lord through our lives; we must be His image and likeness. God, being good and holy, expects all kindness and holiness from us" (Rogoti 2008, 14).

This is the mission of the religion teacher: the shaping of the human soul and guiding it to God, "the Father of lights", from which "the entire good gift and the entire perfect gift" descend (James 1:17). "A people without God, is a people without morals, and a people without morals goes towards self-destruction", once said a great scientist. "It is easier to build a city in the air than to build a state without faith and without religion", (Felea, Ilarion V. n.d., 14.). Plutarch said, because religion brought man out of animality, it softened its instincts, cultivated the germs of its spiritual life, and opened its light dawns of scientifically, artistically and cultural progress. If religion is the matrix in which culture was conceived, then the religion teacher is a sage of culture. At the desk in the classroom, the religion teacher confesses Christ as "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14: 6), just like the priest preaches Christ in church, from the pulpit, showing the believers the way to follow, the truth in which they should believe and the ideal life they must live. The same Christian apostolate is fulfilled by the religion teacher. He drops into the souls of young people the balm of the word of God "alive and working and sharper than any two-edged sword, which penetrates to the separation of soul and spirit" (Hebrews 4:12), illuminating the mind and awakening the consciousness asleep by sin. So, the religion teacher is a missionary, an apologist, and a Christian catechist in the true meaning of the word. "The true catechist is the one who feels, within his soul, the exhortation, the vocation to teach the word of God to others, saying with all the power of his soul: for this I was born, to this God sent to me in the world, so that I teach my disciples, to perfect in them Christian characters, according to the model left to us by Jesus Christ" (Călușar 1955, 201). This mission is quite delicate and sensitive. It requires love, passion and dedication and tenacity in

the art of transmitting the word of God and shaping the human personality. The modeling is done with pedagogical tact, within the classes of Religion, through the warm word, with all the power of inner conviction and feeling, with the tone of gentleness and sincerity and, above all, through personal example. "The Christian catechist is called to quench through the warmth of his soul, through the power of his life, through the flame of his pure and sacrificial enthusiasm for his neighbor" (Călugăr 1955, 199). In turn, the disciples must be conquered and touched by the beauty and sublimity of the divine word, so that they can speak like St. Peter the Apostle, who, when struck by the Savior's teaching, exclaimed: "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we believed and knew that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6: 68-69).

As a theologian and teacher of Religion, I live from the holy light that the teaching of the Holy Church projects on me, but I must display it increased by the warmth of my heart, saying, as did the Holy Apostle Paul (Galatians 2:20), what I know and what I feel, now, when Christ God prepares his dwelling place in the depths of my soul and penetrates me with his wisdom and divine grace. Therefore, Christ must dwell in us, so we may be able to reveal Him to others. "The kingdom of God is within us" (Luke 17:21), but it must also be extended around us, in the environment in which we live and work, making us all examples "by word, by conduct, by love, by spirit, by faith, by purity" (I Timothy 4:12), as St. Paul the Apostle urges his disciple Timothy. We can reach this desire only to the extent that we strive to actually translate in fact the word of God into our daily lives, living in the light of His holy commandments, as the psalmist says: "Light to my feet is Your law, God, and light to my paths" (Psalm 118, 105). Not everyone can become the messenger of God's word, but only the one who maintains a living and real relationship with God, authentically living a virtuous Christian life, in the spirit of prayer and sincere love for God and for his neighbor. "In order for the teacher to be able to share to his students a true religious education, his life, deeds and words will have to be at the height of the requirements, always and in all circumstances: in school, in family, in society and in the whole religious-moral life, and this is all the more so, as the students see, consciously, an ideal in their teacher" (Ghibu 1911, 9).

At the experience of a true spiritual life we cannot arrive without a clear and profound knowledge of the teaching of faith, acquired in the family, in the holy place of the church and in school. "This is eternal life: to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17: 3), but this knowledge does not come from the realm of pure reason, but from the realm of practical reason. In Orthodoxy, "the knowledge of God is not intellectual, but spiritual, meaning that it depends on man's relationship with God. In the teaching of St. Gregory Palama, the sight of the Light not created is closely linked to man's deification, man's fellowship with God, and the knowledge of God. Therefore, theology is one with the sight of God, and the theologian is one with the one who sees God" (Făgețan 2000, 157). Christianity has revolutionized the world by imposing a new way of thinking and a new ideal of spiritual life, in and with Christ, an ideal with personal existence in the God-Man. Therefore, it instituted the most brilliant system of education of the human soul (Bulacu 2009, 2), "the only one that answers all the life aspirations of the world" (Zamfirescu 1992, 24). This was due to the fact that from the beginning of the Byzantine era, "Christianity and the Church concentrated all the energies of that world and became the only realities called to print the stamp of their spirit in history. The most valuable heads of the pagan society deserted and enrolled among Christians" (Zamfirescu 1992, 24). Christianity produced a true cultural and spiritual revolution in the world, because" it is not only knowledge, but also feeling and seeking to learn firsthand the knowledge of the true God, and then to show His heart like a holy tent as His dwelling" (Grigoriu 2009, 43). The Christian morality launched the principle that "the essence of faithfulness consists of two things: from righteous teachings and from good deeds. Neither the teachings are not well received by God without good deeds, nor are the deeds done without righteous teachings received by God (Fecioru 2003, 50). This axiom summarizes the entire moral content of the Christian religious education system. This optimum result is essentially, targeted by the teaching of Religion in schools.

