What is Children's Theology? Children's Theology as theological competence: Development, differentiation, methods

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Children's Theology, theologising with children, or Child Theology has become an established concept in the discipline of religious education in Germany. The discipline departs from the point of view that children have a right to their religion, which makes the process of religious education the focal point. It is, however, important to understand the theology generated by children and also to create interaction with their religious views. This requires dialogue in which relevant questions are to be considered and discussed. The challenges for religious educators are subsequently treated.

What is Children's Theology? Children's Theology as theological competence

The background for the concept is secularism and religious plurality in Europe and that leads to the question: How can we pass on our religious tradition to our children? Over the past 20 years, Children's Theology has become an established concept in Europe within the academic field of religious education (Kraft, Roose & Büttner 2011b). Based on the point of view that children in institutions of public education have a right to their religion (Schweitzer 2000, 2011:10) and, particularly in religion classes, have a right to religious education and to information that is new to them, pioneers of Children's Theology such as Anton A. Bucher, Gerhard Büttner, Friedhelm Kraft, Petra Freudenberger-Lötz, Hartmut Rupp, Elisabeth Schwarz and Mirjam Zimmermann advocate 'a hermeneutics of active acquisition rather than transmittal' (Bucher 2002:23). They are convinced that children can be regarded as people:

> [*W*]ho can think about theological topics in their specific way. Just as children are sensitive to philosophical questions, they are sensitive to theological questions. … Children are not only encouraged to say what they think, they [*are*] also encouraged to specify why they think, what they think and in which respect what they think might differ from what other children (or adults) think. (Kraft *et al*. 2011b:5)

Is seems that theologising with children is a concept that is primarily related to religious education at school, but there are also descriptions of possibilities with children in families.

The goal is to understand the theology generated by children, to interpret the 'pattern (hypothetically) detected in this way' (e.g. on prayer see Roose 2006:137–146) and finally to give new theological ideas, identify the nuances and make it more flexible.

Using the concept of the advancement of theological competency (Zimmermann 2012:131–164) allows the more open notion of 'religious competency', which is used extensively in the competency debate, to be expanded into an area so far neglected and to be brought back into the theological tradition of thought. The intention is to thoughtfully investigate a historical, contemporary or personal faith practice, while moving away from a spirituality of the child that is practiced but not reflected. Therefore, in order to advance theological competency, a process of confrontation, examination and reflection must take place in classroom situations.

Additionally, theologising gains connectivity in the religious-didactic field through its integration into the competency debate (Kraft, Freudenberger-Lötz & Schwarz 2011a:9–16). Competency in Children's Theology is defined as the empirically measurable ability of children 'not only to articulate but also to reflectively penetrate and refine their own thoughts and ideas on theological questions' (Reiß & Freudenberger-Lötz 2012:133). It is thus a cognitive ability that reveals itself in the posing and processing of theological questions as well as in narrative and metaphorical modes of thought and which enables one to deal with paradoxes and hermeneutical questions. It assists in the solving of theological problems, the points of origin which lie between the child and the theological issues. Its specificity to a field or domain is revealed through specific theological

subject matters (e.g. the question of God, Christology, the Holy Ghost). This competency can be learned, tested, expanded and improved and it can be called up as a competency for communicating and acting in appropriate situations. It can be analysed in form and content, for example with regard to consistency, abstraction, dependence on language, the use of fundamental categories, the generation of causal systems and connectivity to interpretations and systems, and it can be evaluated and promoted according to didactic goals (for more detail see Zimmerman 2013:163).

Drawing on established definitions within the systematic-theological tradition, Children's Theology is defined as:

- theology of revelation and answers
- lay theology
- existential and personal theology
- concrete, creative and contextual
- but also temporary, critical and dialogical theology.

In every case it is closely tied to language as the medium for reflection (for more detail see Zimmermann 2012:88–92).

Many aspects concerning the goal and the road to be used still needs further definition and research. The central concern of researchers is to remain respectful of children and not to functionalise or romanticise their voices in order to come to a new vitality in theology. Certainly, the awareness of the position of children in theology is part of the actual hermeneutical turn in theology (Dillen 2007) and can also be seen as a '*postmodern modus*' of doing theology (Roebben 2011:15), in which the difference between a child, an ordinary theologian and an academic professional theologian is not substantial, but graded (Bucher 2002:11).

