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**Study of Child Theology in the Lives of Christian
Families with Small Children**
Doctoral thesis summary



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1. Aims and objectives of the research

It is a generally observed feature of the developmental psychological predisposition of young children that, prior to or upon reaching the age of 4 or 5 at the latest they begin to contemplate existential questions that will inevitably lead to issues such as life and death, right and wrong – issues that can only be grasped with the help of theology. It was the developing field of Child Philosophy Studies, subsequently followed by Child Theology Studies drawing on Child Philosophy Studies and emerging as a new field of German Religious Education Pedagogy that first took an interest in children's natural curiosity and, more importantly, creativity in this area. Even at a very early stage, children reflect upon questions that require a purely theological response, thus engaging in theology at their own individual developmental level. Child Theology Studies, a modern branch of Religious Education Pedagogy researches, interprets and catalyses this spontaneous theological activity.

Academic literature identifies three distinct aspects of the phenomenon, study of, and engagement in child theology: Theology of Children (Theologie von Kindern) is child theology itself and is scientifically researched within Child Theology Studies; Theology for Children (Theologie für Kinder) is the activity catalysed by adults in order to enhance children's theological competence; and Theology with Children (Theologie mit Kindern) is the theological activity adults and children engage in together.

The aim of my dissertation is to introduce Hungarian readers to the scientific field of Child Theology Studies, which is relatively distinct and well-defined in western academic literature

but is yet to be published in Hungary, and discuss it within a context that has not yet been researched in western Europe: the family context of young children (2-7 years of age). To achieve this, empirical research was conducted into young children and their parents' theological activity in Christian families. Thus the dissertation explores an entirely new area, and while it outlines the potential of child theology within the family setting, it also investigates possibilities and methods which, via the findings of Child Theology Studies, will enrich both our practice in Religious Education and our ministry towards young children in the church.

The introduction to the Child Theological Approach emerging in the German speaking world is preceded by an overview of its historical foundations in Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology and Religious Education Pedagogy. In the second part of the dissertation, after having discussed the psychological developmental, spiritual developmental and sociological aspects of childhood in the family context, explore, via the findings of my empirical research, the phenomenon of child theology prevailing in families with young children.

The theses of the dissertation are based upon the findings of the following three fold research:

1. A questionnaire focussing on theological interactions occurring naturally in the 42 families surveyed and the parents' attitude concerning these occurrences.
2. Five-year-long qualitative research into child theology conducted on a pastor's family – conscious parents. The research examined the potential of the Child Theological Approach in the family setting.

3. A 2,5 - month-long qualitative data collection in a control group of 15 families that, through content analysis and typology, detail the families' spontaneous theology-related conversations recorded by the parents.

2. Theses and conclusions

Until recently Child Theology Studies have researched the phenomenon and significance of child theology as it occurs in a controlled setting created for school age children. However, my research shows that **young children also engage in child theology in their everyday environment: in the family setting; that is to say, they initiate their engagement without any extrinsic influence. Therefore the most natural environment for children to engage in child theology is family life itself (Thesis 1).** Child theology occurs spontaneously and naturally in the family setting. The latest developmental psychology studies suggest that children start to think in terms of causality at a very early age. In their first years they mostly use their imagination to create contrafacts via a form of intuitive logic. These experimental lines of thought often emerge during question-induced conversations, and assist children to process information in various fields of life as well as in forming an age-specific view of the world. Having been formed by God, children inevitably arrive at questions concerning the ultimate meaning of existence by applying the very same method. Via these trains of thoughts children initiate child theology in the natural environment of their family. In this regard the dissertation raises counter-arguments against the concept of child theology as interpreted in western academic literature, for this interpretation limits child theology to theological conversations that take place exclusively in a

scientifically established, purpose-oriented, methodically defined and assessable environment. Children raise their questions about and reflections upon ‘that which is beyond’ in their real-life contexts and it is there that they most often express the truths they have discerned. Children themselves do not consider these revelations to be the final answers. They juxtapose their insights with their most important reference points, most commonly with their parents’ views, and constantly review and revise them in the light of what has been discovered as a result of the juxtaposition. Therefore child theological conversations occurring in family surroundings are an inevitable and essential feature of Christian upbringing.

