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## **Developing Religious Thinking Using C. S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia\***

### **Abstract**

The authors present the results of authentic theologizing with children while using the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis in the process of religious education. Since the 1950s, when this series of seven fantasy novels for children was published it became recognized as an English classic of children’s literature. Although from the beginning, they have faced praise as well as criticism – particularly due to the recent attempt to use them as a script for a film adaptation – experience with this series of children’s book shows that they can contribute positively to the development of children’s religious thinking. The most important concept for the development of the spirituality of children is their concept of God and what it means to have faith in God.

### **Keywords**

Religious education in schools, children, concept, God, faith, literature

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## 1. Introduction

Today's children, the so-called Generation Z or New Millennials, have been growing up 'in front of' the TV and computer screens. Since their birth, computers, smartphones and the internet have been the very air they "breathe". Not only neurologists, sociologists and psychologists, but also their parents and teachers, confirm that the recent technological and social media boom has had an obvious impact on all dimensions of their lives,<sup>1</sup> including their relationship to belles-lettres and to books in general.

There has been much research on children's preferences between literary culture and visual media culture.<sup>2</sup> Researchers point to the fact that the new Millennials seem to prefer pictures/video/sound to text. Media culture – in contrast to literary culture – has a different potential for nurturing the development of the thinking skills of children as the next chart<sup>3</sup> shows:

| What is literary culture like?  | What is media culture like?   |
|---|---|
| Rational<br>Abstract thinking<br>Analytical<br>Leading to individual response<br>More psychologically distant<br>Linear, chronological<br>Predominantly verbal<br>Predominantly actual/real | Intellectual<br>Concrete / specific situational thinking<br>Intuitive<br>Nurturing group response<br>More psychologically engaging<br>Using time twists, fragmented<br>Predominantly visual<br>Predominantly fictitious |

Due to the availability of digital information covering practically every area of world events, the interest of Generation Z in printed publications has decreased. So they are sometimes referred to as the 'Paperless' Generation. If available, instead of reading a book, they might often prefer its film version.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. Hanesová, *Educators in search of the fine line between use and misuse of new technologies*, "Communications" 19 (2017) no. 1, pp. 44–48.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. N. Brádňanská Odrášek, *From Generation Y to Generation Z: Focused on Generation Z*, "Od Generácie Y to Generation Z", Banská Bystrica 2012, pp. 101–124.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ch. Critcher, *Making Waves: Historical Aspects of Public Debates about Children and Mass Media*, in: K. Drotner, S. Livingstone (eds.), *The International Handbook of Children: Media, and Culture*, Los Angeles & London 2008, p.101.

This progressive media culture penetrated into all levels of education, e.g. by substituting printed schoolbooks with smartphone applications in Finnish or Dutch schools.<sup>4</sup>

The question is how this trend influences the methodology of Religious Education (R. E.) in schools. Can children's religious thinking skills be developed via printed children's story books in R. E. lessons? (By thinking skills we mean the whole range of lower as well as higher thinking functions, e.g. according to revised Bloom's taxonomy,<sup>5</sup> including the ability to analyse, evaluate and create one's own ideas.)

To answer this question, we decided to conduct an experiment in theologising with children using the Chronicles of Narnia. This set of seven books, written by a British academic and novelist C. S. Lewis in the early 1950s, belongs to the classics of children's literature. Three of them were made into film versions, including its last spectacular Disney version (between 2005 and 2010). Having turned away from atheism back to Christianity, Lewis wrote these books from a Christian standpoint, though the Christian messages penetrates them almost unintentionally and only by implication.

In this study we argue, with reference to other authors, as well as to our own experiment with children that in spite of the growing pressure of visual media pushing the printed media more out of the main attention of schools and their students, narrative literary texts still have a major impact on readers. It extends to the deepest levels of their self-knowledge and perception of reality.

## 2. The power of a story and its role in theologising

When entering into the imaginative world of the story, the reader is invited to take part in a specific initiative to assess the intentions of the text. To start a meaningful reading process, the reader is expected to conclude an agreement with the author to accept the rules of the author's game. "This creates an intimate, rather mysterious and latent bond between the model author and the reader."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. D. Hanesová, *Educators in search of the fine line between use and misuse of new technologies*, "Communications" 19 (2017) 1, pp. 44–48.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. W. Anderson, D. R. et al (eds.), *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, New York 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, Bloomington 1984; J. Hábl Jan, *Učit (se) příběhem*, Brno 2013.

Lewis was persuaded of the major impact narrative literary texts may have on their readers. Based on his own experience with the *Phantastes* by MacDonald<sup>7</sup> (first publ. in 1858), Lewis described the process by which narrative texts have a transformative effect on readers, with far-reaching impacts on changing perceptions of reality. He called this experience of his own as the ‘conversion of his imagination’. According to Hošek,<sup>8</sup> Lewis asserts that reading a story presents new, previously undiscovered opportunities for the reader’s orientation in his own world. To answer individual questions about the unknown (who I am, where I come from and where I am going), stories respond by showing the known and organizing the chaotic and unstructured life experience into meaningful patterns.

A Czech Comeniologist and author of story books, Hábl, also highlights several irreplaceable functions of a story. Similarly to Lewis, he expects the story to have an impact which means creating a need for the reader to complete any further details, to think, to imagine, to guess, to evaluate, to deduce, to relate, to trust, to compare, to sort, to project further associations, etc. Such mental activities connected with reading a story “have the price of gold.”<sup>9</sup> The story enables the reader to enter into a mutually transforming interaction with his/her own life horizon, to put in order or to organize a meaningful self-understanding about who I am by offering new, previously undiscovered opportunities for the reader’s orientation in his/her own world.

