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Faith and Morality Modern Transformations and Challenges from a Polish Perspective

The relationship between faith and morality has always been a subject of great interest to moral theology. Numerous reductionist attempts to label the Gospel as nothing more than a mere “ethical system” and to downgrade Jesus Christ to a status of a moral teacher, no matter how great (as, for example, Tolstoy did¹), badly miss the point. But equally missing the point is a theory that morality is entirely independent of faith. There are undeniably very distinctive features, endowing them even with a certain degree of autonomy, which must be seen in the context of their mutual interconnections and interactions. An obvious expression of the relationship between faith and morality is language. It appears in official documents of the Church as *fides et mores*, and in everyday speech, where the two words, faith and morals, are frequently invoked together.

The constraints of space preclude a thorough treatment of the relationship between faith and morality in this paper, so it needs to be limited to an overview of some of the challenges facing moral theology in Polish society in the second decade of the 21st century. Though transformations affecting perception of moral norms occur on a global scale, they do have their own, local characteristics. The second part of this essay is devoted to one of the central issues in the current debate on faith and morals, that is, the status of conscience and interpretations of the idea of the freedom of conscience. Though the relationship between faith and morality is analysed in this paper from the point of view of moral theology,

¹ For Tolstoy, Christ was merely one of the great “life mentors”. M. MACHINEK, «*Das Gesetz des Lebens?* Die Auslegung der Bergpredigt bei L.N. Tolstoj im Kontext seines ethisch-religiösen Systems, EOS Verlag: St. Ottilien 1998, pp. 111–115.

sociology of religion is also taken into account², as it is the latter that verbalises contemporary psychological and social contexts and makes diagnoses of social transformations and their impact on our subject.

1. An overview of the situation

The link between faith and morality can be clearly discerned during an analysis of the extent of secularisation and instances of its manifestations. Though variously defined and – what is even more important – held in various esteem³, the term “secularisation” has come to denote changes in individual and public expressions of faith. Even though the processes of secularisation in Poland are slightly different from those in Eastern or Western Europe, they are nevertheless visible. The differences are due to the size of the country (with the population of a little over 38 million, it is one of the largest in Europe) and its relative religious homogeneity. Slightly more than 90% of Poles declare themselves Catholic. Of course, voluntary declarations and religious homogeneity do not necessarily result in similitudes of behaviour. Suffice to look at some statistics in this regard. Another important factor are the close links between national affiliation, religious identity and morality in Polish history. Nearly every Polish uprising was inspired by the Christian faith of the Poles. One may venture a generalisation that the Church and many of her more prominent members played very positive roles in those struggles. It is deeply embedded in the corporal national memory. Another component of Polish religiosity, that needs to be taken into the equation, is that besides the so-called folk church (*Volkskirche*) with its traditional, still very much alive devotional forms, there are many Catholics who have joined various movements for religious renewal, undergone extended catechesis and made conscious decisions to lead their lives in accordance with Christian values. Despite occasional tensions between these two groups of faithful, generally they do not compete but function within the same ecclesial structures.

² A remarkable researcher on the sociological dimension of morality in the context of the Catholic Church in Poland is Janusz Mariański. J. MARIĄSKI, *Socjologia moralności*, Wyd. KUL: Lublin 2006.

³ Processes of secularisation belong to characteristic features of modernity. Charles Taylor, one of the foremost researchers on the subject, describes them as “historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization); of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of *malaise* (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution”. CH. TAYLOR, *Nowoczesne imaginaria społeczne (Modern social imaginaries)*, transl. A. Puchejda, K. Szymagiak, Znak: Kraków 2010, p. 9.

The differences just outlined undoubtedly influence the pace, extent and effects of secularisation. But they are not able to prevent it. Secularisation first affects religiosity, i.e. the external manifestations of faith. Decline in Sunday Mass attendance is usually taken as an indication of diminishing religiosity⁴. On the face of it, this does not seem to have much to do with morality. Yet, a closer observation suggests that consciously nourished religiosity – at least as a motivation – may have not a negligible impact on everyday choices and decisions. Secularisation does not rest content with affecting external acts of piety alone, but reaches deeper down into the faith itself, having ever more to do with the way and style of life and everyday moral choices. Public acceptance of certain Church's teachings, especially on sexual ethics, is shrinking just like in many other traditionally Christian societies. The same applies to morality in economics, interpersonal relations and concrete, daily activities, for instance, responsible driving. Discrepancy between what is widely regarded as Christian values and ideals and actual behaviour is noticeable⁵. Secularisation also affects the very place of religion in society. It would be worthwhile to begin our detailed analysis dealing with the latter issue first.

