

# The role of spiritual formation in the education of modern human beings: A European Christian perspective

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One of the most considerable changes in the contemporary European educational mentality is a person's disconnection from spiritual life. Christian formation has been replaced with religious pluralism, in terms of syncretism influenced by global economic ideologies. Some consequences are low resilience and low spiritual resistance to contemporary challenges, associated with mental traumas or social behaviour deficits. Is it possible to restore the modern person's spiritual education? There is no evolution in the modern individual's social life without a horizon of spiritual expectation and fulfilment, different from the strictly material one. Moreover, conscious education cannot deprive people of cultivating the spiritual part of their consciousness from which the real values of existence are born. A series of arguments for renewing the relation between school and the mature, Scripture-based Christian thinking in the spirit of the European pedagogy are revealed by the factual historical analyses. Both Eastern and Western European experiences have met after 13 years of evolving into two antagonist geopolitical spheres. Their lessons in the education field could be an appropriate model, academically applied at the cultural mentality and the European pedagogy level.

**Contribution:** With this study, I want to highlight the historical and conceptual frameworks of the Christian religious education meaning in the context of the rediscovery of Orthodox Christianity by the international theological culture in post-communism. Orthodox Christianity, forgotten in dictionaries and syntheses by the Western theological elite, brings in a spiritualisation of education according to the Lord Jesus Christ's Gospel and not of the ideological cultural interests.

**Keywords:** spiritual formation; educational convergences; learning cultures; transculturalism; cultural energy; teaching theology; pastoral theology.

## Introduction

My research interests focus on the relationship between education and the spiritual formation of the (post)-modern person as one of the multiple perspectives to explore the European cultural development of the last 13 years. On the one hand, there is the theologian's call, accustomed to the analysis of ascetic education, to discover how the mystical formation of the contemporary people is able to decisively influence their lives. On the other hand, there is the pedagogue's call to frame in time the educational tensions that she or he feels affecting the human society in which she or he lives the truths of the Christian faith (Beard 2017:248–269).

I choose 1989 as a historical milestone that corresponds to the implosion of Communist regimes in Europe. Moreover, it comes after a social upheaval period, similar to the post-World War II time and therefore, reveals those fractures of education that deepened during the ideological enslavement of the dictatorial regimes. This is true whether we are talking about Albania or East Germany, Yugoslavia or Hungary, Romania or Bulgaria, Latvia or Lithuania, Poland or Estonia or the entire area of the USSR and its internal and external satellites (Wolton 2017:280–351).

The attempt to separate men and women from their spiritual roots was the main mission of the party and state leaders. A series of analyses proved the development in Romania, for instance, of one of the broadest mechanisms of arrest and imprisonment of those who confessed the Christian faith (either Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or neo-Protestant Christians) or their own spirituality (Jewish and Muslim). That phenomenon easily fits into a whole arsenal of social psychiatry,

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presented by Irene Talaban in her doctoral dissertation on ethnopsychiatry (under the supervision of Tobie Nathan) as a complex of elements of social psychopathology (Shafir 2020; Talaban 1999). In this perspective, I assert that understanding the phenomenon of de-spiritualisation in Eastern Europe would have been enough for Western Europe and its academic construction to avoid a series of collapses that it experiences in the present confusion of the transition from the academy to over-capitalised higher education enterprise (Brunner et al. 2019:119–140).

Testimonies of prominent people in Romanian culture and in every European culture subjected to the pressure of the communist dictatorship, remind us of the gap between individuals and spirituality as a programme of the state education system (Paşca 2014:181–196).

## The deconstruction of the religious educational system before 1989

I should note that one of the hardest blows that affected the education system was the abolishment and the reversal of the hierarchy of values that turned its prestige into a caricature. It led to both the plunder of the cultural elite (their assets and academic titles being effectively stolen or annulled) and the development of social disharmonies in which the spiritual had no place and the thinking was obstructed. The goal was to introduce people into the phantasm of the party ideology and in the area of propaganda intervention. A well-known literary critic in Romania notes on this topic:

Elite robbers are ready to imagine that talent, intelligence and charm can be stolen; that prestige can be taken like a hat from the head of a notable person and moved to another head. For the first time in the history of the world, a reverse hierarchy is institutionalized and evolves into a political regime in several countries around the world. (...) The incompetent people who come to power are not able to invent a new society. They foolishly imitate – like monkeys that imitate people's occupations – the previous one. Parliament becomes a caricature of Parliament (in which everything is unanimously voted); elections become a caricature of elections (given that there is only one party); the press become a caricature of the press (an empty servile 'wooden language', unrelated to reality), art (subservient to the regime) a caricature of art, trade a caricature of trade (because of standardized goods and prices); money a caricature of money, with an artificially set value; work a caricature of work (as the poor quality of goods proved, except for those produced by passionate people, immune to persecution); competition a caricature of competition ('socialist competition'), celebration a caricature of celebration (with mandatory participation, lack of enthusiasm) etc. At one point communism had spread like cancer and there was a risk of reaching the very essence of humanity. (Ştefănescu 2020:90)

However, communism had reached the essence of humanity, for the abuses against free thought, knowledge and Christian witness were far more extensive than the imprisonments that took place between 1948 and 1965. The dramatic consequence of that process is that today we live in the 'corpse' of that epoch when the spiritual aspects of education, social dialogue or active citizenship were avoided in various forms.

