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Pupils as Theologians. Investigation of Theological Conversations of Pupils in Religious Education in Slovakia

This article explores the theological conversations of pupils of Religious Education in schools in Slovakia. It clarifies the foundations of a theology of children that seriously takes pupils as subjects and constructors of their own religious reality, and discusses the possibilities and conditions for children's theologizing in Religious Education. It analyses and examines specific sequences of pupils' theological conversations, highlighting the specific roles of the teacher of Religious Education and offering suggestions for supporting pupils' independent theological thinking

Key words: children's theology, theological conversations, Religious Education, teacher of Religious Education.

Introduction

Theological conversations in the classroom represent a crucial part of Religious Education in schools. To see pupils as theologians, who are capable of reflecting and reasoning as actual theologians, is a central idea of the so-called *children's theology*, which is becoming a new paradigm in Religious Education. The children's theology is indeed a crucial basis for understanding theological conversations that are often the central dimension of Religious Education classes.

The investigation of theological conversations of pupils is done on the grounds of Religious Education as well as of the new curriculum for teaching Catholic Religious Education. In order to analyse theological conversations, we chose to work with the topic of “The Parable of the Good Samaritan”, and thus we studied its contextualisation in the class, as well as specific theological conversations, in order to identify the theological knowledge that the pupils themselves brought into these mutual conversations. In the end, we are going to present a series of evaluations from the Religious Education teachers as they reflected on their own Religious Education classes, and we are going to state some important implications for teaching Religious Education.

Children’s theology as the basis for theologising of children

The idea that it is possible to theologise with children during Religious Education classes is the result of discussions that have taken place over the past decades of the 20th century. It was the religious educator A. Bucher who first used the denomination *children’s theology* in order to explain the type of theology that is formed by children themselves. For centuries, according to A. Bucher, children had been considered unconscious and inadequate beings, in mercy of their own instincts, tossed about by their own whims¹. It was not until the cognitive-structural development psychology, that an opinion prevailed, according to which the child is above all an active subject. Children are therefore seen as subjects and creators of their own reality, and they are described as active and constructive².

Taking children seriously as subjects and constructors of their own religious reality is a fundamental belief of children’s theology, which thus becomes a new paradigm of Religious Education. However, when we talk about children’s theology, we have to start from an expanded understanding of theology, which is defined as religious awareness of religious thinking. Children’s theology contains this reflective moment, which manifests itself in a rational interest in God or in the desire to embrace faith, and shows that children not only speak and think religiously, but are capable of reaching a reflective level where they reflect on their religious thinking.

¹ A.A. Bucher, *Kinder als Theologen?*, “Zeitschrift für Religionsunterricht und Lebenskunde”, 21/1 (1992), pp. 19-22.

² A.A. Bucher, *Kindertheologie: Provokation? Romantizismus? Neues Paradigma?*, “Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie” 1 (2002), p. 14.

Concerning the term children's theology, a number of semantic levels exist nowadays. If children's theology means an independent manner of theologising by children alone, it does not mean that children do not need a targeted Religious Education³. Therefore F. Schweitzer calls for differentiating children's theology and accompanies children's theology by theology for children that offers specific theological knowledge for children, as the manner of children's contemplation and reasoning depends on the level of knowledge that they acquired in the given context. Even though Religious Education emphasizes independence as well as independent pupil's activity, it is always dependent on teacher stimulation⁴. Religious Education initiates manners in order for the children to become aware of their own religious experience and to be able to interpret it, but at the same time it corrects their experience and expression. Therefore, for the theological reasons, the Religious Education program of children must always include theology for children⁵. Finally, in 2005, H. Schluß emphasized the need to take children seriously as theological partners, and thus he complements the differentiation of children's theology with the third basic feature, that of *theology with children*, which respects the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and students, but at the same time underlines the symmetrical communication between teachers and students on the relational level: teachers become partners in dialogue with pupils. Therefore, children themselves are theologians, however, they only become theologians with the assistance of adults, who are capable of accepting the questions of children concerning life and keeping them open, and who also experience their own questions and answers authentically in regard to children⁶.

