Selected Aspects in the Perception of Sustainability Values Among Religious Education Teaching Students

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The article describes the attitudes of students of religious education towards the values of sustainable development. It examines the degree of knowledge of these values and their practical reflection in the monitored group

Concept. We carried out a preliminary examination through interviews and a questionnaire. The questions focused on the knowledge of the values of sustainable development and ways of their interpretation by respondents.

Results. Students have adequate to poor knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They do not understand their connection with religious values and have no motivation to apply these values in their pedagogical practice.

Conclusion. It is appropriate to innovate curricula where future religious teachers are trained to strengthen education in the values of sustainability. It is necessary to support education aimed at understanding sustainable development as a key aspect of school education.

Cognitive value. Complementing curriculum content with sustainable development values creates support for social cohesion and inclusion, which is crucial for a sustainable society.

Keywords: sustainable development, values, acceptance, knowledge, students of religious education, school environment

Introduction

We have been dealing with the issue of sustainable development for a long time. Currently in a project Religiosity and Sustainable Development Values (APVV 22 — 0204) focused on the relationship of religious values and sustainable development, specifically on their mutual support. In this project, we explore the extent to which religiosity and religious values can be used in processes that promote mindset-oriented support activities toward achieving the SDGs. One of the partial objectives of the project is the research of value orientations and attitudes of young people and the monitoring of variables that influence their value orientations correlated with sustainable development. Among other variables, we plan to pay attention to religiosity in this survey, as one of the possible variables that have an impact on value orientations towards sustainability. To create a research questionnaire, we carry out several rounds of pre-research, partial results of which are the subject of this article.

The long-term aim of our research is to explore the relationship between religiosity and sustainable development values. In the project, we focus on exploring the historical development of religious values that are linked to the values of sustainability. In our theoretical research, we also focus on the cyrilo-methodian tradition, which played an important role in the creation of religiosity and value attitudes in Central Europe. The historical research is complemented by a theological reflection on the current documents of the churches as well as a philosophical and ethical analysis of the values of sustainable development. As part of the project, we also examine the real value orientations of young people, while we specifically focus on students — future teachers who will be teachers of religious education.

Characteristics of Respondents and Method of Data Processing

The data we processed came from a specific sample, which is interesting from several points of view. These are students of teaching, that is, future teachers. The common subject they will teach is religious education, so they are future teachers of religious education. It is a subject that is tied to the Catholic denomination and students are bound by specific provisions of the Code of Canon Law in the exercise of their vocation. It follows that our sample was made up of young people who are religious and fully accept, at least formally, the principles of the teachings of the Catholic Church in their lives. The group consisted of 8 students, two students specialising in mathematics, one in English, one in German, one in pedagogy, one in citizenship education, one student in physical education, and one in geography. They combine these subjects with religious education and it will be their future teaching approbation. Students are in the master's degree, with an average age of 23 years, gender is represented by 5 women, 3 men.

We used qualitative research methods. We were interested not only in the opinion of students on the selected questions but also in how they justify their attitudes and claims and how their motivation is affected (Zimmerman, 2008). Data collection took place during the winter semester period in 2023. Respondents filled in an entry questionnaire that surveyed their basic orientation in the field of sustainable development. We focused on both theoretical and practical questions. We asked whether students were aware of the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations (UN) and whether they also knew the significance of these goals. We investigated whether they could identify possible links between the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the UN and the teachings of the Catholic Church, or whether they saw consistency or contradiction in the values of the UN and the Catholic Church. In addition, we paid attention to students' practical attitudes to sustainable development in their personal lives, i.e. whether, for example, they reflect the need for recycling and the use of renewable energy sources. We also looked at whether respondents perceive the Catholic Church as an institution that should address the problem of sustainable development and lead the faithful to responsibility in this area as well (Riley-Taylor, 2002).

