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Adults' Need for and Interest in Religious Education

Abstract: Adults indicate their needs for and interest in religious content in a variety of ways. They express a conviction that adult religious education should not be limited to catechesis and look for such forms as correspond to their needs and expectations. One of these is the Bible Correspondence Course (BCC). This form of adult religious education has been present in Poland for over 20 years, and in Austria for even longer. The Course is not only attracting growing interest amongst adults but also meets their expectations and brings (often unexpected) results. By analyzing the motives for their participation in the BCC, one can see that this form of adult education is a significant event for many people and has become a unique part of their lives. Thus, its effects relate to many areas and dimensions of human existence.

Keywords: religious education of adults, religious knowledge, developmental tasks, religious competence

Introduction

The religious education of adults is often associated with catechesis and restricted to it. Moreover, although in the documents of the Catholic Church it is considered to be the most valuable form of catechesis, in pastoral practice it is often marginalized and the main focus is put on the religious education of children and youth (CT 1979: 43). At the same time, adults indicate their needs for and interest in religious content in a variety of ways. Assuming that adult religious education should not be limited to catechesis, we will attempt to understand adult educational activity based on religious sources through the prism of the participants of the Bible Correspondence Course (BCC). This form of religious education – present in Poland for over 20 years, and for even longer in Austria – is not only attracting growing interest amongst adults, but also meets their expectations and brings (often unexpected) results (Kryzstofik and Walulik 2016: 101–128).

The research on adult religious education that we have conducted shows an ever-growing interest in this issue and ways of using the acquired knowledge in everyday life. The analysis of the collected research material (narratives of the graduates of the Bible Correspondence Course and the demographics of the participants) shows that arguments arising from a natural cognition of reality are not sufficient for the adult to realize their developmental tasks. This paper aims to show how religious education can be a part of the postmodern everyday life which is considered an area of lifelong learning.

Religion in the lifelong learning of adults

The term 'lifelong learning' has become almost a 'catchall' phrase in educational policy. It replaced the term 'continuing education' which was equally popular in the 1970s and 1980s (CEC 2000: 3). This change is expressed in recognition of the complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal education, and, in regard to adults, in the transition from teach-

ing to learning (Malewski 2010: 41). This way of thinking about education associates lifelong learning mainly with the task of supporting humans in the broadly-defined idea of 'development'. The lack of formal restrictions is to enable "the need to create a multi-dimensional social and individual identity, becoming aware of a balanced functioning in many social dimensions (family, community, parish, regional, state, national, continental, planetary) in combination with multiple dimensions of the creation of identity of the individual" (Nikitorowicz 2013: 25).

The idea of lifelong learning sets important tasks for religion and opens up new (or rather recalls postponed) perspectives of its presence in the daily lives of adults. Therefore, one can talk about the need, or even the necessity, to achieve religious competencies. They are inextricably bound up with learning, and their broad contemporary understanding must not restrict them to the religious dimension of human life (Walulik 2013: 198–202).

Permission for the participation of religious competences in life and the development of the individual implies a recognition of the existence of two different forms of human cognition. One of them is based on the achievements of scientific research, which is possible through the use of natural methods of cognition. The other requires that the given content is taken for granted, as provided by the professed faith. Religion, thanks to the possibility of going beyond the natural study of reality, adds a new dimension to individual components of competence, as well as to the purpose of achieving them. It enriches the natural study of reality with religion-based cognition (Marek 2014: 49-54). Amongst other methods, the Bible Correspondence Course enables the use of these two methods of cognition.

The purpose of this form of religious education of adults is to popularize the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Its organizers assume that, due to the proposed form, participants will be able to go beyond a casual knowledge of Scripture, which in turn will enable a more efficient use of Scripture in their religious life. This means that the Course helps them to acquire the knowledge necessary to understand the Bible. The completion of the Course does not, however,

eliminate any possible difficulties arising from the reading of Scripture. Moreover, that is not the aim of the Course, since the elimination of all difficulties related to the understanding of the content of faith or the exploration of Scripture is quite impossible. Thinking otherwise would not only put an end to the intellectual development of the adult but would bar the way to their development as well. Moreover, it would deny the expectations and needs of adults interested in religious issues. In their statements, graduates of the Course combine their knowledge acquired through the study of the Bible with their everyday life experiences in a variety of ways.