In the Slovakian context, the children's theology, as seen from the point of view of the religious-educational relation, has been adopted on a very small scale. Apart from suggestions made by two religious educators from the Czech Republic, N. Bravená and L. Muchová, who have been studying theologising and philosophising of children in Religious

³ A.A. Bucher, *Kindertheologie: Provokation? Romantizismus? Neues Paradigma?*, "Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie" 1 (2002), p. 25.

⁴ F. Schweitzer, *Was ist und wozu Kindertheologie?*, "Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie" 2 (2003), pp. 11-18.

⁵ U. Kropáč, *Kindertheologie: eine neue Formel auf dem Prüfstand*, "Katechetische Blätter" 131 (2006), pp. 89-90.

⁶ H. Schluß, *Ein Vorschlag, Gegenstand und Grenze der Kindertheologie anhand eines systematischen Leitgedankens zu entwickeln*, "Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie" 1 (2005), p. 25.

Education for quite some time⁷, there is exclusively D. Hanesová in Slovakia, who deals with the issue of children's theology, and who is exploring how the basic children's religious knowledge influences their ability to express their religious experience⁸. It is an interesting fact that the attention to the theologising of children is rather applied in the area of homiletics and catechetics than in the area of Religious Education⁹. This is especially evidenced by the great emphasis on children's theology within the framework of "Catecheses of the Good Shepherd", inspired by the translations of series of publications from an Italian author S. Cavalletti¹⁰.

Theological conversations in Religious Education classes

Theological conversations with children during Religious Education classes are quite complex. Pupils do not always ask questions as expected, their questions are rather surprising, sometimes provocative, other times they are inconspicuous and quiet, and thus they are easily overlooked. However, even primary school pupils can ask the most difficult theological questions.

According to A. Reese-Schnitker, conversations represent the core dimension of Religious Education, and they account for the third of the total teaching time of the Religious Education classes. At the same time A. Reese-Schnitker emphasises that these conversations, that take place within a large group, sometimes of up to 30 pupils, cannot be compared with conversations that take place under normal everyday conditions. Conversations in class are extraordinary and therefore present a challenge for every teacher. They follow specific rules that are clearly formulated and agreed upon by the pupils of each classroom. Teacher is the one who directs, leads and closes the

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⁷ L. Muchová, *Filosofické rozhovory jako způsob otevírání výuky v předmětech etická a náboženská výchova*, in: *Kritické myslenie a filozofická reflexia v edukácii*, ed. J. Kaliský, Banská Bystrica 2020, pp. 171-181. N. Bravená, *Dítě teologem. Nábožensko-pedagogická reflexe dětského prožívání transcendence*, in: *Myšlení o transcenci*, ed. M. Ryšková, M. Mikulcová, Praha 2013, pp. 199-220.

⁸ D. Hanesová, *Prvky konstruktivismu v náboženskej pedagogike*, in: *Zborník vedeckovýskumných prác č. 14, Acta Universitatis Matthaei Belli*, ed. S. Karikov, Banská Bystrica 2013, pp. 85-98.

⁹ R. Horka, *Možnosti a spôsoby formovania hodnotových rámcov v homíliách pre deti a mládež*, in: *Morálka v kontexte storočí*, ed. E. Brodňanská, A. Koželová Prešov 2019, pp. 168-169.

¹⁰ S. Cavaletti, *Náboženský potenciál dieťaťa*, Bratislava 2019. S. Cavaletti, *Náboženský potenciál dieťaťa vo veku 6-12 rokov*, Bratislava 2022.

conversation. Their aim is to create a conversation that is characterised by the mutuality of its participants, who they try to involve into the dialogue the most, and by the meaningfulness of their expression by following a specific didactic goal in mind. It is a challenging task for each teacher, and it requires an extraordinary amount of creativity and ability for communication¹¹.