The development of Children's Theology

Although the term 'Children's Theology' is quite new, the concept behind it has a long history. Individual aspects reveal analogies to insights and postulations from various phases of theology and religious education, such as:

> [*T*]he perception of the otherness of the child in ancient times, the attempt to improve its social status in the New Testament, a recognition and appreciation of its own value during the Enlightenment, the change of perspective in an education 'originating with the child' in progressive education, the exploration of the religious development of children through developmental-psychological or religious-sociological studies within empirical theology since the 1970's and the insight, supported by new child research, into the independent interaction of children with their environment … (Zimmermann 2012:400)

Through child research in the social sciences the deficient image of the child, postulated by developmental and socialisation theories and measured against the norm of adults, has been replaced by the concept of the child who acts, thinks and speaks independently. Thus, the insight that children actively construct their own worlds and are capable of complex thinking, for example, of forming analogies, at a much earlier age than formerly assumed, has grown. This change of perspective has taken place over the past 30 years through sociological, psychological and pedagogical issues and has been taken up in theology and in the church especially through developments such as Children's Theology. In Religious Pedagogy, 'Children's Theology, Child Theology or theologising with Children' is explicitly spoken about within the religious-pedagogical discourse since 1992 and the discussion has become more intense since the appearance of the '*Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie*' (Yearbook of Children's Theology) in 2002.

Since then, several monographs, for example on the interpretation of Jesus' death (Albrecht 2007; Zimmermann 2012), the resurrection (Butt 2009), prayer (Kammeyer 2009) et cetera, have been published and a bibliography up until 2010 is available (Zimmermann 2012:51–54). Since 2010, an additional focus on youth theology has been established (Dieterich 2012; Freudenberger-Lötz 2012; Schlag & Schweitzer 2011) and the '*Jahrbuch für Jugendtheologie*' (Yearbook of Youth Theology) has been published alongside the Yearbook of Children's Theology since 2013.

Philosophy has provided a decisive motivating factor for the interest in conversing with children and for the appreciation of children's thoughts. Both through transfers and differentiation from the 'philosophising with Children' (Camhy; Matthews; Freese; Horster 1992; Lipman 1980 etc.), we have been able to learn essential aspects about establishing and structuring Children's Theology. The following can be considered to be common core beliefs:

- interest in the questioning attitude of children and trust in children's competency, even in explicitly philosophical questions (Lipman 1980)
- the partial criticism of the cognitive stage theory based on Piaget (Matthews 1991) for the evaluation of statements in Children's Theology
- the appreciation of the particularity of individual children's thought processes (Matthews 1984, 1993)
- individual interview methods (particularly the dialogue method of Martens 2009:97–115; Socratic discourse in Horster 1992).

However, in addition to these analogies, it is possible and necessary to make a clear distinction between the object of Children's Theology and that of the philosophy of children. In defining the object of theology more specifically, we gain a clearer separation between Children's Theology and the philosophy of children (Rupp 2009:170–181). Children's Theology develops clear contours through an orientation toward the established term of theology in the systematic-theological tradition. In the same way that theology must refer here to Christian faith, Children's Theology must also in some way be able to be referred to the history of God with people and people with God, which is transmitted through biblical tradition, proclaimed by the church and is

experienced in the present day. Finally, theologising with children and philosophising with children differ in their claims to truth and validity. As philosophers in this field emphasise, philosophical thought cannot lead to normative security in the sense of life certitude. However, for Children's Theology, the essential aspects are a connection back to a faith which is externally authenticated – in theological terms: 'extra no's' – providing a claim to one's own self-discovery and the possibility of successfully managing one's life as well as the hope for a goal.

In an interesting book, which presents the essays of an international discussion in Danish Loggum-Abbey, the participants sorted out the two interesting positions:

> KT ([*Kindertheologie*] *means Children* [*sic*] *Theology*) can be divided in two streams: it is about philosophizing (or wondering philosophically and reflecting systematically) with children *on religious subjects* or it is about philosophizing with children *in the form of religion*. (Roebben 2011:13)

Petermann, who adheres to the first position, wants to invite children 'to make faith (also in the sense of its communications) reflective as an elementary dimension of human experience' (Petermann 2009:144).

Apart from the idea of philosophising with children, there are two more concepts which have influenced Children's Theology.

Piaget and the psychology of children´s development claims that children are not deficient in their way of thinking; they are just different. These differences might be promising, firstly for the understanding of how young children think, and secondly that their thinking provides a valuable and sometimes very creative and surprising contribution to the theological discourse itself in bringing up new questions and also new answers.

