Exploring the Theology of Expectation in Relation to Young People and Youth Ministry

František Štěch | ORCID: 0000-0001-9540-9244

Coordinator of the Theology and Contemporary Culture Research Group;
Research Fellow, Lecturer of Hermeneutics, Protestant Theological Faculty
of Charles University, Prague, CZ
stechf@etf.cuni.cz

Abstract

This article introduces theology of expectation designed by Czech theologian Vladimír Boublík and considers its capacity to potentially enhance the theological background of youth ministry. It starts with a presentation of expectation as a characteristic feature of humanity which is specifically intensive in young age and proceeds with a particular, Christian understanding of expectation in relation to eschatology. Drawing upon Boublík's treatment of expectation a few inspirations and impulses for the field of youth ministry research are suggested. In its conclusion, the article argues that expecting the future in general and awaiting Christ in particular forms a standpoint that comprises a potential for solid theological understanding to young people and helps to perceive youth ministry as an environment where good theology might be transformed into good projects.

Keywords

Christianity – theology – expectation – awaiting – young people – youth ministry

1 Introduction¹

In general, expectation of the future could be identified as a characteristic feature of humanity regardless of faith. Further, it is possible to add that expectation shows its particular intensity when people are young. *"To be young is to look with expectation to the future (...)"*² writes Bert Roebben, one of the leading figures in contemporary religious education and youth ministry research. Roebben's statement may be complemented by the conviction of Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean – pioneers of the so-called "theological turn in youth ministry" – who claim that contemporary Christianity entered a new time of Advent where new eschatological imagination should be evoked allowing us *"to wait with confidence, to name our anxieties without fear, and to make room for new life and new possibilities as Christ works, unseen, to usher us into an unknown future."*³ And they continue explaining that in this context youth ministries *"serve as signs of God's wide-open future, enacted by young people simply because they are young."*⁴ Consequently, an interest in phenomena of expectation within the context of youth ministry research is predominantly theological. Expectation of the future in such perspective can (or even should) be understood as awaiting the eschatological coming of Jesus Christ – expecting the ultimate future giving meaning to all possible futures to be expected. And right here the relevance of young people for the eschatological imagination of the whole believing community could be manifested. In words of Root and Dean: *"Young people's sense of open-ended possibility, their candid rejection of the fear of death, remind us that youthfulness is built into Christian eschatology. It is not age that makes us young. The future makes us young, and the future belongs to Christ. Fear not."*⁵

Youth in theological terms is to be understood as an integral part of each human being, yet as a specific kairos (a very opportune time) characterised, besides other things, also by an intensive sense for expecting the future.⁶ The discovery of such a strong expectational element enshrined in youth asks for further explication. Theology of expectation as had been presented by Czech

1 This work has been supported by Charles University Research Centre programme No. 204052.

2 Bert Roebben, *Seeking sense in the City: European Perspectives on Religious Education*, (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013, 2nd edition), 235.

3 Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 213.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 217.

6 Cf. František Štěch, "Who are Youth in Theological Perspective?," *Journal of Youth and Theology*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2016), 128–129.

Roman Catholic theologian Vladimír Boublík⁷ seems like good entry into the topic. It may also prove relevant for further and wider study of expectation in the context of youth ministry research.

1.1 *Theology of Hope or Theology of Expectation?*

Expectation clearly has great influence on human lives as might be evidenced, for instance, by investigating the well-known placebo effect.⁸ Unlike in other disciplines, expectation has not enjoyed much attention from theology in the past. Based on the Christian understanding of grace, which is a free gift of God, it has been widely thought that to speak about expectation is for theology inadequate. Traditionally, priority was given to the notion of hope, as it might be exemplified by the well-known *Theology of Hope* by Jürgen Moltmann published in 1964.⁹ Explicit theology of expectation comes only 8 years later when Vladimír Boublík published his Italian book *L'uomo nell' attesa di Cristo* (1972).¹⁰ Both authors were most probably inspired by Ernst Bloch's philosophy of hope,¹¹ but they did not react to each other in any direct way. Moltmann's theology of hope understood hope as essential to Christian faith and thus it was not concerned much with the Jewish hope for the Messiah to come. The perspective of Boublík was different. He maintained that awaiting the Messiah's coming is for the chosen nation not as much a matter of hope as it is a matter of expectation. He further asserted that the messianic expectation of the Israelites is born directly from the Word of God – from God's covenant with the ancestors of Israel – and therefore, it is free from fear and uncertainty. It “gives