Young adults relate religious competences, inter alia, to professional and personal tasks. The Course becomes a part of the significant task for a young adult to seek a mentor:

Children ask a lot of questions. (...) Sometimes I think to myself that the only questions missing here are whether Jesus used a Nokia or a Samsung mobile phone, what the address of St. Peter's webpage is or whether IPN has got Judas' portfolio? There are many such questions and I have to answer them in a serious way, or while smiling, because even people asking those questions smile as well, expecting my embarrassment or shame. In this tragicomic situation of encounters with contemporary youth, good religious knowledge gives me a sense of security and expands the area of teaching opportunities. (Female, 30, higher education, teacher of religion)

I decided to take part in the Course because I wished to deepen and understand my Christian identity. I was raised in a Christian family, but I do not understand many 'things'. We have small children, a young family, an uncertain job market, turbulent times – they all surely drain people. This course gives you the feeling that you are moving closer to God in all of this. (Male, 34, higher education)

For middle-aged adults, religious education creates the space necessary to answer the question about the meaning of their actions to date:

The greatest value of the Bible Course was the self-realization that I should not waste my time. (...) My life seemed pretty hard and I'm a little bruised now. It's really hard for me to pull myself together again. What is most painful is the sense of wasted time. (Male, 40, craftsman from a small town near Gliwice)

Scripture has taught me how to experience love. Nowhere else have I gained such a condensed amount of knowledge about human love and the love of God as well as God's love for us humans. (...) Now, we have a broader understanding of death, although that does not eliminate suffering. As the affirmation of life is so important in the Gospel, we decided to take a ten-year-old, Hania, away from the orphanage. We haven't done that out of pity or the need to find our daughter in Hania. (Female, 44, teacher of mathematics in a junior high school in Sosnowiec)

For graduates of the Course who are in their late adulthood, religious education enables them to appraise their lives:

The knowledge I have acquired during the Course is in constant use and serves me as a compass on my way through life. I'm still living a pensioner's life but I do a lot things with greater motivation and joy. (Male, 73, secondary technical education)

I started well because the entire Bible Course I went through gave me a new sense of life and a deeper meaning to my religion. I wish I had learned about this course much earlier because my life might have worked out differently if I had completed the BCC twenty or thirty years ago. (Female, 66, teacher of Polish in Szczecin)

I have forgiven the person who once attacked me because love for your neighbour is most important, and he did not know what he was doing. (...) If I had behaved and thought differently, what would be the point of my faith and the Bible Course in which I put so much effort and heart? Is it easy for me to forgive? It's hard. However, my religion is based on forgiveness. If Christ forgave those who crucified him, then why would I not forgive in much pettier matters? (Female, 55, with disability pension)

The need for adults' religious education

Observations of everyday life and studies on the presence of an adult in the postmodern world show that humans "seek various forms to satisfy their religious needs, however not necessarily in institutionalized religions and churches" (Mariański 2010: 195). This does not mean a lack of interest in educational activity in organized forms, however. The need for adult Poles to explore religious content in this form is shown by the following statistics (Kryzstofik and Walulik 2016: 27–28).

In May 1993 about 50 people started the Bible Correspondence Course. Over the next few months the number of participants went up to 300, and by the end of the year the number of submitted applications was already over 1,300. The largest increase in interest in the Bible Correspondence Course was recorded in the years 1999–2001, which might be the result of the increased interest in religion at the turn of the century. During the 20 years of the presence of the Course in Polish adult religious education, more than 5,500 people who sent the Office their declaration of participation in the Course have taken part in it. In addition, another group of people use its materials: those who individually come into possession of the *Notebooks* by purchasing them in Catholic bookshops. That is clearly shown from the data of the WAM Publishing Company, which is the publisher of the *Notebooks* (more than 7,000 copies have been sold to date). In addition, since 2014, there has been a possibility of implementing the Course in an electronic version (kursbiblijny.deon.pl). Those

figures point both to individuals who actively and systematically do the Course as well as those who can be described as a circle of supporters. Some of them started to work on the Course, actively participated in the work for a certain period of time, and then decided to stop. The statements of the people who came back after a break and are now continuing their work on the Course provide some reasons for this state of affairs:

My long pause in the Course [approx. 2 years, A.W.] – I guess I started in March 2005 – was caused by quite a complicated family situation. The last months required organizational effort and kept me awake at night. The situation is more or less settled now and I've started to work again. (Female, 58, higher education)

It can also be assumed that some of the causes for the termination of the Course are reasons typical of many participants of distance education. This kind of education has its own specific character and requires that participants have personality traits such as, for example, regularity, perseverance, and not being discouraged by difficulties (Kusztelak 2003: 65–68). At the same time, due to the use of the principles of correspondence education in exploring the content of the Bible and the reduction of all formalities to the bare minimum, interest in the Course, regardless of age, is getting higher and higher.