The other concept that formed the idea is that of 'Children's Spirituality'. Especially in the United Kingdom, the concept of spirituality is also part of the pedagogical debate, which understands spirituality as part of the *condition humaine.* This concept reminds of Maria Montessori's concept, but it was developed in an interreligious, pluralistic context (Freudenreich 2009:131–144). Roebben asks (2011): How do this term and the underlying movement relate and respond to the Anglo-Saxon development in children's spirituality? Is it a more academic approach (therefore *theology*) to a more educational praxis (therefore *spirituality*) in the life of children? Are the German religious education specialists building on the 'lived theology' that comes out of the Anglo-Saxon empirical and hermeneutical research of children's spirituality?

Internal differentiation: Children's Theology as theology by, for and with children

Early on in the framework of theoretical reflection on Children's Theology, Anton Bucher (2002:9) differentiated between *Theology of Children* (Genetivus subjektivus) and *Theology for Children* (Genetivus objektivus). At the same time, we also find the term *Theologizing with Children* (Büttner & Rupp 2002, in the book title). In his leading article in the *Jahrbuch der Kindertheologie* (2003), Friedrich Schweitzer (2003:11) effectively differentiated among theology *by, for and with* children. The following table (Zimmermann 2012:123) gives a brief overview, which will be discussed below.

This system was also adopted in *Youth Theology* and was differentiated with regard to the various forms of youth theology: Implicit theology, personal theology, explicit theology, theological interpretation with the help of theological dogmatic, the specific theological argumentation of youth (Schlag & Schweitzer 2011; explained by Schlag at the conference for Children's Theology 2011). When considering Table 1, it is important to remember – due both to epistemological considerations as well as with regard to

TABLE 1: What is Children Theology?

Variable	Theology by children, the theology of children	Theologising with children	Theology for children
Theological concept	Theology as human discourse about faith Function of faith (Härle)	Dialogical act of the search for truth Function of the church (Tillich)	Theology of revelation (people as listeners) Function of revelation (Barth & Bultmann)
Role of the child	Active, independent, fully-fledged subject. Autonomy of the child	Relationship-oriented, dialogical-communicative	Active and independent but also capable of development and learning; deficit in knowledge and experience
Role of the teacher	**actor** Passive listener at the most providing stimulus Enrichment/questioning of the position of the teacher	**partner** (Dialogue)partner Respectful correction and intervention; questioning	**addressee** Orienting, leading, transmitting Co-responsible for the validity and security of the subject matter
Method(s)	**Basic attitude:** **amazement, questioning** Socio-scientific empirical: descriptive	**Basic attitude:** **searching, talking** From communication science	**Basic attitude:** **inviting, offering** Hermeneutic prescriptive
Religious-pedagogical goal	To foster the creativity and independence of children's theological activities	Symmetrical and open communication; common search for theological truths	Assistance in the development and expansion of the domain-specific religious knowledge of the child; from biblical-theological tradition
Limits/ problem	**Oriented toward identity;** **goal: mature Christian** Cannot be reached methodologically/ epistemologically not a corrective	**Oriented toward dialogue; goal:** **community of the searchers/church** Symmetrical communication is an ideal but cannot actually be reached	**Oriented toward education; goal:** **acquiring and understanding of tradition** Perception/appreciation of children only with regard to certain religious-pedagogical goals

Source: Zimmermann, M., 2012, *Kindertheologie als theologische Kompetenz: Grundlagen, Methodik und Ziel kindertheologischer Forschung am Beispiel der Deutung des Todes Jesu*, 2. Aufl., Neukirchener-Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn.

the integration of Children's Theology in practical religious-pedagogical contexts – that the various dimensions of Children's Theology have been differentiated with heuristic intention. Ultimately, there are three facets to Children's Theology.

Theology by children

Early on, Anton Bucher called for 'sensitivity toward children's theological capabilities' and valued children as theologians and thus as independent and active constructors of theological artefacts (Bucher 1992:20). At the beginning, a focus on the theology of children was necessary in order to differentiate between classical religious education and the movement of Children's Theology. It also led to a change in the role of adults, who at best should stimulate children's thoughts or provide space for their development. This image, however, does not appear consistently throughout the '*Yearbooks of Children's Theology*'. There should actually be no correction of unfortunate or incorrect statements, as these enrich the position of the teacher or even call it into question.