The research has also revealed that **the actual outcome of spontaneous and natural child theological conversations in the family setting largely depends on the parents’ child theological knowledge (Thesis 2)**. The research conducted on a pastor’s family and in the control group of 15 families consistently suggests that theological knowledge combined with a child theology-conscious attitude catalyses, intensifies and enriches child theological interactions in the family. The parents’ apt participation provides a more efficient framework for children in which they can discover and consider theological answers that further their own progress, and this undeniably contributes to more whole some, sound and age-appropriate spiritual growth. To meet this end it is imperative to establish the methodology of child theology in the family setting, and, by exploiting this methodology the Church and individual congregations have to acquaint parents with and enhance their competence in child theology.

It can be asserted that parents do not need to artificially initiate and stimulate child theological interactions in the family setting; they do not need to accelerate their children's spiritual development and theological interest. Children evolve these of their own accord as and when it is suitable and necessary for them. The principle that children actively create their environment and stimulate their own development, including their spiritual growth, is supported by the latest findings of sociological and developmental psychology research. However, parents do not simply assume a neutral position in this process. According to my research parents play a crucial dual role concerning the occurrence of child theology in the family setting: on the one hand they establish an environment that encourages their children's attempts at theological activity and self-expression, on the other hand they provide a religiously-charged empirical horizon that is conducive to the children's search for existential truth.

In order to facilitate the theological activity and self-expression of children in the family setting the same set of requirements has to be met as the one identified by Child Theology Studies for the facilitation of theological activity in a group setting:

- symmetrical communication between equal partners
- a mutually open and respectful attitude towards differing opinions
- a culture of argumentation
- debating skills
- a conscious withdrawal from adult dominance in conversations

- a nursing attitude towards children's quest for answers.

My empirical research indicates that the first two requirements, those of symmetrical and open communication, were satisfied in the surveyed families. It is worth noting, however, that the population who participated in the survey did so as a favour and on a voluntary basis, therefore we assume that the families who actually completed the survey had a positive attitude towards the Child Theological Approach from the very beginning – an assumption that is confirmed by the answers given in the questionnaires. In a more traditional religious family setting, parents are still more likely to consider their children unsuitable for theological discourse, therefore they do not only discourage but, in effect, thwart their children's desire to contribute to such conversations in any form.

Apart from an open and respectful attitude, a conscious child theological approach, i.e. a particular strategy to lead and accompany conversations, is also essential for the evolution of child theological interactions. Although the research protocol included this requirement, it was only fulfilled in the setting of the pastor's family. When children pose a question to their parents, instinctive parental responses, even though they reassure children that parents are a reliable source of both answers and comfort, generally tend to cut the conversation short – whereas the application of the appropriate conversation strategy in the pastor's family proved that if exhaustive answers are delayed and a further quest for truth is encouraged, children are able to penetrate deeper into their own thoughts and questions, and thus they enrich child theological interactions in a way that benefits the whole family.

However, this delay strategy can only be maintained as long as it furthers the process and the children's development. A family unit is primarily a setting for raising children, and not for conducting research into child theology. The nature of the parental role determines the possibilities and responsibilities of participation in and research into child theology in the family setting. **The children's need for security, including the realm of existential issues, marks the boundaries of all research into child theology that is to be conducted in the family setting (Thesis 3).**

