

# Religious and Cultural Mediation

## A response to the signs of the times

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### Abstract

Theology and theological faculties not only have a role to play vis-à-vis believers, but they also have a role to play as part of the university and the public sphere. Kairology, as a spiritual diagnosis of the times, is a part of public theology and can contribute to the social common good. It can be helpful in the search for solutions to the problems of our time. One of such solutions represents the bachelor's programme Religious and Cultural Mediation, which responds to the deep divisions and different conflicts within our communities.

### Keywords

theological faculty; theology; kairology; dialogue; mediation; conflict; divided society; fraternity; coexistence; education; virtues; common good; communication; understanding

In the context of ongoing conflicts and geopolitical tensions in the world, we observe a growing polarisation and radicalisation also within Slovak society. Public opinion polls indicate a decline in trust toward democratic institutions, while extremist views gain increasing support. Political debates transform into sharp confrontations; opponents are frequently unwilling to meet, resorting instead to harsh exchanges on social media. Society is divided not only in political preferences but also in attitudes toward fundamental values (Žuffa 2024, 74). These factors deepen overall frustration and the inability to engage in constructive dialogue. Slovak society is not the only one that finds itself lacking mutual understanding.

The synodal process within the Catholic Church, whose outcomes are to be implemented over the next three years, has revealed a deficiency in the ability to truly listen and engage in kind and sincere dialogue aimed at seeking together new paths and answers to pressing questions. Many participants have thus identified an urgent need to learn new forms of collaboration, participation, and shared responsibility in the spirit of synodality (see *Final Document* on [www.synod.va](http://www.synod.va)).

The pursuit of reconciliation, forgiveness, and mutual understanding are also central themes of the ongoing Jubilee Year. Pilgrimages to Roman basilicas and holy sites or jubilee churches aim to help the faithful renew their relationship with God, while acts of mercy are intended to heal and restore relationships within families, within the Church and society.

It is evident that addressing many current social and ecological global issues requires mutual cooperation among believers and non-believers, churches and societies of various cultures and

religions. This requires people who are able to see cultural and religious differences as enrichment, not as sources of conflict or division. These mediators can assist in moderating dialogues, reconciling conflicting parties, and finding common grounds for mutual cooperation and coexistence.

### **The Role of Theology**

The above facts can be seen as signs of the times that challenge the Church's various communities and institutions to respond to seemingly irreconcilable divisions, the inability to listen and understand different perspectives, and to find common solutions to often complex situations.<sup>1</sup> According to Tomáš Halík, examining the signs of the times is part of public theology, which he refers to as “kairology” (from Greek word *καιρός* – “the right moment”) in the sense of “spiritual diagnosis of the era” (Halík 2021, 41). This requires cooperation with philosophers, sociologists, and representatives of other humanities to correctly understand the cultural and historical context of the time. Moreover, this spiritual diagnosis is crucial to be communicated in a language comprehensible beyond the theological academic community and ecclesiastical environment.

Academic theology at universities has a dual role. Primarily, it serves believers and the Church by reflecting on how Christian faith perceives God and how that faith is translated into life. Therefore, the theology must have constant contact with believers and respond to their immediate needs and the current cultural context in which faith is embodied. However, since theological faculties are also part of the public space and the academic world, they must meet criteria of scientific rigor, clarity, and societal usefulness (Gallus 2024, 69).

Johanna Rahner adds that theological faculties also help the community of believers to be capable of self-reflection and self-criticism (Rahner 2024, 97). She further clarifies the reasons why the existence of all theological faculties in general are socially necessary. One reason is that they offer and bear responsibility for resources important for social cohesion and the common good through a positive attitude toward the secular state. They also bring a perspective that transcends a purely naturalistic worldview and alongside other humanities, they represent a different facet of scientific inquiry (Rahner 2024, 97).

In the realm of knowledge, theology is called to expand the boundaries of reason and, in dialogue with other disciplines, to present an image of God who is not only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but also the God of philosophers and scientists.<sup>2</sup> The same can be

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* 4: “To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.”

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, some scientists try to dialogue with theology from their point of view. See for example Karaba, Miroslav. 2014. *Božie pôsobenie vo svete: reflexia koncepcí J. Polkinghorna, A. Peacocka a I. Barboura*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.

applied to other theological concepts such as life, the human person, nature, or history (Tanzella-Nitti 2024, 371).

Due to deficiencies in these areas, current theological faculties are often perceived merely as unnecessary appendages of state universities. A thoroughly developed kairology as a practical science that seeks concrete answers to recognized signs of the times could have multiple benefits. It could contribute to the common good in collaboration with sciences and other societal components and at the same time highlight an area where theology and theological faculties can offer their specific contributions.

