

Teaching Approaches of the Past and Present in Religious Studies

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast how Religious Studies were taught in the past with how they are taught today. First, we will define what we mean by the term “past”, by referring to the period when the actual teaching of religious studies began. We will also put emphasis on the actual essence of the specific lesson and search for any possibilities to make it more modern and up to date; a comparison with other European countries will also guide us towards this new direction. Finally, we will examine the practical part of teaching Religious Studies through all teaching models in all classes of Primary school.

Key words: religious, lesson, today, old, Europe, models

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to compare the teaching methods of earlier years with today, through the respective school textbooks.

Nevertheless, prior to discussing the teaching methods and their evolution, it is important to clarify whether the subject of Religious Studies can be evolved and if there are any possibilities for modernization.

For this reason we should look at:

- 1) Religious Studies as a teaching subject;
- 2) The principles of the Religious Studies course;
- 3) What is happening in other European Countries?
- 4) The socio-religious level.

1.1 Religious Studies as a Subject

Religious studies are classified as a theoretical lesson whose aim is the human reference to God. Unlike in philosophy, poetry and other theoretical sciences, the scholar can soar indefinitely but in religious that cannot be vague. The rules, the terminology and the universal answers for God, define a clear space for search. However, when these universal answers are being challenged and questioned, we are in danger of being unconsidered heretics and not theologians! Therefore, we are safe in the lesson only when we follow the words of the Bible (Old and New Testament books) and the Holy Fathers. In addition, the current legislation and specifically the law on education (1566/85), states that in Greece the subject of religious studies is dogmatic and not inter-religious. Thus, every teacher, regardless of his/her personal beliefs, is obliged to teach the lesson based on the dogmatic and confessional framework of religion.

1.2 Brief Overview of the Religious Studies Lesson (Principles of Religious)

From ancient Greece, religion existed as a field for research. Among the Twelve Greek Gods, there was Athena, the goddess of wisdom; statues to honor her, dominated the most important parts of each place. Almost all of the ancient philosophers theologized and researched the true God, many were exiled for their beliefs and some managed to convince others, by building the famous statue of “the unknown God”. Later, in Byzantium, the dominant position of the Church with Religious Education was evident, and the great teachers of the aristocracy, who were mostly priests and monks, were using the Patriarchal Texts as textbooks. A noteworthy detail in the observation of this strong connection between education and religion, is the word “psalter” which refers both to the book of Psalms of the prophet David, but also to the name of a musical instrument, which was used in reading and singing. In the post-Byzantine years, the spark that ignited the fire of the Greek Revolution was the Orthodox teaching of Patrocosmas of Etolos, who taught Greek letters, exclusively through ecclesiastical texts, to enslaved Greek children (1760). With Faith in God and love for the enslaved Homeland, the Revolutionary Struggle of the Greeks against the Ottoman Turks began, which ended in the liberation of the Greek Nation. The prominent position of the Church in the first Greek state was a natural consequence; given the fact that it was organized immediately (1833) as a public authority, acquiring the status of the National Church.

1.3 The Lesson of Religious Studies in other European Countries

The papacy (papal revolution of the 11th century) and Protestantism (Protestant reform) were orientated to a different direction which became clearly and visibly autonomous, almost throughout the rest of the West. In Germany, for example, the subject of Religions differs from region to region (due to the many religions), so it is taught exclusively by people of the specific religion who hold some kind of “Certificate”. In England, the subject of religion is also decentralized by the public education system and is taught by certified representatives of the various religions. In Italy, which is the pre-eminent core of Papism (a resemblance to Greece - the core of Orthodoxy), the lesson is the responsibility of the national Education system; however, its content is designed in collaboration with the Council of Catholic Bishops. This paradigm could also be applied to modern Greece. This unclear relationship between the State and the Church creates most of the problems in the teaching of Religious studies, and essentially degrades the lesson or even destroys it!

1.4 Socio-religious Level

More specifically, in recent years, we have observed a permanent instability in the content of the Religious Studies course, and therefore in the ways of its teaching. On the one hand, the Greek educational system is trying to adopt many elements from the constantly developing scientific-educational-pedagogical model of the West, in order to modernize it. At the same time, however, the content of the course changes and tends to become more inter-religious, instead of dogmatic, trying to soften interfaith differences with other countries. Of course, this is immediately criticized by the Ecclesiastical Authorities as secular and probably heretical (or globalizing). Respectively, on the other hand, when one recalls the long-standing, inseparable ties between the State and the Church, one can be considered old-fashioned and obsolete. Unfortunately, however, in this power battle for the subject of Religious Studies the teachers cannot be held responsible. For instance, a philologist who advocates Modern Greek must teach polytone in ancient Greek, and a physicist must teach theorems that he knows that they have already been refuted. Thus, the teacher or the theologian should be limited to the genuine Orthodox dogmatic teaching, letting the students to mature and to seek for the Truth, later in their lives. The purpose of the teacher is not to solve the modern religious problem, and in fact in front of his students. The purpose of teaching Religious

Studies is purification, enlightenment and deification! In any national educational system, the course of Religious Studies aims at the personal transcendence of the student, from the human to the divine — taking, of course, into consideration — the religion of each state. Therefore, in Greece, the goal is to help students through the Right Doctrine of our Faith, to help them overcome their weaknesses and quest for wisdom to climb the spiritual ladder. Let us focus, then, on the fact that the teacher is obliged to teach Religious studies within the Right of the Orthodox Church (our official religion), regardless of his/her personal views, perceptions and ideas.

