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The Potential of the Word for Adolescents' Spiritual and Moral Development

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Abstract

Recently, a considerable literature has grown up around the theme of a low level of social responsibility in communication in the global world, leading to a small contribution to Mankind development. As stated by modern researchers, the situation in the field of education is characterized by spiritual and moral surfing, the prevalence of individual values in the value hierarchy, and the dominance of utilitarian-rational morality.

The research purpose is to formulate approaches to the spiritual and moral development of modern adolescents, taking into account modern trends in the Russian society. This study employed survey methodology together with essays to investigate adolescents' values. The results show that depriving the educational process of an efficient spiritual and moral component based on the ethnic cultural heritage gives the effect inverse to the goals of the education process. The absence of moral codes and guidelines for setting life goals results in the education of not a socially active person but the opposite one. The authors propose intensification of the religious culture study coupled with the formation of the cultural identity through the cultural heritage (history, literature, folklore) using individual educational trajectories. The practical significance of the research results is proved by the experiment of implementing spiritual and moral education at a teacher training university, a college, and comprehensive schools.

Keywords: spiritual and moral development of adolescents, literature, spiritually-oriented dialogue, real and fictional personality, cultural and religious identity formation.

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Introduction

Tremendous possibilities of communication in the modern world and the process of globalization imply a high-level responsibility from everyone to contribute to the development of the Mankind. In reality, responsibility for what is said and done is gradually decreasing. One can get the impression of own invulnerability in the world of net-communication with extensive means for manipulating other people. Hiding behind a fictitious name, a person can live in the guise of not just one but several people playing with the consciousness and feelings of others.

It became possible to communicate under fictitious names in social networks both at the level of distance learning at universities and in journalism. Consequences of such communication can be various with different levels of severity of the deeds lying in relations to other people. That is why there is an urgent need to address the moral and ethic problems caused by modern communication trends. There is not only the feeling of permissiveness in impersonal communication without any limitation; the feeling of loneliness and depressive states of adolescents is generated escalating up to suicidal thoughts and an internal aggression outburst.

In this regard, the question of spiritual and moral guidance of modern adolescents and their support becomes one of the key issues which this research is set to address. The history of Mankind suggests that adolescent's family can be the necessary support. However, destruction of the traditional family foundations, sometimes hidden under the guise of tolerance, leads to the fact that the teenager does not find the sought support.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the further practical research is to formulate approaches to the spiritual and moral development of modern adolescents, taking into account the trends of the modern Russia society.

Literature review

President of Russia (Putin, 2016) in his Address to the Federal Assembly emphasizes that “today, Russia is experiencing a lack of spirituality. (...) It is expressed in indifference to public affairs and takes on ugly, aggressive and defiant forms. (...) It is a threat to the security of the society”. As noted by some modern researchers, the situation in the fields of education is characterized by a number of negative phenomena:

- the “spiritual and moral surfing” (Semyannikov, 2017);

- the prevalence of “individual values in the value hierarchy” (Weber, 2011; Selcova, 2013);
- “the dominance of utilitarian-rational morality” (Razarenova, 2004; Tlemeshok, 2015).

We believe that there is a special attitude to the word as the means of influencing the human soul not only in spiritual practices and in an appeal to sacred texts in different branches of faith. The concept of the word as the means of moral education was studied by Potebnya (1990) who advocated that the internal form of the word refers to the "image of the idea" (p. 53). Losev (1993) paid particular attention to the naming of objects. Following the ideas of Potebnya (1990), Mineralov (1999) focused on the modern literary criticism in his "Theory of literary art". The scholars also underline an important role of teachers in educating adolescents through literary works.

Mineralova (2014) believes that at any level of education, teachers should be guided by works of Likhachev (2018) who highlights the importance of the spiritual and moral impact of the word. In her work "The Eucharistic resource of Russian culture, manifested by artistic literature and painting", Mineralova (2014) notes:

“The definition of the essence of creativity as the process illuminated by the spiritual eminence of Truth is more accurate. (...) Comprehension of the Great Sacrifice of the Savior takes place through the Liturgy (common action), and it cannot be other than the Eucharistic. This is the path of a “broken heart” penitence that destroys the barriers of human sins between Man and God” (Mineralova, 2014, p.149).

The importance of an appeal to a special vital function of the word, as well as to the category of dreams that are important today, and the experience of repentance with a broken heart is evident in this quote. Apparently, this is a special key to reading, understanding, and discussing literature of art.

