

CHILDREN'S COMPREHENSION OF THE RELIGIOUS STORY AFFECTED BY THEIR EMOTIONAL CAPACITIES

Abstract

The use of the religious stories is an important element of the religious education of preschool and younger schoolchildren. The question arises here, in what way should the story be presented to the children in order to be understandable to them at their specific level of development? In this article children's understanding of a story is placed within the context of their emotional development. The key emotional competencies, mastered by the child until the age of 12, are presented, as well as the key aspects of the social reality which the child can understand based on the mastered emotional competencies and which are important for the understanding of the story. The aspects of the biblical story about the multiplication of the loaves are shown through each individual development stage of a child in order to show the things a child is capable of understanding at a particular stage.

Key words: understanding the religious story, religious development, emotional competencies, preschool and younger schoolchildren, religious education.

Introduction

Right at the beginning an examination of religious education leads us to story, respectively stories with religious content. The Bible as a foundational book of Christian religious education is full of stories, and Jesus also uses stories, or rather parables, in his speeches to people. As Tilley claims in the introduction to his book *Story Theology*, "Christian stories provide the central and distinctive structure and content of Christian faith. /.../ Stories do not merely decorate or illustrate, but provide the substance of faith. The better one understands the Christian stories, the better one understands the Christian faith"¹.

¹ T. Tilley, *Story Theology*, Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1990, p. xvii.

The basic purpose of the religious stories is the transfer of a spiritual message from an educator or a teacher to a child. When the apostles asked Jesus why he was not transmitting his spiritual message to people directly, why he was telling them the parables instead, he answered: "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (Mt 13:11) and: "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables" (Mr 4:11). The story is thus primarily an attempt to bring spiritual reality, which we do not yet understand or are not yet aware of, closer to people. We could say that the story is a bridge between spiritual reality and psychological awareness, through which humans attempt to approach spiritual reality, until they enter into spiritual reality itself.

When we use the story in religious education, especially in religious education of small, preschool children, we quickly stumble upon the question of how children understand the stories with religious content. Working with children we quickly realise that children of different ages understand stories in different ways, according to the child's psychological maturity, but what exactly are these differences? Which elements, respectively aspects of a story can children at a certain psychological development level understand and which are not yet understandable to them?

In our research we focused primarily on the aspect of social-emotional relationships between the characters of the story. We wanted to know how discoveries in the field of developmental psychology, especially in the field of emotional development in humans, can help us choose the appropriate difficulty level of the story, so that the children can actually understand the level of interpersonal relationships between the characters.

1. Individual's faith development theories in the context of emotional development

An overview of the literature in the field of development of faith and religion shows that Fowler's theory of faith development² and the theory of development of religious judgement by Oser and Gmünder³ are the most detailed and established. Oser and Gmünder's theory does not reach into the time period of preschool development, as it recognizes the first development stage from the age of 6 onwards. Fowler's theory places two development stages into the preschool age: the first, which is not even called real faith since Fowler uses a term the pre-stage of faith, and the second, which encompasses the entire period of time between the child's

² Cf. J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, New York, HarperOne, 1995.

³ Cf. F. K. Oser and P. Gmünder, *Religious Judgement: A Developmental Perspective*, Birmingham AL, Religious Education Press, 1991.

3rd and 7th year of age. In comparison with the contemporary development theories, like for example Greenspan's theory of functional emotional development⁴, which defines the preschool stage much more precisely, the current religious development theories in this earliest stage remain loose and do not take into account the nuances in the child's capacities for understanding, which change very quickly during the preschool age.

The research, upon which the above-mentioned researchers of religious development came to their conclusions, was based on children's verbal descriptions of their understanding of faith. Adult researchers asked the children questions and the children more or less only expressed their views. In the pastorals for the children, the opposite process often occurs: the teachers or educators express their views of faith, tell the children religious stories etc. The children are also the ones who listen, watch and receive. Observing the pastoral practice we thus legitimately ask the question: "How can current faith development theories be boosted when seen from a different perspective?" Not only what the children can express about their faith to others, but also how much is transmitted to them and what the children are capable of understanding and accepting at a certain age. What should a grown-up teacher or a religious educator do in order to help a child to understand? How and in what way should they bring a religious story closer to the child?

To answer this question, we used the findings from the field of emotional development, especially Greenspan's⁵ findings which foreground the key emotional competencies that a child masters in an individual development stage for each key stage of emotional development⁶. Table 1 shows the development sequence, in which individual emotional competencies appear in a child's development; concurrently, the development stages of faith as defined by Fowler⁷ and the development stages of religious judgement as defined by Oser and Gmünder⁸ are shown.