Based on the observation, there are four different forms of conversations in Religious Education classes. A half of all didactic conversations in classes has the form of “ping-pong” conversation, with continuous attention alternating from teacher to pupils. Another form of conversation is manifested by a sequence of several student contributions, which are not commented nor interrupted by the teacher. This is not a real conversation as such, regarding that the pupils’ statements do not follow each other nor do they relate to each other. The third form of conversation is understood as a “camouflaged” teacher’s lecture: the teacher, who is the dominating figure there, by using targeted questions, is trying to lead pupils into defining, repeating or guessing the content that has been previously chosen by the teacher. As A. Reese-Schnitker puts it, only one sixth of all communication forms in Religious Education take place as real conversations between pupils, where pupils speak between themselves, relate mutually, or eventually discuss things in a controversial manner. This means that the pupils explicitly confront certain topic and express or develop their own opinions. At the same time, the teacher plays the role of an observer, or they can join as a participant with their own views. Using real conversations in the classroom is appropriate when the aim is to create a personal opinion, to reassess attitudes, and to implement what pupils have learned previously, as well as when the aim is the mutual controversial exchange of reasoning¹². According to F. Kraft, real conversations between pupils are rare, mostly because high quality conversation is needed. This cannot be achieved without a specifically created environment in class, and above all a certain conversation culture, that is openness and respect on the side of the pupils, interest in the other as well as a willingness to know and to understand other points of view. Therefore, an important aspect of these conversations between pupils is the quality of relationships between

¹¹ A. Reese-Schnitker, *Einanderzuhören und verstehen, aufeinander eingehen und miteinander reden. Gelingensfaktoren von Gesprächen im Religionsunterricht auf der Spur*, “Katechetische Blätter” 4 (2023), pp. 305-306.

¹² A. Reese-Schnitker, *Einanderzuhören und verstehen, aufeinander eingehen und miteinander reden. Gelingensfaktoren von Gesprächen im Religionsunterricht auf der Spur*, “Katechetische Blätter” 4 (2023), pp. 306-308.

the involved pupils. Consequently, if real conversations between students are to be successful, a prerequisite here is to support the ability of students to listen to one another, to want to understand the others and to have genuine interest in the others¹³.

And what are the skills to be acquired by the teachers so that they are capable of theological discussions with pupils beneficially? P. Freudenberger-Lötz emphasizes that the primary goal of theological conversations is for the teacher to sense the way pupils understand a given topic. Therefore, in theological conversations a genuine interest in pupils' interpretations is needed: the teacher must proceed carefully, try to find the child's own opinion, but at the same time the teacher introduces into the conversation the stimuli for further understanding. Teacher plays a role of a professional before the children and inquires about other possible answers to offer to the children in order to incite their further reasoning. At the same time, the teacher needs to acquire the attitude of interest in inquiring and reflecting on the pupils' answers¹⁴.

To theologise with children in Religious Education classes means to help pupils to create a certain questioning attitude and to be able to formulate their own theological interpretation. At the same time, the role of the teacher is exceptionally important, as they take on different roles and enter the play depending on the situation. According to P. Freudenberger-Lötz, these roles can be described either as the role of an attentive observer, who perceives the way pupils understand the topic, or the role of a partner, who incites the dialogue and encourages the pupils into further understanding, or the role of a guiding professional, who contributes with their knowledge on the given topic and offers possible answers to unanswered questions from the Christian-biblical tradition. These teacher roles clearly demonstrate that theological conversations represent a multiple-level process of understanding, which means understanding the topic, and also, a very important aspect, understanding the process of how pupils comprehend the topic. Hermeneutic competence is therefore a key competence in theological conversations¹⁵.

¹³ F. Kraft, *Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern und Jugendlichen. Eine didaktische Perspektive*, "Loccumer Pelikan" 4 (2012), p. 154.

¹⁴ P. Freudenberger-Lötz, *Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern – Chancen und Herausforderungen für die Lehrer/innenausbildung*, "Theo-Web. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik" 6/1 (2007), p. 15.

¹⁵ P. Freudenberger-Lötz, *Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern. Untersuchungen zur Professionalisierung Studierender und Anstöße zu forschendem Lernen im Religionsunterricht*, Stuttgart 2007), p. 130.

The context of Religious Education in Slovakia and the theme of “The parable of the Good Samaritan” in Religious Education classes

Roman-Catholic Religious Education in schools is a specific space, where pupils discover and learn about the reality from the religious point of view, which cannot be offered by other educational subjects in school. Teaching Religious Education creates space for pupils to inquire about existential and religious matters and to contemplate answers that are offered to them by the Catholic faith. In this way pupils broaden their own world-view, develop their own understanding of faith and life and have the possibility to discover their personal faith in God.

