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Christian Education for a Generation of Amusement

Abstract.

The expectations of the children of our “amusement society” are different to what they used to be a generation or two ago. I highlight a few aspects, which might be relevant (albeit not new) to how we address contemporary young people. I would like to raise awareness of aspects which are still indispensable and which have probably gained importance for the process of Christian Education, not because they are novel, but because they are fundamental. What has not changed, is the need for real human relationships, the importance of personal involvement, and the delight of performing meaningful tasks. At Christian Education, pupils not only learn about something, but they are also invited into the in-between space of a dialogue with God. This involves learning by doing, experimenting with practices, which are in line with our spiritual heritage, and which offer our pupils a chance to engage in dialogue with God (prayer, meditation, silence, fasting, journaling, singing etc.).

Keywords: Christian Education, amusement society, boredom, play, dialogue, meta-narrative

My students have recently carried out a non-representative survey in schools in Budapest and other parts of Hungary: they inquired about which methods of teaching the youth prefer in religious education classes. Independent of age or region, they invariably would want more games and conversations. Even though this research does not indicate national trends, it does flag up something that we as teachers experience at classes. The expectations of the children of our “amusement society” are different to what they used to be a generation or two ago. And with this cultural shift, the expectations of teachers and parents have probably changed as well, when it comes to education. It is difficult for a Religious Education (RE) class to compete with digital technology and its spectacular potentials, or with million-dollar block-

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busters. This poses several questions: Does it really have to compete with entertainment factories? To what extent is education part of entertainment industry anyway? Is it really necessary to follow the expectations of schoolchildren (whether justified or not) in order to get and keep their attention? Are we not as teachers putting the cart before the horse by concentrating on games and amusement at a class? What is imperative to focus on, in order not to lose sight of the core message we have been called to pass on to our listeners?

In the following section, I would like to highlight a few aspects, which might be relevant (albeit not new) to how we address contemporary young people. Therefore, they are worth thinking through in light of the latest social shifts.² I would like to raise awareness of aspects which are still indispensable and which have probably gained importance for the process of Christian Education, not because they are novel, but because they are fundamental.

1. Social Context

The social context around churches has changed, and the demands of a consumer society influence those within the church, too.³ The media's message ("it's all for you", "have fun") also contributes to it, as Schulze points out while discussing sensation-oriented action:

"it is in opposition to the pattern of delayed gratification, which is characterised by saving money, dating long, resilient political fight, every form of preventive behaviour, training hard, leading a hard-working life, renunciation, and asceticism. In this pattern of actions, the hope of happiness is envisioned in the distant future, whereas, in the case of a pattern of sensation-oriented action, desires seek gratification in the immediate situation, without delay."⁴

² SZÉNÁSI Lilla: *Isten és ember találkozásának színtere – A 21. század katechetikai kihívásai és lehetőségei, különös tekintettel a Z generáció hittanoktatásában használatos IKT eszközökre és anyagokra*. Doctoral thesis, Komárno, 2017; MIKLYA Luzsányi Mónika: *Őt és újat – Vallási-teológiai elemek a digitális nemzedék világgképét meghatározó művekben, különös tekintettel a keresztyénségre*. In: *Theológiai Szemle*, 2015/4. 233–241.; VÁRADI Ferenc: *Gyermekkor és médiahasználat – „kényelmetlen közkérdések”: A kézikönyvírás szükségességéről, nehézségeiről és lehetőségeiről*. In: SPANNRAFT Marcellina – KORPICS Márta – NÉMETH László (szerk.): *A család és a közösség szolgálatában. Tanulmányok Komlói Piroska tiszteletére*. L'Harmattan–Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, Budapest, 2016. 259–268.

³ J. B. TWITCHELL: *Shopping for God – How Christianity went from in your Heart to in your Face*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2007. 55.

⁴ G. SCHULZE: *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft – Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*. Campus, Frankfurt a.M. 1992. 14.

The following needs are prevalent in this culture: captivating the senses, seeking immediate effects, and the pursuit of sensation. These have a great effect on the daily lives and feasts of the church.⁵ Be they mainstream or counter-culture, churches strive to give some kind of answer to our contemporary challenges.

