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## **Identification of viable theoretical (psycho-pedagogical and theological) landmarks for a religious education anchored in contemporaneity**

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**Abstract.** The beauty of Romanian spirituality is the result of the unity between school and Church, of their collaboration in time, both having the same source - the Savior Jesus Christ, and the same fundamental teaching - His Gospel. We currently feel the influence of a world in full process of secularization, and which deeply affects the Romanian school, which tends distance itself from the Church, being pushed towards an autonomy from God. But a school that excludes God, cannot shape Christian lives. It can facilitate their access to the most modern pedagogical methods and tools, to help them specialize in various fields of science, it can provide optimal conditions for them to stand out, but without God there is a risk of becoming humans without strong roots and without a clear direction. If through science and technology man has over time gained power and control over the outside world, in the absence of God he will remain powerless when having to face inner problems. Therefore, if he turns away from the Church and Christ, the school will no longer be in the service of good, beauty, truth, because only inside our savior Jesus Christ one can find the basis of identifying these values, He is being the supreme reason that was imprinted in His creation, and only through Him will the world be able to aspire to the Absolute. The contemporary society must be open to the process of institutionalized religious education, education that contributes to the full formation of man, to responsibly involving him in active life and in the social side, also legitimized by the guarantee of an integral general culture, as a mandatory component part of the civic and solidarity behavior.

**Keywords.** Pedagogy, religion, education, contemporaneity, landmarks

### **Introduction**

Man can be defined as a dichotomous being, made up of the material body and the spiritual soul. Starting from this definition, we understand that education must include several branches, very well anchored in society, which provide the human person with all the qualities necessary for both intellectual and spiritual development. Man cannot be limited to a strictly rational knowledge, but it must be combined with those necessary for spiritual development, for only in this way can education be defined as complete.

We can state that we are facing a reappraisal of the role of religion in the educational process, this could be a confirmation of what Andre Malraux<sup>1</sup> said, that the 21st century will be a more religious one, or rather of what N. Berdiaev<sup>2</sup> said, that Religion in the spiritual life will acquire an ever-increasing importance.

Given the declining performance of secular educational systems, most historians and education specialists advocate the idea of reanalyzing and reevaluating the history of teaching and education, including the rich and complex multiseccular experience of Christian churches in the field of training and educating children and youth.

Over the centuries, education has aimed to initiate subjects in order to integrate them into the social context, taking into account only the horizontal coordinate. This goal was set and achieved both from an instructive point of view and from a pedagogical point of view. An education that aims only at the academic part, respectively the cognitive part, and the civic part, can be a useful education, even a chosen one, but at the same time incomplete, motivated by the fact that the immortal soul is lost sight of. Encouragement towards a critical, independent thinking, the formation of a spirit with discernment, politeness, manners, are an integral part of a good education, but again, incomplete, if they are reported only by the sensitive dimension. Because "what good would it do a person to become a perfect specialist if he lost his soul?"<sup>3</sup>

It is necessary, therefore, that religious education be given a more prominent role in the educational-formative process, thus constituting a chance for young people to become acquainted with the teachings of the Holy Gospels, and the purpose of this paper is to identify, analyzing the Holy Scripture and specialized works, certain theoretical landmarks - evangelical and psycho-pedagogical, necessary for a religious education adapted to the contemporary world, in the context of which school tends to move away from the Church, being pushed towards an autonomy from God.

### **1. School Education**

Christian education must aim to prepare young people for this life, but especially for the life to come. Thus, inside the school circuit, in addition to the training part, which is desired to be of high academic standing, emphasis is also placed on the formative aspect, which includes the spiritual and moral dimension. An integral, noble character, aware of the indissoluble connection between "created" and Creator, is a guarantee of the wise management of resources and the application of information acquired in accordance with the creative order. Which, implicitly, means the use of science for the good of humanity as well as that of the Planet, but also for the glory of the Creator.