Based on the Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See about Catholic upbringing and education, the Roman-Catholic Religious Education is taught as one of the compulsory elective subjects in primary and secondary schools. Religious Education in schools is taught as confessional Religious Education, which enables a direct and authentic contact with the faith of Catholic Church. This meeting with the living experience of faith and its traditions also provides students with the opportunity to create a personal religious identity in an open and diverse society¹⁶.

The biblical parable about the Good Samaritan is among the most popular biblical texts in Religious Education in schools. According to P. Freudenberger-Lötz, children in primary schools are capable of understanding the nature and the meaning of biblical parables. At the same time, she points out that there are significant differences between individual children and some pupils, as some of them are not able to define the meaning of the parable¹⁷. Similarly, A. Bucher emphasizes the importance of already acquired religious or biblical knowledge: the children that have the knowledge of biblical stories are able to identify the parables as *actual parables* at younger age compared to the children who do not possess this knowledge¹⁸.

Similar conclusions are made by D. Hanesová, who within the scope of the study conducted among the children in Slovakia, confirms that

¹⁶ T. Reimer, *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií*, Bratislava 2020, pp. 138-139.

¹⁷ P. Freudenberger-Lötz, *Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern. Untersuchungen zur Professionalisierung Studierender und Anstöße zu forschendem Lernen im Religionsunterricht*, Stuttgart 2007, p. 146.

¹⁸ A.A. Bucher, *Gleichnisse verstehen lernen. Strukturgenetische Untersuchungen zur Rezeption synoptischer Parabeln*, Freiburg 1990, p. 20.

as long as the children have the basic knowledge of religious terms, they are able to express their religious experiences in a better way. This means that a child that has previous knowledge of biblical stories will be more successful in presenting its own interpretation of a biblical story¹⁹.

For that reason, the work with biblical parables in Religious Education presents huge opportunities, as well as challenges and risks. On one side, the Religious Education incites the pupils to discover and learn about the “correct” meaning of a biblical parable, but on the other side, it encourages each student to express their understanding and thus adopt individual approaches in learning productively about a biblical parable.

The parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 10, 25-37) belongs to the best-known texts of the New Testament. The parable of the Good Samaritan deals with an unknown man who is attacked and robbed by robbers and left heavily injured alongside the road. A priest and a Levite see him, but they pass by without helping him. Only a man from Samaria appears to help and have mercy. The parable is introduced by a Jewish law teacher with a question, “Who is my neighbour, who am I to help or to love?” The answer that Jesus gives in the parable about the Good Samaritan ignores this question and rather rephrases it: Who shown himself to be the neighbour of the one who needed help? While the pre-Christian piety deals with the issue of who deserves our help, the Jesus’s Christian moral rather concentrates on this theme: Who has allowed himself to be transformed by the cult to become a source of help and love? The Christian morality is essentially not supposed to be a guide to how to act correctly, but a guide to the right way of being; worship is therefore a prerequisite for knowing our neighbours. The new life thus becomes the source of love²⁰.

¹⁹ D. Hanesová, *Prvky konstruktivismu v náboženskej pedagogike*, in: *Zborník vedeckovýskumných prác č. 14, Acta Universitatis Matthaei Belli*, ed. S. Karikov, Banská Bystrica 2013, p. 95.

²⁰ F. Trstenský, *Biblické východiská chápania milosrdenstva Boha, Božie milosrdenstvo v obraze katechézy*, ed. P. Tirpák, Prešov 2016, p. 22.

Realization and reflection of the theological conversations on the theme of “the Parable of the Good Samaritan”

In this part, we are going to introduce some specific sequences of realized Religious Education classes based on the theme of “the Parable of the Good Samaritan”. The primary reflection is dedicated to the entry, more specifically the contextualisation of the teaching lesson. The idea is to understand the way the teacher brings the topic to the pupils and the way he or she forms the primary understanding of the topic in pupils. For that reason, we are going to deal with specific theological conversations that occurred in Religious Education classes and the knowledge that was brought into the mutual discussions by pupils themselves. In the end, we are going to present a few statements of the subject teachers connected to the reflection of the Religious Education class they taught. We based our study on the results of the implemented innovative education for Religious Education teachers, which was dedicated the topic of “theologizing of children in Religious Education classes”²¹.