An important function of the story is its mimetic function – the extent of and way of reflecting real experience. Lewis expected his reader to have an imagination which is not the same as an interpretation of experience.<sup>10</sup> His stories were written in the mode of “as if”. They were not created to verify the degree of correspondence with reality. According to Lewis, imaginative experience – unlike reason – does not ask questions about truth. Imagination is a body of meaning, not truth. The organ of truth is reason.

Although Lewis gave his readers the freedom of interpretation and did not require them to interpret his Narnia stories in a religious way, he had envisaged the role of his readers to comprehend the intention of his writings. It seems that he had readers in mind whose imagination would not be impaired and who

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. Mac Donald, *Phantastes*, Grand Rapids 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění (The Magic of Storytelling)*, Prague 2013, pp. 7, 14, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Hábl, *Učit (se) příběhem*, Brno 2013, pp. 7, 26–27.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění (The Magic of Storytelling)*, Prague 2013, pp. 13, 60.

would be able to see and listen to what he was interiorly experiencing, to his intuition. Only they can, e.g., see the King Aslan within the fictional world of Narnia as what the Son of God could have been 'if he were to be incarnated into such a fictional world'.

This is one of the reasons why texts such as the Narnia stories are suitable for theologising – because they are accessible to all children regardless of their religious pre-knowledge.

From what has been said about the power of a story, we strongly believe that children's books are irreplaceable for the healthy growth of their inner life even in the age of the boom in technologies. They still represent a great collection of topics for the development of children's contemplation and religious thinking. According to the experienced researchers and teachers from the European Child Theology Network (CTN), children's story books are "an inexhaustible medium for theologising with children."<sup>11</sup>

By theologising they mean to converse on themes in cases where "the result of the conversation is not given precisely, because the great questions of life do not allow for any clear answers... Theological language reflects beliefs that tend to focus on existential emotions rather than general answers. Their own point of view is questioned, the willingness to find a language for their own faith, is thus demanded."<sup>12</sup>

Before presenting our own experiment into whether stories can nurture or attenuate the abilities of children to theologise, it is important to explain our choice of specific texts and themes for the purposes of theologising with children.

### 3. Choice of Narnia stories for theologising with children

There are several reasons to use the Narnia books for theologising with children. One is the mere fact that they belong to the category of fantasy books<sup>13</sup> so they offer children who are in their 'realistic' stage (6–12 years old) a valuable mirror

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ch. Kalloch, *Mit Bilder- und Kinderbüchern theologisieren*, in: G. Büttner et al. (eds.), *Handbuch: Theologisieren mit Kindern*, Stuttgart 2014, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. W. Kraft, *Theologisieren mit Kindern und Kompetenzweb*, in: G. Büttner et al. (eds.), *Handbuch: Theologisieren mit Kindern*, Stuttgart 2014, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ch. Kalloch, *Mit Bilder- und Kinderbüchern theologisieren*, in: G. Büttner et al. (eds.), *Handbuch: Theologisieren mit Kindern*, Stuttgart 2014, p. 59.

of reality. According to Hošek,<sup>14</sup> “the very young child resembles the mentality of archaic man who was connected to the Base or the Deepness of existence”. In this stage of childhood, children perceive reality in an intuitive way, having a very strong imagination.

The second reason why Narnia books were used during R.E. in a denominational school context was pragmatic. School staff, as well as parents, trusted these famous books were written by a Christian. So they were included on the list of recommended reading and into the school libraries. Although it is necessary to point at some misunderstandings at this point. Compared to other explicitly religious or Biblical books, the Chronicles of Narnia do not contain explicit ethical, religious or even Biblical messages. According to Lewis, the Chronicles of Narnia were created as the way of only listening to his intuition and recording what he was inwardly experiencing.<sup>15</sup> Writing these fantasy books started with the pictures that emerged in his imagination, not anticipating how his books would unfold. Initially, they did not exist in a form of a continuous story, only gradually did they began to organize into meaningful relationships and more obvious links. The story of the Gospel, which is quite clearly echoed in Narnia, gradually emerged as an orientating plot of the whole work. Lewis<sup>16</sup> said: “Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children... and then... hammered out “allegories” to embody them [basic Christian truths]. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn’t write in that way at all.” Even Aslan was not intended as a biblical allegory of Jesus Christ.

Thus Lewis’s imaginative ideas of Narnia are not the exact copy or descriptive reproduction of any (neither Biblical) reality, but only its mimetic reflection enabling the child to imagine and to experience world of Narnia and through it some Christian doctrines, including the Gospel story.<sup>17</sup>

The testimonies of many readers of Narnia suggest that it provides a powerful opportunity for a transcendent response. The question for our experiment, described below, is whether they can also serve as a prompt for developing religious thinking within R. E. lessons. But first the reasoning for our choice of two specific theological concepts as the objects of theologising with children will be explained.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, C. S. Lewis: *mýtus, imaginace a pravda*, Praha 2003, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění (The Magic of Storytelling)*, Prague 2013, pp. 80 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, London 1994, pp. 32–33, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění (The Magic of Storytelling)*, Prague 2013, p. 85.

### 3.1. The concept of God: Is God dangerous?

For every human being, religious ideas are central for his/her understanding of the religious and ultimate matters, also having consequences for all aspects of his/her life. According Tozer<sup>18</sup> the strongest idea influencing the whole human life is our idea of God. To ask children what they think about God indicates what the spiritual development in their further years might be.

