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Educating for Communion: Orthodox Responses to Pluralism and Extremism

Abstract.

This study examines the challenges contemporary education faces in reconciling religious values within a globalized world characterized by individualism and extremism. The article explores how educational systems can maintain coherence while engaging with diverse perspectives and global influences, proposing pluralistic approaches that support critical thinking and intercultural encounter. Building upon the Ecumenical Patriarchate's document *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, the study highlights the Orthodox Church's theological commitment to ecumenical engagement as a model for educational responses to religious diversity, grounding interfaith encounter in liturgical theology, Eucharistic communion, and the pursuit of peace.

The study proposes that effective religious education in pluralistic contexts must be both confessional and intercultural, particular and universal, rooted in authentic tradition while capable of meaningful encounter with other traditions.

Key Orthodox concepts such as *theosis* (deification), *phronema* (mind of the Church), *kenosis* (self-emptying), and *philoxenia* (hospitality) provide theological and pedagogical foundations for countering extremism and fostering genuine pluralistic engagement.

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The paper's original contribution lies in applying Orthodox liturgical theology, specifically *theosis*, *kenosis*, *philoxenia*, and *phronema*, as a constructive normative framework for pluralist religious education, moving beyond mere tolerance towards a theologically grounded pedagogy of communion that advances further than existing secular or liberal pluralism models.

By demonstrating that Orthodox liturgical practice functions as a formative pedagogy cultivating dispositions (kenotic openness, eucharistic solidarity, eschatological hope) directly applicable to pluralistic educational contexts, this study shows how strong religious identity and genuine pluralistic openness are not competing values but theologically unified in the Orthodox framework.

The article concludes that the future of education in pluralistic societies depends on developing robust frameworks that balance fidelity to tradition with openness to intercultural encounter, grounded in positive visions of human flourishing, communal life, and divine communion.

Keywords: religious education, pluralism, Orthodox theology, ecumenical dialogue, extremism, liturgical theology, intercultural education, value transmission, globalization, educational ethics

1. Introduction

Many people still look for the salvation of the world in a romantic key, appealing to education and religious, cultural, or even political values as a safe solution to overcome crises and challenges such as individualism and extremism. Today, we witness a crisis of values not because they have become obsolete but because contemporary man no longer believes in them, convinced that they are rooted in a peculiar experience of a particular era. Today, the reference points are different, marked by individualism, progress, and each person has all the freedom to construct their universe of beliefs and values as they wish.²

However, suppose we still appeal to values today. In that case, it means we can situate ourselves within a long series of experiences from previous generations that we assume to be valid today for us as well. Values always claim acceptance of a communal experience and place the person in a broader axiological context, in which, as a receiver

² DELSOL, Chantal (2022): *Sfârșitul creștinătății. Inversiunea normativă și noul timp*. Transl. and preface by Teodor Baconschi. Bucharest, Spandugino. 55.

of these values, they become, in turn, a transmitter within their community. This is how tradition is born and nourished, itself as the main foundation of an education process, alongside with respect for values.³

This study proposes that Orthodox theology offers a distinctive and constructive contribution to these debates. The paper's original contribution lies in two interconnected claims: First, it demonstrates that Orthodox liturgical theology, specifically the concepts of *theosis*, *kenosis*, *philoxenia*, and *phronema*, provides a constructive normative framework for pluralist religious education that moves beyond procedural tolerance towards a theologically grounded pedagogy of communion. Second, it shows that Orthodox liturgical practice functions as a formative pedagogy, cultivating dispositions (kenotic openness, eucharistic solidarity, *philoxenia* 'hospitality') directly applicable to pluralistic educational contexts. This advances beyond existing discussions by providing a theologically coherent account of how strong religious identity and genuine pluralistic openness are not in tension but mutually constitutive, and by grounding normative responses to diversity not in neutral procedural frameworks but in a positive theological anthropology of communion and human flourishing.

At the outset, this paper will examine how the key concepts of pluralism, extremism, values, and dialogue can serve as its conceptual framework.