Sustainable Development Goals

At the beginning of the research, we looked at whether students are familiar with the Sustainable Development Goals as defined by the UN. Knowledge of these objectives is a necessary step for any subsequent discussion and a basis for developing a positive value orientation aimed at promoting sustainable development (Sterling, 2001). We do not understand sustainable development in a limited context that only

covers environmental issues. In a broader context, we also pay attention to equality and fairness, as well as well-functioning institutions, which are essential for a sustainable future. The context in which our thinking moves is linked to the philosophy of accepting otherness, which we interpret as a positive, as a source of potential development and the search for new solutions. The primary starting point of the research was to determine whether students are familiar with the SDGs and to what extent they identify with them. We drew on the experience we have with other implemented projects. These studies have shown a low level of knowledge of the principles and goals of sustainable development, as well as a reluctance of young people to engage in achieving these goals.

Several students have shown disinterest to be a problem, which is partly influenced by social media information (Tkáčová et al., 2023). Disinterest in respondents is built on an often unconscious disregard for the needs of others, which correlates negatively with the commandment to love one's neighbour. Students took a selective approach to defining who is a neighbour, using various criteria based on which they defended their negative attitude toward other people. Alena said:

> After all, we love our neighbours. We love all the people in the world, but they are very far away. We can't, really help them. Besides, we have to solve mainly our own problems, I have no qualms about that. I have enough of my own problems.

The reason for the selective approach of several students was their fear of another, which they considered foreign and therefore dangerous. Many of the respondents were convinced that other cultures and other nations posed not only potential but also real risks and security threats. They perceived negatively the issue of immigrants and migrants, while they lacked knowledge of the basic facts associated with current migration. They refused to reflect on the gravity of the situation of refugees leaving their countries in fear of their existence. Of course, these activities also have their negative sides, but our respondents reflected only negative aspects.

One result that is common to most respondents is the local nature of their thinking. They approach the issue of sustainable development through the lens of their problems. They mainly observe what is happening in their immediate surroundings and what directly affects them (Judák et al., 2023). For them, the European context is distant, they perceive developed countries as an enemy and their culture as decadent. They perceive less developed countries as competition that threatens their incomes or deprives them of jobs. Respondents lacked knowledge of basic economic facts about international trade, the market, and the production of goods, but also about the real economic condition of their own country. They had a basic understanding of the impact of production and consumption on the environment but shifted responsibility to big polluters, big companies, or other countries where massive extraction and processing of raw materials takes place. Tomáš said: "Global capitalism is to blame for everything. International corporations control the market and set prices

to control and manipulate us as much as possible. We have no freedom, we are only economic slaves." Respondents showed a tendency to divide people based on religion. As we have already mentioned, an aspect of selective understanding of who is a neighbour and for whom they are responsible has emerged. For them, belonging to a church was a sign that they considered someone to be a neighbour, and vice versa, someone who did not declare belonging to the church was not close enough to pay attention to him.

A characteristic feature in the responses of our respondents was the reluctance to change the current state of affairs. The students did not feel an immediate threat and were relatively well provided for socially, so they were relatively satisfied with the situation they were in. Part of the respondents had a negative attitude towards electromobility, considered it an inappropriate solution and one of the respondents declared the necessity of preserving the use of fossil fuels. Once again, it turned out that the respondents' knowledge was very weak, but they nevertheless vigorously insisted on their positions and defended their claims. It has been confirmed that emotional reflection on the problem plays a much greater role in it than its rational processing. For example, Alena claimed:

> We are not to blame for the fact that we have a damaged environment. Factories and chemistry are to blame for this. We can't do anything, we are completely helpless. We watch nature disappear before our eyes ... we still have pandemics, man-made diseases of civilisation. We are just victims, pieces on the chessboard.

The respondents' responses resonated with the absence of critical thinking, which was weakened thanks to the use of social media, where they are confronted with tendentious messages and information that work purposefully with the fear of the percipient. Fear was a decisive aspect in shaping their attitude towards migrants, fear accompanied the formation of their opinions in the field of technological progress. They were suspicious of pharmaceutical companies, food manufacturers, car manufacturers, and so on. The absence of critical thinking was also shown in their reactions, where they reacted negatively to most stimuli and rejected a priori the possibility that there was a positive solution (Sipos et al., 2008).