The psychologists of religion are of a similar opinion<sup>19</sup> saying that “the concept of God is a useful tool for measuring the substance of the faith of an individual. The concept of God predicts religious attitudes better than prayer, church attendance or belief in religious leaders.” To find out the child’s concept of God is especially important and revealing in interacting with children as they usually live with subconscious, in a way ‘imprinted’ idea of God from their parents and teachers. If adults transfer to children their own adult anxieties, feelings of guilt and distrust of God, they build up a negative image of God in children. Children from families where the parents perform a wide range of religious activities, which are not balanced by authentic faith, often learn to start fearing God and later on even turn away from their ‘reflective’ faith.

As God does not come within the context of our natural lives in such a way that makes it possible to understand him by our senses and reason, it is not possible to find any appropriate representation of him. He cannot be defined, and so it is possible that by describing him symbolically by various human characteristics.<sup>20</sup> People, including children, can form various ‘false’ ideas about God, e.g. as a strict, unpredictable dominating power with a questionable sense of justice.

The first topic that we chose for theologising with children was the concept of God and, specifically, of him being ‘dangerous’. The idea came from the extract from the book “The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe”<sup>21</sup> where the Beavers introduce the Lion Aslan to children for the first time. To the question “Is it safe to meet the King Lion?” the answer was negative, “Of course not”. Theologising upon this short story might reveal if there is any association embedded in this

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, New York 1978, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. Hatoková, *Koncept osobného Boha*, in: P. Halama et al (eds.), *Religiozita, spiritualita a osobnosť*, Bratislava 2006, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> According to Frankl, in: M. Hatoková, *Koncept osobného Boha*, in: P. Halama et al (eds.), *Religiozita, spiritualita a osobnosť*, Bratislava 2006, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Harmondsworth 1950, pp. 74–75.

image with the concept of God as being dangerous. We supposed that feelings of fear/awe/respect before the King of the Bible – God – might be brought to the fore at this point.

In the concrete moral thinking of children in the early school years, thoughts about the consequences of sin and God's punishment and rewards dominate. They reflect biblical doctrine on sin and God's holiness. When treating sin, God is described as hating it and being angry with it. Tozer compares this feature to a mother who hates the palsy disease as it has a potential to rob her child of life. Thus humans have to approach God with faith and meekness. From what has been said it is evident that the concept of God's anger is exposed to a high level of misconceptions, and might be presented to children as a false truth about God.

Lewis realised this and tried to describe God in a new, imaginary way – as a Lion, the king of the whole country. Can Lewis's idea of God be recognized as misleading or positively resonating in the minds and hearts of young Slovak readers 50 years after it was invented and in a different historical and geographical context?

### 3.2. The concept of faith as 'seeing God'

The second concept that we were interested in theologising with children was their concept of faith. The idea of faith as trusting and believing in God's protection often occurs in the early stages of developmental theories. Similarly Ricoeur explained his concept of 'faith' as not a belief or having faith in anything, but in terms of confidence (trust).<sup>22</sup> Christian theology considers faith to be a vitally important element in human life, based on Heb 11:6 that "without faith it is impossible to please God". Faith is a complex concept, not easily defined. The Bible itself does not have a definition, "outside of a short definition in Hebrews 11:1",<sup>23</sup> and even in it, "faith is defined functionally, not philosophically. That is, it is a statement of what faith is in operation, not what it is in essence". Faith in the Bible is described via stories, which show the effect of faith, without theoretically defining it. Thomas a' Kempis said, "I had rather exercise faith than know the definition thereof."<sup>24</sup> According to Tozer, "the true quality of faith is almost universally missed, viz., its moral quality. It is more than mere

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Život, pravda, symbol*, Praha 1993, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, Bromley 1984, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, Bromley 1984, p. 88.

confidence ... It is a highly moral thing and of a spiritual essence... It shifts the inward gaze from self to God.”<sup>25</sup>

In connection with Numbers 12:4–9 and John 3:14–15, faith is closely interconnected with looking at God, “faith is a gaze of a soul upon God. According to Tozer, “many people know something inside their hearts sees God... If faith is the gaze of the heart of God, if this gaze is but the raising of the inward eyes to meet the all-seeing eyes of God, then it follows that it is one of the easiest things possible to do.”<sup>26</sup> That is the reason why to believe in the sense of trust in God seems to be simple enough even for the youngest children.

In our theologising on the issue of faith with children, we built on their imagination. We did not intend to test their faith or to assess it somehow. We focused only on their imagination in this topic, as distinguished by Hošek: “Imagination does not give an interpretation of experience. It is only in the mode of “as if”. It does not verify the degree of correspondence with reality.”<sup>27</sup>

For theologising about faith, we chose probably Lewis's most vivid image of faith in the story of Prince Caspian.<sup>28</sup> The idea that only the youngest child, Lucy, was able to have faith, ie. to see the King of the Narnia, comes from Lewis's conviction<sup>29</sup> that the perception of reality is conditioned by the quality of the perceiver. One sees only what he/she can see – given, amongst other things, the current state of his/her inner state and his/her imagination and its capacity. A bad, bitter or envious person is actually blind towards some dimensions of reality. He/she cannot think of them. His/her imagination is deformed. This fact became a crucial plot of several parts of C. S. Lewis's stories, including the scene of Lucy seeing the Lion and other children not being able to see him. Only the people of pure heart can see Aslan. Others can see either nothing or just an ordinary animal.