The term "pluralism" operates on two distinct levels that must be carefully distinguished for educational discourse. Pluralism means a balance between distinction and the factual coexistence, between what we call descriptive pluralism – the factual coexistence of diverse worldviews in a society – and normative pluralism, which means the ethical or political claim that such diversity ought to be affirmed and protected.⁴ Descriptive pluralism refers to the empirical fact of diversity, the observable coexistence of multiple religious, cultural, and philosophical worldviews within a given society or educational context. This is a sociological observation: contemporary classrooms, neighbourhoods, and

³ CHAIKA, Oksana (2024): Bridging the Gap: Traditional vs. Modern Education (A Value-Based Approach for Multiculturalism). In: Gomez, World – Paloma, Filippo (eds.): *Lifelong Learning – Education for the Future World. Education and Human Development*. IntechOpen. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.114068>.

⁴ KIRCHMAIR, L. (2019): Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Global Legal Pluralism: A Gentle Reminder of David Hume's Is–Ought Divide. In: *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*. 51, 1. 48–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.2018.1557971>. WENNEBORG, E. G. (2021): Making Sense of Pluralism: A Neo-Calvinist Approach. *Philosophy of Education Archive*. <https://doi.org/10.47925/77.1.131>.

nations are characterized by religious and cultural heterogeneity. At a general level, while pluralism emerges spontaneously among ordinary people, normative pluralism involves an external authority that regulates coexistence through rules and norms.

Normative pluralism, by contrast, denotes the prescriptive endorsement of diversity as a positive value, including the promotion of tolerance, mutual respect, and institutional accommodation of difference. Normative responses to diversity involve deliberate curricular and pedagogical choices that affirm diversity while maintaining critical standards.⁵

In educational contexts, this distinction has direct practical implications. A curriculum may acknowledge religious diversity (descriptive pluralism) without necessarily endorsing all expressions of it (normative pluralism). The question for educators is not whether diversity exists, it manifestly does, but how educational institutions should respond: through neutral description, active affirmation, critical engagement, or some combination thereof. Orthodox theology – as this study will demonstrate – offers a distinctive normative framework grounded not in procedural neutrality but in a positive theological anthropology of communion.

One of the main topics in discussion is extremism, which is not just “violence” but the absolutization of partial truth claims, combined with rejection of any kind of dialogue or approach. This is a real challenge for the religious truth and for the dialogue in a pluralistic context.⁶ In the context of education, extremism refers to the adoption of ideological positions so rigid and exclusive that they preclude genuine intercultural encounter, critical thinking, and respect for human dignity.⁷ Extremism is not merely a political phenomenon but an educational one: it emerges wherever formation processes close off the possibility of encounter with the other, substituting indoctrination for genuine inquiry.

From an Orthodox theological perspective, extremism represents a distortion of authentic religious identity, a contraction of faith into an ideology of exclusion that refuses the kenotic (self-emptying) movement towards the other. Authentic religious formation, by contrast, produces persons capable of maintaining strong convictions while remaining genuinely open to encounter. The educational response to extremism, therefore, is not

⁵ SKEIE, G. (1995): Plurality and Pluralism: A Challenge for Religious Education. In: *British Journal of Religious Education*. 17, 2. 84–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141620950170203>.

⁶ PEELS, R. (2025): What Is It to Explain Extremism? In: *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 37, 1. 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2255902>.

⁷ Ibid.

the elimination of strong religious identity but its deepening and purification through formation in the theological and spiritual resources of the tradition, resources that, in the Orthodox case, include *kenosis*, *philoxenia*, and the ecclesial mind (*phronema*) capable of discernment.

The generic term of values does not mean generic ideals but normatively binding orientations rooted in communal and historical experience in each community.⁸ Values, in the educational sense, are the normative orientations, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, and civic, that communities transmit across generations through formal and informal processes of formation.⁹ They are not merely subjective preferences but communally validated principles that situate the individual within a shared axiological horizon. Values claim acceptance of a communal experience and place the person in a broader context in which, as a receiver of these values, one becomes, in turn, a transmitter within the community.