2. Making a diagnosis in the context of social life

Sociology describes processes of secularisation of societies and individuals, using its own proper methods as far as they allow it. Description, however, is not synonymous with diagnosis, the latter venturing into an evaluation of the thing being described. To make a diagnosis one needs to take into consideration a number of questions: Where do the changes come from? Are they simply built-in factors of social development and – if so – somehow automatic and inevitable? Or, are they provoked, supported, enforced and directed by one or another social or political interest group? What are the consequences of these changes – not only the actual ones, but also in terms of conscious reactions and attitudes? The last question has both individual and communal, ecclesial,

⁴ According to the data published by *Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego* (Catholic Church Statistic's Institute), Sunday Mass attendance has been declining since 1991. In 2013 it was 39.1%. On the other hand, the number of faithful receiving Communion has been increasing. <http://www.iskk.pl/kosciolnaswiecie/193-dominicantes-2013.html> (accessed on 07.01.2015).

⁵ See reflections of J. Mariański on the relationship between religion and morality in Polish context in: J. MARIANŃSKI, *Religia i moralność w społeczeństwie polskim. Współzależność czy autonomia?*, in: J. MARIANŃSKI (ed.), *Kondycja moralna społeczeństwa polskiego*, Wyd. WAM: Kraków 2002, pp. 481–504.

aspects. One may also look at it, as it were, from two different points of view: from “without”, that is from the point of view of social expectations towards individual believers and the entire Church; and from “within”, that is from the perspective of self-awareness of individual believers and of the Church as the community of believers.

2.1. Secular character of the State

There is a wide-ranging debate on axiological foundations of society in Poland today. Sociological transformations, which in Western Europe were relatively slow and gradual, happen at a lot more rapid pace in countries of the former Eastern Bloc. A movement for secularisation of the public sphere of life has been steadily growing stronger and more radical for the last ten years. It has even acquired a political representation. Some parties openly declare themselves as anti-Church ones, and brand the presence of the Church in public life as a near pathology. In often quite emotionally charged discussions, their participants champion total neutrality of the State with respect to the world views of its citizens. Partisans limiting the influence of Christian values in public life aim at pushing religion into a strictly private sphere and containing it there. They want to eradicate all traces of it from public space – not only its symbols and representations, but also the very idea of religion itself. Ever recurring debates on the display of crucifixes in schools, hospitals and public offices, teaching religion in schools, or state funding of theological faculties at public universities, are among some of the more telling examples of a drive for secularisation in Poland.

In the context of these claims, a crucial question must be posed: Should – or we may rather ask – can a state, i.e. any state, be really neutral with respect to world views of its citizens? If the answer is affirmative, it follows that it should abandon all of its axiological foundations. Contempt and respect, for instance, could then become two neutral and equally feasible options to be followed at will, both deserving equal reverence. It would require an enormous stretch of the imagination to set up a state (and expect it to last and peacefully coexist with its neighbours) whose citizens are not bound by at least the very basic set of values⁶.

⁶ Charles Taylor distances himself from such model, identifying it with the French model of *laïcité*, bent on sweeping all religious references from the public sphere. *Wiara w epoce świeckiej. Dyskusja*, in: J. JAGIEŁŁO (ed.), *Świat i wiara w godzinie przełomu*, Wyd. Żnak: Kraków 2010, p. 180. ↵

It is noteworthy in this connection to take a look at the Polish Constitution and check to which State agents it applies the words “neutrality” and “neutral”. First of all, it says that the Polish armed forces shall observe neutrality regarding political matters and shall be subject to civil and democratic control⁷. It uses the adjective “neutral” in reference to a corps of civil servants, operating in the organs of government administration, whose task is to ensure a “professional, diligent, impartial and politically neutral discharge of the State’s obligations”⁸. So, when referring to the core nature of the Polish State, the Constitution does not invoke neutrality. Instead, it employs the term: “impartiality in relation to outlooks on life”⁹. For the purpose of this paper a somewhat more succinct term, recognised in relevant literature, may be used: “world views impartiality”. On the one hand, impartiality implies negation of a denominational state, whatever might be understood by it. No religious, non-religious or atheistic world view may claim exclusive rights. On the other hand, however, impartiality entails plurality of participants in public debates on the format and arrangement of social life, and their equal right to express their ideas, inspired by their different world views, freely. Providing, of course, that they respect basic human rights in the first place.

