Education in the Contemporary Culture: „That the World May Believe“

This paper analyses the role of education in the religious formation of an individual in Soviet and post-Soviet society. It discusses how Catholic doctrine was transmitted during the period of intensive anti-religious propaganda in Latvia. With the example of the Roerich movement, the author demonstrates how in post-Soviet society a wide variety of non-Christian ideologies try to fill the ideological void left after the collapse of the Soviet regime. The author stresses that for the Church there is an urgent necessity to guarantee a continuity of religious education on all levels of formation of the individual.

The Classical and the Judeo-Christian Understanding of Education

The term “education” stems from the Latin educo – “to lead out” (ex – “out”; duco – “to lead”). This expression points to the possibility of activating, developing and perfecting the potentiality that may be found in every human being. The Greek term paideia – “education, formation, culture” comes from the noun pais – “child”. In paideia emphasis lies in the general formation of children. But the chief purpose of paideia was to communicate to the child the values necessary for life in society and to prepare him to take his place in the life of the state. There existed a clear-cut difference between paideia and technē: the latter simply produced a craftsman¹. The Hebrew term tōrāh – “instruction”, “law” includes a wider religious, cultic, ethical, sapiential and legal perspective². Tōrāh is the Law that embraces all aspects of life in society.

Western culture has synthesized and further developed these three forms in its understanding of education. Education begins in childhood, continues during school years, and eventually lasts through all of life³. The distinction between Bildung (technical, professional education) and Ausbildung (a humanistically oriented education) has become obsolete⁴. Every kind of education must communicate technical knowledge; but it must also communicate something else: high ethical qualities, such as a sense of responsibility, a capacity for teamwork, an ability to make decisions, and sense of loyalty⁵. Religious education is not an exception. The equality and interdependence between theory and praxis already manifest themselves in the early stages of a child’s integration into the Christian community and into the family. The Catholic way of life and a conscientious study of religion become extremely important during the years of a person’s formal education. A special theological education is required for those who will serve the Church as priests and

Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamas švietimo vaidmuo religiskai ugdant atsiškinius sovietinius ir posovietinius laikotarpus. Remdamasis Rericho paminklo pavyzdžiu autore parodo, kaip įvairios nekritiškios ideologijos mėgina užpildyti posovietinėje visuomenėje susidariusią švietimą su tuo pačiu po sovietų režimu žlugimu. Autorė pabrėžia, kad Bažnyčiai iškyla netiksliausia būtinybė laidoti religinio švietimo tęstinumą visose asmens ugdytojų pakopose.
catechists⁶. And a highly specialized academic education is necessary for those who, as scholars and scientists, will promote the Christian faith and way of life⁷.

As the history of the Western world clearly demonstrates, there has been little difficulty in synthesizing the Classical and the Judeo-Christian understanding of education. Such a synthesis has led to our understanding of education and its role in society. The difficulty arises rather in the practical implementation of this understanding in modern secular society. Today education retains its role for the development of personality (the Latin approach), or for preparing someone for life in society (the Greek approach). But the impact of religious, ethical and, especially, of cultic elements (the Jewish and Christian approach) has gradually lost its influence in the state or private school system, with the exception of institutions with a special religious orientation. Is this purely a result of the division between the State and the Church? The secularly organized State uses its right to determine what should and what will be taught to its citizens in order to prepare them for life in society. Or is it a more complex phenomenon which also presents the various trends and movements within society?

Two Types of Education

Let us compare two different types of relations among the State, society and the Church, as well as their goals in, and impact on, the sphere of education. In the Soviet type (the same is true in other materialistically oriented dictatorial regimes), education was based on a purely materialistic view of the world¹. The ideology of the one ruling party was imposed by force on the whole of society. The child was practically under the pressure of the official ideology even before becoming acquainted with it on the theoretical level. This ideological and cultural pressure was imposed by families. In many of them parents were afraid to transmit the fullness of the Catholic faith to their children because it would expose the child to persecution in school. The non-existence of God was drilled into the future member of society as early as kindergarten and during all the school years. In the universities, what was called scientific atheism was taught as an obligatory course at every department. This anti-religious education was enforced and continued through state-controlled mass-media, conferences, and regular anti-religious meetings at work. Political institutions (the Communist party, the Young Communist League, the Octobrians) and state organizations were effective means for reinforcing this ideology in society. The whole educational system was aimed at creating “the new man” who does not believe.

But in what did this whole educational complex really consist? Was this education – that the world may not believe, as it was represented in Soviet ideology? On the one hand, the state required that the individual should accept the official doctrine of the non-existence of God. But on the other hand, the principal question for the individual was not whether to believe or not. It has always been affirmative: to believe. The question was rather: in what or in whom? The state demanded belief in the non-existence of God, in the prophetic role and infallibility of the Party, in the charismatic quality of its leaders, in a better tomorrow and the final victory of Communism. The Soviet model of education was impregnated with concepts and practices transposed from the religious sphere into the domain of materialistic ideology. Soviet education was an education that the world may believe.