⁴ Cf. J. Greenspan and S. I. Greenspan, *Functional Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (FEDQ) for Childhood: A Preliminary Report on the Questions and Their Clinical Meaning*, *The Journal of Developmental and Learning Disorders*, (2002) 6, p. 71-116; S. I. Greenspan and S. G. Shanker, *The First Idea: How Symbols, Language, and Intelligence Evolved from Our Primate Ancestors to Modern Humans*, Cambridge MA, Da Capo Press, 2004, p. 51-91.

⁵ Cf. J. Greenspan and S. I. Greenspan, *Functional Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (FEDQ) for Childhood: A Preliminary Report on the Questions and Their Clinical Meaning*, p. 71-116.

⁶ Cf. M. Cvetek, *Živeti s čustvi: čustva, čustveno procesiranje in vseživljenjski čustveni razvoj*, Znanstvena knjižica 41, Ljubljana, Teološka fakulteta, 2014, p. 95-167.

⁷ Cf. J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*; J. W. Fowler, H. Streib and B. Keller, *Manual for Faith Development Research*, Atlanta and Bielefeld, Candler School of Theology and Universität Bielefeld, 2004, p. 30-59.

⁸ Cf. F. K. Oser and P. Gmünder, *Religious Judgement: A Developmental Perspective*, Birmingham AL, Religious Education Press, 1991.

Table 1: *Comparison of the development stages of three theories: Fowler's theory of faith development, theories of the development of religious judgement by Oser and Gmünder, and Greenspan's theories of lifelong functional emotional development.*

Fowler's theory of faith development	Oser and Gmünder's theory of the development of religious judgement	Greenspan's theory of functional emotional development
Primal faith (pre-stage of faith)		0-2 months Emotional regulation and shared interest in the world 2-4 months Engagement and relating 4-8 months Two way intentional communication 9-18 months Complex, problem solving gestures (Mutual social problem resolution) 18-30 months Creating representations or ideas
3-7 years Intuitive-pro- jective faith		2.5-4 years Building bridges between ideas 4-7 years Multiple-Cause and triangular emotional thinking
7-15 years Mythic-literal faith	6-12 years First stage: Deus Ex Machina / Absolute Heteronomy Orientation	6-10 years Grey Area, Relativistic Thinking 9-12 years Reflective thinking with an internal standard
Adolescents Synthetic-conventio- nal faith	8-18 years Second stage: Do Ut Des Orientation	After 12 years Extended reflective thinking Reflections on the individual's future
	16-25 years Third stage: Deism / Abso- lute Autonomy Orientation	Stabilisatio n of the separate sense of self
Young adults: Individual-reflective faith	Fourth stage: Mediated Autonomy and Salvation-Plan Orientation	Long-term intimate commitment Responsible care for another
Mature adults: Conjunctive faith		Responsible care for the broader social community
Rarely attained by anyone: Universalising faith	Fifth stage: Intersubjective Religious Orientation (rarely attained by anyone)	Wisdom

2. Development of the emotional capacities

In the field of development psychology the term emotional competency is understood as a specific ability to emote which an individual develops at a specific development stage of their lifelong emotional development. Stanley Greenspan, who first developed the theory of lifelong functional emotional development, understands emotional competencies as the abilities of an individual at a specific development stage to perceive, express and communicate emotions and to integrate them into their own sense of self⁹. In an individual's lifelong emotional development, emotional competencies become increasingly integrated and interwoven with the higher mental functions, like the use of symbols, logical thought, ability for self-reflection and similar¹⁰. Emotional competencies significantly contribute to an individual's partaking in interpersonal relationships both in understanding interpersonal dynamics as well as in effectively regulating emotional exchanges between participants in a social interaction¹¹.

Greenspan divided his lifelong theory of functional emotional development into 16 development stages, from which 16 central emotional competencies can be derived¹². Because the main interest of this article is children's understanding of the religious story, only the first nine emotional competencies that derive from this theory will be briefly described. The following briefly describes the emotional competencies in the same sequence as they appear during an individual's lifelong development.

Emotional regulation or emotional calmness in a children's early development is understood as the ability to calm down with the support of a comforting caregiver. This fundamental emotional capacity further enables the children to focus their attention outwards, which is noticeable as the child's *shared interest in the world*.

