

UNIT 3C: MINISTRIES AND MISSION

85: Christian Education

I. Introduction

The word *education* is derived from the Latin word *educare* meaning “to bring out” or “to draw out”; and the process of education often involves drawing out the values that exist within a person, rather than promoting specialist learning. The goal of Christian education is for each Orthodox Christian to grow into oneness with God, “to be filled,” as Father Dumitru Staniloae neatly phrases it, “with the working presence of God.”¹ But how is this to be achieved? How can we be formed in Christ, as set out in Lecture 75: Asceticism? What should be contained within a programme of Orthodox Christian Education? Are there existing models of education that are relevant? Let us begin by looking at a few of the models of education that are set out in the Scriptures.

II. Models of Education in the Scriptures

A central teaching of the Old Testament given to the Israelites is the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut 6:4-5). The methods to be used by the Israelites in educating themselves in this challenging command were diverse: (1) to keep them “on your heart”; (2) to “teach them diligently to your sons”; (3) to “talk of them” to others throughout the day; (4) to place them in small boxes on their foreheads and left arms;² and (5) to place the key words on the doorpost of each Israelite house (Deut 6:6-9). The evidence of this love of the Lord was to be shown by meditating on “the law of the

¹ *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological Press, 2002), p. 21.

² The small boxes are known as ‘phylacteries;’ and the same words (drawn from Ex 1:1-10, Ex 1:11-16, Deu 6:4-9 and Deu 11:13-21) are written in *mezuzahs* (small scrolls symbolic of The Torah) on doorposts. However, the practice as exercised by the Pharisees and scribes at the time of Jesus was strongly criticized by Jesus and St Matthew as a sign of ostentatious prayer (Mat 22:5).

Lord ... day and night (Ps 1:2); and God’s response was to rescue this praying, studying person because of His “loving kindness”, His *hesed* (Ps 6:4). In a sense, the central goal of the educational process was for the believing Israelite to learn to “trust in the Lord” (Ps 4:5b), to take refuge in Him (Ps 7:1; 11:1) and to pray: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer” (Ps 19:14).

Without directly refuting this approach to learning, Jesus laid stress on two other aspects of education: posing questions and using parables to encourage listeners to reflect more deeply on the meanings He intended. For example, consider the parables of the Kingdom (Mt 13) and the use of the ambiguous term “Son of Man” with which he probed the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13). It was this question posed more directly to St Peter (“But who do you say that I am?”) to which St Peter responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” that demonstrated that God had given St Peter the revelation that would empower him to lead the disciples and lay the foundations of the Church (Mt 16:15-17).

Jesus’s stress on integrating “what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52) is an indication that he was seeking to lead his fellow Israelites into an awareness that their present understanding of God’s presence in their lives was about to change significantly because of His presence on earth. On the one hand, Jesus did not intend to change in any way “one jot” of the Law (Mat 5:18), yet at the same time he did urge significant changes in the way that Law was to be observed—internally through faith, rather than externally as a sign of religiously correct behaviour (similar to the contemporary concern with politically correct behaviour). In a way that much puzzled the Scribes and Pharisees, and even His disciples, Jesus was affirming the Law, yet also rejecting how it was being observed. Today the encouragement of such thinking in which two opposing ideas are held “in fruitful tension” is known as integrative thinking.³ In many ways, a part of Jesus’s legacy

³ Roger Martin, *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), p. 6

was to be a reinterpretation of Israelite values that many Jews today still find hard to fathom.

The manner in which each of the four evangelists, especially St Matthew, teaches by moving back and forth between parables (Mt 13:1-52) and narratives (Mt 13:53 f.) is a further indication of how Christian education can occur. The approach which Jesus took to education is similar to that of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551BC-479 BC), although this is not to suggest that Jesus was directly aware of or influenced by Confucius's advice: "By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."⁴ Certainly, the Gospels urge us to reflect about Jesus' message and to become aware of the power of the Incarnation, the life of Christ on earth, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension in our own lives.