Ever since one's religion and denomination has become a decision of personal preference, taste, and style, they have been considered to be a matter of free choice. This has made the process of joining a community also very diverse.⁶ In the past, people were born into a community, they were connected to the church through marriage, relocation, or religious education. On the other hand, nowadays, there seem to be numerous points of contact from baptism, through RE, to a choosing a church community consciously.

It is almost impossible to evaluate our own social context, as we live in it, so to every statement about it, a counterstatement could be found. Still, there are certain trends, which are less typical for previous generations than they are for today's society. The values, or crises of value, the givens, and the lack of givens in a social and cultural context, all have an effect on the world-views and value systems of church members, too. Even though God's Word is a point of reference for believers, the surrounding culture does shape the way they practice their faith.⁷

2. Flight from Boredom

While boredom was a privilege of the aristocracy up until the Middle Ages, today it has grown into a phenomenon threatening the masses.⁸ As boredom is frightening, something always has to happen that has an effect on us. It is the nature of consumer society that it enhances narcissistic traits by the illusion that "it's all about" us consumers, that our satisfaction is the number one priority for tradesmen, marketing experts, media workers, public institutions, and politicians alike. This attitude has spread to other areas of life (family, school, church etc.). Gerhard Schulze has used the expression "sensation" to express an essential element of our society and culture, i.e. the need to captivate the senses. In a sensation society "*aspiring to live a beautiful life means aspiring to live a sensational*

⁵ BATTÁ István: *A spiritualitás újra-felfedezése a kálvinizmusban*. Doctoral thesis, Selye János Egyetem Református Teológiai Kar, Komárom, 2014.

⁶ J. B. TWITCHELL: *Shopping for God*. 13.

⁷ H. STREIB: *Faith Development Theory Revisited – The Religious Styles Perspective*. In: *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2001/3, 2001. 144–158. 149.

⁸ L. SVENDSEN: *A Philosophy of Boredom*. Reaktion Books, 2005. 11.; Lásd még: L. KENNY: *Boredom Escapes Us – A Cultural Collage in Eleven Storeys*. University of Toronto, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009.

life.”⁹ Sensational experiences have become the fetish of a life that is meaningful and worth living.¹⁰

As teachers, we would like our classes to be exciting and useful for our pupils. But school life is not always sensational: by definition, there will be boring events. Boredom, however, is a natural part of daily life (even a Christian life): sometimes you have to wait, do your well-know, tiresome routine, and repetitive actions. Naturally, new and fascinating impulses will not come from one minute to the next.¹¹ Contrary to reality, though, smart phones or other digital devices can create artificial stimuli at will, any given time.

Quick stimuli with instant response, several impulses with shorter reaction time, input with immediate output: these traits have reduced the space for personal reflection, for filtering and assessing information, or for a substantial interput. In a world of blurred, “fluid” knowledge, there is less energy to store and process information. This cognitive overload causes a kind of “hovering” attention (surfing), which enables contemporary people to have broad knowledge in a wide range of areas. However, in order to navigate well on the seas of information, absorbed reading and reflection (scuba diving) is also vital.¹² Yet, there is less and less energy for this, as the digital world gives us virtual sensations (with a rush of dopamine) much more quickly than actions that require greater effort.¹³

What has not changed though, compared to past times, even in a sensation-society, is the need for real human relationships, the importance of personal involvement, and the delight of performing meaningful tasks. Earlier, people used to know about each other, they were familiar with each other’s lives, past and present; today, relationships have transformed dramatically. The high demand for online communities also proves that humans cannot live without continuously sharing themselves, and being involved in others’ lives. These are the areas where teaching activities in schools/churches could and should be synchronised with the needs of this generation.

3. The Function of Dialogue in the Learning Process

In the world of business coaching, we encounter ever new methods. These spring from the very same main concept, only they are being sold in different packaging. The essence of various therapies, coaching, mentoring, or supervision is that there is someone who dedicates their time and attention to another person. And by listening to their problems and

⁹ SCHULZE, G.: *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*. 38.

¹⁰ BAUMAN, Z.: *Society under Siege*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002.

¹¹ FELDMÁR András: *Életunalom, élettér, életkedv*. HVG Kiadó, Budapest, 2014. 13.

