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The Contribution of University Theology to the Education of Social and Charity Workers

Abstract

Social and charity workers are educated at theological faculties and they also take some courses in theology. The article deals with the current position of theology (theological topics) in their education. Currently, it appears that theological topics are incomprehensible to students and they tend to consider them as unnecessary, thus narrowing their understanding of charity as well as social work. By focusing on theological competence, we can achieve a more adequate definition of the goals of such education at theological faculties, including a more adequate definition of theological curricula content. The contribution offers the first definition of the theological competence of social and charity workers based on experience from the Czech Republic.

Keywords: social work, study, theological competence.

Wkład teologii uniwersyteckiej w kształcenie pracowników socjalnych i charytatywnych

Abstrakt

Pracownicy socjalni i charytatywni są kształceni na wydziałach teologicznych, a także biorą udział w niektórych kursach teologicznych. Artykuł dotyczy obecnej pozycji teologii (teologicznych zagadnień) w ich edukacji. Wydaje się, że obecnie zagadnienia teologiczne są niezrozumiałe dla studentów. Są oni skłonni uważać je za niepotrzebne, co prowadzi do zawężenia ich rozumienia działalności charytatywnej i pracy socjalnej. Koncentrując się na kompetencjach teologicznych, można osiągnąć bardziej adekwatną definicję celów takiej edukacji na wydziałach teologicznych, w tym bardziej adekwatną definicję treści programów teologicznych. Niniejszy artykuł oferuje pierwszą definicję kompetencji teologicznych pracowników socjalnych i charytatywnych w oparciu o doświadczenia z Republiki Czeskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: praca socjalna, studia, kompetencje teologiczne.

Before 1989, theological faculties in the Czech Republic prepared students mainly for pastoral and preaching vocations. After the Velvet Revolution, theology faculties in the Czech Republic had to adapt to the transformation of higher

education, including the requirements for scholarly activity and internationalization of faculties, but also for financial sustainability (e.g., a fixed amount of money per student or graduate in university budgets). Czech theologians networked with foreign experts, and drawing upon those foreign standards built the methodology of Czech biblical studies, systematics, church history, and practical theology. Following the Czech tradition, the categories of Czech Catholic, Hussite, and Protestant theology were first professionalized, and the faculties began to form theological seminaries of various types of Protestant theology.¹

At first, the field of study of theology began to open up to the knowledge of other sciences (philosophy, religious studies, Judaic studies, pedagogy, social work), and later the faculties began to offer so-called interdisciplinary studies, where theology formed a solid majority dominating the curricula. At present, some collaborating disciplines such as pedagogy and social work have defined their minimum knowledge standards or competency frameworks of education at the level of given ministries of the Czech Republic, thus clearly defining the minimum knowledge and skill requirements for graduates of state-regulated professions. Consequently, the theological curriculum has been narrowed down to subjects with a predominantly applied character. This has brought different challenges to such disciplines in theological faculties and to the educators who teach in these disciplines.

In this article, I would like to open up a very topical issue that has not yet been systematically addressed. With the reduction in the time allocation of theological courses, the question of the clarity and relevance of theological topics for the field of social and charitable work has necessarily arisen.² This goes hand in hand with uncertainty on the part of teachers about how to interpret theological topics in a comprehensible way for today's students. However, there is a lack of appropriate reflection that would address the topic very specifically in terms of the competencies of educators and future social workers. In this paper, therefore, I will pursue the basic question: What is the current position of theology (theological themes) in the education of social and charity workers and what are the basic challenges for theologians and for churches as founders of religious charities?

¹ This paper originated as part of the COOPERATIO project Sociology and Applied Social Sciences (Charles University in Prague).

² Similarly, see the call for a paradigm shift for the teaching of religion in Mendl ("Wende zum Subjekt") – Hans Mendl. 2015. *Taschenlexikon Religionsdidaktik*. München: Kösel-Verlag, 16.

1. The Educational Link between Theology and social Work

The educational link between the discipline of theology and social work has a long historical tradition. The incorporation and union of the Czech theological faculties into the university after 1989 is relevant for this paper.³ Theological faculties very soon began to offer other study programmes in addition to the study of theology (i.e., various denominational models). Thus, they responded to the demand from below, but also to the fact that theology contains anthropological specifics important for the social services and helping professions, and therefore has clear benefits for students. There was also an integral economic reason which was also related to the overall concept of university funding in the Czech Republic and the long-term unsustainability of a purely theological degree preparing pastors.