The key to a correct understanding of the State’s world views on impartiality is the Preamble to its Constitution which, though contains some references to God, is not denominational or religious in character. The author and subject of the Constitution is the Polish Nation, i.e. all citizens of the Republic, “both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty, as well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values as arising from other sources”. They all work and act recognising their responsibility before God or their own consciences¹⁰.

Just as there can be no demands on the part of the Church to dominate the public sphere, there can be no demands for her exclusion from it. The Church cannot be relegated to the category of sub-systems¹¹, where her activities shall be confined to providing for society’s spiritual needs. While

⁷ See *The Constitution of the Republic of Poland*, art. 26.2.

⁸ See *The Constitution of the Republic of Poland*, art. 153.1.

⁹ See *The Constitution of the Republic of Poland*, art. 25.2: “Public authorities in the Republic of Poland shall be impartial in matters of personal conviction, whether religious or philosophical, or in relation to outlooks on life, and shall ensure their freedom of expression within public life”.

¹⁰ See *Preamble to The Constitution of the Republic of Poland*.

¹¹ Niklas Luhmann, a German social theorist, used the term “sub-system” in relation to religion. The central function of religion in an all-encompassing social system boils down to solving problems stemming from feelings of uncertainty and accidental nature of existence, i.e.

recognising the validity of the reasons behind secular character of the state, it would be difficult to develop a coherent argument for barring the entry of religious elements into the public sphere, and building social life on agnostic or atheistic foundations.

2.2. Christians in public life

Another hotly debated issue is whether society is entitled to expect holders of public offices to adopt a neutral world view in discharge of their duties. Especially when they happen to be Christians. One may use the analogy of Karl Rahner's anonymous Christian here. Quite apart from the theological implications of this term¹², it may be used in reference to the so-called "people of good will". Though not actual members of the Church, they nevertheless share her values system. By way of a reversed analogy, Christians – especially those holding public offices – are expected to be sort of "anonymous atheists" (or agnostics) in the discharge of their duties. They are not required to demonstrate any actual affinity with an atheistic world view. That is, not in their private life. Privately, they are free to practice their religion and follow its moral precepts as they wish. But in their public incarnation they must act as if their faith had no effect on them whatsoever. As a female representative of the present governing coalition in Poland has once observed: Conscience, world view and the outer garments must remain in the antechamber to the public office.

Every so often there erupts a vigorous debate in the mainstream media concerning the place of believers in the public sphere of life. This can be illustrated by several recent cases.

A managing director of one of the best gynaecological clinics in Warsaw, the Holy Family Gynaecological Hospital, prof. Bogdan Chazan, (himself a very distinguished gynaecologist), was summarily fired after he had refused to perform an abortion on a handicapped child (the child being a fruit of an *in vitro* fertilization), and failed to refer its mother to another physician who might have been more inclined to comply with her wish to have her pregnancy terminated¹³.

in providing a feeling of having a meaning. See N. LUHMANN, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/Main 2000, p. 41f.

¹² According to K. Rahner, every human person is, by the grace of God, positively oriented towards the prospect of salvation even before he is externally incorporated into the Church. K. RAHNER, *Bemerkungen zum Problem des «anonymen Christen»*, in: K. RAHNER, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 10, Benziger: Zürich – Köln 1972, pp. 533–534.

¹³ Explaining the reasons for his decision, prof. Chazan said he had not done it primarily out of his religious convictions – though one's Christian world view undoubtedly makes him more sensitive to the value of human life – but as a physician, acting in accordance with the

The Mayor of Warsaw had chosen to go ahead with dismissal even before the case was investigated and the results of the official control in the clinic published. Under skilful management of prof. Chazan, the clinic used to be one of the very best of its kind in the capital.

Another widely reported case involved dismissal of the deputy minister of justice, prof. Michał Królikowski. Though nobody questioned prof. Królikowski's professional credentials, his open declarations about his Catholic identity and respect for Christian values were enough to get him into trouble.