In Orthodox theological anthropology, values are inseparable from the communal and liturgical life of the Church, grounded in the person's orientation towards *theosis* 'deification' and the common good. This understanding resists both individualistic subjectivism, which treats values as private preferences, and abstract universalism, which detaches values from the lived traditions that give them concrete meaning. Orthodox formation cultivates values not primarily through abstract instruction but through participation in the liturgical, sacramental, and communal life of the Church, where virtues such as *kenosis*, *philoxenia*, and solidarity are embodied and practised.

Dialogue, as an educational concept, denotes more than mere conversation: it implies a structured, intentional encounter between persons or communities holding different convictions, conducted with mutual respect, genuine openness to the other's perspective, and commitment to truth-seeking rather than mere persuasion. In religious education, interfaith encounter is both a pedagogical method and a theological virtue.

In the Orthodox tradition, authentic encounter is grounded in the kenotic (self-emptying) disposition of the person who encounters the other as bearing the image of God (*imago Dei*). This theological foundation distinguishes Orthodox approaches to interfaith engagement from purely procedural or instrumental models: the goal is not

⁸ WOODS, T. (2015): Practice Educators' Experiences of Facilitating and Assessing Student Values and Ethics Learning: Constructing Dialogue. In: *Social Work Education*. 34, 8. 936–951. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2015.1087997>.

⁹ Ibid.

merely peaceful coexistence or strategic cooperation but genuine communion, a meeting of persons that respects difference while seeking deeper unity in truth and love. From the orthodox point of view, the dialogue it is not relativistic exchange but truth-oriented encounter grounded in communion.

Having clarified these foundational concepts, we now turn to the broader context of education in a globalized world and the specific challenges posed by religious diversity.

2. The Role of Education in the Transmission of Values

In the spirit of these values, each government or generation invests in education, aiming to create good citizens who share the broader ideals of the community and resonate with the type of culture and civilization the world desires. Education also aims to temper certain accents of extremism and violence against which young people can remain defenceless if they do not have certain solid reference points and values to govern their minds and lives.

The emphasis in education must be placed on values transmitted from the communal level to each subject of education. Each person must then internalize the entire formative process, transforming information into knowledge and knowledge into values according to which they can live. Moreover, here, disciplines and subjects that offer moral competencies and the content necessary for a broader education aimed at a better life can be more clearly highlighted.

3. Challenges of Globalization

Perhaps at this level, globalization, with its inflation of values and pseudo-values with different cultural patterns, strongly promoted, produces an imbalance in the educational system. How exactly does the student resonate with what they learn in school, in the context where they receive, voluntarily, a different kind of education from media consumption and exposure to social networks, which offer powerful models and strong messages that often obstruct the settled and natural course of education?

In this context, a fundamental question is: what should be the correct relationship between education and its exposure to the global world? An autarkic solution would be

completely unrealistic, considering that today we live in a globalized world where unrestricted access to knowledge makes education even more important.¹⁰ Education is viewed in this sense as a set of values that ultimately gives young people the power to discern.

Similarly, a competitive approach would be totally unproductive, placing the subjects of the educational act in the far-from-simple position of learning something at school that is completely dissonant with what they find outside it, thereby generating an inner schism.

4. Towards a Pluralistic Educational Approach

We must be realistic and recognize that no educational system is closed. On the contrary, it enters into dialogue both with the diverse perspectives of its participants and with the wider global world. At the same time, it must be capable of establishing guidelines that ensure its coherence and, above all, protect it from the kind of axiological relativism that can ultimately lead to the dissolution of any educational project.

The solution seems pluralistic, not excluding diversity but seeking to understand it and place it in a broader context, where each element finds its place and meaning. Such an approach does not fear engaging in a dialogue with the wider world but seeks to understand how this can be productive for education and for the formation of young people.