The accreditation documents have undergone some evolution during the past twenty years. The curricula of non-theological disciplines contained the so-called theological core (stem) curriculum, to which the foundation of other specialties was assigned. In the curricula of the so-called combined studies of the two programmes – theological and non-theological – theological subjects were at first predominant, but in the last ten years they have become rather superstructural in terms of curricular content. The latter is still related to the anthropological framing of service to the other, but it emphasizes the diaconal and charitable work of the churches and from this perspective leads the student to an understanding of theology. Thus, with the transformation of the Czech society in which we register a move away from the institutionalized forms of Christianity and an increasing preference for personal spirituality, the applicant who applies to theological faculties has changed over the years. In my opinion, as of now theological faculties have not yet sufficiently adapted the offer of education in theology to this significant change.

With the generational renewal has come a more pragmatic conception of study even in theological faculties, a fact which can be captured by this statement: “to study everything in the shortest time possible, without any effort, and only what the students enjoy.” However, the theology courses in the original accreditation documents were designed with content for those who either have theological knowledge (e.g., from the Church) or on the basis of other introductory courses, complete this basic knowledge already in the first year of study. The current state of teaching at the Hussite Theological Faculty at Charles University therefore

³ Zdeněk Kučera. 1990. Projev k inkorporaci Husitské teologické fakulty do svazku Karlovy univerzity slavnostním aktem dne 24.9.1990. *Theologická revue Církve československé husitské*. (14.11.2024).

raises the question of the contribution of theology to the field of social and charitable work, which is also a question of the educational goals of theology. The Faculty of Theology was already one of the founding faculties of Charles University when it was founded on 7 April 1348, and this is also the case elsewhere in Europe. We can state *de facto* that theology is essentially part of a cultural heritage that is currently being conflated with practicing Christianity, which is in decline in Europe. However, it would be a mistake to view the academic discipline itself through this prism.

A small research survey in the course “Theology and Social Work 2024” at Hussite Theological Faculty showed that most students on the follow-up Masters degree studyprogramme come without any previous theological training. And if they are interested in theology, they tend to concentrate it on the general topic of “spirituality.” In this sense, we need to question the clarity of the link between theology and social and charitable work, as well as the understanding of the benefits of such studies.

2. The Typology of the Bond between Theology and Social Work

If we carry out a content analysis of the current literature, we observe a certain typology of the link or bond between theology and social work:

- 1) A historical bond: historically, theology emerged before the field of social work and focused on service to others, that is, it had a strong social aspect and brought very practical solutions to people’s lives.
- 2) A bond of good practice and examples: Applied theology and lived Christian practice offer a sufficient number of exemplary actions of groups and individuals (e.g., Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, etc.) that can be re-discovered and applied in contemporary social practice.
- 3) A conceptual bond: Theology offers a transcendent reflection on the notion of service to the other, which is associated with pro-sociality and practical help for others. It is inferred that there is a common interest of both disciplines in helping the other person on the basis of professional assistance.
- 4) A bond of discipline: Theology has a sub-discipline of practical theology which includes diaconal and charity work and thematically intertwined with social work. In addition, these terms occur as the main names of helping church organizations.
- 5) A spiritual bond or connection: theology is inconceivable without human spirituality, in which it has a longer lived experience than other non-theological disciplines (up to about 5,000 years). The experience and sharing

of a transcendent dimension is what connects the two disciplines regardless of the individual's inner beliefs and type of ministry. However, in some types of services this is at the forefront: for example, hospice services where suffering, death, and dying open up questions beyond human existence.⁴

The given typology offers a clear thematic and conceptual bridge between theology and social and charitable work. However, it is a pointillistic bridge, in places unarticulated in lectures and seminars (assumed by theologians) and obscured by much other information. Moreover, it is a bridging that inevitably raises questions for the practical student concerning the applicability of the information in practice. The problem is not that the theologians are not saying relevant information and that it is not applicable in practice; the problem is that the student cannot read the message in such a way that he can apply it in practice. In essence, we can say that the speech of theologians is opaque to the point of being obfuscated for non-theological students because it is primarily based on theological hermeneutics. Misunderstanding⁵ is then identified by the student with the meaninglessness or irrelevance of the information toward the work itself. Almost all phenomena in theology are methodologically inferred through facts and events that have already taken place; this, in my opinion, is very incomprehensible to contemporary students and feels like a recycling of something unfashionable and therefore redundant. Moreover, the contemporary student considers the history of any discipline (pedagogy, philosophy, psychology, medicine, etc.) as something outdated by the current era (i.e., irrelevant to study). This is also because we do not teach students history as a flow of time set in a specific space, time, and place that co-creates humanity as such, and without the past even the present is unthinkable, but we still teach students knowledge about history.