What has been observed through the specialised research in the field of education has been verified within the European post-communism. On the one hand, the fall of the political bloc revealed the managerial deficiencies of the organisation and an alarming syncope in social work ethic and values-based education. On the other hand, what seemed destroyed was activated. In this regard, the regeneration of the religious–spiritual element required by education for humanity of new generations was a form of resistance and a solid platform to rebuild education. Several generations, educated very differently, were caught in the social game. People who had survived World War II were barely literate in the religious phenomenon. Nevertheless, they filled, for many years, the gap of education in school or even in the church environment by developing a popular catechesis within the family. Moreover, given that catechesis was unofficially banned at that time in Romania and the priests who violated the rule of 'pastoral silence' arrested, the religious education has been long maintained because of the family pastoral events (baptisms, weddings, funerals) and the intense moments of the spring, summer or winter holidays marked by feasts. This happened mainly in rural areas or in urban centres where grandparents were called for help by generations of young proletarians who lived in industrial agglomerations. However, the Church was not deprived of the support of high theology (Boicu 2020:439–445).

The message of the interwar generation was clear – *do not give up your spiritual education!* – whether we are talking about Prague, Bucharest, Budapest, Riga, East Berlin or any other communist state capital. The problem arose because of the propaganda machine of the communist system that attacked the educational uprightness proposed by the witness generation. Following the Soviet propaganda model, the East European countries developed and publicly adopted their own systemic hostility towards the people of the Church and other cults. They were found guilty for they limited through their public testimony the power of ideological influence expected by politicians at that time (Giosanu 2019). In this context, atheist propaganda developed institutions, published magazines, books and treatises. Although it could not fully exhaust the spiritual profile of the individual subjected to transformation into *homo sovieticus*, it broke the educational solidity of some generations.

From 1948 to 1989, Eastern countries faced educational dystrophy of the spiritual topics. That phenomenon affected faith contents and the publishing of books or sourcebooks, such as the Bible. Despite the schools of theology that were opened or 'catacomb' seminaries that gave birth to generations of priests as it happened in Poland, the operational activity of the Security (political police) was dynamic and generated informers' networks with a big role in the spiritual education of future spiritual leaders. However, parish priests, pastors and monasteries become true transformers of human energies, strengthening the

communities' spiritual resistance. It is notable how people understood to activate the spiritual direction in the context of the first intellectual oppression (Zub 2020).

At this time, Western Europe almost did not acknowledge the spiritual activity of Eastern European Christianity, with few exceptions. For instance, until 1990, no Romanian Christian orthodox scholar was mentioned in the research publications of Western Theology. Moreover, the scientific community failed to communicate the West-East-West research and spiritual-cultural skills historically acquired by previous truly remarkable scholars from the Eastern community. However, the 18th-century outstanding monk and theologian Paisie Velicicovschi was known as the restorer of hesychasm. One of the greatest modern orthodox theologians, Dumitru Stăniloae was scarcely received by Western scholars. André Scrima was a Romanian Orthodox theologian, representative of the Patriarchate of Constantinople at the Second Vatican Council. Father Prof., Ph.D. Ion Bria played an important role in the ecumenical movement, being executive secretary for mission and relations with Orthodox churches within the World Council of Churches (WCC). In 1987, he became the director of the WCC Sub-unit for Renewal and Congregational Life and shortly before his retirement in 1994, director of the Faith and Witness Unit. I do not blame the Western Theological Research but note the communication blockade that sanctioned the Communist regime, forgetting about millions of Christians. The lesson of cultural murder by obstructing the spiritual education seemed rather a fad far from the democratic, adult society of Western Europe. This is how a series of educational principles and schemes emerged in adult education (English 2005:1169–1192). Unfortunately, these models did not reach the European society deprived of freedom by the communist regime for almost 50 years.

Western Europe meant freedom, democracy or simply escaping from communism. The enthusiasm of approaching Western Europe values grew with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The event signified the opening of the borders and the assumption of escapees from the former cultural and social camps of Eastern Europe.

## Challenges to Christian pedagogy after 1989

The main intervention in adult pedagogy was the release from the negative tension of ideologisation of education. Various types of lifelong learning training, the reconsideration of the key topics in education and the bibliographic revitalisation of the research in the field were not just charades. We witnessed fundamental restarts in many areas of adult pedagogy. The civic education, the recovery of the culture of social and civic dialogue, the reconstruction of educational culture related to diversity or disability management proposed new models whose history is worth revealing.