¹² J. TAYLOR: *A digitális nemzedék nevelése – Hogyan válhat gyermeke tudatos médiafogyasztóvá*. Móra Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2016. 118.

¹³ S. SINEK: *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*. Penguin Books, New York, 2014. 53.

engaging in dialogue, they strive to find a common path. Evidently, there are certain trends in teaching as well, the basic concept of which is as old as Antiquity, namely: dialogue between teacher and pupil, alongside the pupils' questions. Just as Socrates or Jesus were conversing with their disciples, this kind of human need has not changed in millenia. We need conversational spaces (be they real or virtual), where our thoughts are being listened to, where we are important, where we can ask questions, and where we can receive guidance for our lives.¹⁴

Through the centuries, as it has become necessary to educate the masses, teaching has shifted from being personal dialogue. Take the first universities: they were complemented with monastic communities. Or in case of village schools, the local community topped knowledge at schools with its capacity to guide and hold cohere.¹⁵ This kind of social network is not a given for the current generations any more. In an age of disintegrating families, it is a unique opportunity for the church to offer a familial experience in the local community, at schools or RE.¹⁶ The Christian community can fulfil its vocation primarily as a community of dialogue. During an RE class, not only is the teacher's message about community and their personal story present, but the inner "movies" of all pupils are also being played.¹⁷

It is a vital part of the connection matrix, as pupils in the learning process compare their own lives with that of other people or their narrations.¹⁸

*"Any kind of verbal narration is by definition a dialogue, even if the audience is silent. Only the present is able to unfold the story – it can even alter its course. The audience is the co-creator of the story."*¹⁹

Only then will the message fully unravel, if it encounters an active listener. Individual perceptions and interpretations will influence each other during the interaction of those involved. As Miklós Kocsev puts it: "*religious communication happens in our words, deeds,*

¹⁴ K. FECHTNER: *Praktische Theologie als Erkundung – Religiöse Praxis im spätmodernen Christentum*. In: E. HAUSCHILD – U. SCHWAB (Hgs.): *Praktische Theologie für das 21. Jahrhundert*. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2002. 55–67. 59.

¹⁵ MIHÁLYFI Ákos: *A papnevelés története és elmélete*. I. kötet. Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 1896. 54.

¹⁶ E. H. FRIEDMAN: *Nemzedékről nemzedékre – Családi folyamatok egyházi és zsinagógai közösségekben*. Exit Kiadó, Kolozsvár, 2008. 303.

¹⁷ L. MILLER – A. ATHAN: *Spiritual Awareness Pedagogy: the Classroom as Spiritual Reality*. In: *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, Vol. 12, No. 1, April 2007. 17–35.

¹⁸ T. ANDERSEN: *A visszajelző csoport – Párbeszéd a párbeszédéről*. Animula, Budapest, 1990. 41–43.

¹⁹ C. G. OEHLMANN: *Einfach erzählen! – Ein Übungsbuch zum Erlernen des mündlichen Erzählens*. Paderborn, Junfermann, 2001. 21.

and lives.”²⁰ The church lives through its human communities which constantly interact. So, the broader Christian community, the church’s interpretation of reality, its symbols, ethics, and perspectives will always manifest their concrete meaning in the historical-cultural context of an actual local community. A common horizon of meaning emerges and comes to life during dialogue.²¹ In each and every interaction, the main traits of a common interpretation are present, and so with each and every interaction, the elements of a common interpretation are also revised, therefore, the community lives on. In order for Christian faith to become a community experience, the group needs to breathe together, where the individual impacts the community and the community impacts the individual. The knowledge of what following Christ means, based on practice and experience, will be accumulated in the whole of the community, and, therefore, it will be neither possessed, nor embodied by individual members. In other words, the church consists of a network of practice-communities. Consequently, we are justified to view the whole of the church as the *community of communities that are in dialogue* with God and each other.²²

4. Learning (Faith) by Doing

Theology has two languages: one is informative, the other is addressing. The purpose of the former is typically to tell stories of the Faith; the latter is doxological, i.e. it intends to praise God.²³ At an RE class, both kinds will manifest themselves: on one hand, we learn about the Bible and the acts of God. On the other hand, it is not only the experiences of others that we aim to understand, but also to reflect and thereby ripen our own experiences of faith. Compared to other classes, a large proportion of time is devoted to addressing God Godself, namely, in songs praising God, in prayers dedicated to God, and moments of silent reflection. At RE, pupils not only learn about something, but they are also invited into the in-between space of a dialogue with God. This involves learning by doing, experimenting with practices which are in line with our spiritual heritage, and which offer our pupils a chance to engage in dialogue with God (prayer, meditation, silence, fasting, journaling, singing etc.)