3. Two strands of Theological Reflection on the Bond, between Theology and Social Work

In contemporary theological discussion we see the justification of the link between theology and social work on the basis of theological reflection. The latter is of two types:

⁴ Jan Kaňák. 2015. "Postavení diskursu spirituality v sociální práci". *Sociální práce* 4: 31.

⁵ Noemi Bravená. 2018. Children and Veiled Transcendence. In *Seeking God's Face*. Ed. Mireia Ryšková, 290–304. Praha: Karolinum.

3.1. The Direction from Theology to Social Work

- 1) Theology justifies its relevance to social work biblically and ethically, choosing the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example or norm for the helping professions. The ethical altruistic appeal then unites all those who are not indifferent to the fate of the other person.
- 2) Theology justifies its relevance to social work in systematic theological terms. This is especially so in the Catholic confessional model and its social doctrine of the Church. Reflection on the Church's document *Gaudium et spes* thus provides the basis for understanding the Church's service to the world, but also the Church's reception of help from the world. The ecclesiological bond and mutuality create a specific communion with the whole world.⁶

3.2. The Direction from Social work to Theology

A different justification is found where the rediscovery of the notion of service as a prerequisite for theology is concerned (Hoburg). In the work of social workers, benefits are sought, or the so-called extended hands of God are sought; they are God's workers without realizing it. However, it is not their particular service to the other that is at stake, but the fact that where service to the other is happening, both actors (the helper and the recipient of help) may be open to a different (i.e., Christian) interpretation of the situation. The situation between the helper and the recipient of help is interpreted on the basis of the hermeneutic and universality of God's help to man. By helping, space is created for a theological interpretation of the world, regardless of whether or not one believes or accepts this justification as relevant.⁷

These justifications of the link between theology and social work are based on the reflections of theologians and are based on two concepts: the universality of salvation and the importance of all people striving for the good for the Church. Speaking in systematically-theological terms, this justification is acceptable, but only the believing student, that is, the one who has come to know the grace of God will understand this approach. The student who is not religiously socialized from these statements does not really know what he has competently gained from them for his particular work with people. Moreover, this thesis can be quite easily associated with cheap grace – “live as you please,

⁶ Michal Opatrný. 2013. *Social Work and Theology: Inspirations and Suggestions of Social Work for Theology*. Prague: Vyšehrad; Noemi Bravená. 2022. “Základní aspekt vazby mezi teologií a sociální prací”. *Theologická revue* 93 (1): 102–104.

⁷ Bravená. 2022. “Základní aspekt vazby mezi teologií a sociální prací”, 102–107.

since when you do good to others you are serving God.” While the student may feel good that the church also appreciates his work, this is done on a transcendent level, not practically.

On the part of the unbeliever, theological knowledge is often understood in this way:

- very difficult to grasp intellectually;
- he does not know why and how it should be useful to him;
- a superfluous thought construct tied to the church – it is a matter for the church;
- presented as a positive added value to a person, but the student may not identify with this; this statement captures it: “what do I care if I don’t believe, and I don’t care whether or not I serve the church as well”;
- perceived as imposing a worldview on the student that they have no interest in;
- means of keeping the church “alive.”

The statements make it obvious to any theologian that this is a misunderstanding of the underlying messages. Even though this is a theologically relevant reflection on the intertwining of theology and social work, I think it is a discussion that is in some ways exhausted and needs to be thought about from a different perspective.

4. The Contribution of Theology Found in the Aims of Education

I think that the link or bond between theology and social work cannot be drawn only from the core of theology, which is based on revelation as well as on a person’s personal connection to God. Nor is it intelligible to draw conclusions from theology as an academic science, because it is a complex science, and these insights cannot be squeezed into a few theological subjects. In fact, this approach puts theology in an apologetic role where theology defends its contribution and as a consequence educators defend their role as teachers of theology, which is demotivating for them.