Methodologically, such approaches are used to exert the least influence on the thoughts and statements of children because these should be registered only descriptively. At this point we come up against the limits of such a perception, because ultimately, it is adults who structure and focus the interpretations through the theological setting, the materials and the questions asked and it is adults who are active as interpreters when they evaluate and present the children's statements (Roebben 2011:19).

Theology with children

'Theology with children' or the more commonly used 'theologising with children' is a middle position that feeds out of the 'theology of children' where it originates, but also introduces aspects into the discourse and thus recurs as a 'theology for children'. As the name itself reveals, children are partners in the action. The term is based on 'philosophising with children' and can be construed as a practically implemented integrative approach. However, the role of the teacher, who needs the key skill of so-called flexible role modulation, holds a central position (Freudenberger-Lötz 2007:351).

Theology for children

Although the term 'theology for children' was used early on in publications as a contrast to differentiate from the 'theology of children' (Bucher 2002:9), it later became clear in many contexts that the 'theology of children' is dependent on the stimulus and supplementation arising from 'theology for children'. In 2012, one of the yearbooks was devoted explicitly to this topic. The astonishment at children's theological capabilities was no longer sufficient to prevent work being done on the shortcomings that had come to light in the framework of Children's Theology. Thus, empirically acquired data often refers to an exceptional selection of children's statements that do not represent the entire spectrum of children's theological competencies. 'Theology for children' is also necessary because many children have too little basic knowledge and their statements are often random, selective and problematic (explained in Zimmermann 2012:43–47). Therefore 'theology for children' must conceptualise meaningful situations that challenge children theologically but also support them in the development of their abilities to question. It must convey a basis of knowledge that enables more complex and creative theological thought during the process of theologising and must attempt to establish in the long-term the development of these competencies in order to minimise randomness.

Methods of Children's Theology

Drawing on a working paper by Hartmut Rupp, Heinz Schmidt identified seven basic didactical forms:

- *Socratic discourse*, which aims at self-recognition and exists in a 'clarifying dialogue' between child and 'master'
- *basic teaching*, which identifies mistakes and what is correct
- *mythological narration*, which suggests elementary narrative images and stories and thus addresses and connects deep-seated emotions
- *literary narrative* also with pictures (picture books), which stimulate and process questions using dramatic stories and vivid images
- *question-oriented lessons*, which are based on children's questions and refer to these questions to unlock biblical narratives, images, words, songs and music
- use of *dilemma stories* to activate and call into question children's fundamental ideas and motivate children to reconstruct their theological concepts
- *free work*, in which children develop their own questions, process them independently using various resources and solve them as much as possible on their own (Schmidt 2002:18–19).

Both this list and the contributions in the '*Yearbook of Children's Theology*' on teaching methods reveal that the above basic forms do not fundamentally differ from those of classical religion or confirmation classes. The difference lies not in the method but in the goal of the pedagogical process. Here, the primary central interest is not on transmittal; instead, the children are regarded as equal discourse partners even on the factual level and are taken seriously if they express their theological positions on a topic or problem. Only by drawing on the theology of the children do the adults introduce other positions not mentioned in the group or by the child. The openness of the outcome is decisive and this must not be confused with arbitrariness. As an example of such a theological conversation we can use the image of a playing field upon which no entirely new areas are developed but rather limits are drawn and rules are outlined. The way in which the game develops within the limits, however, depends on the players.

Methods oriented toward perception

Researchers have a variety of empirical methods available to them which help to perceive the theology of children with as little bias as possible (Zimmermann 2012:167–188). In reference to data gathering and evaluation we can identify the following criteria:

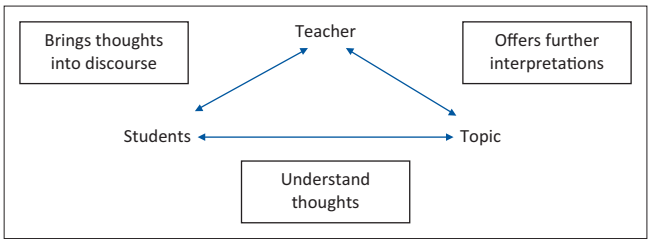
- intersubjective conformability
- indication and coherence of the research process
- empirically established according to the common standards of the social sciences, for example, the justification of the selection of the test group, the relation to the comparison group, the criteria of theoretical saturation et cetera
- limitation and relevance, which help to determine the validity of the research results
- reflected in subjectivity that is conscious of the fact that the Children's Theology is always meta-theology because the researcher himself or herself is extensively involved in the topic being researched as Children's Theology (for methodological problems see also Roebben 2011:17–18).

