

MORAL AND RELIGIOUS TRAINING – EDUCATION STUDENTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL

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**Abstract**

The issue of environmental education is one of the most important issues for the contemporary world. The human relationship with the environment and especially, the human attitude towards it seemed a solved problem a century ago, but in the last decades, it has become a real provocation for more and more people, decision makers, from different backgrounds. If we refer only to the need to maintain a clean environment around us, we have already made an important step for training the young generation. However, the environmental education aims to go much further and it wants to identify viable formative models in the education of today, so students can develop their personality with an acceptable level of understanding their role and place in the created world. In this context, religious and moral formation can bring a significant support for this new aspect of education, in particular, through the arguments based on biblical texts, which you can make to students of different ages. In terms of teaching, to achieve these objectives, there is a set of principles and appropriate methods and we offer some suggestions for their emphasis and integration into current educational context. Obviously, an authentic environmental education integrates models for emphasizing the message that the nature often offers to the man in search of his own identity.

**Keywords:** Religious Education, environmental education, teaching models, youth education

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**Moral and religious training – education students for environmental****1. Introduction**

The approach of the pedagogical human-nature relationship can be made from multiple perspectives, each of them is worthy of research and analysis which lead to conclusions meant to make aware the students about their role and their responsibilities in the natural surroundings they grow. This study proposes an analysis in terms of how Religious Education, by religious and moral formation of students, can contribute to awareness of human relationship with the environment and, in general, with the creation.

Our assertions have as starting points the next premises, based on the biblical texts:

- The whole universe is the creation of God, Who has His existence only by Himself, "*I am who I am*" (Genesis 3,14);

- In the context of the creation, the man has a privileged status given by his creation after the image of God and his calling to the likeness of Him; the man was created through a direct and personal act of God and he is the only vertical person on the Earth and the last of the stages of Creation: "*Taking the Lord dust of the ground, formed man and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul*" (Genesis 2,7); receiving the command to rule all creation;

- In heaven, man was in harmony with the whole universe: the animals were subjected him; the ground gave all necessary fruits, all created work based on laws that were not broken. To maintain this status, he has to honour the divine commandment, not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil;

- The falling into sin had implications over the material universe, which was the subject of degradation, suffering together with the man: "*The creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who had subjected in hope; because the creature itself also will be delivered from the slavery of corruption into the glorious liberty of God's children. For we know that the whole creation groans together in pain together until now*" (Romans 8, 20-22); the man, the lord of creatures, became her servant.

- In the seen world, God has established a very close connection between man and nature; in fact, the man is the creature that links between spiritual and material world, because he was created as a soul-body unity. The man needs the material world around him to survive, and the nature, God's gift to man, has value only by human presence.

- The man can know God by natural revelation, namely the material universe in which all natural phenomena are governed by the precise laws that assure us of His existence and tell us about Him: "*The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handwork*" (Psalm 18, 1), and "*the invisible things of Him from the creation are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, his eternal power and Godhead*" (Romans 1, 20).

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### 2. Principles and teaching methods, relevant to education for man-nature relationship

The close relationship between man and nature is the subject of some educational approaches, exceptionally valued by Jesus Christ, with different goals and in different ways, taken over the education of the first millennium of the Holy Fathers and ecclesiastical writers and later theorized by modern pedagogy's representatives, with religious concerns. Often these elements are found in what today we call principles and methods of education, of which we will refer to those we consider most relevant to approaches that support the environmental education.

#### 2.1. The principle of intuition

The relationship between the two realities which the religious education reports to - mundane and transcendental - leads to the need for using the intuition, since the access to the world of divine grace is conditioned by concrete knowledge, sensory, which are the basis of the abstraction and generalization of notions, studied concepts (I. Bontas, 1995, pp. 114-115; S. Sebu, M. Opris, D. Opris, 2000).

Things and objects from the surrounding world affect directly our senses by abundance, variety, features, facilities and material and symbolic value, and because of them, the principle of intuition becomes one of prime importance in achieving the aims of religious education, aspect also identified in the biblical and patristic texts. Jesus Christ Himself expounded His divine teachings by both direct speech and in parables, which are images taken from the world "*and without a parable, He didn't speak anything*" (Matthew 13, 34). Since the true knowledge is based on reason and sensitivity, the Saviour showed that the need of intuition is related directly to the abstraction of teaching level (D. Opris, 2012, pp. 182-184).