The main themes that need to incorporate a spiritual dimension as an important part of research and practice are the ones related to experiences of social inclusion and models of adult education. The solution should be the restoration of the values that defined adults (she or he) in the European education space (Tight 2002:18–120). The adulthood vulnerability, difficult to accept by the actors involved, evolved into adulthood social anxiety, marked by changes in the social system, immediately after 1989 (1990–1996).

Christian pedagogy was challenged to promptly react to the economic insecurity and a series of failed social reforms that generated a large number of retirements and a high unemployment rate. A laboratory pedagogy carefully reconsidering texts of interwar pedagogy was developed to face social loneliness and isolation. It sought to reinterpret the entire pastoral theology in the key of andragogy, namely pedagogy of adult education. Lifelong learning topics underwent important mutations from a Marxist-Leninist and mono-materialist ideology to ideological pluralism. However, recalling the just redefined systems by nostalgics brought to the educational ideas market great tension that evolved into a real shock in education. A completely new symbolism was developed, with the emergence of new myths and self-images of the adult who demanded education (Tisdell 2003), such as the democrat, the tolerant, the illuminated atheist and the cultural Marxism adherent.

The reflection on education led to system reforms that happened in all Eastern European countries. Unfortunately, Romania has registered the unwanted record of changing the educational frameworks, not always in favour of the beneficiaries. All these reforms affected adult education (Necula 2013a). The whole pedagogy of formation was obsessively oriented towards the birth of the 'non-sovieticus' new person. However, the same mistakes were made as the previous political system by ignoring the spiritual formation needs. This educational system often focussed on robotisation, on human estrangement by turning the subject into traded commodity or production.

The Christian pedagogy promptly reacted (Comitato 2009). Educational anthropology research demonstrated that the core of any humanisation through education could not be based on systems lacking in knowledge of the soul. The reaction to both the pedagogies of syncretic spiritualities and the formative syncretism is an interesting aspect worth to be noticed in the evolution of the Christian pedagogy systems. Besides preaching and liturgical service, the Christian pedagogy of spiritual formation was forced to develop projects based on the commitment to combat school dropout or illiteracy itself because of the formative changes. Moreover, in these cases – almost punctual since 1968 ('Dieu est mort' / God is dead Paris) – the need to rebuild the foundations of spiritual education proved to be urgent and fundamental (Guneneley 1991).

How was the foundation of education through the intelligence of faith or the development of empathy restored? Firstly, an entire practice of establishing pastoral (pastoral-catechumenal) intervention centres was invigorated. They

generated pertinent diagnoses regarding the loss of the spiritual identity of human communities. Starting from this issue, a large part of European catechetical research focused on regaining the meaning of community in personal projects, on ensuring educational, medical and social safe spaces for dependent people, on the evangelical assumption of climate changes or religious structure of European population. Before the wave of migration, the moral support of the political approach assumed by European politics developed a series of methods of social pedagogy that deserve to be recorded as such (Mecheril et al. 2010). Thus, cultural and cross-cultural topics, internal ecumenism or inter-religious dialogue became important. Education aimed at cultural values or non-formal education. A series of models of intercultural pedagogy were developed: psychoanalytic-relational, dialogical-personalised, critical-anthropological, polycentric-European, innovative-transcultural and religious-Christian (Toriello 2001:53–83). To balance the pedagogy of adults, these directions represented the poles of the andragogical cycles from which a new spiritual pedagogy grew.

Although I cannot expand my research of identifying the European profile of a modern person's education by reducing everything to adult education, I have to admit that its practical reorganisation influenced the entire education of modern individuals (not just European). Thus, theories, strategies and policies, systems, bodies and agencies were developed and they proposed programmes and methods whose target audience was all ages and all social status. This way of educational reorganisation has generated a series of educational agents that influence even today the effort of educating modern individuals (Ministero, BDP, EAEA 2000).

The re-establishment of the educational environment focussed on Christian values, which generated much of the European educational tactical model, seems to be the most important challenge in modern education, proposing the truth of full education, namely body and soul. The avoidance of the educational plan deviation from the spiritual to the purely material aspects has experienced a series of cultural reductions. However, Christian formation in education has some requirements that are worth mentioning. Firstly, Christian research in the field must identify the need for spiritual education. What are the sources of this need? Is there the perspective of a spiritual or religious question in modern persons' life? Who should provide support to the formation, self-formation in the religious field? Is it still relevant? From this point of analysis, Christian education proposes a formation of the inner world, making the catechumenal agent (e.g. priest, pastor or teacher of religion) a major partner in the complex education of modern person. Nevertheless, who does not have access to the parish or is isolated from the community can still benefit from this education? Secondly, the research of religious experiences (conversions, covenant renewals, mystical experiences) was developed by emphasising the

need for content analysis in order to avoid fundamentalisms and extremisms. The Christian educational project has an accentuated missionary character, often leading to the construction of an educational ideal, opened to the eschatological community.