### **The necessity of dialogue**

One of the aforementioned signs of the times is a divided society, marked by strong individualism, mistrust and often despair, which requires, first of all, a renewal of “fraternity and social friendship” (*Fratelli tutti*, 5). It presupposes a common dialogue in mutual respect and a sincere search for what unites us.

Such dialogue is more than a communication tool – it is the art of coexistence on two levels: between individuals and between groups of different cultures, religions or worldviews. The Christian understands dialogue above all “as a response to a challenge addressed to him at a particular historical time (*kairos*)” (Zamboni 2014, 211). The Second Vatican Council definitively rejected the dichotomy between the Church and the world and affirmed the close symbiosis between Christians and other people:

“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 at the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men” (*Gaudium et spes*, 1).

Such a symbiosis, however, presupposes the ability to listen, to perceive what bothers people, and to engage in a dialogue that is not a one-sided affair. It is not only about what the Church can and should offer to the world, but also about what Christians can learn about others, about themselves, their own identity and vocation.

The dialogue of Christians must take place in the truth: “Truth, in fact, is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos*, and hence communication and communion” (*Caritas in veritate*, 4). Even though it always happens in the background of faith, which depends on the mediation of culture, truth enables “to let go of subjective opinions and impressions, and to move beyond cultural and historical limitations” (*Caritas in veritate*, 4). Dialogue must lead to

“an encounter with the other, to the establishment of important bonds across potentially irreconcilable differences, in order to heal possible wounds and to set in motion a path of true reconciliation” (Zamboni 2014, 212).

Dialogue requires humility because truth cannot be owned. Only the humble-minded reject the temptation to impose his own view and can listen attentively. It also presupposes freedom, non-attachment to one's own opinions, and respect for the freedom and conscience of the other. Such a dialogue appears to be in contrast to the sometimes-proclaimed clash of radically different cultures (Zamboni 2014, 211).

The aim of dialogue is never to convince the other of one's own truth, nor it is merely an exchange of arguments and counter-arguments:

“Dialogue is a relational process whose meaning is not exhausted by the transmission of information or the formation of consensus; it concerns people, not as objectified and interchangeable units, but as unique persons with their own freedom and responsibility. Their mutual understanding is the goal of dialogue” (Poláková 2008, 8).

Such a dialogue presupposes a sense of responsibility for the other and “the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns” (*Fratelli tutti*, 203). Dialogue opens to hope. It can endure the fatigue of getting to know the other, it can wait for the appropriate time when the other will manifest himself, and it creates opportunities for sharing. Dialogue is related to love.

### **Through dialogue to mediation**

A specific case of dialogue is the search for reconciliation between conflicting parties. Unfortunately, the necessary skills and procedures to conduct such a dialogue are often lacking in our communities. The more complex and escalated a conflict is, the more there is a need for trained persons who can moderate and facilitate such a dialogue and thus accompany the conflicting parties in their search for a common solution. Such an activity is called mediation (defined as a voluntary, confidential process in which a neutral mediator helps the disputing parties to negotiate a settlement out of court). Mediation can also be seen as a process that enables bridge-building between different cultural and religious groups. It is about actively seeking common language and understanding, reconciling conflicts and promoting dialogue between people with different views, traditions and values. In the context of education, mediation is a tool that contributes to better mutual understanding and cooperation in a multicultural and multi-religious environment.

The main skills of a mediator are active listening, empathy and ability to facilitate dialogue. Although theology graduates are already considered suitable to do mediators for example in the courts, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Trnava offers a special professionally oriented Bachelor's programme in Religious and Cultural Mediation that trains mediators, soft skills trainers, community workers, and professionals in the field of religious communication and personnel work ([tftu.sk/mediacia](https://tftu.sk/mediacia)).<sup>3</sup> Programme graduates find employment in various of

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<sup>3</sup> More about the vision of the Jesuit theological faculty see in Jeník, Lukáš, Mária Spišiaková, and Jozef Žuffa. 2017. “Quo vadis Aloisianum – k vízií jezuitskej teologickej fakulty.” *Studia Aloisiana* 8 (2), 35–60.

religious and civil institutions or companies where people of different cultures and religions come together, as well as in the field of education, where practices for conflict prevention and reconciliation are needed.