5. An Orthodox Theology of Education for the Common Good

In this context, the Orthodox Church's recent articulation of its social ethos offers a compelling theological framework for understanding how religious communities can engage pluralism while maintaining fidelity to tradition. The Ecumenical Patriarchate's document *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, published in 2020, presents a comprehensive moral theology, grounded in the recent developments of the society. It analyses contemporary social challenges through the lens

¹⁰ OZÉIAS, Rocha – AMPHAMBALÉ, Daniel K. – MAC MAHON, Cormac – COETZER, Jon-Hans – MORALES, Lucía (2023): The Power of Education in a Globalised World: Challenging Geoeconomic Inequalities. In: *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*. 35. 708–723.

of liturgical life and communal witness.¹¹ This groundbreaking text, endorsed by the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and published in fourteen languages, articulates the ecumenical vision that is particularly relevant also for educational contexts seeking to reconcile religious values with pluralistic realities.¹²

The Orthodox Church's approach to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, as articulated in the document *For the Life of the World...*, offers a robust theological framework for educational engagement. This framework is particularly valuable because it grounds dialogue not in relativism or mere tolerance but in a positive theological vision rooted in liturgical life, Eucharistic communion, and a commitment to peace and human dignity.

The social doctrine of the Ecumenical Patriarchate asserts a special responsibility of the Orthodox Churches for ecumenical dialogue, rooted in the Patriarchate's understanding of the relationship between the Church in general and the Orthodox Church.¹³ This responsibility stems from a distinctive hermeneutics of the Orthodox tradition of dialogue and cooperation with other churches, a tradition dating back to the early twentieth century. The Ecumenical Patriarchate positions ecumenism as an integral part of its social doctrine and public mission, viewing ecumenical engagement not as an optional activity but as essential to the Church's identity and witness in the contemporary world.¹⁴

For the Life of the World... is described as outward-facing, encouraging practical exchanges, and inviting ongoing conversations rather than issuing closed juridical answers. The document's approach to ecumenism reflects a pastoral and dialogical mode of engagement that prioritizes witness and discernment over rigid pronouncements.¹⁵

¹¹ „Pentru viața lumii”. *Către un etos social al Bisericii Ortodoxe. Învățătura socială a Bisericii Ortodoxe în viziunea Patriarhiei ecumenice*. Transl. by Dr Viorel Coman and Dr Petre Maican. Oradea, Editura Ratio et Revelatio. 2020.

¹² HAMALIS, P. T. – DEMACOPOULOS, G. E. – PAPANIKOLAOU, A. – PRODROMOU, E. H. – ROMMEN, E. – GALLAHER, B. – HOVORUN, C. – BLACK, M. C. – SIMMONS, K. – THEOKRITOFF, E. – DANCKAERT, L. – PORTER, S. L. (2022): A Fresh Vision for Orthodox Social Ethics: Responses to *For the Life of the World (2020)*. In: *Studies in Christian Ethics*. 35, 2. 179–286.

¹³ GULIAMOV, Bohdan (2021): Social Doctrine of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations. In: *European Philosophical and Historical Discourse*. 7, 1. 105–111. Available at: https://ephd.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/ephd_2021_7_1/17.pdf (last accessed on: 26.02.2026).

¹⁴ HAMALIS et al. 2022, 186.

¹⁵ Op. cit. 189–201.

This orientation towards dialogue as an ongoing process rather than a completed achievement provides a model for educational institutions seeking to engage religious diversity without compromising their own identity or mission.

The document's ecumenical vision is particularly significant because it emerges at a time when the Orthodox world faces internal tensions and geopolitical pressures. By affirming ecumenical commitment as central to Orthodox social teaching, the Ecumenical Patriarchate offers a counternarrative to isolationist or nationalist tendencies within some Orthodox contexts, emphasizing the universal and reconciling dimensions of Christian witness instead.

6. Liturgical and Eucharistic Foundations for Dialogue

A distinctive feature of the Orthodox approach to ecumenism in *For the Life of the World...* is its grounding in liturgical theology and Eucharistic communion. The document situates social engagement, including ecumenical encounter, within the life of Christ as experienced in the Eucharistic assembly, thereby establishing liturgical identity as the theological foundation for outward witness and dialogue. This liturgical foundation is not merely decorative but constitutive: the Church's engagement with the world flows from its participation in the divine life made present in the liturgy.