7 Vladimír Boublík (1928–1974) was a Roman Catholic priest candidate in 1947. Shortly after February 1948, when the Communists took power in former Czechoslovakia, he was arrested and imprisoned. In 1952, after four years in Communist prisons, he managed to escape and under various dramatic circumstances came to West Berlin. From there he went to Rome, where he studied theology and philosophy. He was ordained a priest and later he became professor of fundamental theology at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. He worked at this institution until his early death in 1974.

8 In relation to this matter see, for instance: Katharina A. Schwarz, Roland Pfister and Christian Büchel, “Rethinking Explicit Expectations: Connecting Placebos, Social Cognition, and Contextual Perception,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 20, No. 6 (2016), 469–480.

9 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*. (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1964. The first English translation of Moltmann's theology of hope appeared three years later in 1967: Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. (New York (NY): Harper & Row, 1967).

10 Vladimír Boublík, *L'uomo nell' attesa di Cristo*, (Bari: Paoline, 1972). Unfortunately, there is no English translation of this book.

11 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 Bände (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1954; 1955; 1959). For a contemporary English translation of Bloch's “Principle of Hope” see Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vol. set (Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1995).

priority to certainty over hope."¹² Especially the Letter to the Hebrews convinced Boublík to give priority to expectation over hope, because for Boublík as well as for the author of Hebrews, faith "*is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*" (Hebrews 11:1).¹³ This confidence in what we hope for is what gave birth to Boublík's preference for humble expectation (not presumption) over hope, even though in principle his concept of humble expectation comes very close to what other theologians (including Moltmann) think when they speak of hope, because "*hope gives us an orientation towards God and anchors our desire to live by faith.*"¹⁴

Boublík's expectation of the future can be pursued in history thanks to the principle of hope which manifests itself in Christian eschatology, which may be called a "doctrine of hope". Eschatology encompasses not only possibilities of the future but unfolds also here and now as much as it is rooted in and springs out of the past. As such, it gives hope for a better future for all those who encounter any kind of suffering and encourages a humble expectation of the future to come. It may be said that Vladimír Boublík unveiled for theology a relevance of the topic of human expectation and proved it as complementary to more traditional theology of hope.

1.2 Vladimír Boublík – *Fundamental Theology of Expectation*

Vladimír Boublík is perhaps best known (at least to Italian and Czech readers) for his discussion of expectation within an apologetical (philosophical-apologetic) or fundamental-theological framework.¹⁵ Unlike most of his theological colleagues, he did not want to produce another alternative eschatology for Christian believers as it was common in the age when his career culminated. His focus was different. Instead of those who already found their home in Christianity, he aimed at those indifferent to or even opposing Christianity. In other words, at all those who do not consider Christ the ultimate fulfilment of history and the only possible future of humankind. It could be said that Boublík's theology was designed both (1) *ad intra* (for Christians) and (2) *ad extra* to attract those outside Christianity as well. Boublík had a primary anthropological concern, for theology was for him not only for Christians, but he strongly emphasised its relevance for all human beings, as it is especially exemplified in his theology of expectation.

12 Boublík, *Člověk očekává Krista* [Human Awaits Christ], 31.

13 Boublík cites this passage from the Letter to the Hebrews at length (Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16, 32–40). Ibid., 32–33.

14 Ivana Noble, *Tracking God: An Ecumenical Fundamental Theology*, (Eugene (OR): Wipf & Stock, 2010), 10.

15 Cf. Vladimír Boublík, *Člověk očekává Krista* [Human Awaits Christ], (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 1997), 6–8.

