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# Biblical History as the *Locus Ethicus* in Sofia Cavalletti's Concept of Religious Education

Biblijna historia jako *locus ethicus*  
w koncepcji religijnego wychowania dziecka  
Sofii Cavalletti

## ABSTRACT

The concept of the religious education of a child aged three to twelve by Sofia Cavalletti (1917–2011) has been present in educational practice since 1954. In Poland the assumptions of that concept have been fulfilled in certain educational institutions since the 1990's. The objective of the article is to answer the question of why is Biblical narratives constitute the *locus ethicus* in Cavalletti's concept of child education? Religious education based on the Bible and liturgy is strictly related to the task of the catechesis which is ethical formation. The story told in the Bible is shown in the catechesis as the history of God and a human being who are the partners of the covenant. This relation is understood as the source of life and the basis for ethical education.

## KEY WORDS

Biblical history, Biblical narratives, ethics, parenesis, norms, relation, covenant.

## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

historia biblijna, narracje biblijne, etyka, pareneza, normy, relacja, przymierze

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## ABSTRAKT

Koncepcja religijnego wychowania dziecka w wieku od trzeciego do dwunastego roku życia w opracowaniu Sofii Cavalletti (1917–2011) jest obecna w praktyce edukacyjnej od 1954 roku. W Polsce założenia tej koncepcji są realizowane w niektórych placówkach oświatowych od lat 90. XX wieku. Celem artykułu jest udzielenie odpowiedzi na pytanie: dlaczego narracje biblijne stanowią swoisty *locus ethicus* w koncepcji wychowania dziecka proponowanej przez Cavalletti? Wychowanie religijne oparte na Biblii i liturgii ściśle łączy się z zadaniem katechezy, jakim jest formacja moralna. Historia opowiedziana w Biblii jest ukazywana w ramach katechezy jako historia Boga i człowieka, którzy są partnerami przymierza. Ta relacja stanowi źródło życia i podstawę wychowania moralnego.

## Introduction

Sofia Cavalletti (1917–2011) is the author of the concept of the religious education of a child aged three to twelve, based on the method of Maria Montessori. Both the selection of the contents, i.e. the curriculum, and her method of working with children, are the result of a pedagogical experiment which started in Rome in 1954. The concept was named “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd” (*La Catechesi del buon Pastore*) and is now carried out in numerous educational institutions all around the world. Due to its specific features, it requires appropriate equipment and specific preparation of the teachers, which is why it cannot be treated as obligatory in all schools. However, it’s a good idea to analyse its approach both to the child and to the Bible.

Seen from the theological point of view the nature of the “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd” may be described as Christocentric-Trinitarian and anthropocentric. It should be noted that the latter is not based on the child’s experience but on the child’s spiritual needs which were gradually discovered by Cavalletti as she analysed the children’s response to the Biblical contents presented to them. It’s a kerygmatic catechesis, but it is more similar to the one that was proclaimed at the start of Christianity than to the one which

was created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Cavalletti began working with children, the catechism of Pius X was compulsory, which is labelled as the catechism of questions and answers.<sup>1</sup> The learning objective was to memorize the contents of the catechism which was a kind of a religious knowledge compendium. It did not require any particular method. Analysing such a way of teaching, which might be called a definition-based method, Cavalletti concluded that it shaped the wrong image of God and transcendence. Thus, she gave up the definition-based method of teaching and started to create a new, alternative method which she called the method of signs or parables. It is strictly related to the teaching based on the Bible and liturgy.

The objective of this study is to present the arguments which explain why Cavalletti believed that Biblical history is the “place of ethics” (*locus ethicus*) and how ethical education, which is closely related to the history of God and humankind, is fulfilled in her concept.

According to the documents of the Catholic Church, the objective of religious education is to build a personal relationship with Jesus. The concept in question makes it possible to fulfil this objective. For Cavalletti a relation—according to the Biblical terminology—i.e., a covenant, is the main category which results directly from the experience of man, from the history described in the Bible, from the events in which God reveals Himself. Such history becomes the place in which the invisible and infinite God meets a human being who is limited and closed within the borders of time during his earthly life. It is a meeting of two realities which aim at unity and fullness. It is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ Resurrected. The history told in the Bible is revealed in liturgy. In the concept of Cavalletti, religious education consists of two stages. The first one is listening and the second one is responding. The relation may be built through the knowledge of God which results from listening to His Word. And the response is living in that relationship.