The state of experiencing intimate *engagement and relating with another* is the second fundamental emotional competency. In the children's interaction with their caregivers we notice this especially when the children intentionally stare into the caregiver's face, that is the eyes. It is a relationship with a basic trust that is characteristic in the safe prox-

⁹ Cf. S. I. Greenspan and S. G. Shanker, *The First Idea: How Symbols, Language, and Intelligence Evolved from Our Primate Ancestors to Modern Humans*, Cambridge MA, Da Capo Press, 2004, p. 51-91; M. Cvetek, *Živeti s čustvi*, p. 95-167.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Greenspan and S. I. Greenspan, *Functional Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (FEDQ) for Childhood: A Preliminary Report on the Questions and Their Clinical Meaning*, p. 71-116.

¹¹ Cf. D. Nelis, I. Kotsou, J. Quoidbach, M. Hansenne, F. Weytens, P. Dupuis and M. Mikolajczak, *Increasing Emotional Competence Improves Psychological and Physical Well-Being, Social Relationships, and Employability*, *Emotion*, 11 (2011) 2, p. 354-366; S. A. Denham, *Dealing with Feelings: Foundations and Consequences of Young Children's Emotional Competence*, *Early Education and Development*, 12 (2001) 1, p. 5-10.

¹² Cf. M. Cvetek, *Živeti s čustvi*, p. 95-167.

imity of another person, a global sense of contact, inclusion and connection with another.

- (1) *Two way intentional communication* represents the ability of mutual sharing common interests, mutual surrender to a common activity and meaningful and intentional responding to each other.
- (2) The emotional competency of *mutual social problem solving* can be understood also as the ability to cooperate with others, as it involves mutual assistance in meeting one's needs and wants mutual assistance in attaining goals, respectively.
- (3) *Creating representations, ideas and symbols* can be understood as the ability of representing emotional states with the help of mental ideas, symbols and words. At first, symbols and ideas are non-verbal; later, especially verbal symbols which facilitate expressing emotions become important.
- (4) *Building bridges between ideas* and also logical thinking about emotions enables an individual to connect his/her emotional state with its cause, and also facilitates our ability to predict which emotional state is likely to follow a particular happening.
- (5) *Multiple-Cause and triangular emotional thinking* represents the ability to connect emotional states with a larger number of possible causes or consequences. Mastering this competency enables the individual to take into account different viewpoints, to compare different individuals, behaviours or circumstances with each other, and similar.
- (6) *Relativistic thinking or emotionally differentiated thinking* represents the ability to notice and discern many shades of emotional experience and to distinguish between various intensities of emotional states. Consequently, the individual's reactions to emotional circumstances become more refined, which enables the individual to behave more tolerantly and flexibly in interpersonal relationships.
- (7) *Reflective thinking with an internal standard* represents an individual's ability of self-reflection and comparison of their current emotional state and behaviour with the internalised standard of their usual state, and also with their desired and ideal states. This emotional competency, when mastered, enables the individual to accept responsibility for his/her state and also includes the autonomous desire to change one's self (e.g. in the direction of the desired image of one's self).

The individual develops the emotional competencies presented above in a typical, universal sequence. Greenspan¹³ believes that the order of developmental stages in the emotional development cannot be skipped.

¹³ Cf. J. Greenspan and S. I. Greenspan, *Functional Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (FEDQ) for Childhood: A Preliminary Report on the Questions and Their Clinical Meaning*, p. 71-116.

Table 2: Overview of the emotional competencies and some aspects of social reality that a child can understand based on the mastered emotional competencies, from birth until the age of 12 years. The aspects of social reality that can be found in the religious story are foregrounded.