The parents' contribution to the occurrence of child theological discussions is crucial in another dimension as well. The contexts of the conversations suggest that the majority of the child theological interactions emerged in relation to some religious ritual. This demonstrates that child theological activity tends to occur mostly on the empirical horizon that is established by the family's religious habits. The children's innate desire to make sense of the world and spiritual transcendence prompt them to search for a religious system of concepts and symbols, which, at this stage of life transpires to them via their family and its religious rituals. Although this is not an intentional child theological activity but a natural characteristic of family life, both the Church and parents should be made aware that children's spiritual formation, which might assume the form of child theology, is influenced by the presence or absence of religious rituals in the family, or by the media replacing these rituals. On the other hand, Religious Education teachers and pastors have to acknowledge and take seriously the perplexity of modern parents who, not having had a religious family model, try to incorporate the dimensions of their religion into their family life mainly by

experimentation. Religious Education and pastoral family counselling have a great responsibility to raise awareness and encourage parents to integrate into their family life the religious rituals that are appropriate for the age of their children and that can further their spiritual growth. These rituals will later on function as a rich source of theological nourishment for children in the family setting.

Several of the parents who participated in the survey admitted having difficulties in responding to their children's questions. There seems to be a kind of insecurity and uncertainty regarding not only religious rituals but also theological knowledge – parents do not exactly know how to give their children age-appropriate theological answers. To assist parents in accompanying their children on their theological pursuits, a structured evaluation of the topics that surfaced in these families as well as the children's responses is included in the dissertation. The next step forward is to offer families further help by providing parents and children with methodological handbooks, presentations and online resources that utilise the topical summary in this section.

The findings of my research and their implications correspond well with the argument that **the three aspects of child theology as described in Religious Education Pedagogy are present and valid in the natural settings of families too, albeit they assume different proportions and significance there (Thesis 3)**. Child theology in the context of the family encompasses the same variety of rich and colourful interpretations as child theology does in the context of Religious Education. The presence of an open, receptive, and child theology-conscious

parental attitude helps prompt, encourage and advance the Theology of Children (Theologie von Kindern), family rituals catalyse Theology with Children (Theologie mit Kindern), while the parents' theological competence plays a significant role in Theology for Children (Theologie für Kinder).

Furthermore, my research confirms the argument of Child Theology Studies that children characteristically tend to use a wide range of forms to express themselves during their theological quests too. In a family setting this occurs even more abundantly and profoundly as the family unit provides the most natural and secure environment and also the most freedom to use various styles of learning and self-expression. The survey found various examples of child theological activities emerging in the form of games, stories, drawings, arts and crafts. On the one hand this finding is in line with the suggestion of Child Theology Studies that the practice and methodology of child theology need to be expanded with 'genres' other than conversation. On the other hand it brings the importance of the family setting to the fore, as it is the kind of environment that naturally generates this vibrant variety. Therefore **Child Theology research conducted in the family setting needs to encompass child theology surfacing in different 'genres' of self-expression (Thesis 4).**

It can be concluded that the Child Theological Approach can raise awareness and enrich the quality of spontaneous child theological activities in the family. Religious Education Pedagogy and the Church have the potential and the responsibility to:

1. adapt the theory and methodology of child theology to the benefit of Religious Education pedagogical research, training and practice;

2. draw up a well thought out and Child Theological Approach-based family counselling scheme by incorporating some of the other disciplines of Practical Theology (Liturgics, Missiology, Church Sociology, Pastoral Psychology, and Homiletics);
3. introduce and develop in individual congregations the type of pastoral family care that integrates the objectives of the Child Theological Approach too;
4. equip parents for their role by publishing family ritual- and family religion-related methodological books that are based on the findings of Child Theology research;
5. design further methodological resources for both parents and children by involving the disciplines of Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology in order to facilitate child theology in the family setting.

In my dissertation undertake the task of approaching child theology from a new perspective. I would like to utilise the initiatives of Religious Education to the benefit of the spiritual formation of children in the family setting. I make an attempt to discover an uncharted territory of Child Theology Studies and at the same time make families with young children the focus of attention of Religious Education Pedagogy and church ministry.

The Church has endeavoured to reach out to parents via children's ministry for decades. In my view this strategy needs to be reversed: we need to reach out to children via counselling their parents. If we cooperate with responsible, purpose-driven and dedicated parents in one of the crucial areas of child-rearing the area of existential questions posed by children – we can help

draw parents and children into the presence of God – after all, it is God who has the ultimate, reassuring and satisfying answers for all ages.