Steven Porter highlights that *For the Life of the World...* presents liturgy not merely as ritual practice but as “the ultimate context for the moral life”, thereby grounding ethical and social reflection in the lived reality of worship and communion.¹⁶ This approach contrasts with purely rationalistic or rights-based frameworks for dialogue, instead grounding engagement with others in a sacramental anthropology that sees human persons as created for communion with God and one another.

The Eucharistic foundation for dialogue has profound implications for education. It suggests that authentic engagement with religious diversity requires not just intellectual understanding but a transformation of the person through participation in communal life and worship. Educational approaches to religious pluralism, from this perspective, cannot be purely academic or simply detached; they must involve formation in the practices

¹⁶ Ibid.

of communion, hospitality, and mutual recognition. The liturgical emphasis also highlights the importance of beauty, symbol, and embodied practice in religious education, countering tendencies towards purely cognitive or propositional approaches to religious knowledge.

The theology of communication that informs the Patriarchate's social doctrine further develops this liturgical foundation, framing dialogue as part of Christian responsibility towards peace and human dignity.¹⁷ Communication, in this theological vision, is not merely the exchange of information but a participation in the divine life of communion, reflecting the Trinitarian nature of God as a communion of persons.

7. The Orthodox Affirmation of “Seeds of the Word” in Other Religions

The Patriarchal Document adopts a notably positive stance towards other religions, affirming that they contain “seeds of the Word” and recognizing spiritual truth and value beyond the boundaries of Orthodox Christianity.¹⁸ This theological affirmation provides a foundation for respectful encounter and moral cooperation with non-Christian faiths, moving beyond mere tolerance to genuine appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit in diverse religious traditions.

The document's language regarding other religions is described as conciliatory and respectful. Secondary sources report that *For the Life of the World...*, or its drafters, describes Judaism as an “elder brother” and notes that Islam can contain “beauty and spiritual truths”.¹⁹ Such language supports respectful interfaith engagement and provides a theological warrant for educational approaches that take the truth claims and spiritual insights of diverse religious traditions seriously.

This affirmation of “seeds of the eternal Word” in other religions reflects an old patristic theological tradition that recognizes the universal operation of the divine Logos. The concept, rooted in the writings of early Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, suggests that all truth, wherever it is found, ultimately derives

¹⁷ GULIAMOV 2021, 106.

¹⁸ Op. cit. 108.

¹⁹ Op. cit. 110.

from Christ as the Logos through whom all things were made.²⁰ This theological framework allows Orthodox Christians to engage other religions with both confidence in their own tradition and openness to learning from others.

For educational contexts, this theological stance offers a middle way between religious relativism and exclusivism. It provides a basis for genuine dialogue that neither reduces all religions to equivalent expressions of a generic spirituality nor dismisses other traditions as entirely devoid of truth. Students can be encouraged to engage deeply with diverse religious traditions, seeking the “seeds of the Word” present in them while maintaining their own religious commitments and identities.

Commentators note, however, that *For the Life of the World...*'s approach to interreligious relations is more expansive than its treatment of relations with other Christian churches. Some judge the document's ecumenical section as relatively conservative because it stops short of affirming the full ecclesial status of non-Orthodox churches.²¹ This tension reflects ongoing debates within Orthodox theology about the boundaries of the Church and the ecclesial status of other Christian communities. Nevertheless, the document's emphasis on practical cooperation and moral witness provides a framework for engagement that transcends these unresolved theological questions.

8. Ecumenical Dialogue, Peace, and Resistance to Fundamentalism

The social ethos articulated in *For the Life of the World...* explicitly links ecumenical and interreligious dialogue to the pursuit of peace and the resistance of religious fundamentalism.²² This connection is crucial in educational contexts, as it frames dialogue not in itself as an end but as a means toward the concrete goals of peacebuilding and the prevention of religiously motivated violence.

The document's emphasis on peace reflects the Ecumenical Patriarchate's longstanding commitment to conflict resolution and reconciliation. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has been a prominent voice for peace in contexts of religious and ethnic

²⁰ „*Pentru viața lumii*”, §55. 96.