Emotional competency	Aspect of social reality, mastered by the child by the end of the stage
Emotional regulation and shared interest in the world (0 to 2 months)	The child can <i>calm down</i> near another person.
Intimate engagement and relating (2 to 4 months)	They can establish a <i>trusting relationship</i> with the person close to them. They can intentionally watch another person, follow them with their eyes, and pay attention to them.
Two way intentional communication (4 to 8 months)	They begin to notice <i>individual people</i> (especially their faces) and <i>individual objects</i> that they come into contact with in an emotional exchange with an adult. They pay attention especially to people and objects that have emotional value for them (bring them pleasure, are interesting to them etc.).
Mutual social problem resolution (9 to 18 months)	They recognise <i>individual acts</i> related to them which the person close to them daily performs. They understand acts which are often repeated in their everyday life and are familiar to them.
Creating representations or ideas (18 to 30 months)	They recognise individual <i>acts in context</i> : they can conceive an act and also the area the act is performed in. They understand the acts and the areas which they know from experience.
Building bridges between ideas (2.5 to 4 years)	They are able to <i>connect individual acts into a story</i> , i.e. into a sequence of logically connected events. They understand stories that are based on events which are connected to <i>external behaviour</i> .
Multiple-Cause and triangular emotional thinking (4 to 7 years)	They begin to differentiate between external behaviour and internal states (emotional experience and thought). They understand <i>the entanglements that occur on the level of emotions or the content of thoughts</i> .
Relativistic Thinking (6 to 10 years)	They recognise different roles of individuals in a group and begin to understand <i>social and moral rules</i> (what is expected in a community and what is not, what is right and what is wrong), they can already take into account multiple opinions when judging something.
Reflective thinking with an internal standard (9 to 12 years)	They can discern the moral of the story; <i>they can compare their life with the moral of the story</i> and judge whether they live in accordance with that moral or not.

Each next development step, in particular developmental competency, encompasses all preceding developmental competencies and means an upgrade of preceding competencies.

3. The emotional capacities and the understanding of social reality

Having reached the emotional competencies or not determines to a significant degree how the child will understand himself/herself, in relation to others and in relations between people in general. Since the religious stories are put into the context of people's social reality, the child's understanding of interpersonal relationships is vital for understanding the religious story. Table 2 shows the key aspects of social reality which a child is capable of understanding at a specific stage of emotional development. Since this article deals primarily with children's development, the table encompasses the first nine development stages that cover the time period from birth until the age of 12 years.

4. Example of a religious story

Due to children's predominantly concrete way of thinking it makes sense to choose those Biblical stories for the religious education of children where the language of the story is concrete. For the purposes of this article we chose the story of the multiplication of the loaves as an example of such a story: Jesus feeds five thousand men (Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:30-44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-15).

The first two development stages

At the beginning of a child's life we can hardly speak of the child's understanding of social reality and stories, since the child is simply psychologically not mature enough for that. And yet this earliest stage is important for understanding the child's later participation in activities, related to understanding stories. The competencies of being able to calm down and direct attention into the world and to establish a trusting relationship with the storyteller, which the child begins to develop in the first two stages of emotional development, form the base which needs to be established in every relationship between a storyteller and a child, even when the child is older.

Stage three

In the third developmental stage of a children's emotional development, when the children can recognize individual objects or people, the children can only grasp the key objects, like bread, fish, boy, basket, in the story about the multiplication of the loaves. The children understand individual objects in so far as these have been introduced to them in a physical

form and if they have an emotional value for him/her. The children can observe attentively individual images of these objects, if each individual image is portrayed with contrasting colours and set on a uniform background. This is reminiscent of the first step of exegetic Bible study methods as understood by Butler¹⁴, where the starting point of the study is to identify the keywords used by the author of the story in order to write down the story's key message. In the adult world these keywords can also represent more abstract ideas, like justice, mercy and similar, with small children, however, it makes sense to foreground only very concrete objects that the children are in contact with in their daily life.

At this stage the child can establish an emotional relationship also to Jesus as a person, whereby it makes sense to take into account the child's predilection to ascribe the same emotional value to people who are not their caregivers as is ascribed by their caregivers. In connection to this, developmental psychologists speak of social referencing and conclude that in this early stage of development children already exhibit one of the key components of this ability, namely social observation of people important to the child. The child adjusts their behaviour to what they notice in their caregiver¹⁵. The kind of relationship that the child will establish on a psychological level with Jesus and other religiously important individuals thus depends largely on the way the child's caregiver will express the relationship with the mentioned individuals.

Stage Four

At the beginning of the fourth development stage (9 to 12 months) the children still mostly perceive individual concrete objects or individuals, but are able to observe more of them (e.g. on one page of a picture book the children can observe three or four individual and clearly defined objects). Later, in the second half of this stage (12 to 18 months), the children master the ability to understand individual acts. For example, in the story about the multiplication of the loaves the children can well recognize the picture of a boy with the bread, or the picture of a praying Jesus or that of Jesus dividing the bread, the picture of the boy eating the bread and similar. The children can recognize the acts portrayed in the pictures if they have observed and performed the same acts in their daily experience.

From an emotional standpoint the child develops at this stage the ability to signal their needs and wants to another person, whereby this

¹⁴ Cf. T. C. Butler, *Six Ways to Study the Bible*, St. Louis MO, Chalice Press, 2010, p. 41.