In Hošek's<sup>30</sup> words, thus the child reader can, in his/her imaginative experience, encounter the Christian story of salvation as if from ‘inside’. The child may enter the literary world of Narnia and quite immediately experience its quality, not mediated via any doctrines of faith. Under the influence of the experience

<sup>25</sup> Cf. A. W. Tozer, *The Divine Conquest*, Bromley 1984, p. 38.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, Bromley 1984, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění (The Magic of Storytelling)*, Prague 2013, p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, Harmondsworth 1951.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění (The Magic of Storytelling)*, Prague 2013, pp. 63 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. P. Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění (The Magic of Storytelling)*, Prague 2013, pp. 83 & 92.

of reading such a literary work, the way the reader perceives reality may change in the following way: “When readers ‘pass through’ the enchanted forest, the result of it should be not that they would appreciate it more than the real one, but that when they finish reading, everybody will perceive a real forest as a bit like the enchanted one.”

## **4. Theologising with the Chronicles of Narnia in schools**

### **4.1. An experiment – its presuppositions, sample and procedure**

Being aware of the characteristics of the New Millennials, we entered into an experiment with theologising using the Chronicles of Narnia with several presuppositions. First of all, we wondered what the reaction of a sample of post-millennial children aged 9–14-years to the incentive of the R. E. teacher to talk about the spiritual values and ideas of the Narnia stories would be. First of all, it may be presumed that with this youngest generation the existence of high-budget films about Narnia—as is the case of many other stories—has overshadowed the meaning of the Narnia books themselves. We envisaged that our sample of the Gen Z children would prefer the film to the book and that – fulfilling their desire to know these stories – the film version might even function as a substitute for reading the books. On the other hand, there was a hypothetical chance that after first seeing the films some children who love reading would decide to even read the books, in other words, that the films functioned as an advertisement for reading these books.

So in the first part below there are the responses of the sample of children to our suggestion of spending some time reading from Narnia books, theologising over them and discussing some points in their group. We tried to learn if they were willing to open their minds and hearts to reading the original texts and to theologising about them. We observed their immediate emotional as well as intellectual reaction to our suggestion.

The next two hypotheses concerned the abilities of children to theologise over two chosen topics – over the concept of God and his Holiness, and over the concept of personal faith in God. We supposed that the reading of the selected texts would stimulate the critical thinking abilities of children and a theologising discussion about these concepts would develop.

Our research sample consisted of 130 students from church-maintained primary schools, aged 9–14. All of these students had received initial information

about Narnia books in their school and even could find them in their school library. As it was very important to find out in our opening question what the attitudes of the students towards the Lewis's book were, we decided to ask everyone a starting question whether they had read any of the Narnia books or seen any from the three films produced so far on Narnia, and what their relationship to them was.

Afterwards, all of the 130 students participated in the first round of one-time theologising about the character of Lion Aslan (alias for Jesus). It was accomplished in groups of 6–12 children after reading a short passage on the character of Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The hypothesis behind this procedure was that during discussions about Aslan some of the children's basic theological views about the nature of God would be revealed.

The second round of multiple theologising went on for several weeks. It was accomplished during discussions involving a small group of 8 girls, aged 9–10, during their afternoon school club. The combination of a regular club hour, a stable group of students and a teacher who had been working with this group for over 4 years, opened the door to more family-style theologising, i.e. talking about ideas that arouse directly after reading through the book of *Prince Caspian*. The teacher fervently expected that there would be moments when, not only curt replies to her questions, but thoroughly theological thoughts on various topics would be verbalized by the students. What follows is a selection from the records of the most precious theologising moments from both phases of our experiment.

## 4.2. The results of the experiment with theologising over Narnia

### 4.2.1. Theologising during the initial phase

The initial set of questions about the respondents' familiarity with and attitude towards the *Chronicles of Narnia* was very straightforward and consisted of two parts: a) "Have you read any of the Narnia books, and if yes, how many? Have you seen any of the three films on Narnia, and if yes, how many?" b) "What is your present relationship towards Narnia books or films?"

All of the respondents confirmed that they were familiar with the existence of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Practically all of them had seen at least one of the Narnia films. All of them were aware that at least the book "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" had something in common with Christianity. They considered the character of the Lion Aslan to be the image of God the Son. One 8-year

old girl said that “the book was a little bit like a Bible, because there was a son of Adam and a daughter of Eve”. Another 8-year old girl said that she knew it was about God because in the beginning there was somebody who created everything and who gave animals in Narnia speech, wings etc. She identified Jesus in Aslan by the statement in one of the books that “He ... loves when we ask him for something”.

One third of the respondents had seen all three films on Narnia. Almost  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the older children and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the younger ones had read through at least one of the Narnia books. About 10% of students had read through all seven books.

Only 3 older respondents commented on discrepancies between films and their original literary texts. One of their critical comments was that the voice of Aslan used in the film was too youngish for the mighty Lion Aslan. When being asked about this idea in the group of the younger children, one boy refused this objection resolutely, saying: “But it was all right, it should have been so. Because he was a young man on the earth, he was not too much like God here on the earth.” Most of the comments on the films and books seemed rather general and could be applied to other films. But one 9-years old boy described his transcendent experience in a very peaceful voice and simple words: “I liked the film Prince Caspian... because ... when I was watching it, as I tried to put myself into it ... then ... I experienced it.”