It is therefore necessary to look for a justification of the contribution of theology in the profile of the graduate who is supposed to be helpful to all people, that is, also in spiritual needs. The justification is not so much for a person who does not believe in the universality of salvation, nor in service to the other, but in the activity of the future graduate who is to respond to the needs of all, that is, even people engaged in a transcendent dimension of themselves or their community. This is an educational goal that is relevant and perfectly under-

standable.⁸ This is essentially reflected in the response of the students in the survey already mentioned, where they want to understand spirituality first and foremost in order to respond to the needs of others.

Students of charity and social work at the Hussite Theological Faculty currently have courses oriented around the concept of the church and its history, service to others, learning the foundations and history of charity, reflecting on missiological models, and examples of good practice of charities. This is understandable content for those who are familiar with the Bible and have a greater understanding of Christianity and churches. For students with no prior knowledge, navigating such a breadth of thought is quite difficult. In doing so, it should be noted that the solution is not to reduce the number of required readings. The degree of difficulty is not determined by the amount of knowledge, but by the hermeneutical context and complexity of theological scholarship. Students who evaluated the relevance of their undergraduate studies in personal interviews often stated that they had to discover the meaning for themselves and then it “started to make sense” to them. Neither the educators nor the knowledge-based conception of theology is to blame, but the change in the educational paradigm that has taken place from the so-called bottom up with the change in societal preferences, the shift in theological emphases, and the change in the requirements for the clarity of theology for contemporary people.

4.1. Theological Competence in Theology

If the accreditation document says that the graduate will be equipped to work in charitable and church organizations, it does not say that he or she will be a Christian, but that he or she will have the knowledge and skills to be able to hold those jobs.

Currently, the so-called competency-based models of learning are resonating throughout Europe in primary and secondary schools. In this sense, even the Ministry of Education has redefined key competences for teacher students,⁹ and we can also find a competence model for social workers.¹⁰ Why not open this discussion to theology as well? These are the sets of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and

⁸ Bravená. 2022. “Základní aspekt vazby mezi teologií a sociální prací”, 108.

⁹ In the *Competency Framework for Graduate and Graduate Teachers: Common Professional Competencies by the Ministry of Education*. (03.02.2024) https://www.msmt.cz/uploads/kompetencni_ramec_absolventa_2023_10.pdf.

¹⁰ Ruth Allen. 2022. The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) for Social Workers in England: Creating an Embedded Culture of Excellence, Ambition and Shared Values Across the Profession. In *Social Work in the Frame of a Professional Competencies Approach. European Social Work Education and Practice*. Springer: Cham. (03.02.2024) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13528-6_10.

values that prepare a graduate to perform the profession studied from multiple perspectives.

In 2010, Zimmermann defined theological competence for children and distinguished it from the so-called spiritual competence by the fundamental observation that it is learnable. In doing so, she essentially said that the development of theological competence can be achieved even if the child has an indifferent relationship with God. She differentiated herself from so-called religious competence by attributing to theological competence a Christian content and in essence a Christian teacher.

Research on theological interviews with nonreligious children has revealed (Bravená et al.) a number of deficits that we have assumed in theology students, which vary widely according to the degree of religious socialization:

- a knowledge base: research has shown that even religious knowledge cannot be built by strictly memorizing of Bible in one exam from the New Testament and one from the Old Testament; it is a more complex problem;
- religious thinking or sensitivity to religious thought is associated with one of the monotheistic religions and implies not only detachment but also acceptance that lived religion is possible and real;
- higher cognitive processing of abstract information of religious concepts. This is essentially abstract thinking multiplied by two (i.e., abstraction from abstraction) which I daresay is higher than Bloom's highest level of cognitive goals.¹¹
- religious vocabulary takes quite a long time to form in a child, and recent research shows that it is learned as a "second foreign language."¹² If this is learned continuously over several years, it is not learnable in three or four college courses.

Therefore, it is necessary to open up the question of theological competence to define what is learnable without faith and thus make it practically clear what a graduate actually takes away from college for his or her concrete practice.

¹¹ Noemi Bravená. 2014. Theologisieren mit religionsfernen Kindern zum Thema Engel. In *"He! Ich habe viel Stress! Ich hasse alles": Theologisieren mit Kindern aus bildungs- und religionsfernen Milieus* (Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie, 13). Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 69–75; Noemi Bravená. 2019. "Do Not Be Concerned Only About Yourself..." *Transcendence and Its Importance for the Socialization and Formation of a Child's Personality*. (Beiträge zur Kinder- und Jugendtheologie, 43). Kassel: Kassel University Press (see competence of transcendence).