²⁰ KOCSEV M.: *Gyakorlati teológiai témák – Elmélet és praxis, az igehirdetés személyközpontúsága és a szupervízió*. Habilitációs dolgozat. KRE–HTK, Budapest, 2007. 122.

²¹ N. BLAIKIE: *Approaches to Social Enquiry*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995. 64.

²² J. S. BROWN – P. DUGUIT: *Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice – Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning and Innovation*. In: *Organisation Science*, Vol 2. no. 1. 1991. 40–57.

²³ D. RITSCHL: *Zur Logik der Theologie – Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, München, 1984. 181.

There is a vital aspect in the lives of human communities, which has the potential to connect us to God, and is available in an RE class: namely, the power of rites. In spiritual life, rites and action precede stories.²⁴ Non-verbal communication will always be an indispensable agent of the flow of information between people. A child first sees and experiences routine actions at home; only later do they start to understand and practice them. In Protestant Puritan tradition, there are fears of extremities around rites. However, in the fuzziness and blurred lines of the current age, there is a great need to rediscover them, and rely on them. Rites have always assisted us at transitions: they represented exiting or transferring.²⁵ Even though there is some space at an RE class to practice rites through the feasts of the liturgical year, I still think it is worthwhile being mindful of them today.²⁶ One instrument to enhance experience, which is utilised more and more at RE as well, is drama: e.g. Godly Play, or the KETT-method. On top of these, however, it would be beneficial to attend more to the transitions of the feasts, or to help pupils live through different phases in their lives with the aid of rites. In one of the men's groups in our church, we were discussing the fact that there were no transitions into manhood, so that there is no-one who could affirm when a boy becomes a man, or what makes him one. Confirmation can be such an occasion for young people to experience transition, and a superb one for that. But rites connected to starting or finishing school, holidays, joyful and tragic family events, could also bolster the sense of belonging to the community and God.

5. The Role of Games/Playing in Enhancing the Experience of Learning

"Many consider playing superficial or even trivial. But I think it is a life-giving activity. It makes us younger if we are already old; it matures us if we are still young."

– professes Jermone Berryman when asked about the significance of playing.²⁷ A well-chosen game will add value to the class for a young person, because, apart from a

²⁴ R. N. BELLAH: *Religion in Human Evolution – From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*- Harvard University Press, 2011. 91 kk.

²⁵ MÁTÉ-TÓTH András: *Vallásnézet – A kelet-közép-európai átmenet vallástudományi értelmezése*. Korunk – Komp-Press, Kolozsvár, 2014. 142.

²⁶ M. MEYER-BLANK: *Vom Symbol zum Zeichen – Symboldidaktik und Semiotik*. Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1995.

²⁷ J. BERRYMAN: *Godly Play – An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1994. 1.

sense of liberation and fun, it has several benefits. Playing is a vital framework for experiencing joy, as it involves the wonder of exploration, a challenge, and a meaningful task. Moreover, the group as a whole will also be engaged, which will further motivate pupils to connect emotionally. It is the synergy of these factors that can contribute to a more joyful learning process, therefore, if the game is good, these will appear more or less simultaneously. The experience of a good game offers more than just fun, since it also means practicing community, exploration, and reflection for the individual and the group alike. Playing gives the group an opportunity to socially interact with one another, in a structured framework, but with less supervision from the teacher. Therefore, a game poses risks for the teacher, as it intrinsically entails the possibility that events do not go exactly in the pre-planned direction or as deemed best by the instructor. It has the potential of being a joyful, but meaningless activity for the pupils. Even then, though, giving them a choice, and at points letting them steer the class where they please, increases their engagement. Just as each activity they are exposed to, will ripen to experience through personal reflection, most class games will also eventually fall into place, if the pupils reflect on them.