Methodology

The research methods used in this research were theoretical (the definition of the main concepts based on the analysis of psychological, pedagogical, methodological, theological and literary sources), empirical (survey and essays). Surveys and essays were anonymous. Consents were collected from the research participants. Research participants were from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Voronezh and other regions of Russia. The anonymous survey was carried out through the resource <http://podrostki.today/>, and analyzed with the help of the resource <https://anketolog.ru/>. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically. Qualitative data were coded and systematically analyzed.

The research was longitudinal. In 2014-2015, there were 4000 participants with the average age of 13.5 years. In 2018-2019, 760 respondents took part in the research. In 2019-2020, an additional survey among students of Moscow schools (grades 4-6, and grade 10) was conducted to identify the main spiritual guidelines. Gender composition – 25.6% of males and 74.4% of females, the average age was 21.1 years.

Results

The research results in the Tables 1, 2 indicate attitudes to lies in different communicative situations, and double standards in relations.

Table 1. Attitude to lies of modern schoolchildren and students

What is your attitude to lies (deceit)? (Single choice)		
	Schoolchildren, %	Students, %
Definitely negative.	37,8	33
Negatively, but there are so many lies that there is no strength to resist it.	19,9	19,8
Lying in our lives is appropriate but you need to use it mindfully.	27,5	36,0
Lying is certainly useful because it helps to hide your true intentions from others. Why should others know them?	3,3	2,4
I do not want to answer this question.	11,5	8,8

The figures Tables 1, 2 indicate the degree of aggressiveness and intolerance towards others, and show an encouraging attitude to this quality towards oneself. The results of the survey demonstrate not only a high level of aggressiveness but also the growing egoism of adolescents.

Table 2. The degree of aggressiveness of the modern youth

What will you do if you are deceived? (Single choice)		
	Schoolchildren %	Students %
I will forgive, although it hurts me.	33,6	26
Most likely, I will forgive if this deception does not harm me.	27,3	37,5
If this lie does not concern me then, I will forgive: I do not care about it. But if it concerns me then, I will avenge cheating and deceiving.	7,1	5,9
If someone deceives me I will do my best for him to regret about their lies.	8,8	7

I am lying myself, I am deceived so I am used to it; I do not care about all this.	4,2	3,5
I do not want to answer this question.	19	2,1

The problem of spiritual and moral degradation of modern youth clearly arises reflecting the processes in the education system and society as a whole, indicating the absence of an adequate process of spiritual and moral development.

Discussions

The comparison of different educational institutions' results in the survey leads to a conclusion that depriving the educational process of an efficient spiritual and moral component based on the ethnic cultural heritage gives the effect opposite to the goals of the process, i.e. the absence of creative guidelines for the life goals. Andersen (2013) underlines that educators teach and raise not a socially significant active person but the very opposite, "Homo intellectus", who is active only for the sake of own good in "personal 'ice game of reasons' contrasting the cold of reasons with the fire of feelings in the heart alive" (p.115).

Avoiding responsibility with the impersonality of an "avatar" is akin to suicide in its hopeless darkness. Abstracted from the morality of society, a person is creating own system of spirituality, allowing to be at the head of the system and serving own ego. It is the source of deceit and aggression as a reflection of the desire to evade responsibility through self-justification. In the world of the "avatar", created in the information network, there are laws and people that seem to be subject to a particular person, which creates every opportunity to feel like a master of life – a demiurge, even if this word is unknown to that person.

Considering that, a Russian philosopher Ilyin (1993) in his work "Axioms of Religious Experience" states that "every religious belief and doing is based on a special religious experience" (Ilyin, 1993, p. 34). This means that the experience acquired by a person in cyberspace also becomes a kind of "religious experience". "The life of a man corresponds to his faith ... precisely because he loves it and believes in it" (Ilyin, 2012, p.21). Ilyin (2012) in many of his works constantly notes that folk culture is linked inextricably with spiritual beliefs, religious experience as they are the foundation of culture. In the twenty-first century, modern scholars of axiology advocate for this equitable statement. For example, Lukyanov (2015) in his work "Russian Religious Axiology", claims folklore and Russian art as the basis of mentality. He states that "the origins of the valuable understanding of Russian people can be found both in mythology and folklore of Ancient Russia, as well as in manuscripts of Old Russian writing, in chronicles and hagiography, in the architecture of churches, in icons, etc. Assimilation with the culture of antiquity, as

well as the culture of Byzantium, played an important role in the formation of a valuable worldview” (p.159).

Therefore, it is necessary both to find appropriate and relevant materials that can affect modern teenagers, and propose approaches to their application so that the “eucharistic resource” (Mineralova, 2014, p.56) contained in art – and primarily verbal art – is properly implemented in the work with teenagers.