²¹ GULIAMOV 2021, 108.

²² Ibid.

conflict, and *For the Life of the World...* extends this commitment into a comprehensive social teaching. The document presents dialogue as a pathway to achieving peace, suggesting that mutual understanding and cooperation among religious communities are essential to addressing conflicts that threaten human flourishing.

The resistance to fundamentalism is particularly relevant in educational contexts where young people may be vulnerable to extremist narratives. *For the Life of the World...* offers a theological alternative to fundamentalist interpretations of Christianity, emphasizing the Church's communal, liturgical, and dialogical character. The document's ethos-driven approach, which prioritizes discernment and witness over rigid juridical pronouncements, exemplifies a religious commitment that is both deeply rooted in tradition and open to engagement with contemporary challenges.²³

Hamalis et al. note that *For the Life of the World...* addresses racism and nationalism with incisiveness, challenging religious identities tied to ethnic or political exclusivism. This critique of nationalism and racism is essential for countering fundamentalist tendencies that often conflate religious identity with ethnic or national identity. By emphasizing the universal and reconciling dimensions of Christian faith, the document provides resources for resisting the instrumentalization of religion for political or ideological purposes.²⁴

The connection between dialogue and peace also has implications for how religious education addresses conflict. Rather than avoiding controversial topics or presenting sanitized versions of religious traditions, educators can engage students in a critical examination of how religious communities have both contributed to and worked to overcome violence and division. *For the Life of the World...* models this approach by acknowledging the Church's failures and calling for ongoing conversion and renewal.

The document's vision of theosis, the spiritual process of deification, as fundamentally transforming how individuals act, think, and understand reality, provides a theological foundation for the Church's mission of witness (*martyria*) in addressing peace, human dignity, and ecological crises.²⁵ This emphasis on spiritual transformation suggests that

²³ HAMALIS et al. 2022.

²⁴ MILLER, Joyce (2013): Religious Extremism, Religious Education, and the Interpretive Approach. In: *Religion & Education*. 40, 1. 50–61.

²⁵ SONEA, C. (2022): Theosis and Martyria. The Spiritual Process of Deification and Its Implication for the Mission of the Church. In: *Religions* 14, 1. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010012> (last accessed on: 26.02.2026).

resistance to fundamentalism and the pursuit of peace require not just intellectual assent to correct doctrines but a deep personal and communal conversion that reorients the whole person towards God and neighbour.

9. Religious Education in a Pluralistic Context

Religious education faces specific challenges in this pluralistic context. It must find ways to maintain its identity and specificity while being open to dialogue with other religious and cultural traditions. This requires a delicate balance between fidelity to one's own tradition and openness to others.

The Orthodox theological framework articulated in the document already mentioned demonstrates how this balance can be achieved. By grounding dialogue in liturgical life and Eucharistic communion, the Orthodox approach maintains a strong sense of identity and tradition while simultaneously opening towards engagement with others. The challenge is to develop forms of religious education that are both authentic to their own tradition and respectful of and open to other traditions. This means that religious education must be both confessional and intercultural, both particular and universal. The Orthodox model suggests that this is possible when religious identity is understood not as a closed system of propositions but as participation in a living tradition of worship, practice, and communal discernment.

From an Orthodox point of view, the handling of pluralism in educational practice is grounded not in relativistic tolerance but in the theology of communion (*koinonia*) and the living experience of the Church. In the classroom, this issue can be approached through guided comparative engagement, where students encounter other religious traditions while being rooted in the Orthodox understanding of truth, and encouraged to discern the presence of the *logoi spermatikoi* 'seeds of the Word' in different cultural and religious contexts.

Pedagogically, this implies a form of dialogical learning that reflects the ecclesial ethos: students are invited to witness to their own tradition while listening attentively to others, cultivating both fidelity and openness. Dialogue, in this sense, is not the suspension of truth claims or a relativization but an expression of love (*agape*) and respect for the person as created in the image of God. Moreover, Orthodox pedagogy

emphasizes the formative role of liturgical and communal life. Educational practice can include exposure to liturgical experience, symbolic language, and practices of hospitality (*philoxenia*), through which students internalize a mode of relating to the other that is eucharistic rather than confrontational.