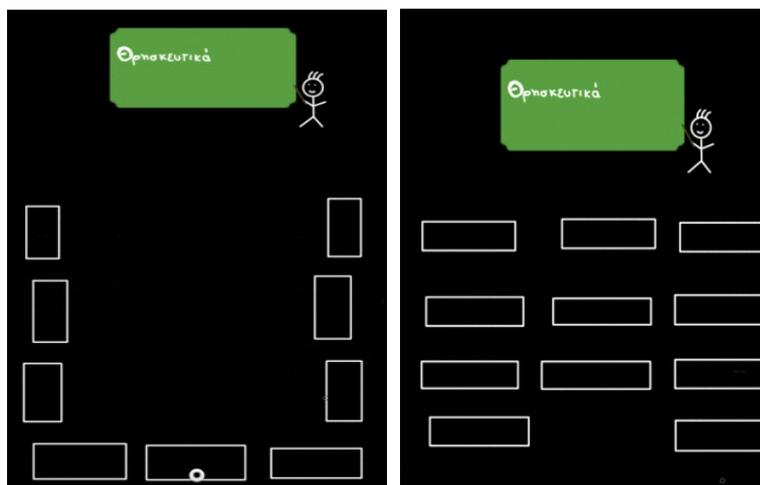
1.5 Proposal for Solving the Current Problem of Religious Studies

Closing the theoretical part of my presentation I will quote two important men, “To be free, you must first learn to be poor” says V. Hugo, and “If you give freedom to the child when he is young, you deprive him of it when he grows up”, speech of Ag. John Chrysostom. Therefore, let us trust ONE way and based on this, we should build the consciousness of our students. These “poor” people later in the lives, will discover a plethora of occasions to seek or confirm the Truth.

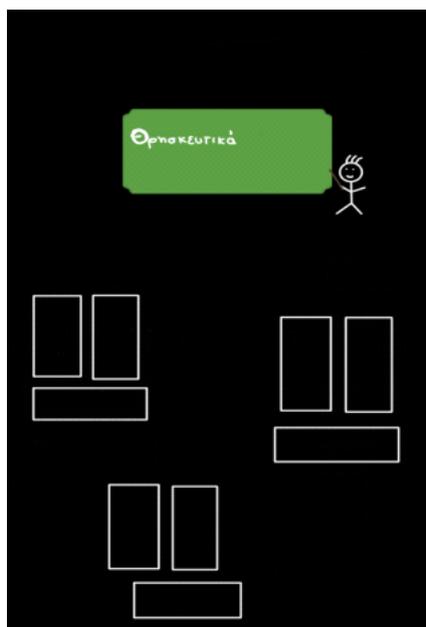
2. Practical Part

Moving onto the practical part, we should remember a traditional, teacher-centered teaching of Religious Studies, in which the teacher as the authority figure provides new knowledge to children (not only in Religious Studies, but in other subjects as well). Thus, we need to follow two teaching methods with more modern pedagogical systems (discovery and constructive learning model), where the lesson becomes an experiential one, improving and upgrading new knowledge acquisition.

We have all experienced and some of us also applied the traditional, teacher-centred teaching. The arrangement of the desks is usually in a vertical and parallel alignment, or in a Π (P) shape. As the teacher is the protagonist of the teaching, he/she usually teaches keeping some distance from the students to reinforce his/her authority. He/she analyzes and explains the new teaching material according to his/her designed lesson plan, according to his/her own pace and timeframe. Sometimes he/she uses specific material to accompany the prepared narrative, but this does not happen very often. The danger that lurks in this model is that the students do not pay attention, no matter how great and brilliant the teacher’s narration is. The worst scenario would be students falling asleep at their desks. But the main problem is that we cannot know if students understood the new knowledge and to what extent. There is absolute silence in the room and the students speak only after the teacher’s permission.