Thus, European Christian education seeks to emphasise the importance of returning to the Church Fathers of reintroducing the Gospel and its values in the skills development field, patronage of communication processes, reformulation of the elements of narrative and Christian language. Moreover, the component of the process of defining the formative model of 'accompaniment' in the culture of receiving (spiritual) faith can be easily expressed in the method of discipleship (eds. Benzi, Cavagnari & Matoses 2018; Streza 2014:35–46).

## From a person's formative path, to community transformative way

How do people design their life is an important aspect of education, whose purpose is to reconstitute modern person's spiritual values supported by Christian education that trigger a broad inter-human, ecumenical and inter-religious dimension (Savina 2019). What is the formative path of the modern person compared to the transformative way of his or her belonging community? Are consumer goods enough for a person to be happy? Starting with 2000, the educational analyses began to emphasise the personal transformation. I find Luciano Meddi's five paths or typologies very appropriate to the Romanian reality:

### The first one targets adults and young adults seeking Christian initiation

It proposes a catechetical path based on the baptismal commitment and the human experience in the spirit of the original evangelical message. Therefore, it aims to reintegrate Christian values into the community.

### The second is the new evangelism

It is addressed especially to those who no longer want a simple sociological affiliation to the Church and Christianity. In Eastern European countries, the process has been reported as a new literacy. The purpose is to assume the Christian life of truly follow Jesus Christ. Not least, it is related to a mature understanding of the Christian message and the valorisation of one's own skills.

### The third path is connected to the mystagogy of culture delivered through the Church

The achievement of preaching is the sacramental life. However, the educational project aims to provide a way to mature self-knowledge and the liturgical community. Both the mission of the Church and the personal exercise of the spiritual life mark this path. It is about knowing, following to and updating the messianic dimension of education.

## The fourth path aims at the prophetic dimension of the Christian community

It has the ability to build a pedagogy of guidance, accompanying in the faith journey and inner spiritual culture. Here we also discover the contents related to the reorganisation of daily life according to the call of the Kingdom of God.

## The fifth path is a participatory formative one

It is based on the development of the culture of the catechumenal agents and pastoral pedagogues. Moreover, it reveals the importance of unity between sermon and charity, namely social intervention. Besides simple contents, it proposes constructions of immediate intervention in the line of immanent social pedagogy (Meddi 2013; Necula 2013b).

Such issues certainly cannot be totally assumed in the context of education of the modern European community. However, they summarise the Christian concept of integrated education. Hence, no faculty of theology assumes a formation programme that lacks the charitable, philanthropic dimension. Besides the vocation of volunteerism, it programmatically assumes Jesus Christ's call to the world, until the end of time. Hence, it incorporates the eschatological and transcendental dimension proposed by Christian education. Anything offered by modern education detached from Christianity – once aggraving its conceptions – has no finality on a long term. However, the fundamental principle of formation proposed by modern Christian education is faithful to Christ's educational calling, namely conversion.

## Conclusions

Therefore, the conclusion of the factual historical analysis confirms that the spiritual dimension of education can be circumvented only with the risks of cultural, mental and educational alienation. In the context of the social tensions that have affected humanity in recent years – the Covid-19 pandemic proposing a single perspective of evaluation – European education has rediscovered the need to identify the spirit as the foundation of the values-based education contents. Christian projects whether they aim at social assistance, psychological support for people in difficulty, equal opportunities for and social reintegration of the disadvantaged or the integration of people of other religions into the social composition of the European nations are not based only on education; they are based on the theology of education (Steibel 2010:340–355). Moreover, they are rooted in the theology of the person. Without considering these basic principles, people's personalities we seek to educate can suffer serious and progressive deconstructions, in the sense given by Jacques Derrida. They lose their human dimension and the meaning through which the human calling is fulfilled in the development of the universal consciousness of love and action in the name of love.

The main contribution to the present article is the analyses of the spiritual and historical roots of Eastern Christian Education, with an accent on the importance of building on

its legacy in developing new spiritual adult education models in contemporary world.

Can Christian education prevent modern people to lose the spiritual meaning? The answer derived from the arguments presented in this study is certainly positive. However, it can be achieved when the contemporary individual assumes the profile promoted by Christian education. We are talking about a dynamic, active profile, willing to adapt to the evolution of the world in which she or he lives, assuming the call of the Gospel that focusses on education; namely assuming both Jesus Christ's message and his integral and restorative person. The value of this assumption derives from the deep restorative power of Christian education for 21st century individual's needs to make correct choices and to transform.

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