III. A Programme of Orthodox Christian Education: The Ideal

An ideal programme of Orthodox Christian Education is grounded in eight sources, which can be grouped into four types of behaviour: (1) participating in the sacraments and the Liturgy; (2) learning from icons and sermons; (3) reading the Bible and the Church Fathers; and (4) initiating personal study and prayer. While the first two types of behaviour are primarily part of the corporate prayer of the Church (especially the local parish), the last two are personal activities carried out largely at home. However, this distinction is somewhat misleading, because much prayer before icons takes place at home, and many parishes offer considerable encouragement to engage in the last two types of behaviour. All eight sources of Christian education are important; and because some Christians in the parish community will be more advanced in certain activities than in other activities, it is often possible to learn from each other. In fact, the local parish, just as the person, has the capacity to grow closer to God.

⁴ Cited by Martin, p. 91.

(1) Participating in the Sacraments and the Liturgy

The Liturgy and the sacraments linked to the Liturgy are “the source, the measure, the life-giver to all the parts” of an Orthodox Christian education.⁵ Many Orthodox believers are living the Liturgy, without realizing that for many others who believe in God—Jews, Roman Catholics, Protestants and adherents to other faiths—the foundations of their religious life are not always and everywhere in worship itself (‘lex orandi, lex credendi’), but in how they act in relation to their faith, or how they observe certain dogmas or doctrines.⁶

Those coming new to the Orthodox faith, from personal conviction rather than family inheritance, find their initial place as catechumens, that is, as learners being educated in the Orthodox Christian faith, through a catechetical process that links instruction in Orthodox beliefs with the practice of Orthodox worship. In the early Church, these catechumens were excluded from attending important parts of the Divine Liturgy at which the faithful received Holy Communion. This practice has been discontinued, although the formal excluding of the catechumens still remains in the Divine Liturgy. Understanding the different forms of worship in the Orthodox Church is an important part of discovering the Church, as is understanding Orthodox *praxis*, that is, the practices that are part of a living Orthodox faith.⁷ Finding communion with God in the liturgical services, especially the Divine Liturgy, is an important part of the Orthodox experience. However, as Archbishop Lazar Puhalo reflected: “The faithful are seldom if ever taught the actual meaning of the actions and the words which they see and hear during the Liturgy. How, then, do we expect educated and cultured younger generations to continue to attend the divine services?”⁸

⁵ Martin E. Marty, “Foreword” to Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Health and Medicine in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition: Faith, Liturgy, and Wholeness* (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life, 1990), p. x.

⁶ Marty, p. x.

⁷ For an outstanding explanation of the Divine Liturgy see Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *The Heavenly Banquet: Understanding the Divine Liturgy*, 3rd ed. (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013). A comprehensive 18-page index enables key ideas to be readily tracked.

⁸ Cited by Father Emmanuel, *The Heavenly Banquet*, opening page.

(2) Learning from Icons and Sermons

In the early Church, at a time when a significant portion of the congregation was illiterate or poorly educated, sermons and icons were a primary tool for education. Although that situation has now changed, both icons and sermons remain significant tools for Christian education. Icons are rightly described as “flat pictures” that “procure both spiritual and temporal blessings, and [are] generally ... powerful channels of Divine grace.”⁹ Much of their power is due to the way the viewer is drawn into the icon itself, with the possibility of being transformed into the likeness of God.¹⁰ **This possibility of personal transformation arises because “an icon expresses divine truth in a manner that humans can perceive and understand....** Every icon, whether it depicts Christ, the Word and Son of God, Mary the Mother of God, a saint, or a biblical scene or feast, represents a confession of faith and a witness to the Incarnation.”¹¹

In a similar manner, **every sound sermon is “a confession of faith and a witness to the Incarnation”**—a confrontation of the preacher with the Word of God in which a teaching emerges in which the preacher tries to fulfil the call from God to Jeremiah: “All that I command you, you shall speak” (Jer 1:7).¹² Thus both the image and the spoken word are important aspects of Christian education, as is the written word, especially the Bible and Patristic writings.

(3) Reading the Bible and the Church Fathers:

Metropolitan Kallistos urges us to read Scripture with a four-fold perspective: “in obedience, as a member of the Church, finding Christ everywhere, [and] seeing everything as part of my own personal story”; and he

⁹ F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone, *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), p. 815.

¹⁰ See Anton C. Vrame, *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Tradition* (New York: BookWorld Press, US, 1999).

¹¹ Mariamna Fortounatto & Mary B. Cunningham, “Theology of the Icon” in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 136-147, esp. p. 136.

¹² See Ken Untener, *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 130.

notes how this draws us to “sense something of the power and healing to be found in the Bible.”¹³ This approach is both liturgical and Patristic, grounded in how specific Scriptural passages are used in the liturgy and interpreted by the early Church Fathers.