6. Finding Meaning and Significance in the Meta-narrative of Christianity

Why do we do things in life that are less, or not at all, sensational? We do them if they are, for some reason, important to us: if it is meaningful to invest our work and time in them. School is a system of coercion; therefore, children must do and learn a number of things there that are more burdensome than joyful for them. There are few students for whom RE (religious education) ranks high in the hierarchy of subjects. However, even if it has not much to offer when it comes to going to college, it is the place where pupils usually like their teachers more, and where they report about a familial atmosphere. But there is more: namely, the opportunity to reflect on the meaning and the significance of personal life, not with a consumerist approach, but with a Christian one.²⁸

There is great emphasis on stories in our RE textbooks, which has a huge significance. Besides the biblical stories, another vital factor is the encounter between the lives of teacher and pupils. A schoolchild once explained to me that the biggest reason why he liked attending RE was that the elderly pastor doing it regularly told stories about his own life and childhood. Personal stories help connect life with faith. Through them, one can

²⁸ Siba BALÁZS: *Life Story and Christian Metanarration – The Importance of the Research Results of Narrative Identity to Practical Theology*. L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, Budapest, 2013.

receive guidance for one's own life. The reason people are by definition intrigued by stories is that they help us understand our own lives, since: "a good story is built up in such a way that it carries the listener away, who can, inconspicuously, rediscover her/himself in them. Among other things, it happens through the identification with the protagonist's search, fears, questions, and conflicts, by which s/he has the impression that the tale is actually about her/him."²⁹

Stories have an effect on us, even when they are not really about us. We find examples of which way to develop, and patterns to interpret our paths behind us. We need shared narratives.³⁰ However, only then will it become a collective story, if the group becomes aware of it, and also finds it relevant: "it is critical that we find the points of contact in the individual story that link it to the collective one. In other words, our story can only be understood when it is embedded into the collective narrative."³¹ Not all sensational experiences become experiences of faith. Only those in which emotions are paired with such cognitive explanations that support integration into their worldviews.³² Our robust Christian meta-narrative can serve both teacher and pupil to find the meaning and personal significance of their lives, in the perspective of the Whole. For this to happen, pupils have to find our message relevant to their daily lives. As Gerkin puts it:

*"The aim of our ministry is first and foremost to help individuals, families and communities change their lives. We do this by shaping, and re-interpreting their stories in such a way that they engage in dialogue with the central metaphors and themes of the Christian narrative."*³³

Perhaps the most important aspect of teaching/educating is still what it has always been: our presence and attention. As a high-school teacher once said: "the point is to love

²⁹ I. BAUMGARTNER: *Pasztorálpszichológia*. Semmelweis Egyetem TF/ Párbeszéd (Dialogus) Alapítvány / HÍD Alapítvány, Budapest, 2003. 555.

³⁰ H. J. DÖRGER: *Heilige und andere Menschen – Gedanken zu vier Fernseh-Meditationen*. In: A. GRÖZINGER – H. LUTHER (Hgs.): *Religion und Biographie: Perspektiven zur gelebten Religion*. Kaiser, München, 1987. 261–272. 268.

³¹ U. POHL-PATALONG: *Seelsorge zwischen Individuum und Gesellschaft*. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1996. 258.

³² I. U. DALFERTH: *The Experience of God*. In: T. GUNDLACH – R. BECKER – H. KIENE – K. MERZYN (eds.): *Trusting in God in New Ways*. Church Office of the Evangelical Church of Germany, Evangelische Kirche Deutschland (EKD), Hannover, 2017. 22–25. 23.; Siba Balázs: *Spirituális útkeresés és a református lelkiség – lelkészinterjúk fényében*. In: *Theologiai Szemle*, 59:(3), 2016. 158–169.

³³ C. V. GERKIN: *Prophetic Pastoral Practice – A Christian Vision of Life Together*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1991. 59.

them.” Using the latest ICT and modern methodology is indispensable, even if of secondary importance compared to our message, when it comes to connecting to the new generations. We, therefore, need a balance between the “why” and the “how” in teaching, in order to avoid making our RE classes fun without meaning, or a bore without fun.

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