



TEACHING ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY TODAY

A NEW ERA DEMANDS NEW STRATEGIES

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Since the 1970s, we've thought of our society as being in the "information age." For most of us this new era became part of our daily experience about twenty years ago with the arrival of the Internet. Since then the explosion of digital information and our immediate access to it has transformed all that we do, in education generally and specifically for us in religious education. For nearly as long, religious educators, myself included, have argued for an approach that does more than inform, but also forms and transforms.

Orthodox Christian religious education is not just about handing over information. Knowledge of any topic, especially in our age, abounds and is easily obtained. Our methods of instruction must go beyond the rote transmission and banking of information in learners. This is especially critical today when facts and figures can easily be obtained and held in the palm of our hands on our phones. With so much information surrounding us—even on topics of faith and religion—why is there so much religious illiteracy and ignorance? This alone should persuade us that information transmission is not enough to bring about an educated person. What is needed is a community—a Church—of formation and transformation, where the Faith is embodied, practiced and reflected upon, thus leading the individual into increasingly greater “levels” of Christian life. Information that is disconnected from experience cannot be formative. Information without formation and transformation is merely trivia retention, as John Boojamra liked to call it. What students need is critical thinking skills so that they can separate the wheat from the chaff of the abundance of information returned by Googling any question about the Orthodox Faith. On the other hand, formation without information (and the freedom to think and question) can become a form of oppression.

Thus, I believe Orthodox Christian religious education should renew its consideration of formation as central to the teaching of Orthodoxy today. So, then, what is formation?

Two verses from Scripture provide us a place to begin to answer the question. One section of the Orthodox Christian funeral service opens with a Psalm verse that tells of a formative process in human life, providing an educational insight for us: “Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments” (Psalm 119:73, NRSV). Later in the funeral (and in the Memorial Service), we hear, “Lead me back again to Your likeness, and renew my original beauty.” This too is an artistic metaphor for our vision of formation: a beautiful person.

The Prophet Jeremiah also provides us with a formative metaphor to consider:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel,

can I not do with you as this potter has done?” says the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.” (Jeremiah 18:1–6)

In short, for the scriptural mind, God is an artist. In antiquity, the educational process was also seen in this artistic manner. Within the ancient Christian ideal of education, we hear about formation as *morphosis* and *paideia*. In this perspective, education is a plastic art, like sculpture, shaping the life of the person. To educate is to form another person, to shape his or her character, his or her being and way of being, to make a better person, to create the beautiful person—there is an understood sense of the ideal in the term. This ideal involves more than the mind, but the whole person.

“BEHOLD, LIKE THE CLAY IN
THE POTTER’S HAND, SO ARE YOU IN MY
HAND, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL.”

Jeremiah 18:6

So then, can we begin to create a definition of formation for Orthodox Christian religious education? I propose the following: Formation is the hands of a community—the Church—touching the life of a person, in a lifelong process leading to that person becoming God-like (*theosis*) or complete and becoming a contributor to that community. It occurs through instruction, interaction, experiences, role models, conversations and dialogue, questions and responses, leading persons to become well-informed members of that community. Formation occurs through ritual, familial, communal and societal activities, and, in our case, ecclesial and liturgical activities as well. Formation happens through the relationship of the learner with God and his or her community: family, Church and the world.

TODAY’S LEARNERS

There isn’t enough time to discuss the challenges presented by today’s learners to religious educators. Suffice it to say that in too many of our parishes, religious education has not kept pace with today’s learners. Students still read to one another and color nice pictures. Teachers are always looking for new activities, better ways to use glitter and glue. Class content, especially with older students, still focuses too heavily on relatively unimportant topics, like names of vestments or finding the deep symbolism of a color and focuses less on the important questions of life and meaning or religious practice that seeks repair and reconciliation in our world.

Over the last few years, researchers have paid particular attention to the question of today's learners. Standing out is the work of Jean Twenge. She has gained a lot of attention with her work on "Generation Me," those thirty-five-years-old and younger in our society. She wrote:

Generation Me students like doing things themselves better than sitting and listening to a lecture...Few young people today, even the high achievers, enjoy sitting quietly with a book and reading. Instead, they attempt to multitask, doing homework while surfing the web and exchanging instant messages with friends. (Jean M. Twenge, "Generational changes and their impact in the classroom: teaching Generation Me," *Medical Education* 43, no. 5 [May 2009]: pages 398–405)

What is so striking about this article is that she is describing the challenges of educating medical doctors! This can be a distressing situation, but Twenge is optimistic when she points out that when the connection between the classroom and the world is made students will usually respond:

Most young people no longer respond to appeals to duty; instead, they want to know exactly why they are doing something and want to feel they are having a personal impact. This is an opportunity: if young people understand the deeper meaning behind a task, they can bring their energy and passion to bear on it. (Twenge 2009, page 404)

If we are to take seriously the issues of formation, then Orthodox Christian religious educators might begin to modify their methodologies, with resources to match. The newest materials from the Department of Religious Education are attempting to use the following principles.

OFFER INFORMATION IN SHORT BURSTS AND "CHUNKS."

Information provides the "external check points" because it is objective. As the saying goes, each of us can have our own opinions, but not our own facts. In religious education, this is the scriptural and theological tradition of the Church. In religious education practice, this will mean providing direct access to the sources of the Orthodox Christian Faith and Way of Life: Scripture, liturgy, patology, theology, etc., to the best of our ability, depending on the students and the teachers involved. Short bursts of activity and chunks of information, likely leading to many of them over time, seem to capture the attention of our learners better. Connecting the information to various experiences is also important, as is recognizing the construc-



tion of knowledge that is taking place in the learners through the interactions of information and experience.

A CRITICAL APPROACH, QUESTIONING THE SOURCES MUST BE ALLOWED.

In a recent presentation, Dn. Nicholas Denysenko stated that we should no longer expect people to blindly accept the information we offer, even the received Tradition of the Church. The Church in its educational processes can and should create the space for questions and questioning the sources, recognizing the individual cognitive and spiritual development taking place in the learner. This means creating, in the classroom, the safe space and freedom for students to question the received wisdom of our Tradition. As Parker Palmer writes, "Learning does not happen when students are unable to express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance and prejudices. In fact, only when people can speak their minds does education have a chance to happen" (*The Courage to Teach*, Jossey-Bass, 1998, page 75).

DISCUSS MEANINGFUL TOPICS AND CREATE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES IN A LIFE TO FAITH TO LIFE APPROACH.

The dynamic of moving from life to faith to life can be tremendously effective. A seminary student of mine approached me to say that after he began using this approach, attendance at his class and in his youth group increased. When we ask our students what they want to know and we ask about their lives, we will often learn that it is far more meaningful and challenging to us as teachers, thus creating a better learning environment for all.

While the content of the Orthodox Tradition has not changed over the centuries, our approaches to teaching our Faith can be updated to meet the unique needs of today's learners.

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