The theological foundations of mediation are based on Christian teaching and tradition, which emphasizes forgiveness, reconciliation, love of neighbour, and sincere dialogue with the world and with other religions. The roots of mediation as a search for a balance between the different needs and interests of conflicting parties exist in the history of philosophical thought. Philosophical approaches like phenomenology and existentialism can be inspirational for mediation through their emphasis on subjectivity, empathy, and relational dynamics. Knowledge of psychology, religious studies, law, and the mastery of practical techniques for conducting non-violent communication (Rosenberg 2005) or facilitating and moderating group dialogue (Pokorná et al. 2023) is also essential. In the spirit of the Jesuit tradition of holistic human formation, the study will combine intellectual depth with spiritual wisdom and a practical approach.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of the religious and cultural content to which the mediation process can relate, the current situation gives us many clues. Different attitudes towards the LBTQI+ community, vaccination or warfare, as well as attitudes towards immigrants, Jews, Muslims, or liberals and progressives, are very often sources of tension and conflict both in society and in the Church. A valuable experience for elaboration of the practical part of the mediator program are various discussions with students and the public on these topics.<sup>5</sup>

### **Lines of Mediation Formation**

If theology is to be understood as education, it means that it is realized as the care of the soul, its purpose is to accompany a person in his or her personal development (Svobodová 2024, 2). It happens in three dimensions: in the knowledge and acceptance of oneself, in the understanding of human relationality, and in establishing and deepening a relationship with God.

These three dimensions of personal development are also an integral part of mediation studies. First and foremost, mediation presupposes the personal formation of future mediators, because accompanying others through dialogue toward reconciliation requires a mature personality. Knowledge of oneself – of one's inner world and emotional experiences – is a prerequisite for self-acceptance, which in turn is the basis for accepting and understanding others. The art of dialogue requires the ability to grow, to give and receive, and to respect the other. These are

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<sup>4</sup> What Jesuit Superior General Arturo Sosa, S.I., said in relation to the pandemic crisis is also true in today's situation: "This crisis is a spiritual and intellectual challenge for us. Listening to the Spirit, trusting in God and allowing ourselves to be guided by him does not exempt us from the effort to understand in depth the causes of this crisis, its consequences and the ways to make it an occasion to advance towards a more just and humane world. The apostolic body of the Society rests and walks on its two legs: spiritual depth and, also, intellectual depth." Webinar: *The Preferences in a time of Uncertainty and COVID-19*. <https://www.jesuits.africa/the-preferences-in-a-time-of-uncertainty-and-covid-19/> (7. 4. 2025)

<sup>5</sup> It was possible to extend these discussion activities beyond the Theological faculty through the civic association Apeiron – Institute of Humanities Studies ([www.apeiron-ihs.org](http://www.apeiron-ihs.org)).

essential for every dialogue participant, but especially for the one who is to accompany others on the path to reconciliation.

In mediation practice, it is equally crucial to understand how relational dynamics work and how certain inappropriate relational patterns – e.g., tendencies to dominate or destroy others, to parasitize, or to show indifference toward them – may constitute significant barriers to dialogue (Poláková 2008, 11–19). Conversely, it is necessary to adopt approaches and develop virtues essential for dialogue such as patience, kindness, disciplined argumentation, critical tolerance, and the capacity for self-criticism (Pokorná et al. 2023, 18).

Cultural and religious mediation requires knowledge of the differences among cultures and religions and an awareness of their commonalities and shared roots. It is equally necessary to understand the role of spirituality or religion in human life and the importance of human relationship to the divine. Religion is significant not only in shaping personal attitudes but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon influencing the values and preferences of entire communities. Since religion involves a claim to totality and bears both peace-making and violent potential, it is necessary to study and critically discern religious phenomena to prevent potential escalation of interreligious conflict and, conversely, to utilize those elements of religion and culture that can serve as foundations for reconciliation and mutual understanding (Beck 2018, 68–69).

### **Conclusion: Theology in the Service of the Public Sphere**

As society faces deep polarization, loss of trust, and the inability to engage in constructive dialogue, the public role of theology has taken on renewed importance. Theological faculties, often questioned for their societal relevance, are now more than ever called to step out of their inner-church frameworks and become partners in seeking solutions to contemporary challenges.

The Religious and Cultural Mediation theology programme is a concrete manifestation of the kairological sensibility, the ability of theology to read the signs of the times, to speak the language of contemporary man, and to enter areas where the fate of understanding between individuals, groups, and nations is broken. This is not simply a matter of applying Christian teaching to practice, but of creating a space in which theology engages in dialogue with psychology, the social sciences and cultural analysis, thereby fulfilling its role as part of public discourse.

Understood in this way, theology defends its own scientific value and also asserts its right to exist within the university. It shows that in a time when new forms of coexistence are being sought, religious thought can offer more than just answers for believers; it can contribute to the common good by forming individuals capable of facilitating dialogue, reconciliation, and “a culture of encounter” (*Fratelli tutti*, 216).

Thus, the Faculty of Theology is not merely a place for transmitting religious knowledge. It also becomes a point of contact between the world of meaning and the world of challenges. It forms personalities that are able to connect the reflection of faith with the ability to act in

concrete conflict situations, thereby fulfilling the most essential mission of academic theology: to be a voice of understanding in times of tension, a bridge between transcendence and everyday life.

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