In the Sermon on the Mount, the principle of intuition is often used; the mission will be accomplished by Apostles being likened to the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the torch - whose role is to light the way around. A text of great beauty is relating to the God's care of the man, face to face with the human spirit of worry who owned. Jesus Christ, intuitively, uses the specific aspects of life such as feeding the birds, beauty of lilies and of field to help people understand that the human value and the concern that the Creator gives him are perfect: "*Behold the fowls of the air: for they don't sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more than they? [...] Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they don't toil, neither do they spin. And yet I say you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven, will God not much more clothe you, of little faith?*" (Matthew 6, 26; 28-30).

Using of various aspects of nature as a support of the use of intuition is found in the writings of St. John Chrysostom. The Biblical metaphor of the tree in the path of the storm is used to highlight the role of the patience to acquire true faith: "*We need great patience, my dear, this virtue is formed and grows in us, when word of God planted its roots in our hearts, and, like the wind with all its violence and fury, can not uproot a tree that has roots deep in the earth, so no one can overthrow a soul that fears God bound tightly. For, to be nailed is much harder than being rooted*" (St. John Chrysostom, 1998, p. 263). In this text we find presented in a very

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intuitive way the similarity of God's attachment and love with the way in which a body can be linked to one another or fixed by a nail.

J.A. Comenius uses intuition with a skill that shows not only strong anchor in daily life, but also the understanding of nature as a book by which God speaks to us and He may be known. To illustrate the importance of early education in shaping the human soul, he uses gradually three examples from nature: the wax modelling, the mobility of young trees and of the strings wooden: "*Soft wax leaves modelled and remodelled, while the reinforced one cracks very easily. The little tree allows gently be planting, cutting and bending up and down, but the strong tree doesn't allow. Who wants to twist a rope from a tree, has to take a green and fresh one, because the dried one doesn't allow being twisted*" (J. A. Comenius, 1970, p. 35).

For St. John Chrysostom, the care for the natural world is linked to the attention to the social environment, both founded on strong moral and religious education. In the advices offered to parents regarding how they can perform their duties related to spiritual training of their children, he resembles their soul with a fortress: "*Consider that you are a king who tapped a fortress: your child's soul; his soul is indeed a fortress. And as into a city some steal, and others are right, some work and others do everything anyway, so there are good thoughts and bad thoughts in a soul: some struggle against those who do wrong, that some soldiers in a city, some take care for all, body and home, that those administering the cities, while others give commands like dignitaries, some talk shamelessly as the dissipated people, other speak decently as the wise people*" (St. John Chrysostom, 2000, p. 109). The increased urbanization and the reduction of the students' interest to the nature activities in the favour of the virtual world brought by new technologies, will lead, in our opinion, to decrease the possibilities of using intuition starting from different aspects of nature, with an equal impact on the relationship between man and nature and on the social climate. Hence, the decisive role that Religious Education can play in helping young people to form a correct attitude towards the environment, based on revealed values.

## 2.2. The description

One of the most used methods in all sciences is the description, this consisting in the direct observation of external features, characteristics of objects, processes, events, places etc. (E. Voiculescu, D. Aldea, 2005, p. 92).

The using of this method in the Religious Education on issues related to the description of some aspects of nature is in direct relation with the specification and the knowledge of their characteristic aspects, as they appear in the Sciences: Biology, Geography, Ecology etc., which involves interdisciplinary approaches on different levels (M. Opris, 2004, pp. 114-127).

Even if the description of certain aspects of nature is not a concern in itself in Religious Education, the aim of this teaching action is one that prepares the explanation of some religious concepts, promoting their understanding. Jesus Christ presents in this way the image of God's kingdom: "*How shall we liken the kingdom of God or what parable shall we think? Like a grain of mustard seed which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth; but, when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and its large branches may lodge the fowls of the air under the shadow*" (Mark 4, 31-32).

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In the teaching of Religion, we can use this method in all classes. For example, to understand that the resurrected body of the man is deified, we can use the description of a caterpillar's metamorphosis which undergoes to the stage of butterfly: the caterpillar crawls on the ground, eats leaves, damages, but it becomes butterfly after a time when it is cocoon and it is flying in the sky, it feeds on pollen and has a beauty that delights our eyes.

To use the description of some aspects from nature means to go over the natural and material reality, being a step in the contemplation of the creation.