In spite of the enormous efforts of this educational system, it succeeded only partly for various reasons. It should however be recognized that these reasons had a charac-
ter that was primarily educational. On the one hand traditional Christian values were handed down by means of unofficial but parallel Christian education. Such an education, elementary as it mostly was, was achieved through families, underground publications, illegal activities by catechists and priests, and, to a lesser extent, through the very few officially permitted ecclesiastic institutions that were strictly controlled and limited in their activities. On the other hand, and this is the most paradoxical fact, the success of Soviet atheistic education was already greatly reduced by its repressive nature that strove to exclude every other type of doctrine. Because of this the Catholic Church and the Christian faith in general were considered by society as an alternative to the official ideology that gradually lost its appeal because of the permanent presence of obvious lies in almost every sphere of life.

The relations among the State, society and the Church in post-Soviet society are completely different. There is no obligatory world view anymore. But a cultural void in ideology has been left after the collapse of official Soviet education. This void has been automatically filled by Christian but also perhaps to an even greater extent by new religious movements. As an example let us analyze the presence and influence of N. Roerich’s movement in Latvia on educational and cultural life.

Nicholas Roerich (1874 – 1947) was the artist of extraordinary Himalayan landscapes who created more than 7000 paintings. He and his wife Helena compiled their own doctrinal variant of Theosophy. They published 15 volumes containing the teaching of Living Ethics or Agni Yoga. The Roerichs presented their doctrine in the form of revelations received from the Master, and claimed to encompass and synthesize the philosophies and religious teachings of all ages. N. Roerich defined his own mission in terms of beauty and knowledge, and dedicated his activity to the idea of the synthesis of cultures. The influence of his thought is international and enduring, and his effort to form a universal culture went beyond a purely theoretic description. In 1922, in New York, he founded the Corona Mundi, an International Art Center which recognized beauty as the pinnacle of human existence. This society sponsored schools, art studies, libraries, exhibitions, concerts and scientific expeditions. In this way N. Roerich societies continue the social mission that is an important dimension of contemporary theosophical activities. The Roerich Museum was opened to the public in 1924. His effort to focus international attention on the importance of preserving and protecting the world’s cultural heritage culminated in the so-called Roerich Pact, the international treaty signed in 1935 to protect and preserve cultural institutions and monuments in times of war.

After 1918, when theosophists in Russia were subject to persecution, Latvia became the center of their activity. The main agent was the Roerich Society in Riga. During the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries (1940 – 1991) the Society was banned but its literature continued to be very popular. Whoever visited a museum exhibiting N. Roerich’s paintings entered not only “the realm of Roerich” dominated by the glorious landscapes of the Himalayan mountains, but gradually came under the influence of his Theosophy. During M. Gorbachev’s political reforms in the former Soviet Union the Roerich movement became part of the renaissance of theosophical thought. The Roerich Society in Riga was already revived in 1988 and almost immediately began to issue the Agni Yoga series in both Russian and Latvian. In the face of the confusion created by recent political and socio-cultural developments and changes in the value system, Latvians are attracted by the
theosophical world outlook and they show an extreme openness to N. Roerich’s culture-centered theosophical thought. There are several reasons, but the central and most important is the role of education. Roerich not only pretended to create a new spiritual culture, but also insisted that it ought to be taught from the earliest years of childhood and that it is necessary to introduce into schools a new system of education. According to the teaching of N. Roerich, every human being becomes a cultured person not in virtue of interpersonal relationship with other human beings, but in virtue of acceptance of the one Truth. In his opinion, true culture means a deep insight into Theosophy which transforms the people and makes them able to penetrate the mysteries of the universe. Thus education means the awakening of the latent powers of the child. The Roerichs’ attention is centered on the “building of individuality”\(^4\), on the individual perfection that can be reached by means of Agni Yoga, a new yoga system that they created. This perfection however has another, further, cosmic scope: the evolution of the universe. The individual turns out to be nothing more than a means for cosmic evolution.

Since N. Roerich’s doctrine is almost always initially masked by his theory of culture and the manifold cultural activities by which Theosophy is spread in practice, his theosophical doctrine is gradually assimilated until it becomes a lifelong concern that affects all aspects of an individual’s life.

It becomes more and more evident that the activities of N. Roerich’s movement on the educational and cultural level are principally directed towards one main goal: society in Latvia, Russia, and eventually the whole world, should believe. But it should believe in the doctrine of the Roerichs. This goal makes the activities of the movement, as well as those of any other pseudo-spiritual movement, similar to the ideological, educational and cultural activities of the preceding Soviet regime. And education is considered as the basic and principal means for propagating the movement, as was done by the propagators of Soviet ideology.

