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**RELIGION EDUCATION IN STATE SCHOOLS
AS ACCOMPANIMENT ON THE EMMAUS ROAD
OR THE EMMAUS ROAD AS “AN OPEN-ENDED STORY”
OF CZECH RELIGION EDUCATION TEACHERS’ FAITH?**

Religion education being compared to the Emmaus road is something I hear quite often. I somehow naturally understand that in this comparison, children and young people are the disciples accompanied by us, Religion teachers, while Christ joins us on our way unrecognized, interpreting the Scriptures, to be first recognized when breaking bread. By that optimistic hope is being indicated that although Christ’s matter – his message and teaching, his mediation of salvation – seems to be failing in our society, one day, together with our students, we will finally manage to get to the point at which Jesus reveals himself as Christ to all of us. The only thing is to concretely fulfill the word “accompaniment”. In what way does Christ accompany us on our way to Emmaus and what way do we use to accompany our students on their way to Christ? How to arrange that also they hear the words of the Scripture, that all of that “had to happen” and recognize him when the bread is being broken?

The situation of children and young people in my country does not seem to me to be similar to the one of the disciples on the Emmaus road.

Children and young people stream on the crossroads of today’s society stopping by at various identity offers, they are tasting these offers, and accepting them either up to certain level or for a limited period of time to be able to try a different offer later on. They are playful, they experiment, enjoy life without commitment

as long as possible. Even love and sexuality is a game that is not serious, the only responsibility to bear in mind is to prevent unwanted pregnancy or HIV infection. They strive to postpone the time of being adult to be able to postpone the time in which they encounter the unscrupulous dictatorship of the society: Employer, job, partner and child and last but not least the dictatorship of entertainment. They will become involuntary slaves of culture system – I identify with the authors who point out the so called strong identity (understood as searching the center of own personality from which everything unfolds and towards which everything is aimed, a center that one had been looking for since they were born and when finally found, it makes one stronger and further develop), such a strong and stable identity of a man belonging to a certain group and which unfolds to a right for dignity and recognition has been replaced by a weak identity (or even liquid identity). Such an identity is distinguished by attitudes that are not stable, random, fragmented, contrived and based on agreement. Social psychology does no longer refer to this as to identification or even grouping based on the group of society with which a certain person currently is identifying. “In today world one does not gain identity by being born and adopting it, neither does one learn to strengthen and keep it stable. One rather tries to acquire the ability to change the learned behavior patterns, values and ideas as fast as possible. To sum up, identity is not being strived to be strengthened but changed”¹.

Spiritual search of young generation in my country is often influenced by not very exemplary childhood in families which being enslaved by the system of communism often were not able to provide the children with unconditional love, stability, empathy patterns and generous forgiveness. In this country the divorce rate that has been rising from 40 percent up to current 50 has been typical (with little deflections) since the 30's². Approximately 50 percent of the firstborns are born to single women, most of them living with the partner without marriage. This kind of relationship is rather more vulnerable than a marriage. A lot of children, elementary school pupils, live in incomplete families and rather unstable, changing relationships of their mothers. Misconception of emancipation together with consumerism puts strong emotional attachment of mother and child in the first year of life in jeopardy. The number of emotionally deprived children is increasing. Their behavior is being referred to by professionals as to violent, cynical, cruel and unscrupulous as their prevailing desire is to gain power over their environment. This is also being referred to as “uprising of deprivants”³. Negative atmosphere of tension between the richer and poorer or the ones with better and worse results is

¹ Lužný, D., *Náboženství, globalizace a (de)sekularizace*, in: Lužný, D., Václavík, D. a kol., *Individualizace náboženství a identita. Poznámky k současné sociologii náboženství*, Praha 2010, p. 32–33. Translation mine.

² See Rozvodovost available <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/rozvodovost> [accessed Jan 16th 2016].

³ See. Koukolík, F., Drtilová, N., *Vzpouřa deprivantů*. Praha 1996.

arising in both work and school environment. This by no means contributes to a feeling of safety and trust. The most dominant aim of the school is to equip the children with competencies to succeed in the competition on the job market. Despite the criticism of general pedagogues wide range of knowledge is being emphasized but in this range knowledge is in fact only pretended to be taught by the teachers in order to gain students' loyalty and resulting sufficient number of students that brings sufficient financial means for the institution. Children coming to school from families with a deficit in the field of morals will usually not encounter any correction in terms of developing the sense of deeper humanity.

The subject of Religion is taught at schools only marginally, the number of the students enrolling for Religion class continues to decrease, although the subject is already now barely feasible. Another factor to play a role is the restitution of the property back to churches – Religion taught by priests seems to be a cheaper option (compared to being taught by laics) and is therefore preferred although the professional competencies for teaching Religion were not included in their Theology studies. The church in our country tends to underestimate Humanistic science, its' importance in pastoral work in general and the work of the laics in general. Even today, Religion education in the state schools is considered rather a form of catechesis by a lot of bishops. Also the curriculum is not being prepared not considering the increasing secularization and broadening of the society.

The question remains: How to understand the Emmaus story in the context of the try to keep and develop the Religion education in the Czech Republic at the beginning of 21st century? The situation is rather a test of Czech Religion teachers' faith in the future of Christianity in this country. Czech theologian, Tomáš Halík, refers to the story of Jesus crucified and resurrected as to an open story that was not ended by his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension but rather has been continuously developing in the context of history. And our faith is an "Easter faith": Faith that keeps resurrecting from the grave of Non-faith. It does not feel ashamed for its' wounds, it does not recognize Jesus resurrected approaching even us similarly to the disciples that did not recognize him on the Emmaus road. For Jesus is approaching us in the form of the naked, thirsty, hungry and unfree people – as it is indicated in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel⁴.

What this means for our education activities? We are slowly putting up with the fact that Religion education in the state schools is slowly disappearing. We are looking for the areas in society, where we can serve the children and the young by Christianity to encourage them to open their minds for something deeper than consumerism and to enter their way of looking for the essence of humanity. I am going to close up by an example:

⁴ See Halík, T., *Ježíšův příběh zůstává otevřený* [on-line], available on <http://halik.cz/cs/tvorba/proslovy-kazani/proslov/51/> [accessed Jan 2nd 2016].

In a class, I had a dialog with my students about the decreasing quality of interpersonal relationships, which is a topic that was very sensitive for them. After a short discussion we concluded that in certain situations of unfairness or even violence one cannot expect help from outside but rather needs to look for his internal sources of power necessary for either persistence or change. At that point I was given a chance to talk about these internal sources of mine. I described it as faith in God's power that comes from my soul and makes me stronger to be able to share the message of God's kingdom by everything I do. May it be just a little step forward. My students inspired by my openness were looking for their own internal sources of power. They concluded that this can be described as mightiness that they mobilize in themselves as they believe that it is located deep in their hearts and has the meaning of the essence of humanity. We gained was a very good understanding of each other that helped us to value and appreciate each other, anything more but anything less than that. My education ambition got limited to give a helping hand to my students in their acute distress. It ended at the point of them being able to overcome it. For me it was a short moment of seeing Christ resurrected but intentionally, I am not asking myself a question, if, how and when this moment will be visible for them. Is this too little to do? If yes, what more can be done?