The youngest person that sent in an application was 17 years old and the oldest was 84. People in their late adulthood make up the smallest group, which in some way goes against the common belief that mainly elderly people are interested in religiosity. The largest participation in the BCC is by people in their mid-adulthood, and that may be associated with developmental tasks typical of this period, such as midlife crises, the phenomenon of the 'empty nest' or giving support to children who are growing-up to become happy and responsible adults (Cross 1981: 124–131; Oleś 2000: 11–13; Miś 2000: 45). The lower participation of young adults in the BCC can be similarly related to the typical developmental tasks of this period, such as one's first professional job, or starting a family. They require, on the part of the adult, not only a time

commitment but above all an emotional and cognitive commitment (Gurba 2011: 302–305).

The Course participants also differ in regard to their educational background. Still, it should be noted that, in each stage of adulthood, the number of participants who have gone through higher education is highest. The statements of the participants of the Course also indicate that raising the level of professional education broadens cognitive horizons and develops the conviction that new knowledge and skills are also needed in other areas of life. The phenomenon that professionally active people take up non-vocational training may indicate their appreciation of the role of education and may be caused by their participation in various forms of professional training. In addition, professional activity can develop other forms of activity, including learning. This relationship in the case of participants of the BCC is confirmed by the small number of unemployed people enrolling on the Course.

The above statistics, obtained from the information included in the declarations of participation, show that the assumptions made by the organizers of the Bible Correspondence Course in relation to the recipients of this form of religious education correspond to the needs of society. The Course's open form (anyone interested in the Bible can become a participant) is increasingly becoming a way to popularize the content of the Bible. It also presents the Bible as a learning source. In addition, it helps us to learn that religiosity and faith can be areas of education.

Religious Distance Education

Since the earliest centuries of Christianity, the religious education of adults has been associated with distant learning. Despite the fact that direct teaching was the most common form of early Christian preaching, the Epistles and their didactic character can be considered as spreading the Good News 'by mail'. The use of forms of correspondence enabled the strengthening of faith and its adequate transmission as well as facilitated the development of the methodology of the transfer of religious content. For example,

St. Augustine, at the request of the deacon of Carthage, Deogratias, sent his guidelines in the form of a treaty arising from the practice of the teaching of the early Church. The origins of distance education as a way of gaining knowledge in the field of religion can also be spotted in the practice of the American Bible Colleges that taught Hebrew in this way (Walulik 2009: 60-61).

The experiences of the participants and alumni of the Bible Correspondence Course point to both the advantages and shortcomings of this form of religious education. Sometimes, however, this form of acquiring knowledge is quite decisive:

The fact that the course is of a correspondence character was an additional motivation for me. (Male, 21, secondary education)

I work when I want to and when I can, I don't have to spend money on transport, I save time, it's at home, in my own kind of atmosphere, there's good music, I can cook dinner, the family is happy that I stay home... (Female, 50, secondary education)

I'm compelled to make a stress-free, mental effort, and I need it. I decide on my own when to make it. (...) I work very slowly. I am only just about to finish the second notebook. (Female, 65, secondary education)

Materials are sent to me, I do not need to move anywhere, it is good. (Female, 47, university education)

Religious education by correspondence may not meet the expectations of learning in adulthood, however. Even the same people who see a lot of positive sides of that form at the same time consider it as a weakness of the course:

The correspondence form, the lack of mobilization to fill the notebooks – they're drawbacks. I'm late with postal payments – my fault. Correspondence is just your own work. I have no direct contact with the teacher, what's important for me is the content and the lecturer – their gestures, behaviour, voice, the atmosphere

of the facility where the lecture takes place and so on. (Female, 50, secondary education)

Other participants suggest in their letters some form of personal contact:

I think it would be a good idea to meet from time to time. Loneliness isn't good in the long run. The feeling that one is together with a group of people who seek God just through the course is important. How about a 'live' meeting for a few days being organized once a year? (Female, 51, higher education)

The experiences of the participants and alumni of the Bible Correspondence Course in the chosen form of educational activity clearly underline two aspects of adult religious education. The first is related to the pervasive sense of a lack of time and to the difficulty of planning one's time that is dedicated to religious education. The other aspect (perceived by the participants as negative) refers to the inability to ensure the community dimension of catechesis. The question of whether a virtual space for exchanging ideas can meet the need for community reflection on religious content remains open.