¹⁵ Cf. G. C. Mireault, S. C. Crockenberg, J. E. Sparrow, C. A. Pettinato, K. C. Woodard and K. Malzac, *Social Looking, Social Referencing and Humor Perception in 6- and-12-Month-Old Infants*, *Infant Behavior & Development*, 37 (2014) 4, p. 536-545.

emotional signalling largely takes place on the level of actions¹⁶. The children non-verbally gesture what they want, point to the goals they want to attain, attract others into interacting with them, which very clearly shows the children's ability of their own intentional activity. In relation to this, Fonagy¹⁷ talks about the so-called teleological agency of the self, whereby the children experience their intentions and actions as a connected whole (in this stage they do not yet distinguish the internal states or intentions from external action). The children become acquainted with the characters of the religious story also through their performed and externally visible acts and are not yet capable of understanding the intentions as the separate internal states.

Stage Five

In the fifth development stage the child can situate the image of a person doing something into a familiar context. This means that upon the person's act the children can also conceive of the space where the person is performing the act. In the story about the multiplication of the loaves, for example, the children can grasp that the traveller leaves the town to find Jesus; that he meets Jesus in a meadow; that the apostle places bits of the leftover bread from dinner into the baskets and the like. The children's understanding is still very concrete, tied predominantly to the meeting of two people (they cannot yet imagine multiple relationships that emerge in the meeting of the crowd with Jesus). The children thus understand those acts and circumstances that they run into in their everyday life. From the children's viewpoint, the image is still the fundamental story telling medium.

From the emotional viewpoint, the children in this stage already attain the ability to imagine emotional states with the help of mental ideas, symbols and words. This is mirrored in the children's speech where we already notice simple descriptions of persons, objects and spaces¹⁸, and in the vocabulary of children whose parents use emotional talk we already meet with individual expressions for simple emotions. The children can mentally picture the intentions and desires leading an individual to a specific action. They can imagine emotional states that result from behaviours and the like, which the literature on psychology marks with the term

¹⁶ Cf. J. Greenspan and S. I. Greenspan, *Functional Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (FEDQ) for Childhood: A Preliminary Report on the Questions and Their Clinical Meaning*, p. 73.

¹⁷ Cf. P. Fonagy, G. Gergely, E. L. Jurist and M. Target, *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self*, New York, Other Press LLC, 2005, p. 222.

¹⁸ Cf. S. Kranjc, U. Fekonja Peklaj and L. Marjanovič Umek, *Language Development in Early Childhood: Developmental Changes between the Ages of Three and Four*, 2006, p. 729-730 in 737.

mentalisation¹⁹. In the story about the multiplication of the loaves the children can understand that the traveller who came to Jesus was hungry. They can understand the boy's aspiration to help Jesus (by bringing him bread and fish). They can understand the traveller's happiness upon receiving the bread and so on.

Stage Six

According to Fowler, in this stage the children's primal faith transforms into intuitive-projective faith²⁰, and at the level of emotional development the children become capable of connecting emotions and the reasons for emotions, respectively reasons and emotional consequences²¹. The ability to connect ideas into logical wholes enables the children to connect individual acts into a meaningful story. The children understand the time sequence of events and simple causal relationships between them, they also understand that the character which appears in different pictures of the same story is one and the same person²². Such children already understand that, for example, Jesus, who is portrayed at different pages of the book, is always the same person. In this development stage the children can understand events that transpire on the behavioural level, therefore on the level of actions that the children can observe from outside. In the story about the multiplication of the loaves, for example, the children are able to follow the key flow of the "outer" story: they can understand that the apostles went with Jesus to get some rest (in a solitary place), that people hurried after them, that Jesus accepted them and told them stories, that they became hungry, were searching for food, that the boy brought some bread and fish, that Jesus prayed and that he then divided the bread and fish among everyone, and so forth.

Stage Seven

In this stage the children's thinking becomes expressly comparative, which enables them to differentiate between and compare emotions of different people and objects. The child begins to differentiate between external behaviour and internal states (emotional experience and thought). The story is thus no longer understood only on the level of outer behaviour,

¹⁹ Cf. P. Fonagy, G. Gergely, E. L. Jurist and M. Target, *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self*, p. 237.

²⁰ Cf. J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, p. 122.

²¹ Cf. J. Greenspan and S. I. Greenspan, *Functional Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (FEDQ) for Childhood: A Preliminary Report on the Questions and Their Clinical Meaning*, p. 74.

