

SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION: IS THERE A CONNECTION?

Father Theodore Efthimiadis

In Classical Greece, the principle of education, or, *paidia*, originated from the word for child, *paidi*. For the Classical world of the Greeks, from which many of our ideas about pedagogy emerge, education was not merely a means of providing knowledge, but also a form of developing character.

Today's educational system is often described as a means of providing "the know how," which is critical for students to join the work force prepared and make a decent living. Of course there is nothing wrong providing technical or technological knowledge. Humans are, I argue, more than knowledge and physical strength, which we develop from participating in sports and academic exercises. We are also spiritual beings with spiritual needs and inspirations. Today, we are overfed with technological knowledge, but underfed spiritually. Thinking of education, I am reminded of a captain who knew how to pilot his ship but he did not know how to get to his destination. Life's skills should include spiritual strength, as well as academic and technical, and a knowledge that goes beyond understanding. Aristotle, the philosopher of reasoning, perhaps, overly influenced western educational philosophy.

The question is how do get this spiritual knowledge?

Saint Paul arrived in Athens during his travels and preaching and, after taking a tour of the city with its institutions and temples, stood at the Areopagus to speak to the Athenians. We know that Classical Athens was regarded as a sophisticated and advanced state in ancient Greece, perhaps the world. According to Greek thought at the time, a person was regarded a thinking being when he or she would become conscious and reflective of him or herself, as well as his or her environment through the use of intellect.

Saint Paul, in many respects, addressed the philosophers, who were primarily Stoics and Epicureans. These two philosophies exist also today. The Stoics represent a pantheistic impersonal theory of the universe and the Epicureans a more atheistic worldview. Both are different, but have something in common. They are humanistic philosophies, trying to explain the make how of the world through purely rational and intellectual means.

Saint Paul sought to introduce them to an alternative way of understanding their place in the world. He said, "I went to the City and through my walk I discovered a Temple to the unknown God. I came to introduce to you who this unknown God is. So he introduces to them the idea of a personal God who desires to share his person with us {spiritual knowledge} through the love revealed to us by his crucified and

risen Son. Through this spiritual knowledge, mankind can receive inner strength to see things from a different perspective (Acts: 17, 22-32).

From the Christian perspective, we are now spiritual beings created in the image of God, and as such we have a responsibility not only for ourselves but also for each other and the environment. Based on this knowledge, we cannot treat others as numbers, or part of a system that only a few of us can manipulate. Communist and fascist dictators saw humans not as persons, but part of a mass to be exploited. Surely, now the same philosophy is used in the Western world, characterized by self-centeredness and corporal greed. We have neglected the psychological and spiritual needs of our populations by cutting them off from their spirituality in the educational system. As a result, we see today the effect this philosophy lacking spiritual depth has in the lives of the students: violence, drinking, bullying, indecency, and spiritual emptiness demonstrated by the rise of suicides.

Over the past few weeks across the world, we have seen a dramatic antagonism coming into effect, between the new generation and the old corporate world of greed and political dysfunction. The youth, primarily through the means of social media, is organizing and demands to be heard. We seem to be witnessing the death of this hierarchical and manipulative world system, and the emergence of a new dynamic.

How did we get to this point?

In part, I argue, it is because we have abandoned the values of the classical educational system, which was forming a person's character by addressing a person's intellect, spirituality, and self-respect, with a humanistic, self-centered system that neglects the above. We learn that there is no absolute good, and that ethics is subject to reality and social conformity. So what stops me from doing crooked business, as long as I am successful and happy and manage not to get caught?

Saint Paul was not the only person who introduced spiritual knowledge to philosophy and through philosophy to education. Spiritual education was practiced from the beginning of the Byzantine Empire to the past century. The idea was explained by numerous homilies by the famous Three Hierarchs: Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Basil the Great and Saint John Chrysostom. These three Bishops fused the spiritual knowledge of an immanent personal God with the axioms of the classical Greek philosophers. As a result, educational thought throughout the Byzantine world encouraged people to think, concerned the ethic of discipline and hard work, and followed spiritual principles that sought to develop virtue in thought and deed. The fusion of spirituality, ethics and intellect knowledge made people resilient in crises, fulfilled esoterically and strong, which was expressed in altruistic actions such as missionary activity, person-centered educational and social work, and volunteerism for the needs of others.

It should not be a problem then for all these benefits to introduce spirituality to our educational system. And, yet, there is such a huge antagonism, where we should have in our educational institutions environments fostering and encouraging a synthesis

of philosophical and spiritual dialogue to go along with technological and intellectual knowledge. Give the students a chance to redeem themselves and mankind by total knowledge. Intellectual knowledge is only a part of the make up of human existence. Saint Paul is talking about a knowledge that passes all knowledge (Ephesians 3:19).

This journal's title is "Antistasis" meaning from the Greek, to stand against. Let us stand against a culture that wants to separate education from spirituality. More than ever, we need to equip our youth with the knowledge from above to be able to face the modern crises and the tremendous challenges that lie ahead of them.

Rev. Theodore Efthimiadis
Greek Orthodox Church