

Bogdan POPESCU

Does Europe Need Religious Education?

From the very beginning, Christians have not denied the role of education, nor did they reject cultural values. They did reject immorality and idolatry, connected to the Hellenistic world, but tried, at the same time, to reshape the ancient patterns. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, was a highly educated person; Luke the Evangelist studied medicine; Justin the Martyr was initiated in philosophy; Tertullian studied literature, rhetoric, philosophy, medicine and law. Origen read Plato and was the disciple of the great philosopher Ammonios SAKAS; Ambrose of Milan studied literature and law; John CHRYSOSTOM studied rhetoric, philosophy and law; Augustine of Hippo read Aristotle, Plato and Cicero.

CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND CHRISTIANITY

The great Christian schools from Antioch and Alexandria, or later Constantinople, were strongly influenced by Hellenistic thought. Within these schools, during the first Christian centuries, the process of education began with Greek literature and included different classes not necessarily related to religion, such as mathematics, law, history, geography, music or even astronomy.

Philosophy was adapted to the new spirituality and became a very useful tool. Many Christian writers from the IInd and IIIrd century believed it was a pedagogue who introduced Christianity to the Gentiles. Therefore, Clement of Alexandria considered education a "godly gift," "an image of the truth" or an "intellectual exercise," which precedes the conversion to Christianity (*Stromata* I.II). Tertullian also considered philosophical thought very similar to Christian thought (*About the soul* II).

The Christian Church was ready, however, to accept as members both educated and uneducated persons. The great philosopher Origen stressed: "We do think that everybody who studied, all the wise and clever persons are welcome. In the meantime all the uneducated or less clever people, even childish ones, are accepted. If they come, the Logos heals all of them and makes them worthy in front of God (Origen, *Against Celsus* III. XLIV).

It is true that most of the members of early Christian communities were not highly educated persons, but this fact had a particular economic and financial basis. The people who lived in the Roman Empire at that time had very few chances to have access to the expensive schools. The elementary school, organised by a *litterator*, was the only alternative for

poor children. In order to continue studies they were supposed to pay 500 sestertii to a *grammaticus* per year, while a *rhetor* used to receive around 2000 sestertii.

Education and Christianity commingled during the centuries. Christian teachings were studied and taught according to the ancient philosophical methods and means; all the other classes were restructured according to the religious perspective. This strong relationship lasted for centuries in both Eastern and Western Europe, but was later challenged by the Renaissance and tended towards an open conflict during the Enlightenment.

At that time, civil states began to reject the religious character of education and did not accept theology as a field of scientific research. The Christian faith was considered a superstition; a "darkness" which overshadowed for centuries *les lumières* of reason.

The principle *credo ut intelligam* was replaced by alternative slogans, such as *sapere aude*. DESCARTES affirmed the superiority of the patterns offered by nature; MONTESQUIEU underlined the relativity of laws and challenged the idea of divine authority; ROUSSEAU promoted the idea of a harmonious society under the rule of reason.

In the Europe of the third millennium, the relationship between religion and education is rather controversial. There are different voices that propose different patterns, experienced in various European countries.

Do we need classes of religion in public schools? Should we keep religious symbols in these institutions? Are faculties of theology legitimate members of universities? In order to answer all these questions, I will analyse briefly the challenges and the achievements of the Romanian system of education.

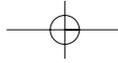
THE POST-COMMUNIST EXPERIENCE OF ROMANIA

In Romania, as in other Eastern European countries, the first schools were organised close to the churches and monasteries, while priests and theologians were the first professors. This relationship lasted for centuries and was quite important for both sides. Science and religion coexisted and cooperated in these countries in the field of education, even during the Enlightenment, until fifty years ago, when this tradition was challenged by communism.

The atheistic regime denied all means of religious education except the formation of future priests. Theological schools were forced to leave the universities and theology was not considered a science any more. The cooperation between Church and state in this field was seen as useless or even dangerous.

After the revolution of 1989, the situation changed dramatically. Religion is taught in public schools for children between 7 and 18 years of age, although there is the possibility to opt out, and the teachers are paid by the state. The facul-





ties of theology are again accepted as members of universities. For example, Bucharest University includes the Orthodox Faculty, the Baptist Faculty and the Roman Catholic Faculty, with different departments.