Spiritual formation during school is the "aura" or crown of formation of the human person as a whole: soul, intellect, body, manners. Academic performance is achieved only through an education that also pursues the spiritual dimension of students. The vertical connection of students represents the crowning of holistic education (whole) which aims at the full humanity of the individual. The school curriculum is absolutely mandatory, including the Theology curriculum, but choosing eternal life is a choice for each individual. Thorough mastery of school subjects is again mandatory, but opening the heart to its Creator is optional. "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they

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<sup>1</sup> André MALRAUX, (b. November 3, 1901, d. November 23, 1976) name changed from André Berger, writer, journalist and French politician.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Alexandrovici BERDIAEV (n. 19 march 1874, d. 24 march 1948), russian philosopher, who dealt, among others things, the philosophy of religion

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 142

with Me." (Revelation 3:20). The greatest emphasis is placed on the orientation of the subject of education towards the kingdom of God is justified by the rhetorical question posed by Christ himself: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matthew 16:26).<sup>4</sup>

This process is difficult and requires consistency and effort. Parents know best how difficult it is to teach children certain hygiene and order skills, but especially a certain way of thinking, a certain scale of priorities and a certain system of values. This process is much more difficult when the principles that are to be established in the minds of students are in contradiction with the society's way of thinking and its values. Christian education takes place in an imperfect school institution, where teachers work with children of different ages, with different temperaments, coming from different backgrounds. Spiritual formation also includes divine intervention, because the birth from Above is a gracious gift given by God through the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit does not duplicate the words of authority figures, they will echo only in the ears, not finding their way to the hearts of the students. Thus, the task of Christian education includes much dependence on God on the part of those who do this education, in prayer and humility.

In addition to the academic requirements called for by the analytical program, school must take into account the spiritual aspect of the child's person. School is an institution entrusted by the community to transmit a certain system of values. School is an environment of communion and communication. Communication performed through education is not only intellectual, but it also belongs to the affective realm.

The school as an institution is one of the most important social institutions, the place where the student receives the alphabet of inter-relationships. He is taught to work in a team, forges friendships, learns the values and standards of the group, learns to know his position in the social structure, etc. He also learns to grasp culture, arming himself with the spirit of discernment that Holy Scripture gives, given the challenge with which the "image of this age" seeks to impose its values and thinking. Individualism, hedonism and materialism affect each individual. Schools are not perfect collectives, but if a school is filled with the Spirit and truth of Jesus, the results will be seen in changed hearts and lives<sup>5</sup>.

Teachers who teach Religion have a great responsibility: towards their own person, towards the Church, towards students and parents, but also towards society. Their job must be a continual devotion, a continual sacrifice to bring into the minds and souls of the students the greatest joy of life, which is Christ, Our Savior, God, and Man alike.<sup>6</sup>

A good pedagogue has professional qualities – both psycho-pedagogical and theological competence, learned through practical exercise and theoretical study, but also spiritual qualities: vocation, humility, patience, love, kindness, humor, gentleness, sincerity, piety, optimism. Personal example has a penetrating power. Only he who truly believes can carry out religious education optimally. The teacher is not a simple broadcaster of knowledge but, he is above all a modeler, a trainer of conscience and souls. Paul the Apostle counsels us, " *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice and the God of peace will be with you*". Thus, nothing can be more harmful to students' souls than a teacher who does not do himself what he preaches his students to do<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Vasile BĂNCILĂ, *The religious initiations of the child*, Edit. Anastasia, București, 1996, p. 30

<sup>5</sup> Constantin CUCOȘ, *School, the court of spiritualization*, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Van Brummelen HARRO, *With God in class. Approaches of teaching-learning process from Christian*

<sup>7</sup> Constantin CUCOȘ, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

The formation of the student is not limited only to the intellectual field, it is necessary to include everything regarding the whole identity, and the central nucleus should represent his spiritual formation. But the desire to train a person, regardless of the field, without his active and interested involvement, remains only an illusion. Attendance at all courses will be obtained at most, intellectuals will be trained, but no real inner training will be achieved. God wants man's collaboration, obedience and openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, which, together with prayer and meditation, liturgical and sacramental life, are part of the effort of spiritual formation. Teachers, aware of this reality, must receive with sincere love the children whom the family and the Church entrust to their hands to guide them on the path to full maturity in Christ<sup>8</sup>.