10. Addressing Religious Extremism through Education

One of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary education is how to address religious extremism. Education must find ways to counter extremist narratives while respecting religious diversity and freedom of belief.

The Orthodox emphasis on communal discernment, liturgical formation, and dialogical engagement offers resources for addressing extremism. By presenting religious faith as inherently communal and dialogical rather than individualistic and absolutist, this approach counters the isolation and rigidity that often characterize extremist movements.²⁶ The emphasis on beauty, symbol, and embodied practice in liturgical life also provides an alternative to the reductionist and literalist interpretations of religious texts that fuel fundamentalism.

Finally, in addressing extremism, an Orthodox approach fosters discernment (*diakrisis*) through participation in the life of the community and engagement with the patristic tradition. By integrating critical reflection with spiritual formation, students learn to distinguish authentic expressions of faith from ideological distortions, developing a balanced and holistic understanding of religious identity in a pluralistic world.

Research suggests that effective approaches to countering religious extremism through education include:

A pedagogical framework informed by the liturgical and Eucharistic vision of *For the Life of the World...* must move beyond purely cognitive models of education and instead cultivate the formation of the whole person within a communal and relational context. In this regard, several key dimensions emerge.

²⁶ LOVAT, Terence (2019): Addressing Religious Extremism through Theologically Informed Religious Education. In: *Journal of Religious Education*. 67, 2. 103–114.

First, the development of critical thinking is essential, yet it must be understood not as isolated rational analysis but as discernment formed within tradition and community. Students are thus encouraged to evaluate religious and ideological claims critically while remaining attentive to the interpretive frameworks and spiritual practices that shape communal understanding.

Second, intercultural and interreligious dialogue becomes a central educational objective. Such dialogue is not limited to the exchange of ideas but involves structured engagement that fosters mutual recognition, cooperation, and the cultivation of trust between different religious and cultural communities.

Third, this approach entails a value-based orientation that emphasizes fundamental human goods – such as dignity, peace, and justice – while also respecting the particularity of religious traditions and their distinctive moral and spiritual contributions. In this sense, universal values are not abstracted from tradition but are encountered through it.

Finally, media literacy assumes increasing importance in a digital and fragmented public sphere. Students must be equipped to evaluate information critically, to identify ideological manipulation, and to recognize extremist narratives and recruitment strategies. Such competencies are indispensable for responsible participation in contemporary society and for resisting forms of radicalization that distort both religious and secular discourses.

The Orthodox theological framework adds to these approaches by grounding them in a positive vision of human flourishing rooted in communion with God and others. Rather than a simple critique on extremism, this approach offers a valuable alternative vision of religious life that is both deeply traditional and genuinely open to dialogue and engagement.

The Orthodox Church's contribution to countering extremism in education is not defensive or reactive but positive and prophetic. It proclaims, "God became human so that humans might become god", according to Saint Athanasius the Great. This is the ultimate antidote to extremism: a vision of human destiny so exalted, so beautiful, so all-encompassing that it renders violent ideologies pale and impoverished by comparison.

When young people encounter the beauty of holiness in the liturgy, the wisdom of the Fathers in spiritual texts, the love of Christ in authentic community, and the call to theosis in their own lives, they find what extremism falsely promises but cannot deliver.

The task of Orthodox education is therefore not primarily to construct argumentative refutations of extremism, but to embody and proclaim the Gospel in its fullness, offering a coherent and transformative vision of human life. This vision is at once ancient yet ever new, being deeply rooted in the apostolic tradition while remaining capable of addressing the existential questions of every age. It is particular yet universal, grounded in the concrete life of the Orthodox Church and its doctrinal and liturgical identity, yet open to all humanity through its emphasis on communion and the shared destiny of humankind. At the same time, it is mystical yet practical, uniting participation in transcendent worship with a concrete commitment to social ethics, peace, and human dignity.