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Making a proper introduction to the lesson and introducing the topic

The primary task of the teacher is to introduce the topic and its context to pupils. In connection with this, P. Freudenberger-Lötz speaks about creating a stimulating learning environment. The point here is not only in preparing suitable materials, but rather in creating a correct stimulus, in order for each pupil to individually confront the given topic. The point here is also for the teacher together with the pupils to take steps through this created learning environment with the goal of mutual learning²².

Based on the examined sequences of teaching lessons, we found out that in most of the cases the introduction of the topic of the parable of the Good Samaritan takes place in a very simple way – by reading a biblical text and by an introductory question made by the teacher, which usually equals to the reproduction of a text or a scene: “What happened in the story?”. A specific example follows:

²¹ Innovative education took place from October to December 2023 and 40 teachers of religious education participated in it.

²² P. Freudenberger-Lötz, *Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern. Untersuchungen zur Professionalisierung Studierender und Anstöße zu forschendem Lernen im Religionsunterricht*, Stuttgart 2007, p. 127.

In the beginning of the class, the teacher welcomes the pupils of the 4th grade, she introduces the topic to them and she distributes the worksheets. She stands at the teacher's desk during the reading of the biblical text of Luke 10, 25-37, then, during the children's work and discussion, she moves between the children and the desks.

- Teacher: What happened in the story?
- Miško: The story is that the robbers attacked a man.
- Teacher: What did they do to him?
- Miško: They attacked him, beat him and some other things, they took everything from him and left him half dead alongside the road.
- Teacher: Would he have survived if no one had helped him? He might have died, right? Go ahead! Try! (She makes a gesture towards another pupil, who raised a hand.)
- Michal: A priest saw him, but he didn't help him.
- Teacher: Uhm.
- Michal: Then a Levite came along, and he saw that he was suffering, so he took him...
- Ema: Hmm. Not yet...
- Teacher: Who remembers how many people passed by... by the injured one, how many passed by?
- Simonka: Three.
- Teacher: Three. The first one was – yes – the priest, who was probably in a hurry to the temple. Quickly, quickly! The second one was the Levite, who served in the temple, and he was probably also in a hurry, and the third one was the Samaritan, the third one. Did you notice?
- Class: Yes! Yes!
- Teacher: The third one. What did he do?
- Teo: ... so he felt extremely sorry for him. So he treated his wounds with oil and wine, took him with him and continued to take care of him.
- Teacher: Into a tavern. It is a type of a guest house, where you can also have some food. So he could recover completely. The Samaritan paid him the accommodation and the food. If necessary, he would pay any extra cost on his way back. If not for the Samaritan..., Samaritan means a citizen of Samaria, and they did not really like each other, they deprecated each other, they with the Jews reproached each other some things. Even though he was a Jew, he saw that the man needed his help. He overcame all those wrongs, prejudice and hatred, and I do not know what other reproaches, and told to himself, "But he needs my help." And that was what mattered. If it wasn't for the fact

that he realised it, that person probably wouldn't have survived. Do you agree?

Everybody: Yes. Of course.

The example given above is the most common type of introducing pupils to the biblical parable about the Good Samaritan. In most of the cases, the biblical text (Luke 10, 25-37) is read by the teachers, or they let the pupils read it. The most common way of learning about the text is done by a teacher asking a question in order for the pupils to reproduce the text, the scenes or the characters that appeared in the text, "So what was this story about?, Who can tell me?", "What did we hear about in this parable?", "What happened in the story?", "What did we read about?", "Children, what did we hear about in this parable?", or simply by introducing into the lesson an emotional feedback to the presented biblical text, "Did you like this story?", "What did you find interesting about it?". Some teachers, already by their first question, try to make pupils evaluate the behaviour of the characters in the biblical story, "What do you think of the behaviour of the people in the story?", "What do you think this Samaritan did?", "Do you know what the word *merciful* means?", "What did Jesus want to say by telling this parable, what did he want to teach us?". In some cases, the initial question anticipates the basic answers of the parable, e.g. "Who do you think is your neighbour?", "Why do you think he is called the Good Samaritan?".

