

Why We Need an Orthodox Christian Pedagogy

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Before starting any task, it is good to determine whether the task is needed. Since the goal of the following chapters is to articulate, as clearly as possible, the principles of an Orthodox approach to teaching, i.e. an Orthodox pedagogy, it is important to establish the need for such an articulation.

There are currently a few dozen Orthodox grammar schools in the United States, and perhaps several hundred Orthodox families who have chosen to teach their children at home, rather than send them to public or private, non-Orthodox schools. One of the main incentives behind the willingness to make the sacrifices needed to establish these schools is the desire to give children an education within an Orthodox environment rather than subject them to the non-Orthodox, and many times, anti-Christian environments of public and many private schools. If we are to give our children a “fighting chance” to develop correctly in the modern culture, an Orthodox educational environment is key.

Although the motivations behind the establishment of schools, either in the classroom or home setting, have much in common, the educational philosophies of these schools are rather diverse. These elementary schools and home-schooling parents use a variety of approaches.

A few schools are not much different from public schools in their approach. Some use an approach based on the teachings of Charlotte Mason, an English educator who was very active at the turn of the 20th century. Some use the principles and methods seen in the Classical Education, which is based on the thinking of the ancient Greeks and emphasizes the study of Latin and Greek, logic and history. Some are attracted to aspects of Waldorf education, developed by a German philosopher, Rudolph Steiner. Others use the approach of Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator who was active during the first half of the 20th century. While there is some value in each of these approaches, none of them start with the teachings of the Orthodox Church. That does not mean that they are totally opposed to the Church, it simply means that the foundation of these various approaches is not Orthodox Christianity.

If one were to visit grammar schools which were aligned with one of the educational philosophies mentioned above, one would find a significant degree of consistency. Each school’s curriculum and atmosphere would be similar to others using the same approach. However, visiting Orthodox schools, one would not find such consistency. Some would be more Classical, some Montessori, some Charlotte Mason and some very similar to public schools. This observation comes from our visits to Orthodox schools as well as examining how Orthodox schools advertise themselves on their web sites.

At this point, some readers may be thinking, “You are imagining a problem that does not exist. Orthodoxy is a religion; it is not an educational philosophy. What is the problem with Orthodox school using various approaches - Classical, Montessori, Charlotte Mason, or any other approach to education?”

The answer is that Orthodoxy is not a ‘religion’, simply one among many. Orthodoxy is the revelation of Truth, the fulness of Truth, not only concerning the nature of God and His plan for the salvation of mankind, but also concerning the nature of mankind itself. What is important to realize is that at the basis of any educational philosophy lies a particular view or understanding of the nature of a human being and the purpose of education in a child’s life.

Charlotte Mason’s view of a human being was different than Maria Montessori’s view. Therefore the teaching approach is different. The goal of a Classical education is different from the goal of a Waldorf education. Therefore these two approaches emphasize different subject areas and have different teaching methods. The methods of teaching, the subjects emphasized, and the overall goals of these various schools of education reflect their different world-views, specifically their particular view of the nature of a human being. Therefore we should not easily put Orthodoxy in one box and our educational philosophy in another. In doing so, we take on a degree of intellectual disunity by adhering to one view of our nature in church and another view of our nature in our educational efforts.

Another way of illustrating this point would be to compare our Orthodox liturgical life with that of Roman Catholics and Protestants. The liturgical life of any particular faith is the out-picturing, or expression, of that faith’s view of God, of mankind, and of salvation. Orthodox services are, of course, based on the Orthodox world-view, including the Orthodox understanding of a human being. Liturgical services of Roman Catholics and Protestants are very different from ours because they reflect their respective world-views, which are different from ours.

Consider the fact that while there are Orthodox schools which use a Classical approach, there are also Roman Catholic schools, Protestant schools and non-religious schools which use the same approach. The same can be said of schools following the teachings of Charlotte Mason, or Maria Montessori. What is the difference between Orthodox schools using these approaches and non-Orthodox schooling using these same approaches? It is actually the chosen pedagogy which becomes the core of the school. To this core, Orthodox Christians add the teaching and values of Orthodoxy, in the same way that Catholics or Protestants add their teachings and values.