The controversy over the so-called pharmacists' conscience clause has also attracted much publicity recently. Unlike physicians, pharmacists in Poland do not enjoy legal right to invoke the objection of their conscience when it comes to dispensation of medicinal substances the application of which they question on moral grounds (especially antibodies inducing pregnancy failure by impairing embryonic implantation). Many people believe that the present situation generates infringement of the right to freedom of conscience. Their adversaries counter it with advice that if some pharmacists are not willing to dispense certain drugs, they should look for another job. True enough, in the long history of the Church there have been many instances of Christians giving up their job rather than compromise their conscience; but most cases involved Christians living under totalitarian regimes. In a democratic state there ought to be some other options available. For instance, a well-devised and enforceable conscience clause. In matters of great moral concern, citizens should not be driven into situations in which they have to choose between two equally undesirable alternatives: violate your conscience and abide the law, or oppose it and lose your job and bear other consequences of intolerance. The urgency of devising workable mechanisms that would address such dilemmas is obvious. Christian theorists of ethics and moral theologians should make a substantial contribution in this regard.

The examples quoted above disclose a very disturbing tendency on the part of some people to question the validity of moral preferences other than the liberal ones and forcing the latter on everyone else; all in blatant contradiction to their widely and loudly proclaimed assertions that all world views have an equal claim to the truth. Which brings us to another problem that merits close attention: Evolution in understanding and expressing in words such basic ethical ideas like conscience and human rights.

3. Consequences of secularisation in the context of the teaching of moral theology on personal life

The nature and meaning of conscience is a subject that frequently sparks lively debates between representatives of the secular state and the Church. Christian ethics too is constantly being challenged to take a clear stance on it. One of the nearly non-negotiable assertions today, professed by both believers and non-believers, is human freedom and human right to autonomous self-determination and self-actualisation. Continuous extension of personal freedom, which the citizens of more economically developed countries have been enjoying for several dozens of years, and which the Polish ones began to do some twenty five years ago, has triggered an evolution in their understanding of that individual moral norm: conscience. A comprehensive overview of this issue would extend beyond the commonly accepted boundaries of an essay such as this one. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to indicate a certain recasting in the perception of the very essence of conscience.

Formerly, conscience was synonymous with civil courage, encouraging its owner to oppose totalitarian regimes (for example, unshaken oppositionists used to be called “prisoners of conscience”). Today, conscience is synonymous with the power of self-determination. It is often placed in opposition to external authorities. This is the reason for which discussions on the binding nature of conscience and the relationship between individual conscience and external authority – be it the state or the Church – are not infrequently charged with much heat and passion. It might therefore be useful to cast at least a cursory glance at the Christian understanding of conscience.

We may accept as classic the following definition by Romano Guardini: “Conscience is this particular element of our consciousness that is attached to goodness and together with it constitutes the whole of moral reference to such a degree, that we may say that to act morally is to act according to dictates of one’s own conscience, given that his conscience is, in fact and in essence, what it is supposed to be”¹⁴. Unquestionably (and moral theology has always been saying so), conscience is the proximate norm of personal morality¹⁵. Conscience is not a sort of a separate “organ” of the human spirit, or a mere capacity of the human mind, but the very centre of the human person. Adherence to its judgements determines the dignity of the person. To put it somehow more

¹⁴ R. GUARDINI, *Ethik. Vorlesungen an der Universität München*, vol. 1, Grünewald/Schöningh: Mainz – Paderborn 1993, p. 97.

¹⁵ VS 60.

vividly, one may say that conscience is the centre of the human heart (*Mitte des menschlichen Herzens*¹⁶).

In the context of moral theology, high regard for individual conscience corresponds with the conviction that conscience is the “voice of God”. Of course, a refinement of the phrase must be made to avoid running into an irresolvable aporia, leading to charging God with responsibility for evil perpetrated by those who claim being convinced that they act according to His will. The “voice” of God, resounding in human conscience, is not experienced in the same way the normal human voice is. We may say, after John Henry Newman, that it is “God’s voice behind a veil”¹⁷. This qualification does not alter the fact that conscience is indeed “the most secret core and sanctuary of a man, [where] he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths”¹⁸. The really crucial thing in all this is that a god we are speaking about is the God, Christian God. It is not a capricious god who arbitrary marks some things good and others bad, permitted or forbidden, and may reverse his decision any time at his personal whim. Moral truth, and truth about good, is the same as the truth about creation. Moral norms are consistent with the nature of the beings they apply to; first of all, they are consistent with man’s corporal and spiritual nature. No authority, be it human or divine, fashions them in an *ad hoc* manner. It only makes them more intelligible, highlights them and confirms them. Respect due to every individual human conscience is justified precisely by the fact that conscience binds man explicitly and directly with the highest possible sanction. For the believer, that highest possible sanction is God.