When approaching expectation in theological terms, Boublík distinguished two kinds:¹⁶ (1) *expectation of incarnation* (the messianic expectation of the chosen nation of Israel), *death* (Jesus's suffering predictions), *and resurrection* (three days of grieving and despair after the event of Golgotha – the implicit expectation of God's action responding to the peak experience of suffering, disillusion, and hopelessness); and (2) *eschatological expectation* (expectation of the second coming of Christ – expectation of the community of disciples). Based on this distinction, Boublík claims that expectation of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ comes prior to any eschatological expectation. Actually, he is convinced that the first kind of expectation was not only at work before the historical event of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection but continues to work even after that. He perceives this first kind of expectation being present in contemporary times among those who do not believe in a Christian way but continue to expect the future within a framework of religion different from Christianity or even outside religion of any kind. For Boublík, religious people believing different from Christianity are not anonymous Christians, as was suggested by Karl Rahner,¹⁷ but rather potential, anonymous catechumens¹⁸ because they already have faith and expect eternal life. This kind of expectation perceived in religions different to Christianity is for Boublík enough to think that they actually expect to be baptised into Christ in the moment of their death. Similarly, the same is valid for non-believers (even for atheists) who are implicitly awaiting Christ just because they realise their human expectation of the future – their freedom for future. This claim is of course a bit problematic, but it is defensible if we maintain its eventuality and reject its actuality which is reserved truly and fully only for Christian believers.

If non-Christians expect the future, they do not expect Christ's second, eschatological coming as Christians do in actuality of their awaiting Christ, but they implicitly expect his first coming, or at least they cannot reject the eventuality of it. In other words, their freedom for the future eventually, unknowingly, and implicitly expects Jesus Christ to be born into the history of their particular human life. As a theologian, Boublík wants to unveil the nature of human expectation to all people in theological terms. Perhaps the strongest expression of such a position, which partly appeared also at his memorial

16 Cf. *ibid.*, 11–12.

17 Cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. 14*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 283.

18 Vladimír Boublík, *Teologie mimokřesťanských náboženství [Theology of non-Christian Religions]*, (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2000), 320–334.

plaque in his native village, could be found in the concluding part of his fundamental theology of expectation: “*Blessed are those who have the courage to be wrecked in the sea of uncertainties and anxieties, while expecting the coming of the ultimate Love.*”¹⁹

Even though he tries to use an inclusive language Boublík is still a theologian of his era and therefore he strongly holds that Christ is the future of the world and suggests that each genuine, human expectation of the future is in fact awaiting Christ, but at the same time he makes clear that “*expectation may become awaiting Christ explicitly through conversion or (...) implicitly through a genuine expectation of the future through freedom as we desire its perfection.*”²⁰ Perceiving expectation explicitly in the Christian perspective as awaiting Christ can occur only as a consequence of the human encounter with God (experience of revelation), which gives birth to faith and stimulates its development. Encountering God is for Boublík synonymous with encountering true humanity in the world. In his theology it is not possible to reach faith in Christ without trust in the historical Jesus because Christ’s divinity may be perceived best (and Boublík would even argue *only*) through his humanity. According to Boublík, Christianity as such is a celebration of true humanity and, therefore, Christians are utterly connected to the whole of humanity, and “*nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts* (GS 1).”

In fact, anthropological concerns are for Boublík also access points to Christology. He emphasises a focus on Jesus’s everyday life. This means that the acceptance and embrace of the historical Jesus precedes the ability to confess genuinely Jesus as Christ. Boublík holds that encountering Jesus Christ in his earthly words and deeds, encountering his style of life, is what can inspire contemporary young people more than theological tractates about his divinity testified undeniably by miracles or academic books often remote from everyday human experience. In general, young people rely more on deeds than on words and seek authentic encounters and relationships with others more than empty phrases of those who pretend to care of what they do and think or who they actually are. The Mystery of Christ and the mystery of humanity (including the humanity of Jesus) merge in what Boublík calls the Mystery of Nazareth. “*Inhabitants of Nazareth were meeting the incarnated God on the streets, when working, having fun or with a glass of wine. Meeting God on the street is perhaps better than in the smell of incense and faded flowers.*”²¹ The Mystery of Nazareth is the mystery of perceiving divinity through everyday human encounters, in

19 Boublík, *Člověk očekává Krista* [Human Awaits Christ], 182.

20 Ibid., 139.

21 Vladimír Boublík, *Setkání s Ježíšem* [Meeting with Jesus], (Svitavy: Trinitas, 2002), 126–127.

practiced relationality, through meeting fellow human beings in true friendships and true partnerships of those who love or at least respect each other. In relationships to others, that's where the young people of today can encounter Jesus Christ (cf. Matthew 25:35–36). Youth ministry could surely get inspired by such a theological insight.