The responses showed that most of the children who had read any of the books and also seen the films, preferred the films to the Chronicles of Narnia books. Their explanation was that the books seemed too lengthy and almost boring to them. It was caused by long literary descriptions or long static scenes. The films were more attractive to them because of the much higher level of action, and so they reminded them of other favourite action films.

What the children appreciated about the books, was their main idea – the idea of an imaginary country with such a special being as the Lion Aslan, and even the prosaic idea of an adventure for the children from the real world getting a chance to be in that country. Though sometimes they were confused with the complicated plot and fighting sides, the ending and the final victory of good was what they liked most. One of the scenes that children responded to most strongly was the good Lion Aslan sacrificing his life for the boy Edmund, who had been a betrayer. Probably based on other teaching in their R.E. lessons, all of the children understood that this was exactly what Jesus did for people.

What was more revealing and directly lead to theologising with children, were the points of criticism expressed by the respondents against Narnia’s author.

Though they are typical fantasy books, several children did not like their fantasy features – especially 10 years old children wondered about the strange character of Narnia's animals and various creatures that Lewis purposefully included in his stories. Some children considered them too naïve or too crazy, thus expressing their dislike of them. But the majority of respondents agreed that, yes, the Lion image of Jesus was very suitable, as he is the king of the world similarly to the lion being the king of the jungle. One serious counter-argument was verbalised by a 10-year old girl who did not like that Christ was to be represented by such a wild animal as a lion. She quoted her father who told her that lions were the only animals eating their own cubs in time of hunger. "So why is not Christ represented by any other big animal, why not a deer or another animal ... As if God eats us?"

Theologising in the context of a school club revealed some surprisingly thorough critical ideas against Narnia book which seem to represent the very nature of the youngest Generation Z. First, all but one of the girls complained about the presence of so much fighting for the purpose of rescuing somebody in all Narnia films and books. One of them commented that there was the same idea of fighting between bad and evil beings repeated in all the books, and thus they were too boring and predictable for her. Although she loved the idea of Aslan – the Redeemer, she did not like to read something where she could have predicted that in any situation it was certain that the Lion Aslan would have to come and solve it. She, and several more girls joined her at this point, would prefer a real life story to this combination of natural world and fantasy world. They would rather read a story that might have happened in real life, where good people not always get well in the end but maybe die: "I do not like this kind of stories, they are setting my teeth on edge". Instead of fantasy stories or fairy tales about princesses, they search for real stories about animals or people who are in need with somebody real helping them.

Another girl criticised Lewis for using the symbol of eternal winter and the snowy country as a negative phenomenon in the story. She did not understand why something so normal – and such a favourite with Slovak children – as a lovely winter season that was created by God, should be attributed to the nasty White Witch.

Having heard all these critical or indifferent attitudes toward Narnia at the beginning of our experiment, the teacher (and researcher) hesitated and wondered whether to continue. At one point it seemed that the negative attitudes of some respondents towards Narnia stories, and expressing them in front of the

whole group together with complaining about having been ‘pushed’ into reading them (reminding them of reading other ‘compulsory’ school books), might become an obstacle in our experiment.

Fortunately, after an open discussion about it with the teacher, the children decided to trust the procedure. They seemed to overcome the negative past attitudes and decided to give the books “a second chance’ via taking active part in listening to them and theologising about them with the teacher.

#### 4.2.2. Theologising on the character of God

In the Narnia Chronicles, there are several explicitly stated characteristics of the Lion that remind the readers of God – Jesus Christ. His divine holiness comes to the surface as a sudden surprise experienced by the children – Peter, Susan and Lucy – during their conversation with the Beavers.

After reading this passage, the teacher started theologising with the children with a question: “Do you think God is dangerous?” The complementary questions, depending on the complexity of children’s responses, were: “What does it mean for you? Are you afraid of him? Why?”

In order to assess the answers to these questions and to evaluate their potential to lead to theologising, it is important to note that, generally, these straightforward questions led to rather short, direct responses. They did not lead to as much fertile and thorough theologising as expected by the teacher. Although the responses by the children covered the whole continuum of possible answers – from radical “not dangerous” to definitely “dangerous”, including responses “I don’t know”, “I don’t believe in God”, it turned out that, for most of the children, the teacher’s questions were not stimulating enough. Their responses reflected the religious structure of Slovak population (76% Christian believers) that the majority of their parents were familiar with the Christian theology, leading children to fear or respect God, and to relevant responses – trying to obey God and His commandments.

About **10%** of children **did not want to share** their opinion about the concept of a ‘dangerous’ God for various reasons (atheistic/indifferent/upset thinking).

The responses of other children disclosed their theology about the character of the holy God. They can be divided into several categories:

About **14%** of them think that God is **dangerous**. The response to such a concept of God was predominantly fear, respect, awe and willingness to submit to him: “To be without respect towards him means that ‘I don’t give a damn

about it.' Or that 'I am above him.')

but it was also not being afraid ("I trust him he will protect us. I do not think I should tremble before him.")

About 72% of the respondents think God is **both dangerous and safe/not dangerous**. Half of them think so **because of knowing other characteristics of God** (because he gets angry when we sin, he doesn't like sin – he is perfect, sin is against him, he knows we are sinning and he does not like that, he has his own will, he can allow anything – any disaster, end of the world, if he wanted he could change various things – but he is also good as he loves us and helps us, he is mighty – he created many things, he cannot be defeated). One 10-years old girl said: "With him it is like a war.. a patient general simply says to himself: Today, I will suffer their attack, let them bombard us ... but there are a lot of people who understand ... once my end will come." Some of the respondents opposed the term 'dangerous' and 'fear of God', saying those were not adequate words to describe their relationship to God, and mentioned respect or be awed by God.