On the basis of the analysis of sources, one may say that Cavalletti considers the category of relation in several of its aspects. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of Saint Pius X*, <<https://www.ewtn.com/library/CATECHSM/PIUSXCAT.HTM>> (access: 10.08.2017). Example: What does the word *God* mean? *God* means the purest spirit (i.e., a spiritual being which is simple and unchanging) which is unlimited as for reason, will and perfection, and the happiest in itself and from itself.



first one refers to the child—to the child’s nature, religiousness and metaphysical abilities. The second one is the Biblical perspective on relation. The source of relation is God who reveals Himself in the Bible and aims at making a covenant with the man, and not the other way round. The third aspect refers to the description of practical assumptions, i.e. how one may support the process of building the relationship between the child and God. The latter aspect consolidates the two former ones and is the answer to the question of how to help the child create a personal relationship with God.

In this text I am focusing on the Biblical dimension of relationship because it explains the nature of ethical education in the concept of Cavalletti and the idea that presents history as the place of ethics.

### Biblical dimension of the category of relation

Cavalletti’s concept of religious education is based on the Biblical theology rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. She believes that the covenant of peace: “‘berit’ is a universal harmony which comes from the only Personal God, the Lord of history, in order to unite all the levels of creation.”<sup>2</sup> It is partially fulfilled during the Eucharist when Christ unites people with God through the communion, thanks to the fruit of people’s work and the gifts created by God the Father.<sup>3</sup>

According to Cavalletti, education for “berit” means sowing the “seeds of peace”. Moreover, “teaching ‘berit’” means education that does not allow the child to stay withdrawn—it aims at looking for Someone and others. It is not about closing windows. On the contrary—it is to open windows and doors, to open one’s heart in order to see and listen to Someone and other people. Educating people for covenant is carrying out religious and ethical formation. We learn

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<sup>2</sup> S. Cavalletti, *Semi di pace*, Roma 1971, typescript, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> While reading the Bible we can notice that it presents such reality, it teaches us to understand and accept that unity through, e.g. the image of God—the husband: “For your Maker is your husband - the Lord Almighty is his name” (Isaiah 54:5). Another Old Testament image of God is the “shepherd” who watches and protects his people. In the New Testament the same shepherd is Jesus who, calling everyone by their name, builds the relationship: the personal one and that of the community.

about “God who is looking for the man” (according to the expression used by Abraham Joshua Heschel); God who wants to make a covenant in which He Himself is a Partner. Such education leads to the awareness of the fact that “in the world there are other people whom I need to know, whom I have to respect, whom I can learn from, and whom I don’t have to conquer even if I am able to do that.”<sup>4</sup>

The above mentioned quotation shows that education for creating the relationship with God makes the child open to the other person, too. Such an education gains a universal dimension because, as Cavalletti notes, “the Bible transcends the borders of the created universe as it speaks about the covenant which joins the man and the whole of creation with God Himself.”<sup>5</sup> The transfer from the cosmic dimension to the metaphysical dimension is fulfilled through the concreteness of God who became Human. This is the event which constitutes the story told in the Bible. However, the story unravels in time and the man experiences it in everyday life—“here and now”, because the reality of the covenant refers to two inseparable moments, i.e. history and celebration (liturgy). The Biblical dimension of the covenant is made real in the liturgical dimension, which is emphasized by Cavalletti.

The Biblical image of the covenant is based on the permanent presence of God which makes history meaningful and leads it to the certain goal—the unity and fullness of God, i.e. parousia. The history of the covenant is fulfilled according to God’s plan. It begins with the act of creation, its climax is redemption and its goal is the second coming of the Messiah. Those are the fundamental dimensions of time—past, present and future—which are consolidated by the permanent presence of the history’s God.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible shows that God is the source of everything. The covenant is fulfilled gradually. The first stage is the God’s self-revelation as the One who is the Creator and the giver of life. Therefore, God’s action is focused on giving. Shaping the image of God who acts in history makes it possible for the child to realise that the world has

<sup>4</sup> S. Cavalletti, *Semi di pace*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> S. Cavalletti, *Potencjał duchowy dziecka w wieku od 6 do 12 lat. Opis doświadczenia*, transl. K. Stopa, Kraków 2003, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.