Education of the Soviet type tried to suppress faith in Jesus Christ and to replace it with blind faith in the Classics of Marxism-Leninism, such as Marx, Engels and Lenin. N. Roerich’s movement tries to replace the Christian faith with the theosophical view of the world. And it has more success because of its apparently unofficial propaganda, the presence of active members of the movement on all levels of political and state institutions, and the great impact they have on the educational system and on mass media. From all this it is easy to understand that Theosophy in Latvia has an enormous impact on socio-cultural and religious life and forms a real challenge to the new evangelization in Latvia.

**The Church’s Response**

What should be the Church’s response to such situations? What are the priorities in the field of education? The actual situation will always be different because of different levels of democracy and liberty, cultural and ideological differences, the movements involved, and other factors. There is no one universal answer and every situation has to be evaluated individually. Nevertheless the principal goal of the Church has been, is, and will always be, the same - to proclaim Jesus Christ to the whole world\(^5\). The organization and structure of society is also basically the same, although the type of state and social structure may vary considerably. And in any society education constitutes the principal element of cultural formation. All together this permits us to distinguish some permanent objectives in
the educational sphere.

It is well known that the basic unit of society is the family. Education begins in the family\(^6\), which is largely responsible for transmitting basic moral and religious values to future generations. The family is also responsible for the choice of an adequate further education for the children\(^7\). Therefore it is obvious that one of the principal objectives of the Church should be to reach families. How this will be done practically depends on the actual situation. The variety of means used for reaching families will result in a wider and deeper influence on parents. Families can be reached through parishes, priests, religious and trained lay persons. A very positive experience, at least in Latvia, has been the Cana Movement. Every possibility should be explored to reach families through mass-media and religious literature. Sunday school and religion classes in the schools may provide a two-way connection with the family. They can also become a starting point for the first contact with parents who are otherwise far from Church life. On the other hand, Christian parents can contribute positively to the spreading of Christian values at school by active participation in such activities as the elections of the school board.

Another objective in the educational sphere should be the educational system itself. The eventual presence of religion classes in the primary and secondary school, as well as the system of parallel religious education within the structures of the Church, both require adequately prepared religion teachers. Therefore it is an essential task for the Church to promote theological studies for these future professors. The presence of the Church in academic society and the success of evangelization will depend largely on the quality of priests and catechists. On the one hand, as far as it is possible, an intense and constant contact by lay students with the Church should be encouraged. On the other hand, future priests and catechists have to be provided with a solid academic formation.

Another objective, which should not be undervalued, is the influence of Christians on the political and administrative decisions of the government in the field of education. The presence, absence, and status of religious education at school depend on the decisions that are taken on the highest levels of state administration. The presence of a democratic election system mobilizes the attention of society around the necessity of promoting Christian values and religious education. This will guarantee a status of equal opportunities for the Catholic school and will also make religious education accessible to all.

It is of extreme importance in the field of education to use the mass media efficiently, because these reach the whole of society. Therefore it is necessary to program a strategy for reaching different groups and social structures within society as a whole. High-quality religious educational and cultural programs on radio and TV, as well as professionally prepared contributions to periodicals and newspapers, can prepare the way for a successful evangelization of society. The professionally managed Catholic press should be considered one of the Church’s priorities for Christian education.

The availability of mass media for programs and initiatives of Christian content may vary from country to country. The same is true regarding the possibility of influencing the decisions of the actual or future government regarding the educational system as such. It is a necessary to reach all classes of society. Much must be done to raise the level of theological studies for priests, catechists and lay people. All this, however, should be considered as a single complex because of the interdependence of the objectives.
Conclusion

In conclusion it should be recognized that there is an urgent necessity to intensify the Church’s presence and activities in the educational sphere, as far as it is legally permitted in democratic countries, and as far as it is practically possible in countries with open or hidden anti-Christian politics. Parallel educational work should also be carried out within the Church’s structures, such as seminaries and parishes. Therefore the principal objectives of the Church’s activities in the educational camp are families, educational institutions, mass-media, as well as state institutions and political organizations. Evangelization should be considered as the main goal of Church activities in the field of education: that the world may believe.

REFERENCES

9. „Leaves of Morya’s Garden: The Call“ (1924); „Leaves of Morya’s Garden: Illumination“ (1925); „New Era Community“ (1926); „Agni Yoga“ (1929); „Infinity I“ (1930); „Infinity II“ (1930); „Hierarchy“ (1931); „Heart“ (1932); „Fiery World I“ (1933); „Fiery World II“ (1934); „Fiery World III“ (1935); „Aum“ (1936); „Brotherhood“ (1937); „Supermundane I“ (1938); „Supermundane II“ (1939).
10. In an item in the New York „Newsday“ of December 5, 1989, it is acknowledged that Gorbachev is fond of Roerich: „Two years ago, Gorbachev invited Roerich’s son to lunch at the Kremlin and told him that he would sponsor a Roerich center in Moscow. As a result, Roerich societies have sprung up in cities across that country and Raisa Gorbachev has been involved in the starting of a fund in his name.“ (Quoted in *Cranston S.* The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement. New York 1993. P. 551.)

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