### **2.3. The direct observation of some aspects of religious reality**

The Orthodox Faith knowledge has two ways in which God is made known to the people: natural revelation and supernatural revelation and the role of the divine grace in understanding the religious reality: *"There are certain realities which exceed our understanding; they are too great and unfathomable for the weaknesses and the limits of our minds. We can understand the meaning of these realities only through the endless grace of God"* (Origen, w.y., p. 19).

The direct observation of the religious reality is the method which utilizes the religious contemplation of the creation as a way of knowing God (S. Sebu, M. Opris, D. Opris, 2000). *"The true relation to God's creation is born by contemplation. Only then it can be born the experience of living contact with the world and in the same time with God, expressed in the Psalms of praise. In the Christian tradition, a cosmic spirituality is maintained, according to the types and locations (if not always with the same intensity), attested by a greater continuity of Orthodox tradition. After the teaching of the Holy Fathers, through the Cross of Lord, the new creation is glorious and transfigured and it receives the source of resurrection"* (Thecla Vetralli, 2007, pp. 122-123)

The opening of the students' sensitivity to approach the contemplation of creation is a very difficult fact, because, on the one hand, it involves high religious experiences and, on the other hand, it involves a complex and intellectual activity, employing representations, thinking, memory, voluntary, attention.

Starting from the idea that the creation is an open book that talks about her Creator, the use of direct observation of religious reality during teaching activity is justified in particular by its important role in strengthening the faith in God, who has created the world of love and has offered to the people the opportunity to enjoy by the light of His glory: *"God has ordained the man to come into the world, first as a viewer of so many wonders, and secondly as their own master, so that using them to realize Who is who gave them, and by the beauty and the majesty of all the sights to be guided to follow the unnamed and not described power which has made him"* (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2004, p. 21).

### **2.4. The religious meditation**

In religious plan, the meditation is a spiritual work by which the man has the opportunity to reflect deeply on religious issues in his attempt to strengthen the religious life, which brings inner peace and quiet. The moments of silence are chosen by each person, according to inner anxieties and aspirations. However, there may not be missing the reflection on some fundamental

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problems of existence: to the Christian life, God's goodness showed repeatedly to people, the way in which we live the God's commandments.

The approach of confrontation with his own conscience by the religious meditation can lead to clarify some inner anxieties, to make spiritual the religious life and to know God. To achieve this goal, the school use of meditation as a method of religious knowledge of reality which can form religious and Christian attitude towards the environment, requires compliance with a set of conditions: the careful preparation, in relation to the level of students' knowledge and their spiritual age, making relevant links with different patristic and biblical models, the attempt to train the skill to observe the world, searching the answers to life's problems.

Classic, in his meditation on human destiny in the world, Prophet David exclaimed: *"When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have founded them, I say: What is man, that you remember him? And the son of the man you visit him? For you have made him a little lower than the angels and you have crowned him with glory and honour. You made him to have dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet. All sheep and oxen, all, and the beasts of the field, the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea pass through the paths of the seas. O, Lord, our God, how excellent is your name in all the earth"* (Psalm 8, 3-9).

The text quoted above, and other the religious literature available, may be used and linked to different religious events throughout the year such as Lent period, when students are invited to meditate on the Lord's Passion. St. Augustine offers another model of the religious meditation, in which students can better understand the relationship between the religious modelling and respect for world as a whole, redeemed by the Son of God: *"How much you loved us, O good Father, you who have not withheld your Son Yourself, but You gave Him to death for us, the sinners! (Romans 8, 32) (...) Behold, Lord, I give You my concern, to live. You know my weakness and ignorance. Teach me and heal me. Do not defy me those proud because I meditate on my ransom"* (St. Augustine, 1994, p. 327, 328) During the different stage of the lesson, students can be trained to form the skill of meditating on deeds committed on the day just passed, on different aspects more relevant to him and to the others, to the whole world.

### Conclusions

Environmental education is a field which is approached increasingly by the professionals of education and the approach is justified by the many implications of this area in the formation of integral personality of children and young people, with a major impact on the society of tomorrow. The support that the Religious Education from school can bring to assure the success of environmental education is linked to the way in which it can help students to value the created world as a whole, based on the biblical message. In terms of teaching, the collaboration between school subjects covering different aspects of environmental education issues is required and more than possible, and in this context the Religion Education provides methodologically concrete ways to support students in the inner reflection on the value of life and of creation as a whole.