The next and safer model is the discovery one, which is experiential. Our teaching is usually collaborative and here the students discover the new knowledge on their own, structuring the teaching to their own needs. Of course, this requires very good preparation from the teacher who distributes some material; the children thus discover or search on the internet (if there is a computer), or some newspapers or magazines or photocopies that the teacher shares, the new knowledge. Thus, we are simply a good conductor of this interactive process. There may be some productive noise in the class, however, based on my experience, the noise most of times becomes less loud when students become accustomed to working in groups; they gradually become more productive and quiet. In the end, they all design the new lesson together which they have already mastered. The question here, however, may be whether all courses have the opportunity to be taught in such an exploratory manner. “How can one discover the Ten Commandments?”, Or “How is the parable of the Prodigal son discovered?”. Certainly some topics are a bit “more convenient” and offer more in this type of teaching. However, nothing is impossible for an inventive teacher. If one cannot get students to discover the new lesson on their own, they can give them information from different sources so that students can acquire the needed information and keep notes. For example, in the ten commandments, we can divide the students into ten groups of two - three people, offer them a commandment and the opinions of some fathers for that commandment. We should then ask them, based on the given information, to write a paragraph about it and draw a picture - painting - sketch – comic in twenty minutes! Afterwards taking turns, all the groups can present to their classmates their command, so that at the end of the lesson, we have an overall result that is the new knowledge. Another example can be the parable of the Prodigal son. Here we could suggest (probably for the younger classes) the teacher to make a brief description of the parable and then divide the students into as many groups as he/she wants, giving them different materials to reproduce the story again, e.g., Lego, to make the scenes of our parable, or at least one with Lego bricks. Respectively, another group with plasticine, another painting on paper and another with dramatization (to play it as a sketch - role play). The results are surprisingly amazing, in all of the above ideas, and most importantly, the students do not have to study at home. As for the evaluation of our teaching? We just grade the accuracy of each team in relation to the topic!



Finally, the constructive model, which although it offers wonderful results, it requires tremendous patience from the teacher and an excellent relationship with his/her students. The essence of this model is to understand students' feelings and views, and after a guided discussion to challenge and dismiss misconceptions of the past. An example of teaching the Prodigal parable again (to see it compared to the other models); some of the questions we can ask for our purposeful discussion are the following:

- Does anyone know what the “parable of the prodigal son” means? (etymological)
- What could the parable of the Prodigal tell? Let someone tell us a possible story (persons - place - season - plot – etc.).
- Let us now read the parable from the New Testament.
- In the end, was the story you told me similar to the authentic one?
- Do you think that your parents (like the father)/or you (like the Prodigal son? Or like the other brother) would treat you in a similar manner?
- What does the parable ultimately teach us?
- Is it easy to acquire the behavior of the protagonists? What do we have to do?
- Example two is the teaching of the ten commandments:
- Do you know the Ten Commandments?
- What are the Ten Commandments?
- What do we need the Ten Commandments for?

Then we reveal the Ten Commandments.

- Why are these the ten Commandments?
- What does each of the Ten Commandments mean?
- What do we achieve when we respect the ten Commandments?

As for the aforementioned questions, there are student answers that will surprise us, make us laugh or not believe how much ignorance there is in the world. Honestly, these alternative answers are also the most useful for us as humans, but also as scholars. Because now, due to our many years of study, we forget the primary views that could lead us not only to new scientific horizons of research, but to self-knowledge as well! Let us remember so many Saints of our Church who, while illiterate, managed to acquire the Supreme Wisdom, God (see St. Spyridon, St. Porphyry)!

Ladies and gentlemen, let us make a decision to change the way knowledge is transmitted, and let knowledge remain to those in charge. We should oppose to our personal experiences and standards as students, and modernize our teaching, making it more attractive and experiential. Our students' voices must be heard and we should therefore, give them the role they deserve since learning is for their benefit and progress!

3. Religious and New Technologies

As it is well known, the digitization of any subject makes it more attractive for students, but also relaxing for the teacher. However, what do we mean by the term digitization? If we mean the simple replacement of the physical trainer by a digital one, we are referring to a devaluation of the teaching/learning process. No matter how attractive the graphics we use are, the “living” is always superior to the virtual, since it can be adapted to the natural persons it addresses, offering greater immediacy. On the contrary, the virtual narrator-animator, simply because he cannot escape from his programming, loses immediacy and tends to become boring. Therefore,

depending on the conditions and the possibilities of the teacher, we will consider the percentage of new Technologies in our lesson, but without completely replacing the physical face of the teacher!

However, we observe opposite results in terms of the evaluation (empathy) of our students. We realize that a digital quiz or a video game gives us the same or even better results than a possible written or oral examination of our students. Firstly, because these games are usually more enjoyable and less stressful (compared to the strict and cold room), secondly, because they are fairer in their comments, feedback for everyone with the possibility of infinite repetitions and thirdly, because they can be made asynchronous in order to save few precious working hours from the teachers!

4. Conclusions

As teaching methods, student-centered ones are proposed, which make the lesson more attractive and easy to follow, while gaining new knowledge from school, and not as homework. New Technologies can offer us the advantage of digitization, attractive delivery, but also asynchronous and remote evaluation of our students. Ultimately, however, we should keep in mind that the role of the teacher is to transmit new knowledge, always submitting to the doctrine of the Church, thus creating a solid ground in the subsequent quests of his/her students.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us make a decision to change the way knowledge is transmitted, and let knowledge be left to those in charge. Let us oppose our personal experiences and standards as students and let us modernize our teaching, making it more attractive and more experiential. Let's listen to our students and give them the role they deserve, learning is theirs! I wish the Great Teacher and Educator, the Merciful Lord to enlighten us. Thanks!

As a final conclusion we should keep that the role of the teacher is to transmit new knowledge, submitting to the doctrine of our Church, setting strong foundations in the souls of his/her students, thus creating a solid ground for their subsequent quests. As teaching methods, student-centered ones are proposed, which make the lesson more attractive and easy to follow, while acquiring new knowledge from school, and not as homework.

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