However now, when the Romanians are trying to follow and adopt all the western traditions to become citizens of the European Union, many voices claim that we should not return to the traditional cooperation. They strongly recommend the pattern of some European countries, where religious education is not a part of the state system of education.

Personally, I think each country should keep the traditions that have proven to be successful over the centuries. The European Union is seeking the unity through diversity and does not impose infallible patterns. Religious education is a part of Romanian history and tradition and it is very important during this difficult period of transition. The educational system is democratic, and the denominations that are legally registered in Romania should have access to public education.

Classes of religion should be supported by the state because they are important for the formation of the future citizens, and not only from the spiritual, cultural or moral perspective. For example, recently the Romanian Orthodox church developed, in cooperation with USAID, a program aimed at the prevention of domestic violence and the transmission of HIV.

The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church

adopted the project. During the religious classes, young Romanians are educated from the Christian point of view, on how to fight against the spread of the virus, and how to relate to people living with HIV.

Religious education, organised in a democratic and transparent way, could also develop a better understanding of religious and inter-religious relationships. Society could benefit from this education, overcoming superstitions, prejudices and dangerous conflicts.

I do think that Europe should accept Romania as a member, together with its old traditions, which could be found among other member states. The religious education that survived here could be an example of a good relationship between Church and state, an expression of ecumenism and interfaith mutual respect.

Suggested Reading

- CLEMENT of Alexandria, *Stromata*.
- ORIGEN, *Against Celsus*.
- GRANT Michael, *The World of Rome*. New York, 1960.
- HAMMAN Adalbert, *La vie quotidienne des premiers Chrétiens*. Paris, 1971.
- LAISTNER Max L., *Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire*. New York, 1951.

Bogdan POPESCU was born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1976. He graduated from the Orthodox Seminary of Bucharest (1996) and from the Faculty of Theology, University of Bucharest (2000). He has a master's degree in ecumenical studies (Bossey, Switzerland, 2002); his thesis dealt with the Church and state relationship. He recently finished his PhD in Sibiu, doing research on Early Christian Literature; currently he is the Theology Coordinator of WSCF Europe and works as an inspector for the Department of Education of the Romanian Orthodox Church. His email address is bogdanpopescu76@hotmail.com.

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs

The Edification of Community: Education and Ecumenical Renewal

*"Theological education is our nerve centre,
and our willingness to shoulder it is an indication
of our growing maturity in Jesus Christ."*

(Prince THOMPSON)

The phenomena of culture and religion are mutually accountable to each other, and together they constitute the context where theology and education are to be conducted. The ecumenical movement is especially responsible for the Christian education for unity. Through its institutions and methodologies, it serves the visible unity of the Church, for her renewal in dialogue and community.

CULTURE AND RELIGION

According to Paul TILLICH, "Religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion." In TILLICH's thinking, the three forms of culture are the autonomous, the heteronomous and the theonomous.

Culture shapes the human voice that answers to the voice of God in faith. In these ways we have to provide an authentic witness within each culture, taking into account the one Gospel and its diverse expressions.

In the theology of cultures, five main models were developed by H. Richard NIEBUHR to describe the relationship between *Jesus Christ and culture*: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Jesus Christ the transformer of culture.

Historical examples of the various Gospel and culture relationships include firstly *indigenisation* (taking root in the soil), as well as *contextualisation* (the interpenetration of subject and object).

Other historical examples also include *acculturation* and *adaptation* (applying Christian practices to local cultures) and *inculturation* (the prophetic and liberative insertion of new values into one's heritage and worldview).

In the understanding of contextual theology, the divine form of contextualisation is *incarnation*. According to this, there are already theological meanings embedded in the cultures, showing the depth and breadth of the mystery of God.

The main rule for religious and cultural encounters remains, in accordance with Acts 15,28, to impose no further burden than the essential things. The Gospel illumines and transforms a culture, and cultures illumine and incarnate the Gospel.

As a result, every human culture is de-stigmatised, renewed and revitalised by the Gospel, and every human culture is at the same time deabsolutised, relativised and brought into dialogue by the Good News.

Genuine Gospel values are present in all cultures in the forms of life, faith, peace, humility, solidarity, justice, freedom, compassion, dialogue, reciprocity, joy, wisdom and holistic relations with creation.

When rediscovering the catholicity of the Christian Church in each cultural context, the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ serves as the standard for our wise discernment.