With the help of the curricula, with their warnings and guidelines, but also with the understanding and exigency of the specialized teachers, children can be stimulated to be trained, so that they will be able to fully respond to the divine call to holiness and perfection. "Be perfect" (Matthew 5:48) - represents the call to spiritual life in Jesus Christ, in His Gospel.

The teacher must constantly guide the students so that they strive for personal holiness, on the path of spiritual formation. The growth of theological virtues — faith, love, and hope — is the clearest sign of spiritual growth. Faith is not just a baggage of knowledge about God, to believe means more than a simple feeling or knowledge, it means to see God in everything, in each and every person, in any event. Faith is a gift from God and must be asked for every day; we must thank Him for it. A good trainer acts as a witness to the faith and a teacher in front of children, in any circumstance and at any time, through personal testimony in prayer and in life, through personal guidance, regardless of situations and context, at any point in his life<sup>9</sup>.

It is important to create an appropriate formative environment in school, but more importance must be given to the synergistic action of religious education, which makes formation a Liturgy of the Catechumens and from prayer into an important component in the Religion lesson, and not an accessory<sup>10</sup>.

## **2. The importance of religious education and the identification of theoretical landmarks, for a religious education anchored in contemporaneity**

Man, as a complex being, has been defined as having bio-psycho-socio-cultural and religious aspects. Based on this finding we can say that religion belongs, by nature, to the human soul, and religious values, in association with other values, define the very purpose of his life. Thus, "*the person who breaks any relationship with the transcendent is a man "without God", axiologically decentralized, without landmarks, without value-oriented vectors. He does not adapt to the external world, but is molded according to a finality established in his spirit*"<sup>11</sup>. Religious values fortify inferiority and direct man to the conquest of an authentic world.

"*Religious education is the production and development of that higher sense of connection with something eternal and not subject to our spatial conception, a soul, a principle that rules and governs everything*"<sup>12</sup>. It is increasingly appreciated that the rupture between life and religion is the cause of spiritual disorder, which is currently suffocating more and more souls, because "today, you cannot be a man with culture and morality, a person integrated from mental and behavioral standpoints, without knowing and professing the values which religion

<sup>8</sup> Constantin CUCOȘ, *op. cit.*, p. 56

<sup>9</sup> Constantin CUCOȘ, *Pedagogy*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 1998, p. 57

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165-166

<sup>12</sup> Ion GĂVĂNESCU, *General Pedagogy*, Bucharest, 1923, p. 508.

promotes more than any other forms of spirituality”<sup>13</sup>. The human person carries within the perspective of eternity. By definition, he is a psycho-physical, eternal and transcendent entity. Being immortal, the soul goes "instinctively" to something beyond its temporary existence. The words of the Savior always remain relevant today: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, but forfeit his own soul" (Matthew 16:26). For this reason, the implementation of moral acts in their eternal perspective enlivens the soul in the hope of obtaining immortal values, thus forming firm characters.

From a pedagogical perspective, education can be seen as a stage of human formation for its integration into society, and as a product, education sets its goals in behaviors, interests, attitudes, motivations, knowledge, adaptation and integration.

Education is currently facing problems of contemporary civilization: increasing poverty, rapid evolution of knowledge in various fields, lack of jobs, political instability, increased environmental degradation, the widening of the gap between over-education and under-education, escalating conflicts between nations. In addition to these aspects, the problems of any educational system are added: school dropout; inequality of access to education; lack of uniformity of the three forms of education - formal, non-formal, informal; the need to achieve education in exceptional situations - children with sensory and intellectual disabilities; reconsideration of education from the perspective of evolution.