¹² Gerhard Büttner. 2015. *Religion as a Second Language*. Quoted from the manuscript of a lecture delivered at the Hussite Faculty of Theology, Charles University, Prague, 2 November 2015.

4.2. Theological Competence for Social and Charity Workers

Starting from Zimmermann's brief summary of theological competence, we find the cognitive aspect of information processing, the problem-solving aspect, disciplinary interdependence, learnability, and real-life application.¹³ However, it was formulated with regard to religious education in Germany and the perennial religious socialization. It does, however, point in a direction that is desirable.

Starting from the employment positions in which social and charity workers can work after their studies, this basic thinking about theological competence is offered while it is clear that the development of religious competence will also go in parallel.

5. The Theological Competence of Graduates in Social and Charity Work

- he/she understands the basic disciplinary specificity of theology and grasps the key concepts and theological context of the nature of Christianity: its origins, basic facts, and contribution to society, and the orientation of values in Europe;
- he/she is able to distinguish the element of doctrinalism from revealed theology and the *kerygma* of the Church; he/she is fully aware of the boundary between the rational processing of facts and the transcendent dimension of spirituality;
- he/she understands that religious language is a foreign language in terms of intelligibility; he/she reflects on concepts from multiple perspectives and can apply simple theological concepts in communication with other minorities;
- he/she understands selected texts of the Bible, especially in terms of "updating" (practical use of texts in working with clients) and can understand the spiritual needs of the client in challenging situations (e.g., in hospice work);
- he/she can understand at least to a basic level the difference between a normal conversation about spirituality, a psychotherapeutic approach, and the pastoral work of the Church in working with clients;
- he/she can apply or respect the vision of church organizations in working with clients;

¹³ Mirjam Zimmermann. 2010. *Kindertheologie als theologische Kompetenz von Kindern: Grundlagen, Methodik und Ziel kindertheologischer Forschung am Beispiel der Deutung des Todes Jesu*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.

- he/she is oriented to the issues of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue from a position of Christian ethics;
- he/she understands the concept of religious extremism and knows some of the reasons from within religion that lead to it.

In this sense, I dare to say that it is necessary to open also a discussion on the syllabus, the interconnectedness of theological knowledge, and other ways to work with it didactically.

6. Conclusion

The intention of this article was to open a discussion regarding the complementary study of theology in students without religious affiliation and Christian religious socialization in the context of social and charity work studies. This topic is highly thematic because theology faculties offer other majors in addition to theology, while trying to guide these students to the specifics of the field of theology as well. The border situations, death, dying, migration crisis, etc., show that such thinking is desirable; the question is the appropriateness of the current syllabi of the different courses and the didactic approaches of the teachers. The way is not only to explain the link between theology and social and charitable work on which current accreditations and education are based, but to start from the results of education and practical demands. One possibility is to focus more on the goals of education, that is, the theological competence of students studying social and charitable work. This core competency is based on an understanding of the basic specifics of the field which has both a teachable and unteachable (spiritual-experiential) component. It is linked to topics that are related to practical client problems that may be part of real-life conversations. It ties into a different conceptualization and hermeneutic that is fundamentally based on biblical hermeneutics and practical-theological interpretation. Systematic theology then provides essential links to understanding the meaning of Christianity and the vision of church organizations. It appears, however, that theologians urgently need to register the change in the educational paradigm and to adapt not only the choice of topics, the choice of words, and their own vocabulary to this. To put this in theological terms, in the words of the Apostle Paul, the theologian is to become “a Greek to the Greeks and a Jew to the Jews” (1 Cor 9:20–22). Therefore, it is also necessary to look for ways to present, interpret and generally communicate the knowledge and the transcendent dimension of theology to the contemporary world in a way that will offer real benefit. Theology is not meant to be a complex apologetic, but to speak to the concrete situation of man. This conviction

means that it is no longer sustainable by automatically applying a methodology that has taken shape over several hundred years within the history of theology to another field. Returning to our opening question, the current position of theology is clear: theology as a science is in a situation where it cannot turn a blind eye to the redefinition of the educational paradigm of theological education for future practitioners of the helping professions.

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