George Florovsky has suggested that the term “**a neo-patristic synthesis**” is a valid and reachable objective, grounded in three rather different but mutually supportive levels of education: **(1) the exegetical level of seeking to understand what a particular Biblical author meant, in many nuances; (2) the interpretative level of engaging the reader in relating the author’s words to the reader’s present situation; and (3) the transformative level in which the reader permits the words of Scripture to change his or her own life and relationship to God.**¹⁴ This search for “a neo-patristic synthesis” has been greatly helped by the continuing publication (begun in 1998 and now completed) by InterVarsity Press of *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, edited by Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, for each book of the Bible. The “pericopes” or passages of Scripture are given in the full Revised Standard Version, with an overview of argument, linked to extracts from the Church Fathers.¹⁵

¹³ “How to Read the Bible” in *The Orthodox Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), pp. 1757-1766.

¹⁴ Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective, Vol One, Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), pp. 187-238; see also Andrew Louth, “The patristic revival and its protagonists” in Cunningham & Theokritoff, pp. 188-202.

¹⁵ The editors of *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* have chosen to focus primarily “on those writers that best reflected classic Christian consensual thinking,” rather than to explore those areas of sacramental theology, church authority, ministry and prayer in which there are significant disagreements among Christians (Oden, “General Introduction” to all volumes). Thus, the result is not “the Christian Talmud” that the authors claim in which arguments of all kinds are given in a rabbinic style, but rather an affirmation that Christians can share ecumenically in at least portions of what the Church Fathers wrote. While such an approach is of value in introducing contemporary Christians to the writings of the Church Fathers in modern English, readers should also be aware that as a tool for Orthodox Christian education this series is limited because of the views of the Church Fathers that are left out. A true neo-patristic synthesis would need to consider the full writings of many Church Fathers themselves, not merely selected extracts chosen by ecumenists.

(4) Initiating Personal Study and Prayer

How often and how long we each choose to study and to pray are personal choices that we make for ourselves, perhaps with advice from a spiritual counsellor, if such a person is available. **Many people find that study, whether spiritual or secular, leads to prayer for insights, for God's intervention, for God's mercy; yet prayer can also lead to study as we become aware of our need to understand the challenges of life.**

As a single reference book, Cross and Livingstone's *Dictionary of the Christian Church* with its 1,786 pages of carefully written entries by some 500 contributors is very helpful whenever one finds an idea, an event, a saint or a doctrine that is unfamiliar, especially as its Orthodox advisers included Metropolitan Kallistos and Archimandrite Ephrem Lash. As a guide to Patristic theology, John Anthony McGuckin's *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* is a remarkably erudite set of nearly 400 entries, all written by Father McGuckin.¹⁶ Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, especially with its detailed footnotes, is a very reliable guide for those teaching or learning in the Orthodox tradition.¹⁷ Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis has written an impressive 650-page study, *Jesus Fallen: The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective*.¹⁸ Metropolitan Kallistos's *The Orthodox Church* and *The Orthodox Way* offer valuable reflections on the Orthodox faith.¹⁹ Such reading to grasp the wholeness of the Orthodox faith is

¹⁶ London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. Father McGuckin has also written *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); and he has edited *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). These three books offer a full review of Orthodox theology and life.

¹⁷ Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005, Third Ed.

¹⁸ Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013. The 85 pages of indices greatly facilitate tracing key theological themes.

¹⁹ New York: Penguin, 2015 and Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1998. The 2015 edition of *The Orthodox Church* is unchanged from the earlier edition except for an updated bibliography.

especially important at a time of increasing specialization in the midst of “the utter fragmentation of knowledge itself.”²⁰

IV. Changing the Existing Reality of Orthodox Christian Education

Unfortunately, the existing reality of Orthodox Christian education in the British Isles is disturbing. There is no seminary (as traditionally understood) for the training of priests and deacons. There are three broader-based educational initiatives—the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge, the Midlands Orthodox Study Centre in Walsall, Birmingham, (called a “seminary”), and this web-based E-Quip course of some 90 lectures. In practice, the Greek, Russian and Romanian Orthodox churches have a tendency to treat their British or Irish life as a diaspora initiative, even though many of the families involved have lived in the British Isles for many generations and have no intention of returning to their “homeland” for permanent residency. As will be noted in Lecture 86, this reliance on ethnicity fights against the whole notion of mission and indeed the ecclesiological coherence of the Church.