In the above given introduction into the topic of the Good Samaritan, the teacher, above all, takes a role of an accompanying professional, who contributes with her knowledge of the topic and complements it appropriately. More specifically, she corrects Michal with regard to the order of the characters and the person of the Levite as well as the Samaritan. The teacher then further explains the parable by explaining the term a 'tavern' as a place of accommodation and catering, as well as the generosity of the Samaritan. The teacher also chooses to explain the main intention of the parable, when she points out the hostile relationship between Jews and Samaritans, and thus she explains the challenging aspect and the importance of the Samaritan's help. The pupils here rather take a role of respondents to the individual questions of the teacher that she addresses to them directly ("Right?", "Did you notice?", "Do you agree?"). The pupils have the basic knowledge about the characters in the parable, although sometimes they do not get their order right. Although the teacher gives them time to express themselves, she does not strive to broaden their answers by adding any more appropriate questioning.

By observing this introduction to the lesson we notice a straightforward dominance of the teacher's role, as she allows the students to clarify the basic elements of the biblical parable, but eventually takes on the task of explaining its basic characters, circumstances as well as the main significance of the parable. Her way of leaving the space for the pupils to deal with the biblical text more intensely is not sufficient, and she has them play the role of by-standers, who only react to the teacher's questions. On the side of the teacher, we can observe a "ping-pong" type of a dialogue with previously expected answers. Moreover, she does not take the opportunity to clarify the parable by using other biblical texts and thus enables the pupils to understand the parable in a broader context.

Theological reasoning of the pupils based on the example of the parable of the Good Samaritan

The goal of the theological conversations in the Religious Education classes is to help and encourage pupils to do their own theological reasoning and understanding. It often requires the teacher to withdraw herself and leave the pupils the space for expressing their views and opinions. According to the above given roles, the point is to become rather an attentive observer, who perceives the way the pupils understand the topic. As we have seen earlier, the teacher in this case is a dominating figure, she directs and outlines the teaching process rather than accompanying it.

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The teacher's activity also influences the theological conversations of the pupils in Religious Education classes. Based on the examined sequences of the teaching lessons, we could observe that the teachers encountered big difficulties when leading pupils towards a more profound theological reasoning. Pupils rarely had real conversations with one another during the lesson, where they would react to one another and relate with each other. We bring one sequence of a conversation, where a simple theologising took place between pupils, at least in a small amount.

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Teacher: | So, please, could you read to me what you think is the most important in this story. Let's begin: |
| Emka: | The good and the help. |
| Teacher: | Well done. Do you agree with Emka? Maybe you have similar thoughts. |
| Darinka: | To behave well, to help somebody. |
| Veronika: | To be good persons and to help each other. |

- Simonka: To spend less time on video games and to help people or parents.
- Teacher: Well done! Thank you.
- Pefko: To help each other more and not to fight against each other.
- Mirko: To help each other and to be friends.
- Teacher: Good.
- Adam: To do well and to help each other.
- Teo: To always help others.
- Teacher: Good.
- Dianka: To take an example. For example, to be helpful, gracious and kind.
- Miško: To help others, and when we die, it will be a point in heaven.
- Michal: A point in heaven? (He turns around to the classmate with a question.)
- Miško: Just like a reward for a good deed, don't you understand?
- Michal: Ok, well then. I have this one: to help and to ensure help.
- Teacher: To notice each other.
- Betka: To be good.

The teacher introduces this sequence with an open question to all pupils (“What do you think is the most important in this story?”). The pupils react in a spontaneous and open manner. The teacher, by her entries (“well done”, “good”), encourages pupils to join in with the answers. She decides to incite the conversation with questions and encouragement. The pupils prefer to react to the questions of the teacher and relate very little to each other. They do not comment on the answers of the others, nor do they evaluate them. The answer of Miško creates an extraordinary situation, as with his statement he brings a new aspect to the conversation, which incites a question. For others, “A point in heaven” (at least for Michal) is a misunderstood element. Michal repeats his statement, he dares to turn around to the classmate and ask for clarification. A surprising situation occurs. Miško takes on a role of a professional, who is capable of explaining his answer to the classmate and to defend his opinion before the others, while we can observe his own theological reasoning. Not only he discusses with the classmates the meaning of doing well, but he can also apply it in his life as a means of personal responsibility. At the same time, although pupils express it in a childlike way, a simple understanding of eschatology topics can be observed in this sequence – reward and punishment, particular judgement. The teacher takes on a role of an attentive observer in this situation, who perceives how pupils understand and reflect on the topic. This might also be an opportunity for a more intensive mirroring of the pupils’ answers, but the teacher decides not

to enter into the dialogue and thus it ends instantly. Michal agrees with Miško and, at the same time, he says that he understood his intention. However, he does not want to remain in the position of a person who is being instructed, and adds his own opinion to the question.