The teacher: "Is it similar to the respect for your parents?"

S1: "No, it is not, it is different from respect."

S2: "It is ... not the exactly the same... because God is mightier and almighty, parents are not."

S1: "Yes, he is dangerous because he is the most powerful of all."

A 10 year old boy with missionary parents said: "He is kind, he loves you but you have to be in awe before... Maybe also because he is so glorious ... that if we saw him we would fall down dead. Nobody has ever seen him."

A 9 year old girl says: "He is not dangerous that he would do anything bad to us... but for sin there is death.. Jesus came to die for us."

Here are examples of other statements in this category: "When you look at him, he looks strong, so you cannot look at him." – "Sometimes he does something to us but then we learn something from it." – "We fear him, because he is omnipotent and he knows everything. So he can be dangerous in that he can do anything to us, but it is because he is good and protects us. I think yes, he is dangerous. He can be angry, he doesn't like sin." – "Because he loves us ... he is holy and the devil is his opposite... it is as light and darkness... the light enters the darkness. When we are holy we are like lights. But when we sin, we go out... and we enter the darkness." – "He is perfect but sin is against him." – "We should have respect to him... he could do anything, but he loves us so much that he forgives more than punishes ... we have to be in awe of him." – "He has power over everything. Nothing can happen without him allowing it. He allows things to happen ... even dangerous things. But if he does not want them, they do not happen."

Other children were reluctant to call him dangerous because they knew his positive characteristics, e.g. that “He protects those who live with him.” – “He is very good when we are not lying.” – “He forgives when we ask for forgiveness.” – “He is kind and most often he fulfils our prayers.” – “When we sin, we should ask for forgiveness and tell him the truth.” – “He is safe.” – “He is fair.” – “He does not want to do anything bad to anybody so he is not dangerous ... He wouldn’t harm a fly (only the devil).” – “God loves us and he does not want us to sin because sin always has some consequences.” – “He is not bad because he would not have created everything for us.” – “He is forgiving.” – “Otherwise he is very good. He is kind and most of the time he fulfils our prayers.”

The rest of this group of respondents thinks that he is **both dangerous and not dangerous depending on the behaviour of people**. So for these children “God is dangerous if we are making him angry, do not live according to what the Bible says, transgress his borders.” Or “If we worship the devil, go to another religion, say that he does not exist, not believe in him, if you do not care about him, betraying him, doing something wrong on purpose, hurting him, saying things he does not like e.g. cursing somebody or call somebody names, we offend him, if we do not treat somebody nicely, not telling the truth: ‘If you lied to him, it is very, very bad.’”

On the other hand, “God is not dangerous for those who obey Him, who live with him, believe in him, worship him, do what he likes, if we do not lie, if we ask for forgiveness.”

The rest of the respondents do **not** consider God to be **dangerous**, as they are not afraid of him.

The children’s statements revealed that the majority of them do not consider God’s dangerousness to be a basal characteristic of God. He is dangerous only due to his other characteristics and his ‘dangerousness’ depends on people’s behaviour and attitudes. Then his characteristic of righteousness has to prevail. One child expressed the complex concept of God’s nature and our response in two sentences: “I think that if we respect him, he is good. In some situations he seems dangerous to us because he is almighty. But if we have a good conscience we do not need to be afraid.”

Theologising with children over the concept of a dangerous God revealed that, for most of them, their image of God is that of a Holy, in a way dangerous, God but only in relation to sinful people. So generally, the children in their younger school age did not express unhealthy, real fear of God. Their statements showed that they considered sin to be the only obstacle in having good relationship with

God. Otherwise He is the one who protects those who search him wholeheartedly. The statements of children corresponded with the ideas of religious developmentalists, such as Oser, Baldwin, Brown, Harms and others.<sup>31</sup> They described very young children as those who view God as somebody directly intervening into the world by punishing or rewarding people, enjoying their good behaviour. Later on they believe they can influence God and gain his favour by their behaviour. Thus, they try to reconcile with God. As Bravená<sup>32</sup> expressed it, children in their younger school age generally describe God as a real, although external, part of their lives towards whom they feel respect and awe. The 9–11 year olds strongly feel that there is an option for some reciprocity – ways to influence God and his potential rage by either being bad or good, promising, or doing something good. Also according to Fowler, the 7–12 year old children, being in the mythical-literary developmental stage, think about the anthropomorphic characteristics of God and generally believe that God is good and helping them.

#### 4.2.3. Theologising on the character of human faith

Our experiment with theologising on the essence of the concept of faith was based on repeated reading of the Narnia book *Prince Caspian* during several afternoon clubs with 8 girls aged 9. The procedure consisted of a) reading a certain extract aloud; b) the teacher asking a simple 'neutral' question – without using any theological or religious words – about the text which has been read or about the children's anticipation of the continuation of the story; c) the students answering the question and discussing their answers among themselves. Although in the beginning their ideas were at a relatively superficial level, later on some of them revealed the depth of their personal experiences and their religious thinking about the essence of faith.

The readings started at the point when the group of pilgrims trying to find Prince Caspian got lost in the forest, but Lucy – and she alone – beheld Aslan in their near distance. She was so excited about him being there to help them out. But the others could not see Aslan nor did they believe that Lucy saw him. After the reading, the teacher asked:

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. M. Hatoková, *Koncept osobného Boha*, in: P. Halama et al (eds.), *Religiozita, spiritualita a osobnosť*, Bratislava 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. N. Bravená, *Dítě teologem*, in: M. Ryšková, M. Mikulicová (wds.), *Myšlení o transcedenci*, Červený Kostelec 2013.