In brief, it is important to recognise that **the limitation of mono-ethnicity, or at worse, its degeneration into phyletism, has become a major impediment to Christian education itself.** First, parents tend to relate to the Orthodox Church as they did when they were children, for example, by encouraging their own children to receive Holy Communion, but not receiving the Holy Mysteries themselves when there are ample opportunities for confession and preparation. This communicates to their children that full participation is either not important or simply something you don’t do when you are older, and so the cycle continues. Second, holding on to a little understood language in the Liturgy often leads to an impoverishment of the liturgical experience and the loss part of its transformational potential through the word(s), and of course a barrier and an occasion of disinterest

²⁰ Vartan Gregorian, “Higher Education in an Age of Specialized Knowledge” in Valerie Hotchkiss & Patrick Henry (Eds.), *Orthodoxy & Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2005), pp. 139-164, esp. pp. 148, 162.

among those who are not familiar with the language used in church, especially among young people and potential converts. Third, the tendency to treat Orthodoxy and a particular ethnic group as synonymous has led both Orthodox Christians and those who are not Orthodox to assume that Orthodox Christianity itself is incapable of being expressed in and through local cultures and languages. This attitude often conceals a deep-rooted desire to have part of one's life anchored somewhere else other than "here", perhaps an unresolved grief of displacement due to generational immigration.

To move from the present concern with ethnicity directly into the eight sources of an ideal Christian education sketched above is difficult. First, in principle, there need to be clerical and lay parish leaders who believe Christian education is important, as well as unity within a parish that such a goal is attractive and attainable. Second, in practice, resources need to be allocated and appropriate teachers trained, both for adults and children. Third, and perhaps most significantly, just as inner healing needs to take place within individuals before full formation in Christ is a possibility, so a similar process needs to take place within each local parish—a healing of "the parish tree" similar to the healing of the family tree set out in Lecture 72 and its appendices: Healing and Deliverance. Such a healing process could begin with each member of the parish bringing the intention of improved Christian education into their personal and corporate prayer life, especially during the Divine Liturgy, being both informed and transformed. A start has been made on this here in the Antiochian Archdiocese of the British Isles and Ireland with our "Followers" catechetical course for 3 to 18 year olds, a syllabus of some 480 lessons over 16 years.²¹

As set out in Lecture 75: Asceticism, **the ultimate goal of any Christian is to be formed in Christ; and this process of formation requires each of us to "put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (Ephes 4:24).** In a sense, we initiate this process by

²¹ See <http://www.followers-orthodox.com>

the exercise of our free will and choice, but in another sense we must be passive and receptive, accepting God's grace and timing as to whether, how and when such a process of formation is to take place. The process is lifelong and requires a certain awareness of how we grow as human beings, of how we educate ourselves and how we are educated by God and by others.

V. The Stages of Human Development and Christian Education

Before considering Christian education further, especially in the context of educating children, it would be of value to **read carefully the three brief pages of Appendix 3 of Lecture 72: Healing the Eight Stages of Life**. Recall that during each of the eight stages of life one's personal purposes are quite different: **(1) infancy** until about age 2 when one learns to trust and hope; **(2) early childhood** [2-3] when one discovers one's own independent self and begins to exercise the will and freedom; **(3) play age** [3-5] when one learns to be autonomous and to achieve specific purposes; **(4) school age** [6-12] when one learns to be industrious and competent; **(5) adolescence** [12-18] when one learns about one's identity and the meaning of fidelity in relationships; **(6) young adult** [19-35] when one learns through friendship and affection and then beyond that the call to love, intimacy and commitment to a life-long (hopefully!) partner, or maybe for some celibacy; **(7) adult** [35-65] when one learns how to grow more deeply as a person and how to exercise care for others; and **(8) old age** when one strives for integrity and wisdom.

Now this general schema does not apply to every person precisely as set out. However, certain key points arise. **First, these are significant stages in human and spiritual development; and any specific attempts at Christian education must be tailored to the human development of a particular person at a particular age.** **Second, we all experience hurts and failures in order to reach these personal purposes in certain of the stages of our lives; therefore, we can all be much encouraged that it is possible to experience healing later in our lives "to the**

extent we let [our hurts] be touched by unconditional love.”²² Third, this same process of God’s unconditional love can indeed guide Christian education, empowering us to experience learning that was not gained in earlier years.