By making these observations, we are not questioning the value of any Orthodox school or educator. Any parish and any parents willing to make the sacrifices required to start a school or to teach their children at home should be commended and greatly appreciated. Yet the fact remains that while some popular approaches to education have excellent aspects to them, none of them come consciously out of an Orthodox world-view. None of them start with the thinking of the Orthodox Church. This is not to say that they are totally wrong, but it is to say that they are not complete because none of them start from the right beginning.

Since educational pedagogies are based on a particular understanding of our human nature, we must start to develop an Orthodox pedagogy based on the Orthodox understanding of a human being. Unless we can develop such a pedagogy, and make it the heart of our schools, the Orthodox aspects of our schools will be only superficially applied to some other pedagogy, like frosting on a non-Orthodox cake.

The question being posed is, “Can we discern the principles upon which a truly Orthodox pedagogy is based? Can we find, in the teaching of Orthodoxy, as expressed in the Holy Scriptures, in the teachings of the Holy Fathers, and in the Orthodox Divine Services, a set of principles or guidelines which can be used in the teaching of our children, not only in terms of *what* we teach, but also *how* we teach, thereby placing Orthodoxy at the core (from the Latin, *cor*, meaning *heart*) of our schools?” The answer is, “Yes, we can.”

Archimandrite Sergius (Bowyer), the abbot of St. Tikhon Monastery in Pennsylvania, in his book, *Acquiring the Mind of Christ*, makes a simple, yet profound, point.

The Church’s mind is the mind of Christ. The way the Church thinks is the way we need to learn to think about God, each other and the world.”

That we should strive to think the way the Church thinks is a goal which would be difficult to gainsay. This simple observation, however, has a corollary that Orthodox teachers should consider. Would not thinking as the Church thinks include teaching as the Church teaches? Our efforts should be toward learning how the Church teaches, because if we learn to teach the way the Orthodox Church teaches, then the core of our schools can be an Orthodox pedagogy rather than the pedagogy of the ancient Greeks, Charlotte Mason, Maria Montessori, or any other popular educator. By starting with the mind and pedagogy of the Church, we could develop an educational approach that is Orthodox at the core, not just on the surface. Our Orthodox schools could then be more faithful extensions of the Church, in that they would be based on the same understanding of human nature as the Church.

All that has been said thus far does not mean that we must totally disregard the various approaches already being used. It certainly does not mean that, once we articulate the principles of an Orthodox pedagogy, we need to develop a standard Orthodox curriculum to be used in all Orthodox schools. That would be disastrous.

It does mean, however, that we must shift the beginning point of our thinking. It means that we need to articulate a set of criteria, based on the Orthodox Christian teachings concerning the nature of a human being, that can be used to evaluate various educational methods. Some aspects of other pedagogies may be acceptable, others may not be acceptable.

If we learn to teach the way the Churches teaches, then we can hope to fulfill St. Theophan’s admonition,

It should be placed as an unfailing law that every kind of learning which is taught to a Christian should be penetrated with Christian principles, more precisely, Orthodox ones. Christian principles are true beyond doubt. Therefore, without any doubting, make them the general measuring stick of truth. (*The Path to Salvation*, pg. 64)

Where are we to find these principles? It does not seem reasonable to look for them in non-Orthodox sources. Charlotte Mason had some wonderful insights, and Marie Montessori had some as well, but neither had an Orthodox world-view. Promoters of Classical Education appeal to a system that originated before Christianity. It was used in ancient Greece and continued to be used in after the establishment of Christianity. Looking to the past for answers may be a good start, but why only in the past? Our Orthodox faith is ever fresh, ever new, the same through the ages. Perhaps the source of these principles is right before our eyes.