The crisis of contemporary society is not only of a financial, economic, social and political nature, but - obviously - it is a spiritual and moral crisis, an ontological crisis, which once again raises the question of the origin of life and, implicitly, that of human destiny<sup>14</sup>. In this context, marked by "spiritual decentralization", "axiological disorientation", "diminishing the exercises of authentic inner living" and "atrophy of spiritual consciousness", children and young people need a rich spiritual life, authentic and pure, marked by security and spiritual fulfillment<sup>15</sup>. Under the influence of contradictory currents that come from both Western Europe and Eurasian syncretism, young children need to be oriented and focused on unflinching religious values. In exchange for pseudo-models and "teenagers' identity anxieties," they will have to be offered the "Christ Model." Discussing religious education today is an important responsibility and is about "the courage to take on the responsibility of converting this age to that of Christ, the Lord"<sup>16</sup>

The Christian religion could not have had such an important moral and cultural role if it did not fulfill a pedagogical role, Religion being the educating and formative mother of all mankind. Christian religion clearly and precisely discerns between spiritual values that are perennial and absolute, and transient and relative values, namely, material ones<sup>17</sup>.

If until recently, the school was focused on informative training of its students, through religious education, the formative character of education takes shape. Compared to other disciplines, Religion addresses moral and religious education exclusively. As Seneca said: "*Non scolae sed vitae discimus*" - We do not learn for school, but for life.

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<sup>13</sup> Constantin CUCOȘ, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>14</sup> Simion TODORAN, *The Church and the Youth. Moral problems of today's young people and their solutions from the Christian perspective*, P.H. Episcopiei Dunării de Jos, Galați, 2001, p. 190.

<sup>15</sup> Constantin CUCOȘ, *Religious education, theoretical and methodical landmarks*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 1999, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Constantin NECULA, *The salt of the earth. Pastoral studies and articles*, vol. I, Tehnopress Publishing House, Iași, 2002, p11.

<sup>17</sup> Ilarion V. FELEA, *Religion of culture*, Publishing House of the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of Arad, 1994, p. 246.

Professor Gheorghe Antonescu says: "*religious education must occupy a place of prime importance in education*"<sup>18</sup>, and Jean Borella defines religion as "*something so precious that it reveals to man the truth about himself*"<sup>19</sup>.

Religious education forms the human person for a global perception of existence, seeking to facilitate the education of a particular vision of the meaning of existence, having an extremely important role in maintaining the balance of human consciousness<sup>20</sup>.

Carefully reading the New Testament, in order to identify some psycho-pedagogical, but also theological landmarks, we can see that we are dealing with a rich pedagogical material, which demonstrates its importance through the efforts to assume the education and formation of Christians throughout history. The pedagogy of the Holy Scripture is a "welcoming" and "gentle" one, suitable for man and humanity, and understanding and goodness are shown as means of raising the human condition.

In order to assume human vulnerability, a pedagogy of correction and uplift is activated, for those who need guidance. "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners*" (Matthew 9:12-13). In this sense, the attention given by Christ to sinners is a consequence of the pedagogical act of guidance and correction.

Also, a call is being made for the reevaluation of the beginnings, having as a pedagogical guide the principle that teaches that in order to build something, it is necessary to start from a secure base, to identify the most suitable "ground", to establish a point of departure. In this regard, Christ, Our Savior, says, "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it*" (Luke 18:16-17). Childhood is highlighted in a positive way, representing a promise of a spiritual becoming and growth.

Another reference point falls off from the principle of trust and optimism. It is hidden in each of these forces of edification: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house" (Matthew 5: 14-15).

Regarding the servant dimension of education, the pedagogue is never above the disciples, being instead shown as their servant: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:14). The educational process is presented as a work of love, of sacrifice, of submission to the students, and the central point of any education act is not what the tutor feels, but what he asks and is good for his disciples.