Negativity was a common feature in the responses among several respondents. It is a kind of standard of communication to complain, look for negatives, look for reasons why it will not succeed and, of course, look for the culprit who bears responsibility for this situation. The basic framework of their thinking, which has been confirmed in several cases, is to identify the culprit who caused the situation. Subsequently, turn your anger towards this culprit and constantly emphasise the negativity of the situation that has arisen, along with the permanent humiliation of the person who caused the situation. They showed minimal interest in understanding why the culprit acted as he did, refusing to understand the reasons and motives for the action. On the con-

trary, they focused on exalting guilt, slandering the guilty person and constantly emphasising the negative nature of the situation and the inconvenience it caused them.

The principle of respondents' thinking is competition, which is aimed at permanently creating differentiation. In their thinking, there must be a side of good and evil, there must be someone who is responsible for a bad situation and who can be blamed and transferred responsibility to him (Roubalová, Králik, Slivka, et al., 2022). In this sense, respondents denied responsibility for their situation. A certain degree of fatalism is present in their answers, which tend to have a negative interpretation of their situation and in the search for a culprit. Lukáš said that

> no electric cars will save us, we have to stick with traditional energy sources. We have to learn to use them better or use them less, we have to humble ourselves and spend less. The world is good the way it is. Wind power plants in my opinion devastate the country and are dangerous.

In our opinion, this attitude to problem-solving is an effect of setting up processes of both school and family education. Several authors point out that this phenomenon of disclaimer is mainly developed in the countries of the post-socialist bloc, but it is also increasingly occurring in advanced democracies (Maturkanič, Judák et al., 2023).

The starting point of this attitude is the belief that someone else is at fault for our situation (Roubalová, Judák, Maturkanič, et al., 2021). For a long time, there was a phrase in the post-socialist bloc that the communists were to blame, that we were only victims of the previous regime and there was nothing we could do about it. At the same time, this attitude includes the expectation that someone else is obliged to help us. The second reason for the denial of accountability for the state of affairs is the growing influence of disinformation worldwide. Disinformation not only calls into question the urgency of the ecological crisis and the direct risks it poses to humanity but also shifts responsibility onto someone else. In the statements of students in our research sample, claims appeared that it is not in our power to do anything about the problems of the ecological crisis. Those who rule the world and control the world economy are responsible for this.

This way of thinking is nothing new and has its roots partly in religious thought (Roubalová, Hlad, et al., 2023). The religious tradition is based on a two-value understanding of the world. On one side are those who believe. On the other hand, some do not have true faith or do not believe at all. This bipolarity makes it possible to perceive the world as a space that is divided into two parts. Those who believe and are automatically good, and those who do not believe and are evil in principle, even if they do good deeds. So responsibility for evil is always on the side of the evil (Roubalová, Králik, Maturkanič et al. 2022).

In addition, the principle of divine will or transcendent intervention also operates in religious thought. The belief that transcendent can influence human destiny was

behind the emergence of most religions. This conviction allowed man to accept his destiny as the will of God, to which he must submit. It was an attitude that deprived man of free will, or rather an attitude by which man renounced his will. Man could and can argue that his intention was good, but God's will is different. Our respondents also said that the ecological crisis, but also injustice in the world or inequality in the distribution of goods and wealth is the will of God and we cannot do anything about it. This, of course, is not in line with the official teaching of the great Christian churches, but it is an example of how religiosity can be used to absolve oneself of responsibility for the problems of others (Králik et al., 2022).

Another problem that arose during the interview was the concept of neighbour. Respectively, the definition of the object to which responsibility applies. Students discussed the question of who my neighbour is (Maturkanič, Jirišťová, et al., 2023). In theory, respondents mastered the doctrine of works of mercy, i.e. that people in need should be helped, that the sick should be cared for, widows and orphans should be cared for. Respondents were able to respond to the fact that every person is a neighbour, and everyone is a child of God, but immediately applied the lens of bipolar vision. That is the lens of division into good neighbours and bad neighbours (Roubalová, Judák, Králik et al., 2023). The perception of the division between believers and non-believers is very strong in them. They treated other Christian denominations with a certain degree of tolerance, but outside of Christianity, for example, they considered Muslims or Buddhists to be completely misguided or even messengers of evil. In this sense, they also think when taking responsibility for the fate of other people. If they do not belong to believers of the same confession, they are considered less neighbours. They are not willing to think on a global scale, in the sense that every person has equal value. Although they outwardly declare that all people are equal, at the same time they take responsibility only for some (Roubalová, Králik, Maturkanič et al., 2022).