Methods oriented toward mediation

If theologising is understood as the common search for answers to theological questions during which children introduce and develop their own ideas and thus strengthen their own competencies, an important basis for this activity is a dialogue in which all partners are equal. All interpretations must be honoured and contributions to the dialogue that are not serious or 'comments from the students that are alarming or that contradict basic human rights must be dealt with critically in the conversation' (Reiß & Freudenberger-Lötz 2012:124). True interest in the student's thoughts on the topic at hand is a basic requirement. This assumes a trust that the thoughts offered will enrich the conversation and will motivate the teachers to reflect on them. Nevertheless, the teacher remains the official representative of theology. He or she must have very good factual knowledge of the subject matter in order to be able to integrate the student's theological searches, to systematise their interpretations and to offer further or alternative interpretations. It is important that the teacher is conscious of his or her own approach and can justify it plausibly. Additionally, this approach should be offered only as food for thought.

The moments of reflection will be all the more successful the more they are (1) made elementary, (2) interesting, which also and especially means rooted in the concrete experience of the children, (3) intuitive and immediately accessible, (4) challenging and didactically designed to be open to a deeper and a wider exploration of the initial problem, and (5) condensed and to the point (Petermann 2009:143).

The most interesting situations in theologising tend to occur unexpectedly because a student poses an interesting question,



Source: Author's own construct.

FIGURE 1: Didactic triangle of theologising with children.

a position expressed in the class stimulates objection or an event or stimulus in their lives calls theological topics into question. Of course, it is difficult to adequately prepare for such a situation. However, particularly in such situations, the adult discourse partner is on an equal footing as seeker and questioner, bringing greater depth to exactly such conversations (see Figure 1).

A planned conversation poses the following difficulties for the teacher. As the *attentive observer*, the teacher must first understand the students' thoughts and at the same time, as the *stimulating discourse partner*, he or she must bring the students' thoughts into the discourse and as the *accompanying expert* must offer further interpretations, as can be seen in the didactic triangle (Reiß & Freudenberger-Lötz 2012:134).

A well-trained teacher of religious education (Schwarz 2011:153f.) should be in a position to give answers to the following three questions: Where do these children come from personally and socially (context)? How can they be appropriately accompanied by adults in their search for meaning (communication)? What is a good elementary selection of key knowledge that helps them in their cognition (content) (Roebben 2011:16):

It is very important to follow the discourse rules:

- no negative or judgemental comments
- questions may be asked
- one's own opinion should be simply expressed.

The following techniques and questions help to understand what the students are saying:

- Questions: Could you explain that again?
- Repeating what has been said in order to confirm that it has been understood correctly: Did I understand you correctly, when you said …?
- Questions about justifications: How would you justify that?
- Questions about the underlying assumptions: What assumption are you making? Is it valid?
- Questions about terms, words or statements: What do you mean with this term, word, or statement?

What other terms could you use? What would be some contradictory terms?

- Attempts to delimit ideas: What would be a contradictory idea?

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- Questions about conclusions: What conclusions can we draw? Are they logical? What changes if you think that way, if everyone thinks that way?
- Questions about belonging to a group: Who else thinks the same way you do?
- Questions about biographical background: How did you arrive at this idea? Has this always been your opinion? When did you change your position?

The following techniques help to relate the various parts of the conversation to each other:

- A structure is found for the positions in the group: Which positions do we have? How are they different from each other?
- The positions are related to each other, similarities and differences are identified: How are they similar or different?
- The assumptions are clarified by making terms more precise, clarifying the context and asking about own experiences with the subject.
- The persuasiveness is weighted. Students, in particular those who previously had no position on the subject, are asked to examine the sustainability and persuasiveness of the arguments or positions.

It is possible to introduce theologically important but as yet unmentioned positions by:

- referring to positions from systematic theology or from church history in a way that is suitable for children
- introducing (personal) experiences
- explaining the position of an important person.

'It all boils down [*to*] bringing children into enriching "green pastures" of thoughts, where their own theological imagination and reasoning is [*sic*] stimulated' (Roebben 2011:16).

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