Another reference point is that of trust in values, which brings with it the motivation for spiritual ascension and the desire to identify with spiritual models. In this regard, many passages in the New Testament show how Christ values people's faith. "Rise and go; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19); "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." (Mark 11:24).

Last but not least, the exemplary and argumentative force of the parables is highlighted. Christ applies a fine strategy of transmission and solidarity with truths. The Savior does not make a direct explanation of them, but creates premises for understanding. In fact, the

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<sup>18</sup> Gheorge ANTONESCU, *Education and culture*, second edition, p. 112, cited Mihail BULACU, *The guidance of the youth towards Christ*, Bucharest, 1934, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Jean BORELLA, *The crisis of religious symbolism*, European Institute Publishing House, Iași, 1995, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> Mihai FLOROAI, *The role of the didactic method in religious education*, Alfa Publishing House, Piatra Neamț, 2004, p. 32-33.

power of Christ's ideas stems from what can be guessed "among the lines", from that which is not said, but which His hearers discover for themselves.

Another aspect that can be put on the list of reference points is the power of example, and Christ is continuously giving himself as an example worth following. He preached and taught not by saying, but by doing. In current terms, we would say that He performs acts of language, putting into practice what He said, above all.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the fundamental problem which must concern us, whenever it comes to religious education, is to find the answer to some burning and legitimate questions: What is the purpose of Christianity, in the light of the books of the New Testament, about life and the world? How can religious education be adapted to the contemporary world and what lessons should children learn from this religious education received in school? How can religious moral education contribute to the full formation of man, to his responsible involvement in the spiritual and moral life?

The role of religious-moral education consists in instruction, that is, in the transmission of the truth revealed by God and in education, which means exercising in the direction of the formation of Christian habits, through a synergistic action of the will with divine grace. Religious education concerns man as a whole, body and soul, from which a double purpose will emerge: religious education and training. By religious instruction we mean the activity of the teacher to transmit to his students the fundamental truths of faith that should be applied in daily life. Religious education means the formation of religious-moral characters, meaning a consistent and constant will on the path of good-doing. The purpose of Christian education is the perfection of the human person, likeness to the Creator, the restoration of divine beauty on the face of man. And we say this because the religious predisposition to believe is a gift, it is not an evolutionary acquisition, but the strengthening of faith in God is done through education and instruction. The realization of this ideal can be nothing but an act of cooperation with God and will, an act that materializes through personal effort and initiative.

Keeping a distance between school and Church, or between Church and school has serious consequences. Man, being built for eternity, has the inner desire for a higher knowledge, which transcends the boundaries of the natural world. Romanian scientist, Nicolae Paulescu said: "*The idea of 'God' is a fundamental notion, without which science falls into absurdity*"<sup>21</sup>. And regarding atheism, he also said: "*Atheist materialism has invaded modern society, which has blindly received it precisely because it has presented itself as the expression of science, the result or synthesis of its latest discoveries. It used the prestige of science — even though as a system, it represents its very own negation — to impose itself on the multitude of semi-scholars, incapable of understanding its hypocrisy. Through them, it entered schools ... and thus poisoned, with its evil doctrines, several generations. Like any error, materialism means ignorance - either by lack of culture, or by lack of intelligence, or by its addictive character*"<sup>22</sup>.

In order to achieve its goal, religious education will have to be assigned a more prominent role in the educational-formative process, thus contributing to children's familiarity with the teachings of the Holy Scripture, which is a *sui generis pedagogical corpus*. It is necessary, however, for it to be adapted to the requirements of the contemporary world, in order to be able to awaken the existence of God in the students' consciousness, of His presence and actions in their lives. Without God, man's life has no meaning, He being the true Way and the

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<sup>21</sup> Nicolae C. PAULESCU, *Confessional science*, Ed. Christiana, Bucharest, 2002, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem

supreme truth to which every person must aspire, assuming and completing the saving work done by the incarnation of the divine Logos, out of the love of God.

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