Motivation and Effects of Participation in Adult Religious Education

The decision to undertake adult educational activity based on religious sources is a result of many factors, both internal and external. Both categories of motives for learning change in the course of human life. The number of choices of external motives remains at a similar level at each stage of adulthood. On the other hand, the intensity of internal motives decreases with age (however, there is no statistical relationship between age and the type of motives declared). This trend might be caused by the fact that a person entering adulthood is focused on their own

development, their search for intimacy, and their responsibility for their own family. Conversely, community involvement is characteristic of middle-aged adults, and a sense of responsibility for three generations broadens its scope, which goes beyond that of one's closest family. People in their late adulthood engaging in life in a new way discover many personal references in their surrounding reality.

Taking into consideration the fact that the decisions of the participants of the BCC relate to religious education, one can spot links between the choices made and the way of experiencing faith. As noted by James Fowler, many young adults, under internal pressure for even greater autonomy, enter the phase of individual-reflective faith by changing references "from outside" to "inside of themselves" (Fowler 1981: 117–213). Since then, the person becomes subject to their inner voice and requirements. Faith experienced in this form helps to assess one's own world of values and one's own affiliations. It is ruled by the need for truth and integrity. Due to the dominance of critical and rational thinking, this form of walking in the faith is called "the phase of self-reference" or "the period of broken symbols" (Giguère 1997: 60–61).

The acquisition of religious knowledge in the course of educational processes is closely connected with getting to know the faith, and that consists of providing humans with the support necessary for them to be able to be open to the mystery of God and His transcendent presence. Getting to know the faith is to help one to learn how to interpret one's life through a Christian way of looking at its history, to strengthen one's life by faith and to provide grounds for it. It can therefore be concluded that participation in the Bible Correspondence Course is designed to meet the cognitive and spiritual needs of adults. These needs fill a person with a creative anxiety related to the search for both intellectual and transcendent values. They express one's need to discover the meaning of life and existence (Makselon 1995: 260). They are created, but only partially, by external factors that are mainly of a personal nature. This kind of relationship shows that adults are into the search for the forms of educational support that will not only satisfy their intellectual curiosity, but first and foremost will be an inspiration to cope with the developmental tasks of adulthood.

By analysing the motives for participation in the BCC, one can see that this form of adult education is a significant event for many people and has become a unique part of their lives. In consequence, its results relate to many areas and dimensions of human existence. The graduates and participants of the BCC, when asked to describe the relationship between their lives and a systematic study of the Bible based on course materials, indicate the multiple effects that their participation in the BCC has had on their lives. They evaluate, in a way, how the contents of the Bible help them to shape their everyday lives:

Participation in the Correspondence Course is a meeting with the Bible. For me, it has become a book for every day, for every moment. The Bible has opened me up to the wealth of words, wise words, the Words of God. I am astounded by its messages which are so up-to-date for modern man. (Female, 74, lawyer, capital of a voivodeship)

The graduates of the BCC see the effects of religious education in primarily three areas: personal, intellectual and spiritual development (Walulik 2012: 243–321). The authors of the narratives cited above concluded that they had experienced many changes in relation to themselves that were the results of studying the Bible. They show dynamism in the perception and understanding of oneself and of the surrounding world. The dynamism which was spotted by the participants and which is associated with the formation of their own personality through the study of the Bible also expresses itself in their discovery of valuable traits and mental dispositions. The perception of reality presented by the BCC participants (although it might give the impression of being idyllic) is neither naive nor futuristic, but full of the hope that love and respect for the highest values can prevail in the world, provided that there is a bit of good will on the part of an adult. In order to form such a world, involvement on the part of the believer is needed. He or she must accept that their faith is dynamic and subject to continuous maturation (Fowler 1984: 128–147). Both the acquired religious knowledge and a change in existing attitudes, and even shaping them in new ways, may serve that purpose.

The effects noted by the respondents also indicate that their experiences connected with the course changed their attitudes towards other people. Some effects show that the level of their relationships with loved ones has been raised. Others refer to their relationships with other people, regardless of existing relations. The BCC participants are aware that the pace of change taking place in postmodernity calls them to take a position on it. For people in late adulthood, this kind of experience may be difficult and can cause defensive and escape reactions, as well as offensive reactions. Thus, it can be concluded that religious education based on Christian sources aids the activities of individuals and groups, aimed at forming and strengthening in an adult a mature attitude towards themselves and towards others in vast spheres of life.