The Christian religion does not present the spiritual life on an empirical basis, because it is concentrated in Christ-God, the Supreme Teacher and the model of moral perfection, after Whose stature we realize our own personality. The knowledge and propagation of the religious-moral

life is based on the word of God preached in church and during the classes of religious education that are conducted in schools. Religion keeps man's consciousness awake in front of eternal truths and responsibilities that he has to fulfill in front of God. It "responds to the call of the soul after quietness, peace, happiness and divine love. It endorses the acquisition of the eternal values that we thirst for, our encounter with God which attracts us and the reconciliation of the soul with itself" (Felea n.d., 58).

There is no contradiction between science and religion, both harmonizing and complementing each other: the first opens our eyes to the horizon of the material world, and the second one directs our eyes to the sky, towards the nature of spiritual things, towards infinity. Therefore, the arguments of Scripture, as data of the Divine Revelation regarding the creation of the world and the evolution of earthly life, are verified and proved by science as real phenomena. The great astronomer, physicist and mathematician Galileo Galilei said that "Holy Scripture can never lie, or wander. Its truths are absolute and unquestionable" (Popovici 1966, 211), and about Isaac Newton it is said that "through its philosophy, he affirmed the greatness of God Almighty, and through its character, it expressed the evangelical simplicity" (Popovici 1966, 223).

Unlike science, religion seeks to bring man closer to eternal values, helping him to understand and live life as a journey to heaven, as a period of preparation for eternity, for full union with God, in future life, because man, through his psycho-physical nature, is immortal, being ordained to live on the other plane of existence. "With the image of God, man also received the command to raise the image to the likeness of God that is to deify himself, fact made possible only by grace. For this, man must submit to God the passionate power also, that is, his will to be the same as the will of God, as in Christ, his will as a man was, through full obedience the same as the will of the Father who sent Him. Thus, we also become sons of God through grace" (*Vademecum creștin orthodox* 2003, 85).

That is why, the religious education aims to plant in the soul of the students the seed of God's word, to prune from him the hazes of passions, and to make the flowers of the Christians virtues grow and bear in them, because "the soul is healthy when it has no passions". And the health of the soul is virtue" (Nuțescu 2003, 10). The object of religious education is the moral

education of the students, the modeling of the character to become people with sincere faith in God, able to live according to His will, to embody the virtue in their life and to discern the good from the evil and the truth from falsehood. "Therefore, we need divine grace, wide-awake mind, and watchful eyes not to eat the haze like wheat and to hurt ourselves through ignorance, neither to be torn apart by mistaking the wolf as a sheep, nor to see as a benevolent angel the losing devil and be swallowed by it" (Fecioru 2003, 49).

The Christian religion teaches children to be better, more generous and supportive of one another; teaches them to practice prayer and to fast, to regularly attend church services on Sundays and holidays, to listen to parents, to honor elders, to love and help one another, to be understanding and humanitarian, and to build their life on the foundation of peace, justice and truth.

Religious education aims to remove the haze of the passions and wickedness of man and to root in their place the virtuous skills, to channel the will towards moral, noble, loyal, decent and generous behavior, to promote human dignity, superiority of spirit and spiritual delicacy, to restore the inner balance between the will of the body and the will of the soul, and to make the child and the adolescent aware of the fact that he must be gentle, forgiving and patient in his relations with the ones around him. In a word, the formation of the religious personality is the point of reference towards which the sustained efforts made for the purpose of religious education and education of our young generation are directed. "Only when the Christian becomes a man of Christ can a Christian personality be considered educated according to the teaching and deed of the Savior", (Călugăr 1955, 13) and the Savior has revealed to us His divine teaching not only to know it, but to follow Him; to draw near to Him with all the confidence and warmth of our heart. "The will of God is that we know God, and the knowledge of God is communion with incorruptibility" (Fecioru 1982, 249) in the sense of soullessness and purification of the soul, acquired through repentance, for "the return to the divine is done through change; the soul is changed to reach wisdom". (Fecioru 1982, 249). Christianity opened to man the possibility of his union with God through spiritual experience, "revealing the attitude of each man to holiness and that of the whole world to reflect holiness" (Stăniloae 1995, 63). The catechetical education that took place in the early Christian centuries was

not just about transmitting the teaching of faith and morals, systematically exposed to the catechumens, but also following their inner transformation. The seeds of faith had to sprout and develop fully and harmoniously in their individual lives. “It is my duty to say, yours, to take up work, and God’s, to complete it. Let us strengthen our minds, tense our souls, and prepare our hearts! For the soul we run; we hope for eternal things” (Fecioru 2003, 16-17). With this exhortation addressed to his disciples, St. Cyril of Jerusalem began his catechetical action of initiation into the mysteries of the teaching of the righteous faith of the new converts to Christianity.

Focusing on the same pedagogical principle, another church parent addresses the same requests to his disciples whom he prepared for the reception of the Holy Baptism, saying to them, “We want you to show a great deal of rigor to the dogmas of the Church and to have them fixed in your mind, but those who show such a faith should also shine through deeds” (Hancheș 2003, 33).

Our ancestral Orthodox Church, as the spiritual mother of the Romanian people, translated this moral principle into fact, always remaining faithful to the tradition and patristic teaching, consistently observing the norms and criteria of Christian pedagogy and striving, through the catechetical schools and through established theological education institutions, to promote “an educational system that would boost the Christian faith and life and form Christian consciousness” (Bulacu 1928, 2).

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