Paradoxically, students devote a lot of energy to discussions and arguments against accepting homosexuality. They argue that, as members of the Catholic Church, they know the true doctrine and want to help those who have fallen on the wrong path. In this case, they are willing to take responsibility for others, since they can moralise, judge, and condemn others without reason (Plašienková, 2023). In the case of homosexuality, the only help is a recommendation from believers that homosexuals give up their wrong path. Ivan spoke about homosexuals as follows:

> I accept them as human persons... Yes, they are God's creatures. But for me, they live in permanent sin and that is why they are evil. I don't want to look at their sin. I don't want to see them on TV, but let them experience their orientation somewhere in secret, let them hide.

This is therefore not real help, but only criticism. Helping by criticising is part of the attitude of disclaiming, as described above.

Interpretation of the SDGs

At the beginning of our research, we focused on knowledge of the principles of sustainable development and what attitude students take toward these goals, to what extent sustainable development is part of their value orientations. The discussion asked whether students could name the Sustainable Development Goals as defined by the UN. All students were able to agree that it is nature conservation. This means that we have to take care of the environment.

Only one of the respondents was able to identify that the SDGs also have a social dimension and are also oriented towards achieving a just world order, eradicating hunger and poverty, as well as institutional openness and security in the world. Respondent Katarína expressed disbelief in achieving the goals of sustainable development:

> There cannot be a fair market or trade. I agree with the opinion that the market is controlled by global capital. Global capital is not concerned with justice, but only with profit and control of all markets in the world. It can outwardly appear, that he cares about poverty in Africa, but it's really just a pretext for new investments. They don't care about human rights, or poverty, or injustice. If war helps their business, they'll support war.

The reaction that came from conspiracy sources was frequent. In response, there was a belief that the SDGs are the dictates of those who want to dominate the world. It was also not a sufficient argument for respondents that one of the objectives is: „Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels" (United Nations, 2015, para. 16). The research sample was generally characterised by low trust in institutions, which is perhaps a consequence of their own experience, but probably also due to the educational activity and setting of a bipolar religious mentality. In the post-communist countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc, distrust of state institutions remained strongly entrenched in believers. For many, the idea of clericalism, according to which religion should decide and interfere with legislation, remains present (Krupa et al., 2023). This aspect is present mainly in Slovakia and Poland. When political parties do not engage in the legislative process in favour of sometimes unacceptable religious demands, believers perceive institutions as enemies.

The cause of a passive attitude can also be a long-term setting of the social environment, which is also reflected in upbringing, not only in school but also in family. It is an inadequately interpreted obedience that rejects cooperation and active participation (Tomanová Čergeťová et al, 2023). Children are led to absolute obedience to their parents, believers are led to absolute obedience to the church, and citizens are led to absolute obedience to state power. This idea is also supported by the governments themselves, which are guided by the motto: the winner takes all (Swanson & Gamal, 2021). After the election, they no longer answer to their constituents and voters just watch helplessly what is happening around them. Passivity in education is also manifested

in the emphasis on memorisation, memorisation of information with minimal input, and invention of the pupil. Our respondents' testimonials show that they have a similar experience in their school education. Maximum obedience, receiving information, and minimal creative activities were required of them. The solutions to the problems were clear in advance, the results were predetermined. Pupils are expected to assume the meaning of their existence with predetermined patterns as if their future were predetermined and not open (Plašienková & Vertanová, 2023). This non-creative approach is also reflected in the formulation of pupils' value orientations.

The respondents in our pre-survey are future religious education teachers. In their responses, they presented a position in which religious values are related to the problem of sustainable development, but are of marginal importance from the point of view of religious morality. Martin trivialised environmental problems as follows:

> Sustainable development is just an ecological dictate of global capital. Someone else caused problems in the environment and we have to suffer and change our lifestyle. Many of those solutions are dysfunctional anyway, they are a tool for our manipulation. In the US or China, they still emit CO2 and no one will stop them. Let them solve it themselves, the church should not be involved in it at all.