not only things, but also people who are close to him or her, with whom he or she may build the relationships of love and friendship. Such people allow the child to live and develop. Also, the child starts to notice that the gift of the world is complemented with the mutual gifts of human beings among whom the child may find the “helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18).<sup>7</sup> God continues to give gifts to the human being following further stages, until He achieves the full unity. Analysing the Bible, Cavalletti specifies the crucial aspect of the methodology of God who aims at making a perfect covenant with the man. It shows God’s orientation towards His created beings in the attitude of giving. The nature of such action is focused on drawing the man to God. Making the covenant with the man, God promises him the new land and children as a sign of His blessing (covenant made with Abraham, Gen 17:4). God frees His people from the Egyptian captivity and makes a covenant with them. Also, God gives them the Law to which Israel responds. However, the people of Israel are only able to act after they meet God who revealed Himself in a specific event (Ex 19:8).<sup>8</sup> Cavalletti claims that “God who gives is the God of the covenant who looks for His created beings in order to build such a relationship with them that gives them the dignity of His partners. This way the Bible expresses the whole nobleness of its anthropology.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Cavalletti, a gift is dynamic in its nature and it is the opposite of a business deal. Due to the unselfishness of the giver, the gift opens a person to a relation that takes various forms. It is reflected in the practice of religious education according to Cavalletti’s concept. If a relationship is to be born, first one has to focus on the gift and then transfer the attention to the giver. It results in the attitude of surprise based on the fact of “being the subject of an unexpected care.”<sup>10</sup> It results in the willingness to express gratitude. However, the child’s first reaction and response to the gift is showing surprise which draws him/her into the joyous meeting with God. During the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. S. Cavalletti, *La storia del Regno di Dio. Dalla creazione alla parusia*, vol. 1, Todi 2009.

<sup>9</sup> S. Cavalletti, *Potencjal duchowy dziecka w wieku od 6 do 12 lat*, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

next stage, such joy naturally influences the child's choices, actions, behaviour—the response.

The Bible focuses on presenting the initiative of God who aims at making the covenant with the man. The basic dimensions of that covenant are time and history.

The contents presented to the children are focused on showing them the reality of the covenant which is fulfilled in the history of God's relationship with the man. However, before the child gets interested in Biblical history, he or she has to learn who the Lord of that history is. The image of God is shaped on the basis of the parables that emphasize relation and lead the child to the desire of being with Him. The first image which results from the Bible and matches the preschool child's spiritual needs and religiousness, and which reveals that reality, is the image of the Good Shepherd. The next one, with which the children aged six are made familiar, is the image of the true vine. Both images, in a figurative manner, introduce the nature of the covenant, the relation of love between the sheep and the Good Shepherd, as well as the inseparable love between the sheep and the Good Shepherd and the inseparable unity that exists between the vine and its branches. Later the children are made familiar with Old Testament texts which extend the reality they get to know by the dimension of time and history from the creation to parousia in which God's plan of uniting with the human being is fulfilled. Biblical history invites the child to join its course, as it is also the child's personal history and—as such—it is the “place of ethics”.

### Ethical education and its stages

Cavalletti understands ethical formation as helping the child find his or her place in the reality. She defines reality as everything that “includes God and all His creatures, from the human being to the creatures lower than the man.”<sup>11</sup> Also, it is educating the child to listen and open to another person. Since the whole concept of Cavalletti is rooted in the Biblical history and liturgy, its essence is the relation/covenant. Thus, ethical education according to the concept is mainly focused on the issue of “being”. That first period, between

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 135.



the age of three and six, is shaping one's own identity, looking for the answer to the questions: who am I and what am I like? It is fulfilled through the contact with the material reality, the social reality and the transcendent reality the child experiences. It is the time of discovering: who is God and what is God like? Such "being" with God, who is Love, first of all responds to the child's need (being loved and being someone's child), but is also a stage during which the child experiences peaceful and joyous relation with God. It's the time of enjoying God and astonishment.

Only at the further stage, which starts after the age of six, the aspect of acting begins to shape. However, its basis is kerygma. The moment of acting, the obedience to the norms is indubitably crucial, but, according to Cavalletti, it should be built on the strong basis of the person's "being".<sup>12</sup>

Each of those stages should occur at a time suitable for the child's development. During the first stage the child gets to know the reality—love, which results from his or her natural need and which the child aims to satisfy. The child meets God in the person of Jesus who comes to the world, proclaims God's kingdom and says that He is the Good Shepherd. After that stage, which Cavalletti names the betrothal period—the time of "being in love", learning about each other, the stage of acting starts. The first stage has to occur in order to make a strong base for the so-called education for norms and proper ways of behaviour. Keeping the right order of the two stages makes it possible for the child to go from contemplating the reality he or she is getting to know to acting; from the indicative mood to the imperative mood, where the imperative is not the target point but the signpost showing the goal. Such interest in the principles and norms which tell the child what to do in order to live in the relation with God he or she knows, appears at about the age of six. At that time the proclamation, the kerygma, extends by the historic dimension and in a natural manner becomes a moral impulse, too. Why? Because history is the "place of ethics". How? First of all, God draws His creation to make a covenant with Him. Second, in history God's plan is made real—the plan that He Himself fulfils, aiming at the communion. Third, such history consists of events joined with the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 136.