Likewise, we observed the theological reasoning of the pupils in another examined sequence. After reading a text from the Bible, a conversation followed, where the teacher was asking about the characters that took part in the parable, while the teacher took a role of an accompanying professional who clarifies the ambiguities of the pupils (Jericho is a town, the character of the Levite, etc.). The conversation follows:

- Martin: The priest doesn't get it that he should help him, though.
 Teacher: And should he get it? We all would expect that the priest is the one who would help that man.
 Adam: Yes. So why didn't he help him?
 Matúš: Maybe he was drunk.
 Martin: Who was drunk? The priest?
 Matúš: No, that person.
 Teacher: Maybe it was like that. Who knows ... What other reason you think he had for not helping him?
 Pupils: He was lazy, proud, and blind.
 Teacher: How would he see him then?
 Nicolas: He might have tripped over him.
 Teacher: Hm, I didn't find anything like that in the text.
 Matúš: But I still don't understand, why that person, if he became a priest, doesn't believe in God?
 Martin: He didn't have a good heart.
 Adam: But the Samaritan's heart was lit by the oil of love.
 Teacher: Yes, his help is amazing, because he has shown mercy, his goodness.

In the examined sequence, we can observe that the teacher is trying to change from the position of a professional to the position of an attentive observer. She clearly tries to avoid intervening into the pupils' conversation. The pupils' attention is evidently drawn to the behaviour of the priest. Based on their personal experience, they deduce that a priest is usually someone caring and someone who takes interest in other people. Here we encounter an antagonistic behaviour, which incites embarrassment and misunderstanding in pupils. It is explicitly expressed by Martin and Adam, when they say, "So why didn't he help him?" The pupils are now trying to understand the reasons for that behaviour. Matúš is trying to explain this behaviour by stating a possible negative characteristic of the injured ("Maybe he was drunk."),

which, at the beginning, is misunderstood by Martin. Matúš clarifies his statement that he is speaking about the injured man and possibly introduces his own experience into the discussion (for instance, an experience with a drunk homeless person), or rather a social convention (you do not have to help a drunk person). The pupils do not elaborate on this aspect, however, encouraged by the teacher, they rather concentrate on the priest, who refuses to help the injured person (“He was lazy, proud, blind ...”). While Martin emphasizes his moral attitude (“He didn’t have a good heart”), Matúš introduces a completely new aspect: the faith in God. He interconnects the reluctance to help the injured with the obvious deficiency of lack of faith in God. Martin essentially surpasses the usual interpretation of the contrast between worship and charity and introduces a much more profound issue of faith and life. He basically expresses a theological reflection that the new life of a human departs from the faith in God: where there is a lack of faith, so there is lack of service to the neighbour. The new life thus literally becomes the source of love. Therefore, the Samaritan does not only become the prototype of service to the neighbours, but also a prototype of the faith in God. This is practically expressed also by Adam, who closes the discussion with a very interesting statement, describing the Samaritan’s heart as “lit by the oil of love”.

This studied sequence points out the fact that pupils can also become theologians and that they are capable of theological reasoning on a very intense level. However, the environment of acceptance in class is needed as well as the ability to listen to each other and the ability of the teacher to abandon the role of a professional and rather take on the role of an observer and a partner in dialogue.

However, on some occasions, the theological reasoning of pupils occurred also outside theological conversations. When studying the sequences of Religious Education classes concerning the theme of the Good Samaritan, we encountered the topic of drawing a picture containing the figure of the Good Samaritan. It was interesting to observe in various classes what colours the pupils used for colouring the pictures. Almost all children used warm tones when colouring the Samaritan: red, brown, orange, green. As for the antagonistic characters of the story, the children either did not colour them, they used grey tones, or they just struck them out. Such a contrast of characters emerged naturally, without a specific assignment from the teacher. Children thus made a distinction, even by using different colours, in order to accentuate who the good and the bad characters in the story

are. We can consider it a significant expression of theological reasoning based on the topic of a biblical parable.