In order to sum up, Boublík's chief aim was to discover and newly describe fundamental principles of Christian faith. For that purpose, he distinguished between the theological and apologetic aspects of Christian faith. While the first aspect focused on Christian revelation as the source of theological knowledge, the other maintained the topic of credibility. Boublík was convinced that in terms of credibility (which is very important to young people), Christianity, and its apologetics too, shall emphasise the sincerity of Christian life, and the practice of faith in the light of an anthropological focus of each Christian theology. Boublík realised such a plan in *"three steps: philosophical, historical and semiologic."*²² In the first step Boublík identified questions of existential philosophers as highly relevant for ordinary people whose expectation of future to come hits the limit of death. In the second step Boublík offers a solution. If people meet the historical Jesus in Scripture or in witness and proclamation and recognise him as Christ – the ultimate future of humankind – their expectation of the future would transform into awaiting Christ. Recognition of the historical Jesus as Christ – the Messiah – brings us to the third, semiologic step of Boublík's theological plan. Human expectation of the future becomes awaiting Christ – awaiting the eschatological fulfilment of our humanity. Boublík's theology as such has a strong anthropological undertone. He wants to understand the mystery of humanity through linking it to the mystery of Jesus Christ, and expectation serves him as a tool for such a theological enterprise.

1.3 *Relating Theology of Expectation to Young People and Youth Ministry*

Young people *"are full human beings, open to self-transcendence, capable of theologising in their own (ordinary) way, reflecting their faith and connecting to the community of disciples. Yet their style of doing theology is characterised by features connected to their youth. One of these specifics is the expectation of the future."*²³ Theology of expectation as suggested by Boublík appears especially relevant in the context of youth ministry today, because it can help youth

22 Jiří Žurek, *Prolegomena k četbě Vladimíra Boublíka a analýza stěžejních témat jeho myšlenkového odkazu*. [Prolegomenon to reading Vladimír Boublík and analysis of crucial themes of his intellectual heritage], (Praha: Krystal OP, 2008), 98.

23 Štěch, "Who are Youth in Theological Perspective?", 137.

ministry scholars and practitioners to find theological foundations for their research and practice. It is because it brings an anthropological perspective into the discussion with revelation theology and proposes an anthropological interpretation of the mystery of Jesus Christ. This has a potential for grounding youth ministry research in a sound theological concept and allows us to see young people as a specific group in the Church with a special ability or vocation to serve the whole community as a sign of expectation or a stimulant of eschatological imagination – a “*laboratory for eschatological imagination*”.²⁴ This means an openness (or a standpoint of openness) for the future, where there is always more to come in terms of fulfilment of humanity. In this perspective, young people are to be seen as a *kairos* of human expectation – a sign of a youthful church. Great summary of what does it mean to be a youthful church has been offered by Root and Dean:

“Jesus calls us to be a youthful church, not because we are young but because we are his. Nothing is more important for a youthful church than developing an eschatological imagination, which allows us to wait with confidence, to name our anxieties without fear, and to make room for new life and new possibilities as Christ works, unseen, to usher us into an unknown future. Young people’s sense of open-ended possibility, their candid rejection of the fear of death, remind us that youthfulness is built into Christian eschatology. It is not age that makes us young. The future makes us young, and the future belongs to Christ. Fear not.”²⁵

Considering Root and Dean’s perspective we may start to see that theology of expectation may help us to enter the mystery of youth from a specific theological vantage point and eventually perceive and design youth ministry (and youth ministry research) as a specific theological activity too. Theology of expectation represents a concrete way of discerning how human action relates to divine action,²⁶ or more precisely how divine revelation motivates human faith and how faith resonates within concrete action carried out by believers and their communities. If youth ministry shall be perceived in theological terms or even as a theological task, it must be perceived also in terms of environment (the playground of transcendence)²⁷ where Christian revelation

24 Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, 212.