Conclusion

In the adult who has knowledge in many areas of their professional and social life, a need to get to know what he or she believes in is born. The statements of the participants of the Bible Correspondence Course point to the need for religious competences among adults. They also show the need for a diverse offering of adult religious education where the educational needs of adult learners and new ways to satisfy them must be taken into consideration. It is hoped that such a broad demand for religious education in the perspective of the lifelong learning of adults, as declared by the participants of the Bible Correspondence Course, leaves religious education with new perspectives for practice and theoretical reflection.

When analyzing the arguments of the graduates concerning their reasons for participating in the Course, certain expectations of and suggestions for the organizers of adult education can be spotted. They vary depending on people's ages, and in some sense they echo the developmental tasks for various stages of adulthood. Among young adults, the search for a mentor is expected. Middle-aged adults expect that their need to get involved in a social life will be noticed and utilized, and that their participation in education will enable more mature forms of it. People in their

late adulthood, trying to cope with the new situation of their retirement, are willing to offer their time, knowledge and skills in various forms of educational and charitable activities.

Fig. 1. Twenty years of the Bible Correspondence Course in Poland

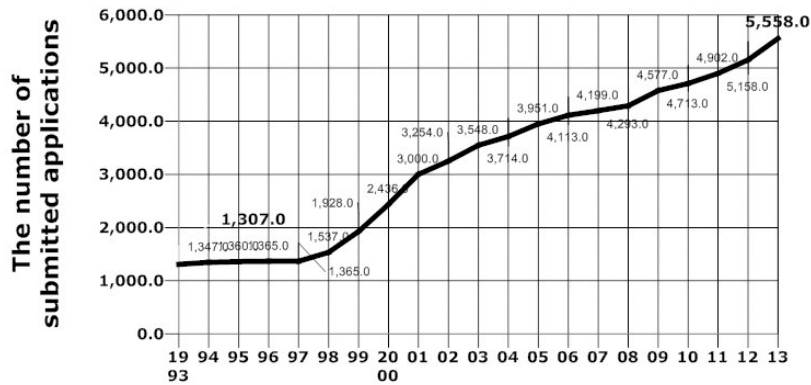


Fig. 2. Religious education in various stages of adulthood

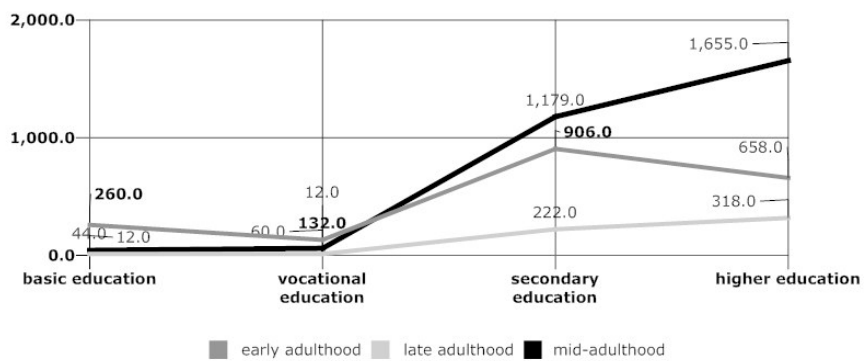
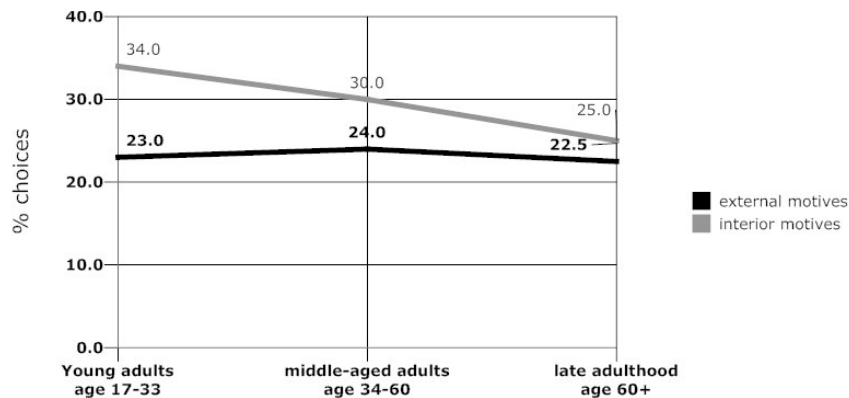


Fig. 3. Motivation in the Stages of Adulthood



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