During the reflection on their own teaching of the classes, the involved teachers emphasized the fact that they did not sufficiently profit from the ability of their pupils to take over the theologising process and to maintain theological conversations during Religious Education classes. One of the main obstacles here is above all the teacher's directive approach in religious education classes. One of the teachers expressed it in the following way: "Most of the time, I took on the role of an accompanying professional, who, in an unsuccessful way, tries to become an encouraging partner in the dialogue. The class is well together, the pupils know one another well, and they know how to make jokes. Maybe they were already tired because it was their last lesson. They answered my questions in a pre-learned manner and it did not take them too much time to think. Moreover, the pupils got used to consulting all their doubts with the teacher and I tend to direct them all the time (teacher, 38 years old)." Another teacher responded similarly, "I would love to take on the role of an attentive observer, but the conversation with the pupils has never developed in such a way that I could be this observer (teacher, 47 years old)." The teachers do realise that they could draw the pupils into the dialogue even more, leave more space to the pupils, and concentrate less on achieving the set lesson objectives.

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The final evaluation of theological conversations on the theme of "the Parable of the Good Samaritan"

Based on the analysis and the evaluation of the examined sequences of the realised classes of religious education based on the theme of "the parable of the Good Samaritan", we can specify some interesting observations concerning Religious Education in Slovakia.

"The children's theology" as such is rather an unknown term. At present, there is no scientific or specialized literature that would deal with the study of children's theology in Religious Education classes. This reflects the fact that the Religious Education teachers do not see the children as individual subjects and the creators of their own religious reality. Also for that reason, in the examined sequences of the lessons, it occurs very rarely that the children express their own observations, questions, interpretations, thoughts, reasoning, reflections and judgements in connection with religious topics that they would think independently about.

A characteristic trait of Religious Education in Slovakia is a dominating figure of the religious education teacher. In most of the examined sequences, the teacher takes on the role of an accompanying professional, who takes over the teaching process, asks questions and contributes to the topic with his or her knowledge by offering possible solutions to the unresolved questions. That, however, means that teachers do not sufficiently develop the questioning attitude in children. One teacher expresses this concisely,

I am not sure whether I supported and motivated them enough, but the pupils did not ask any questions during this class. I was surprised by this situation, as I know the pupils well, and I know that some of the boys are capable of asking significant questions. I think this happened, because this was their first lesson of the day, and they didn't feel like thinking. Or maybe I asked wrong questions. (...) I felt like I was the only one talking, I asked a question every time the class was quiet and then someone answered, but not all the pupils joined the conversation (teacher, 52 years old).

In most of the cases, the teacher is aware of this dominance and considers the possibility to create for the pupils more space for thinking. This is what one teacher stated,

Maybe I could have tried to leave even more space for pupils to develop their thoughts – I think we, teachers, intend to complement the class in order to avoid silence. At least I notice that I have a greater need to speak every time the class is silent, but maybe we would learn more if the teacher sometimes remained quiet for a longer period of time instead of speaking right away (teacher, 44 years old).

At the same time, the examined sequences of the Religious Education classes point out the fact that the teacher often plays the role of someone who directly delivers the knowledge about the Bible to the pupils and does not allow the pupils to come up with their own interpretations about the text.

I didn't strive to find out the opinion of the pupils. I mainly wanted the pupils to understand the matter and the given topic. I didn't incite a much-needed genuine interest in pupils' interpretations by asking the correct questions (teacher, 54 years old).

However, based on the examined sequences of the Religious Education classes, we can state that where theological reasoning of the children occurred, we could witness very profound and intense theological thoughts and interpretations that are often even surprising. This is the

evidence that children's theologising in Religious Education classes, in fact, leads to developing theological competences of the pupils.

The children's theology and the emphasis on the theologising of the children in Religious Education classes is the new paradigm in teaching Religious Education and has the potential of becoming a new challenge for teaching Religious Education in Slovakia. In spite of the lacking scientific background of children's theology in Slovakia, it presents a huge potential in considering children as real theologians and as real actors of their own religiosity. It should be borne in mind that the emphasis on independence as well as on independent children's activity requires the Religious Education teachers to be actual partners in the dialogue with pupils. Although children are actual theologians, they only become theologians when accompanied by adults, who are capable of accepting existential questions and maintain them open for discussion and who, at the same time, live authentically by these questions and answers with regard to children.

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