Such an educational ethos is also firm yet humble: it bears witness to the truth with confidence, while engaging others with respect and without coercion, cultivating a dialogical attitude rooted in love (agape) rather than ideological confrontation. Finally, it is challenging yet compassionate, calling the human person to repentance and transformation, while simultaneously offering mercy, healing, and acceptance within the life of the ecclesial community.

In this perspective, the Orthodox approach does not represent a compromise between opposing positions but rather a “royal path” of balance, integration, and spiritual discernment. It reflects the evangelical paradox of the “narrow way that leads to life” (Matthew 7:14), understood not as restriction but as a path of freedom through communion, shaped by the mystery of the Cross and the hope of the Resurrection. As such, Orthodox education proposes not merely a critique of extremism but a living alternative: a form of life grounded in truth, sustained by worship, and fulfilled in love.

Key Orthodox Concepts for Educators

A theological approach to education informed by the vision of *For the Life of the World...* can be further articulated through several key Orthodox concepts that offer both spiritual depth and practical relevance in addressing pluralism, extremism, and the formation of values.

Theosis (Deification): The ultimate goal of human life is union with God – becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2Peter 1:4). This teleological vision provides a horizon of meaning that transcends the reductive and often nihilistic narratives proposed by extremist ideologies.

Phronema (Mind of the Church): Authentic understanding is formed within the communal life of the Church rather than through isolated individual interpretation. Critical thinking, therefore, is exercised as ecclesial discernment, integrating reason, tradition, and spiritual experience.

Nepsis (Watchfulness): Spiritual vigilance against deception and temptation extends beyond ascetic practice to include critical awareness of ideological manipulation. This concept offers a valuable framework for media literacy and for recognizing the subtle dynamics of radicalization.

Kenosis (Self-Emptying): Grounded in the Christological model of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5–8), *kenosis* emphasizes humility, self-limitation, and service to others. It stands in direct opposition to the pride, domination, and absolutism characteristic of extremist worldviews.

Sobornost (Conciliarity): The Church embodies a form of unity that preserves diversity through communion. This conciliar vision offers a constructive alternative to both authoritarian structures and radical individualism, making it especially relevant for navigating pluralistic contexts.

Philoxenia (Love of the Stranger): Hospitality towards the other is a central Christian virtue. It enables genuine openness to persons of different religious and cultural backgrounds while maintaining the integrity of one's own identity, thus providing a theological basis for interreligious dialogue.

Apophatic Theology (Negative Theology): The recognition of the limits of human knowledge before the mystery of God cultivates epistemic humility. This stance serves as an antidote to ideological rigidity and the false certainties that often underpin extremist positions.

11. Conclusions

Education in a world marked by individualism and extremism requires a delicate balance between maintaining educational coherence and engaging with global diversity. The solution lies not in isolating education from global influences or in uncritically accepting all perspectives but in developing robust frameworks for critical engagement that preserve what is valuable while remaining open to dialogue and growth.

The Orthodox Church's theological vision, as articulated in *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, offers a compelling model for this engagement. By grounding dialogue in liturgical theology, Eucharistic communion, and a commitment to peace and human dignity, the Orthodox approach demonstrates how religious communities can maintain strong identities while engaging authentically with pluralism. The affirmation of "seeds of the Word" in other religions provides theological warrant for respectful encounter and cooperation. At the same time, the emphasis on communal discernment and liturgical formation offers resources for resisting fundamentalism and extremism.

Religious education must find ways to be both faithful to its own traditions and capable of meaningful dialogue with others. This requires well-trained educators not only in academic knowledge but also in the spiritual and communal practices of their traditions, curricula that are thoughtfully designed to balance particularity and universality, and communities committed to the challenging yet necessary work of education.

The future of education in pluralistic societies depends on our ability to navigate these challenges with wisdom, courage, and commitment to both truth and dialogue. The Orthodox theological framework demonstrates that such navigation is possible when rooted in a positive vision of human flourishing, communal life, and divine communion. Only through such an approach can we hope to address the pressing challenges of our time while preparing young people for meaningful and productive lives in an increasingly interconnected world.

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