will of love, events that make a story the meaning of which is known. Moreover, it's the reality to which the man is invited. The awareness of being a part of history makes it possible for a person to go from individualism to belonging and this way the individualistic tendency is overcome.<sup>13</sup>

History, with its category of time, leads us to ethical reflection. When the child becomes interested in history, he or she also starts thinking about ethical issues. Now the child is learning about God who not only is the One who gives life (which the child discovered while listening to, e.g. the parable of the kingdom of God and the mustard seed), but who is also the Lord of history. "He created the plan which is fulfilled in time. Now His design requires an active response from the child—the response that shall complete the earlier response which was proper for the preschool age and which mainly included enjoying His gifts."<sup>14</sup> Being a part of that history requires the child to actively create the history. Also, it invites the child to "stay" united with Jesus (liturgy, the sacrament of reconciliation and participation in the Eucharist) and "bear fruit", thus praising God the Father. Considering history and the ethical problem of a deed (or its lack) refers to the same issue. However, Cavalletti emphasizes that the former one naturally influences the latter one, so describing (narrative) history is at the same the kerygma and parenesis: it is proclaiming God as the Lord of history and, at the same time, it encourages the person to work with Him, to give response to the covenant partner.<sup>15</sup>

In order to fulfil one's history in accordance with the history which is unravelling, the person has to know the rules of that history. Such rules create a certain order and, at the same time, reflect the order—they express a cosmic order which we have to learn in order to put the principles into practice. That is why we need the tools of parenesis, i.e. norms which are described in the Gospel in the form of ethical parables, blessings and other proverbs.

Presenting them requires an appropriate method so that they can speak to the child properly and encourage him or her to put them into

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.



practice. Cavletti writes: “The first step to learn the norms should always include discovering their beauty, rightness, awakening the desire to put them into effect. The basis of ethical life is always falling in love. Measuring the distance between the beauty of ideals and the ability to achieve them is always the second step.”<sup>16</sup> Parables, which in a figurative manner lead the listener to thinking about them and understanding them, are a way to enrich the presentation of the norms which are usually given in the form of an apodictic command.<sup>17</sup> Through the narrative, the parables present the reader an event, characters and their deeds, giving the reader the opportunity to interpret his or her own situation and make a choice while facing similar difficulties.

Religious education not only tells children about ethical norms, but first of all it indicates them in the child’s environment. That good is God’s gift to the man as God created the whole world and filled it with great things out of love for the man, so that they may serve the human being. Also, the man is the gift for the world and for other people. The awareness of that and of that mutual relation, but also of that special responsibility, is the starting point both for self-identification, finding the meaning of life, and for the respect for others.

## Conclusion

History “joins the man’s finiteness with the unlimited flow of time, making him the participant of the plan which God fulfils in it.”<sup>18</sup> Introducing the child into history in the holistic manner, i.e. showing him or her three aspects related to time: creation, redemption and parousia, thus the beginning, present and the goal, we help the child to see his or her smallness and insignificance, and—at the same time—to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 143.

<sup>17</sup> S. Cavalletti chose certain norms from the Bible which she called the maxims, such as “Love your enemies”, which matches the parable of the Good Samaritan. Reflection on that parable, the narrative about the story of several characters who behaved in different ways in a specific situation, indicates the norm the man should follow. The Samaritans and the Jews were enemies. Analysing the situation described in the parable makes it possible for the child to evaluate the situation in an objective manner and then to refer it to his/her own life, asking the question: what is my attitude to my enemies who are also my neighbours?

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 129.

discover his or her greatness and dignity. God creates the world and everything it holds in order to give it to the man. He gives the man His Son so that, through the Son's sacrifice, man has eternal life. The history continues and man becomes the participant of the plan which is unravelled in time. History understood as a gift requires a response and initially such a response includes the attitudes of astonishment, listening and interest. Then it includes gratefulness which is expressed by the child through the words of worship and thankfulness. Both of those attitudes result from proclaiming the kerygma. After that initial stage, the child starts to accept ethical rules and consciously participate in building and maintaining the relationship with God.

Living history also requires living it in liturgy. Liturgical celebration is a very important tool which makes particular events concrete. Also, it makes it possible for future generations, irrespective of when they join the history, to participate in them "here and now."

History is the place in which God meets man. It is in history where the human being gets to know God and is invited to carry out a continuous dialogue with God. The man, in his freedom, has the right to respond to it (in a positive or negative manner). The objective of ethical education is to show the child that reality and make it possible for him or her to meet God who is the Lord of History.

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