As a solution to this problem, the authors propose the intensification of the study of religious culture, coupled with the formation of cultural identity and cultural heritage (history, literature, ethics, folklore, and etc.).

Culture is a manifestation of the philosophy of any society. It forms and translates through times the worldview, traditions, ideals, value system of members of the society. Religious beliefs as an expression of the worldview are also formed by the culture of a particular society: Christianity of Italy and Byzantium, Byzantium and Moscow, “the Third Rome”; the national cultural and ethnic component invariably plays a fundamental role in all areas of life of an ethnic group. The culture of “Islamic range” – of Persia and Syria, Turkey and Islamized Egypt – is no less indicative from these positions in historical retrospective. Everywhere, regardless of religious beliefs, cultural, moral and religious foundations were formed and expressed by means of the word (Lukyanov, 2015).

The word as the main source of communication is not only a manifestation of the inner world of the individual but also a powerful source depending on its connotation. The word is an instrument of any dialogue and the process that makes full communication of two or more personalities possible (Florenskaya, 2009). The works of Florenskaya (2009) and a number of other researchers together with all religious views, unequivocally affirm not only the power of the word but also the sacralization of this phenomenon:

- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1: 1)” – the first line of the prologue of the Gospel according to St. John, telling about the eternal (“dominant”) existence of the second Person (Hypostasis) of the Holy Trinity – God the Son, the Divine Word (Logos). “The first verse of the Gospel of John indicates the eternal, uncreated being of the Divine Word, existing regardless of the world created “through Him” (John 1: 3), on His Divine dignity and on His relation to God the Father” (The Holy Bible...).
- “The faithful spirit descended with him. On your heart, so that you became one of the prophets. In Arabic, pure and clear” (Coran 26: 193-194).

An impersonal (avatar) communication imposes irresponsibility and permissiveness of a spiritually and morally weak personality, contributes to the development of a negative potential, already acquired from the environment. In comparison, we cite the popular expression “face to face” which bears an epic-heroic semantic content that reveals the truth in a person. An escape from the truth into the “avatar world” is a transition into loneliness, into the world of one’s own illusions inspired by pride and egoism. This problem is especially acute in family relations, inherently pure and frank.

Ivashchenko (2008) writes that “the formation of the value system in the process of individual development occurs with internalizing the values of large and small social groups and turning them into sources of individual motivation, along with genetically earlier acquired individual needs” (Ivashchenko, 2008, p.35-36). Choosing these values, it is important to determine their source to look for, meaning them becoming “his own” for any student. Talking about the formation of cultural identity, Likhachev (2018) represents a wide range of sources; cultural “identity should not be formed by developing and introducing new cultural values for society but by a painstaking collection of values that already exist in its culture, no matter how exotic they may seem at a first glance” (Likhachev, 2018, p.15).

In search of pedagogically valuable material, we turned to the songs, included in teenagers’ reading.

An unexpected introduction may be working with a natural history book – a sketch by Vitali Bianchi “Who sings what?” (Bianchi, 1950). It begins with the words “Do you hear what kind of music rattles in the forest? Listening to it, you might think that all animals, birds and insects were born to be singers and musicians. Maybe that is true: everyone loves music, and everyone wants to sing, but not everyone has vocals. Listen to voiceless people, what they sing and how.” Then the author talks about Bittern, Frog, Bug, Locust, and Snipe, their names are capitalized as if they were characters from a book on nature for children, where they talk, their thought process is verbalized on the pages of the book. You can limit your attention to the natural-scientific component of the text, or set yourself the task of working in spiritual and moral terms, and then this essay provides excellent material for your psychological training by acting a part in the forest life, according to your abilities, making you a unique creature. You may recall the Eucharistic resource of literature. At the Orthodox school, quite naturally, the words “Every breath may praise the Lord” were sounded as the main idea of the work. Moreover, one jewelry company designated a series of pendants for children in the form of a teddy bear, piglet, squirrel and other animals with these words of the Psalm.

The interpretation of the Psalm 150 emphasizes the possibility of applying this line to indicate the main idea of the essay: “For the prophecy preaches salvation to the Gentiles, and the end of the prophecy

commands those who have received salvation to chant the Benefactor. And we do not just hear the words, but see here the deeds themselves. For in every city, in every settlement, in the fields, in solitude, in the mountains and hills, in places uninhabited and completely deserted, all kinds of songs are sung” (Psalm... by Blessed Theodorite). Thus, the song that sounds in the forest turns out to be a hymn of life, an anthem, and the need and desire to participate in the mutual work of each creature with the abilities given is the main conclusion for any school. The question arises about the meaning and purpose of life, but already human life.