²² Cf. S. Kranjc, U. Fekonja Peklaj and L. Marjanovič Umek, *Language Development in Early Childhood*, p. 738-739.

seen from the outside, the children also understand what is happening inside people's minds. In the story about the multiplication of the loaves the children can understand people's internal desires – to meet Jesus, to learn something from him or to be healed by him, they can understand the distress of the disciples who did not have enough food for dinner, they can understand Jesus's inclination to help people and so on. The ability to compare thoughts also makes it possible for children to understand the religious stories from other viewpoints. Children in this stage begin to differentiate between what is real and what is not, whereby they judge the religious stories differently than non-religious stories. Most children are convinced that the characters from religious stories actually exist and that the actions from these stories actually happened or could happen, whereas they are sure that the characters from non-religious stories only exist in fantasy²³. Likewise, most children of this age are convinced that God has a different creational power than humans. Thus, for example, children differentiate between small houses being built by people and mountains by God²⁴.

Stage Eight

Children's recognition of different aspects and shades of reality additionally increases in this stage. The child progressively differentiates between a growing palette of emotions and other internal states of persons, likewise they discern an increasing number of roles that people play in different life situations. The growing ability to understand different social perspectives²⁵ gives the child an ever better understanding of interpersonal relationships and the different roles of individuals in a group, at the same time facilitating their participation in social groups²⁶. Thus in the story about the multiplication of the loaves the child understands the negotiations between the disciples and Jesus regarding how much food is needed for dinner for the entire crowd and where to obtain it. They differentiate well between events which follow natural laws and events which deviate from them. In the story about the multiplication of the loaves they thus see that the multiplication of the loaves is a miracle (=sign) that deviates from the usual, natural course of events. In addition

²³ Cf. V. Cox Vaden and J. D. Woolley, *Does God Make It Real? Children's Belief in Religious Stories from the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, *Child Development*, 82 (2011) 4, p. 1120-1135.

²⁴ Cf. J. L. Barrett and R. A. Richert, *Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts*, *Review of Religious Research*, 44 (2003) 3, p. 302.

²⁵ Cf. S. Diazgranados, R. L. Selman and M. Dionne, *Acts of Social Perspective Taking: A Functional Construct and the Validation of a Performance Measure for Early Adolescents*, *Social Development*, 25 (2016) 3, p. 587-589.

²⁶ Cf. H. Gülay Ogelman, V. Oğuz, Ö. Körükçü and A. Köksal Akyol, *Examination of the Effect of Perspective-Taking Skills of Six-Year-Old Children on Their Social Competences*, *Early Child Development & Care*, 187 (2017) 1, p. 63.

to that, children in this stage of development begin to understand social and oral rules (what is expected in a community and what is not, what is right and what is wrong). Thus children of this age can discuss, for example, whether the disciples ought to feed the crowd or not.

Stage Nine

The central development milestone of this stage is the development of an individual's ability of self-reflection. The children are increasingly aware of their own self, they start differentiating between the actual state of their self and the desired or ideal state²⁷. This enables them to think upon hearing the story about what the story is telling them personally. The children can compare their life with the moral of the story and judge whether they live in accordance with that moral or not. Along the story about the multiplication of the loaves they can, for instance, think about their similarities to the apostles or the boy who brought the loaves and the fish. They can consider what their own wishes and expectations would be upon approaching Jesus. They can reflect on how they would answer Jesus's question: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" and similar. In this stage the children are capable of increasing control over their emotional state, they can direct their emotions in the desired direction likewise they begin to express their autonomous desire for change of self. Thus a comparison of themselves with the religious story motivates the children to try and align their behaviour to the perceived moral of the story. We could say that the attained competencies of this stage represent the basis of what Butler calls the devotional study of the Bible²⁸, which presupposes the ability of self-reflection.

Conclusion

An integration of findings from the field of emotional development and children's perception of the content of religious stories shows that it is possible to take a much broader look at the development of children's faith in this early life stage than mainstream theories on faith development and religious judgement are taking. Knowing the micro-changes in the children's way of understanding the religious story enables parents and caregivers to choose a way of presenting the religious story suitable to the children's capacity for understanding at a certain development stage and in which the children can actively participate according to their development level.

²⁷ Cf. J. Greenspan and S. I. Greenspan, *Functional Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (FEDQ) for Childhood: A Preliminary Report on the Questions and Their Clinical Meaning*, p. 77-80.

²⁸ Cf. T. C. Butler, *Six Ways to Study the Bible*, p. 101-102.