Teacher: **Was there anything uncomfortable for you in this story?**

Several girls: “That they [other children] did not believe that Lucy saw Aslan.”

This instant response by 6 girls showed that for them the only disturbing issue was the unfair, almost bullying, behaviour of others towards Lucy as they were sure that she was lying. The response of our girls was very emotional and rather strong. The main source of discomfort for younger school age children proved to reside in moral injustice and the confrontation with others. At this point, none of them commented on how peculiar it was that the other children did not see Aslan. The girls were filled with empathy towards Lucy. They believed her and judged others for not doing that. Such a response was not a surprise as it was in accordance with the stage of their concrete cognitive thinking and heteronomous moral development, still very much focused on being right/just/ethical and against all evil, especially bullying. After this first mostly emotional experience with the reading, the teacher wanted to find out why they thought the other children did not believe Lucy.

Teacher: **“Why was it so, why did they not believe Lucy?”**

The teacher expected their deeper religious thinking – put into Bloom<sup>33</sup>'s words – using not only the lower thinking function, i.e. remembering and comprehension. She tried to encourage the children to ‘dig’ deeper in their minds, expecting them to analyse the situation in a more thorough way. Despite that, the first two responses to her question were still fairly superficial:

Girl 1: “because she was the youngest ...”

It was true, she was the youngest and they probably had had similar experience from their families. Also, their empathy usually goes towards the youngest, weakest, most needy. To some extent, it was the most predictable response. Then the Girl 2 said:

Girl 2: “because that they did not see Aslan...”

At first glance, this response seemed to be a simple common sense statement. Actually, there was depth in it already. The first three responses to teacher's questions pointed naturally to the most important ideas in the story. The children connected believing with seeing.

At this point, the teacher, who was not yet satisfied with the depth of their responses, but taking the hint from girl 2, repeated the question in a more complex way, using the girl's own words:

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. L. W. Anderson, D. R. et al (eds.), *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, New York 2001.

Teacher: **“Ok, so why was it so, why could the others not see Aslan?”**

Girl 3: “because he showed himself just to Lucy.”

In the first three responses, Aslan was not involved in the story as an active subject. Now, with the last response of Girl 3, it changed. She thought that Aslan himself was the reason of the discomfort in the story. It was he who loved Lucy the most and it was his decision to show himself just to her. After this verdict the attention of the respondents started to turn from focusing on Lucy as the source of successful seeing Aslan to their attitude towards Aslan:

Girl 4: “because the others did not think about him that he might help them.”

This was a very surprising response. Suddenly, the reason of not seeing Aslan was not to be sought in ‘the outside factors’ (Lucy or Aslan), but in those who did not see him. Thus, the direction of the discussion turned to theologising about the conditions for seeing Aslan, about the inner attitudes toward Aslan. The response of the Girl 4 sounds too ‘sceptical’, expressing a typical attitude of older, adult people who, despite having lots of experience and evidence, do not think that he might help them again. And so, they do not count on him in life and rely on their own solutions.

Girl 5 (coming from a non-Christian background): “because he wanted them to believe in him firmly.”

Girl 6: “because only she believed in him...”

Here, explicitly, the respondents 5 and 6 associate seeing Aslan with believing in Him – it is his will, he wants them to believe firmly, without wavering. And only Lucy could see him because only she believed in him.

Girl 7: “because he wanted to test their faith.”

Via Girl 7, the explanation of why people are sometimes not able to see Jesus emerges in the very simple words of a child trusting his love – just because God wishes to strengthen their faith.

Girl 8: “Maybe others would see him, but they would not believe in him.”

This response was very original. Could it really happen that people might see God but not believe in him – that it is Him? Girl 8 felt that the story gave this as the reason for their inability to see Aslan.

Girl 1: “I think that only Lucy prayed that they would find the way.”

In giving this response, Girl 1 evidently dug deeper in her theological thinking. Another reason why only somebody can see God is that only the person who really desires help and therefore is willing to put some effort into it – to pray for help – can actually find him and his help.

Girl 3: “The others had – as they say in our church – blurred vision, they did not see. Just Lucy had her eyes open because she had faith. “

Meanwhile, Girl 3 probably recalled a sermon in her church and successfully applied it to this discussion. She heard about the fact that some people have a problem with their spiritual eyes so they cannot see God (Luke 11:34).

Girl 4: “Only she was looking for him and only she had faith that he was still there, that he would not abandon them. And that is why she saw him... They did not believe her because they thought he had abandoned them...”

So Girl 4 widened the sceptical idea from her first response. Some older people cannot see God not only because of their neutral response – that they do not think that he might help them again – but they even think that he has abandoned them. That is why they do not look for him and believe in him.

Girl 5: “The others were resigned to their living in England. But Lucy was the one that wanted to come back to Narnia once again and to see Aslan... So when her older sister Susan asked her why she could not see Aslan, Lucy answered her: “Maybe you did not desire to see him.”

Girl 5, thinking about the difference between Lucy – the youngest, and the older ones – expresses the opposite of faith – ultimately resignation lies in not desiring, not dreaming about or not eagerly looking up to see God.

The teacher continues reading about Aslan encouraging Lucy to tell the others to follow him in spite of the fact they could not see him, saying, “If they will not, then you at least must follow me alone.”

Teacher: “**So what do you think what did Aslan mean by that?**”

Girl 4: “That she had to follow Aslan... even if it was on her own.”