Many Orthodox children are being handicapped by the well-intentioned but misguided attempts of their parents to teach them that going to Church is how one retains one’s ethnic origins. Unlike Jewish, Roman Catholic and Protestant children being brought up in the British Isles, there is almost no possibility whatsoever of Orthodox children attending an Orthodox school. This means that very little time will be spent in an Orthodox context outside of the home and especially in those formative years at school. Whether a particular child retains the Orthodox faith into adulthood will depend largely on how their parent(s) model(s) an Orthodox lifestyle. If one or more parents or grandparents communicate to their children and grandchildren that remaining Greek or Russian while growing up in the British Isles is the central purpose of going to Church, few children educated in such a manner will gain or retain a deeply Orthodox faith. Therefore, **the first and crucial step in educating children in the Orthodox faith is for the parents themselves to be formed in Christ and grow into the fullness of life offered by the Orthodox faith.**

If this first crucial step is taken, then looking at specific books, engaging in specific catechetical activities, encouraging children to pray and participate in parish life will have considerable value. **Without such a crucial first step, few children presently being raised in families that are ethnically Orthodox, but spiritually secular, will become committed Orthodox Christians in adulthood.**

VI. Conclusion: The Future of Orthodox Christian Education

In this lecture an attempt has been made to look back at models of education in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, and to sketch out a possible contemporary programme of Orthodox Christian education grounded in participating in the sacraments and the liturgy, learning from icons and sermons, reading the

²² Matthew Linn, SJ, Dennis Linn & Shelia Fabricant Linn, *Healing the Purpose of Your Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

Bible and the Church Fathers, and initiating personal study and prayer. However, it is clear that to reach such an ideal form of education requires both an understanding of human development and a tricky confrontation for many of us with either the attractions of a secular lifestyle or the call to discipleship in the here and now. St Theophan's approach to education in which piety takes "the first place over learning" and in which "one must preserve young students, just like infants, by means of the piety surrounding them, by means of church life and the Mysteries" might have worked in nineteenth century Russia, but requires considerable adaptations to twenty-first century life in the British Isles.²³

OK, so what might work? How can we get from where we are now to where we want to be? The advice of St Gregory of Sinai (1265-1346) is very much based on the integrated thinking (cited in Section II above) essential to hold together opposing ideas—in this case, that you must **"become what you are, find Him who is already yours, listen to Him who never ceases speaking to you, and own Him who already owns you."**²⁴ **"St Gregory is telling us that we must know who we are as persons. We must discover our real identity as persons, created in the image and likeness of God, not as persons formed by a secular culture."**²⁵

This theme was developed in Lecture 78: Relationships, Marriage and Family (pp. 7-8). Intriguingly, Stephen M. R. Covey, son of Stephen R. Covey (author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*) suggests in *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* that we should **begin with two simple questions: "1) Do I trust myself? and 2) Am I someone others can trust?"**²⁶ This humanist framework is helpful, although the goal is essentially integrity within a secular culture.²⁷ That

²³ See Theophan the Recluse, *Raising Them Right: A Saint's Advice on Raising Children*, 2nd ed. (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000), pp. 47-48.

²⁴ The quotation was originally cited by Metropolitan Kallistos in the first edition of *The Orthodox Way*, p. 12 and then cited again by Benjamin D. Williams and Michael T. McKibben in *Oriented Leadership: Why Every Christian Needs It* (Wayne, NJ: Orthodox Christian Publications Center, 1994, p. 13).

²⁵ See Benjamin D. Williams and Michael T. McKibben, *Oriented Leadership: Why Every Christian Needs It*, p. 12.

²⁶ New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006; p. 45.

²⁷ Stephen M. R. Covey opens the chapter on integrity (p. 59) with a quotation from Warren Buffet, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway: "I look for three things in hiring people. The first is personal integrity,

same need for personal integrity applies to Orthodox Christian education, as we work together to reach an ideal that we already share. **What we essentially need to do is to trust God and not only ourselves, trusting also each other to make the ideal Orthodox Christian education a personal reality for ourselves, our extended families, our friends, our parishes and communities.**

the second is intelligence, and the third is a high energy level. But, if you don't have the first, the other two will kill you." The comment might apply at times to both teachers and learners in Christian education who try to move too quickly or beyond the level of their abilities.