The most important, according to them, is the principle of fulfilling God's commandments, which are expressed in the teaching of the Church. The respondents' approach to the teachings of the Church is highly selective. This means that in the teaching of the Church, they are interested only in those passages that affect them immediately or resonate in some way in their surroundings. Therefore, they place much more emphasis on, for example, the problem of premarital sexuality or homosexuality issues, but environmental protection fair access to resources, or fair treatment are not important to them.

The absence of the principle of participation has several consequences. In the realm of religiosity, it is reliance on God's mercy, in the social sphere it is reliance on the state. In both cases, it is enough to show well, and help will come by itself. This absence of participation is reflected in concrete social relationships and has an impact on low levels of engagement in public affairs as well as in concern for one's neighbour (Tomiczek et al., 2022). In the debate on sustainable development, attitudes emerge in which seniors are identified as a social problem, because they increase the expenditure of the state budget on their care, thereby reducing the level of quality of life of a productive society (Dobríková et al., 2022). The individualism that has developed in the postmodern environment is a concomitant phenomenon of refusal to participate in achieving common goals and taking responsibility for one's actions. These attitudes were also reflected in the respondents to our survey. Some of them took a negative view of the issue of minorities or refugees, seeing them as a burden on society and, in exceptional cases, taking the view that strong and unambiguous action was needed to resolve these problems (Maturkanič, Tomanová Čergeťová et al., 2022).

We have already noted that our respondents had very little knowledge of the SDGs. Unfortunately, it turns out that these shortcomings manifest themselves in other areas as well, leading overall to low levels of critical thinking and the potential emergence of manipulation. In discussions with students, there was minimal effort to find out the sources from which the information comes. The decision-making process was dominated by emotionality, which was intertwined with unquestionable confidence in their own opinion and conviction of the absoluteness of their truth. Typical features of manipulative techniques appeared in the argument (Pavlíková, 2017). When confronted with challenging their opinion, they argued to find fault with opponents and point out the shortcomings of others. As we have already led, this also manifests itself in the tendency to morally evaluate and judge the actions of others. This judgment is based on the aforementioned conviction of the indisputability of one's truth. From this source also come some complications associated with a misinterpretation of sustainable development.

Conclusions

The results of our preliminary survey point to the need to address issues of pedagogy of sustainable development. In the next phases of our research, we will focus on the possibilities of developing critical thinking in students, which we consider to be the first and necessary step towards accepting sustainability values. Our survey raised some questions that we will need to address in the future (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017).

First of all, it is a question of conceptually defining the SDGs. It is necessary to find a certain minimum consensus and intersections between value systems, specifically between religious values and sustainable development. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to identify areas of innovation in pedagogy in the future, on which we will have to focus as a priority. It has been shown that traditional educational approaches used in secondary schools as well as universities are aimed at memorising facts and information without implying critical thinking in the process (Wals & Corcoran, 2003). The problem is that often my teachers present me with alternative interpretations of facts that distort reality and students create a picture of some non-existent reality. They assume that the world is as they created it in their heads and refuse to argue about other alternatives.

The overall concept of sustainable development pedagogy also appears to be problematic, subjects focused on sustainability values are incorporated as separate learning units that offer basic information without emphasis on action, activity, and responsibility for every action. Related to this is the low readiness of teachers for teaching and educating in the area of sustainable development. Teachers are focused on their subjects and sustainability is just an extension for them, which they must

necessarily incorporate into their specialty. Ideally, when preparing future teachers, emphasis should be placed on the values of sustainability in each educational subject, to create an environment of cross-curricular cooperation (Tooth & Renshaw, 2009).

The values of sustainable development are confronted with religious values, and although there is no immediate conflict between them, they become a source of tension. Not because of a real conflict of content, but rather because of an unwillingness to take responsibility for one's actions. To begin with, it will be necessary to investigate which reasons lead to such attitudes and then to innovate education so that its effect is a person responsible.

Acknowledgement

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