Girl 5: “She should have believed that they would believe her and see him too... For example, when my Mum tells me I have to use this path and I say that the other is correct ... She lets me go on my own first, but then she joins me ... So also Lucy should have believed that if she had continued following Aslan, the others would have gradually started following her...”

The Girl 5 used her family situation as an example. In her family she was used to being an equal partner to her mother who often adapted her behaviour according the will of her daughter. Nevertheless, she felt that it was worthwhile and necessary to follow after Aslan, not to be discouraged by the attitudes of others and, hopefully, they would join her after some time.

Teacher: “**What do you think – why should it not matter to her whether the others followed her or not?**”

Girl 7: “what mattered was that she believed Him, and that she knew...”

Girl 1: **“But how can I verify if the voice that I hear inside, is God’s voice?”**

Now Girl 1 brought out her personal application question about how to hear God’s voice, how to be sure about it. So the new round of discussion developed. The girls gave their ideas associated with their personal experiences:

Girl 2: “... that is your conscience...”

Girl 3: “You can feel it in your ‘bones.’”

Girl 4: “I would pray to find out if that really was God.”

Girl 8: “I would ask for a sign ... Once I could not fall asleep. And so I was thinking and I started to doubt if God existed... Then God gave me a sign ... I had the impression I saw him ... and I immediately knew that God exists...”

Then the girls come back to teacher’s question about Aslan’s task for Lucy:

Girl 3: “I would have told them “I don’t mind what you think”. I would go away from them, maybe I would go to live in a monastery...”

Girl 4: “I would let them be ... Yes, and I’ll tell myself “I don’t mind what they think, I believe and I know it, I not only think it is true, but I know it.”

After giving several practical pieces of advice, deep assurance comes – you know it, not just believe it.

Teacher: **“Is there any difference between believing and knowing?”**

Girl 4: “Yes, when you believe, you are one hundred percent sure about it ... without doubt. But if you only think it is so, then you are not so sure...”

Girl 7: “If you believe in Him, the issue is certain ... it is true.”

The replies of girls very clearly demonstrate their full, childish trust in God.

Girl 8: “But also ... for example... when my Daddy tells me that somebody very important came into our school... and I go to have a look, then I know for sure that he is there... but if my Daddy just told me something, and I did not do anything to find it out, then I wouldn’t see anybody.”

Faith, in the opinion of Girl 8, is thus connected with some kind of active response to the message about God. The response might be to go and see.

Girl 3: “Those who saw him know it... Those who did not see him only believe that he exists.”

Faith in children’s opinions is not just believing in something, but to be sure about it – the same assurance as in case of having evidence (which reminds of Hebrews 11:1: Faith is the assurance of things hoped for).

Girl 6: “It happened to the doubting disciple Thomas. He said he would not believe if he did not see him.”

Girl 5: “But some people do not believe what they see with their own eyes.”

Again, imprinted adult scepticism comes out in the discussion. Girl 5 does not have any positive believers in her family. Maybe this response came from what she observed in her family – the disbelief in spite of evidence about God.

The teacher continued reading several more sentences on Susan being the last one to admit that Aslan might be there, getting glimpses of him.

Teacher: **“What do you think – why did it take Susan such a long time to admit that Aslan was there?”**

Girl 1: “Because she also had been thinking that Lucy was just a small girl-making things up... maybe she thought that Lucy made it up because she was missing Aslan badly... and when you miss somebody, you start to imagine that he is there or there or there...”

Girl 1 added to her previous responses a very well formulated objection by non-believers against faith in God: You believe only because you miss it, you need to have faith as a crutch for your life. Mentally healthy and balanced people do not need it. It is just in your imagination.

To sum up, the discussion revealed that it is possible a) to start to discuss a story without theological hints and come to the level of theologising with children; b) to encourage raising the level of theological reasoning and pondering upon the themes from the selected books. Also it was observed that the children’s theology sees believing in God as 100% conviction about his existence, faithfulness, willingness to help – as knowing it. The result of such faith is the ability to see God. Similarly, Root<sup>34</sup> said that when praying with his family for certain things, his children not only believed that God answered prayers, they knew it. They had seen the “sacrament of evangelism”, discovering the active presence of God in their world.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In her study, Bravená points to the situation in Luke 2:39–52 when twelve years old Jesus answered his parents with: “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” In this statement, it is possible to hear the wonder of the child over adults not understanding something that was commonplace for him, thinking that it must be obvious to

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. J. Root, S. Guthrie, *The Sacrament of Evangelism*, Chicago 2011, p. 41.

everyone.<sup>35</sup> Bravená's research confirmed that deeper dialogues with children are the way to develop their ability to articulate specific transcendental messages and experiences. R. E. emphasises not only the description of their experience, but also encourages the development of their thinking about it. The theologising approach uses open questions to lead children to explain and rationalise their ideas.

Similarly to Bravená, the authors of this study presented their experience and ideas from using the Chronicles of Narnia by Lewis in the process of religious education of children. Since the 1950s, when this series of seven fantasy novels for children was published, it became to be recognised as an English classic of children's literature. Although from the beginning they have faced praise as well as criticism – particularly due to the recent attempt to use them as scripts for a few film adaptations – experience with Narnia books has shown that they can contribute to the development of children's religious thinking.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. N. Bravená, *Dítě teologem*, in: M. Ryšková, M. Mikulicová (eds.), *Myšlení o transcenci*, Červený Kostelec 2013, pp. 199–220.

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