The appeal to the song as praise at the beginning of the work is not accidental. It is advisable to turn to the song, where the latent power of the word is revealed in a concise form.

In axiological terms, the scientists note the particular importance of the texts of the songs: “Lyrics act anyway as a tool for transferring of universal values, embodying the best qualities of a Russian person - selflessness, courage, patriotism, endurance, desire for the unity of the people - in a poetic form” (Levina & Huej Van, 2017, p. 152-153). Lyrics “become material for study in the framework of axiological linguistics and linguo-culturology”. This is especially true for patriotic songs.

Meeting the Victory Day, the project "Towards Victory with a Song" has been launched. A series of classes as a part of extracurricular activities is devoted to studying the lyrics of songs of war years, songs about the war, and their music, monuments commemorating the songs, and illustrations. These classes provoked a warm response from the students, their essays on the impressions of the lessons speak of interest and awareness of the basic universal values contained in the lyrics.

The following is an example of diverse songs.

“The Holy War”, a song, that became a kind of anthem of the Great Patriotic War, was published as a poem by the author, Vasily Ivanovich Lebedev-Kumach. There are many options for working with a song’s word. Listening to a song, comparing the text of the song and the text of the original poem, which was almost twice as long, identifying the reasons for the reduction both in terms of the impact of the song on the person, and of the content.

For example, the quatrain not included in the final song version clearly represents the antithesis:

Like two different **poles**,
We are hostile in everything.
We fight for **light** and peace,
He stands for the kingdom of **darkness**.

The following is another example of an image that admits many interpretations:

Black wings don't dare
Flying over the Motherland,
The **enemy** does not dare
Trampling Her spacious fields.

The image of an air battle with the “wings of black” planes (the dark gray color of Nazi Germany’s planes with black “crosses”), and the black wings the “angels of darkness”, or demonic forces, are depicted. In this case, the specifics of the images of air battle or an enemy air raid is a reflection of the invisible battle, characteristic for Russian folklore and Old Russian literature, for Russian culture in general, based on Orthodox Christianity; and in the broad sense, on the religious perception of what is happening.

In the same stanza, there is an obvious reference to the epic imagery “... Her fields are spacious / The enemy does not dare trampling” recalling the epic heroes protecting the Motherland from all evil spirits on earth and in the air.

We continue with a vocabulary analysis, and identification of the antithesis (light - darkness, friend - enemy, peace - war, etc.), and analysis of archetypal images in the song, of rhyme, stanza, etc. We focus on the views of the modern philologist, a famous scientist Mineralov (2007), in approaches to the analysis of the lyrics, the word semantic.

Another example of the classes on spiritual and moral development is a song of a completely different genre, a lyric song “The Twinkle” by Mikhail Isakovskiy. He published the text on April 19, 1943 in “The Pravda” newspaper.

“The Twinkle” lyrics are also built on the antithesis of light and darkness. In this sense, it is convenient to compare the performance in the hymn and in the lyric song with the similarity of imagery.

The whole meaning of the song and the feeling of a fighter at the front could be expressed in the scripture: “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness do not comprehend it” (John 1: 5).

Among many generations of students listening to this song, the question arises, what were the lines of the girl’s letter to the front, making “the soul of a soldier joyful”?

I podrugá dalekaya parnyu vestochku shlet,
And the girlfriend sends a faraway message to a guy
That her love will never die.
Everything that was conceived will be fulfilled in due time,
The golden light will not go out before.

“It is not your business to know the times and dates that the Father set in His authority” (Acts 1, 7). “No one knows about that day and hour, nor the angels of heaven, but only my Father alone” (Matt. 24, 36).

In a generalized form, the students’ responses were as follows: “a battle may occur, and a man can fight fiercely with the enemy if he knows that they love him and are waiting for him.” These words are very important for a person to recognize himself as an object of not hatred, but love. Love of folks he loves, Love of Heavenly Father.

Conclusion

The considered and tested resource of lyrics allows not only to diversify and versatile the work by means of the word, music and illustrative series but also to influence teenagers deeply due to the archetypal layer of the patriotic song. Thus, the potential of the word at the classes for adolescents proves to be an efficient teaching technique in their moral and spiritual education.

The appeal to traditional texts, taking into account the “Eucharistic resource” of Russian literature, allows teachers to lead the conversation and plan the results of their work with students as their personal growth, spiritual and moral development, and orientation to axiological issues of our time.

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