25 Ibid., 217.

26 Cf. Ibid., 219.

27 Roebben, *Seeking Sense in the City*, 214.

may be encountered and reflected upon, where faith can be born and maintained, and community (discipleship) could be fully lived not in isolation from the world but within the world instead. Consequently, youth ministry could be perceived as an environment created by the community of faith, where all things (ordinary and sacred, natural and transcendent) have their own time and place for mutual permeation (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1–15). Only through exploring everything and having the possibility of avoiding evil and adhering to the good (cf. 1. Thessalonians 5:21–22) is it possible to live a genuine Christian life – to recognise oneself as a disciple of Jesus Christ, to expect the future together with all contemporaries, and to await the Second Coming of Christ together with other Christians, and in the midst of the particular Christian community. Recognising that expectation of the future is in fact awaiting Christ is an act of faith which requires resonance with revelation.

By embracing both the human expectation of the future and the Christian awaiting of Christ, the theology of expectation brought into the context of youth ministry opens its gates not only to (1) dwellers (those who are already inside Christianity, Church, or Youth Ministry) but also to (2) seekers (those who are outside Christianity, Church, or Youth Ministry), and perhaps also to those (3) who consider themselves as religiously indifferent. Everyone expects the future, and the future is never fully a result of personalised and customised endeavours. People expect the future together with their fellow human beings and that is why expecting the future may become a platform of encounter for people living within plural environments of the contemporary world. The specific, theological understanding of human expectation as awaiting Christ can also help youth ministry to open up and de-congeal its own potential for public engagement, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, as well as for dialogue and cooperation with so-called secular society. Discovering such potential and investigating possibilities of transforming this potential into concrete action is one of the crucial tasks of youth ministry today. This task is principally threefold: (1) prophetic, (2) missionary, and (3) theological. If youth ministry is to meet this task it will matter not only for the Church but also for the wider community.²⁸ It will become a relevant, creative agent in the public environment.

28 Here I have in mind the prophetic opening sentence of the *Gaudium et Spes* Pastoral Constitution of the 2nd Vatican Council: “*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ* (GS 1).”

2 Conclusion

The theology of expectation and its radical orientation on the future drives our attention to spirituality focused on life, activity and concrete action. Such kind of spirituality may flourish especially in the environment of youth ministry because young people are formed by their expectations of the future, they are agents of hope, and the whole environment of youth ministry is strongly action oriented. Therefore, if inspired by the theology of expectation, theology done in the context of youth ministry may be understood as a project and in fact it can really become a project – a life transforming endeavour seeking its own ground and support in action-oriented spirituality. What making theology into a project means is well described by Hans-Georg Geiser as follows:

Making theology into a project (...) could mean getting out (...) into the enviroing ecology of the close and farther surroundings of our world in order to develop a concrete project with local people in the neighbourhood or our personal communities who want to see theology walk and work, compose and paint, craft and construct, model and sketch, empower and change the globe. This could be a community action, an educational program, a church meeting, a peace project, a shelter facility, a youth cellar, a cultural event, an artistic performance, a political campaign, or a global initiative, all translating and incarnating theology into the concrete and visual, local and experiential places of people's homes and houses, habitats and communities in theology's enviroing surroundings of an ecology of life.²⁹

In order to sum up, expectation in the theological perspective is not a passive process, it is active awaiting, walking towards the day (and place) where Christians expect to meet their master, friend, and God – all in the one person of Jesus Christ – again. When it comes particularly to youth and youth ministry, theology of expectation has a potential (1) to ground our understanding of youth in solid theological anthropology with overlaps to other theological disciplines like eschatology, Christology, soteriology, and of course to practical theology as well, and (2) perceive youth ministry as an environment where good theology might be transformed into good project, as a laboratory where action-oriented spirituality is being developed and planted, as an

29 Hans-Georg Geiser, *The Community of the Weak: Social Postmodernism in Theological Reflection on Power and Powerlessness in North America*, Eugene (OR): Wipf and Stock, 2013, 385.

eschatological imagination think tank of the Church, but also as an open space welcoming dwellers and seekers alike, space where the expectations, anxieties and hopes of young people may be lived and shared, and where meeting Christ today becomes possible perhaps also through those who await His second coming into the world.

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