Awarding greater value to individual conscience is sometimes greeted with a dose of scepticism. Increase in general knowledge about man provided important insights into psychological and social backgrounds of conscience. Certainly, conscience, understood as moral self-awareness and capacity to navigate through moral precepts, is one of the constitutive features of human nature. But its concrete shape depends on many factors. According to Joseph Römelt, conscience is “the expression of human dignity, source of his most intimate, personal beliefs and his openness to truth; the mirror image of the

¹⁶ J. RÖMELT, *Christliche Ethik in moderner Gesellschaft*, vol. 1. *Grundlagen*, Herder: Freiburg – Basel – Wien 2008, p. 76.

¹⁷ J. H. NEWMAN, *O sumieniu. List do Księcia Norfolk (On Conscience. A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk)*, Wyd. Homini: Bydgoszcz 2002, p. 43: “Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives”.

¹⁸ GS 16.

order; yes, the voice of God. But it is also a reflection of man's self-centred egoism and wilfulness, of overpowering pressure of his environment, adjustment to socially dominant attitudes, manipulation through constellations and pressure from authorities"¹⁹. A prospect of getting embroiled in all these things is greater for a man growing up in an authoritarian atmosphere, hindering his reaching of a mature personality. As Sigmund Freud observed, the so-called authoritarian conscience turns into a destructive superego – the voice of an internalised external authority – and ceases to act freely. It does not mean that in the upbringing not overburdened with excessive authority conscience is altogether immune to external influences. Man is not a lonely monad, capable of pronouncing infallible judgements on right and wrong. That is why greater appreciation of individual conscience must be paired with the need and duty of its correct modelling. In the same way that a proper upbringing of the child brings about healthy and strong personality of the adult, his later, continuous self-education and improvement shields his conscience from destructive external influences and his own jumble of desires, ambition and wrong, deleterious decisions. Individual conscience always needs an external, objective point of reference. Two elements comprise the entirety of man's moral references: non-transferable (i.e. that cannot be ceded to others), subjective responsibility for doing right and refraining from doing wrong, and objective moral norms. Belittlement of the former leads to reduction of individual moral responsibility, substituting it with an authoritarian morality, where individuals serve as mere executors of external orders. Equally dangerous, however, might be playing down the latter, i.e. objective points of reference, as it may induce moral subjectivism and, ultimately, wilfulness.

Thus we arrive at the heart of the argument that dominates debates in social and Church circles in Poland and other countries today. The problem is the objective point of reference for individual conscience, mentioned in the preceding paragraph. In some discussions the very need for such a thing is contested, and every external moral norm is branded as a threat to personal freedom and denied access. Endorsement of this view would amount to a total privatisation of morality, with a resulting break-up of social bonds and a quick decay of social life. That is why it does not find itself in a particularly large companionship.

The crux of the matter then is not so much if there is, or should there be, an objective point of reference for individual conscience, but what exactly is

¹⁹ J. RÖMELT, *Christliche Ethik in moderner Gesellschaft*, p. 78.

that point of reference. Secular ethics often look for it in the universally accepted, social moral norms. They are the guidelines for individual conscience and the standards that every individual ought to subject himself to in case of conflicts. It is in this context that one can sometimes hear opinions that society judges certain behaviour, or attitude, morally wrong because "it is not yet ready" to accept it. Not infrequently, these universally endorsed moral norms are intertwined with the existing legal system, or even identified with it. What the Parliament passes as law is proclaimed not only as legal, but almost automatically acclaimed as morally permissible, even right and moral. In the face of such concepts, moral theology must not remain mute but file some very serious complaints.

In European culture, Christianity used to exercise greater or lesser influence on morals and legal systems of various societies (especially Catholic ones), including, of course, Polish society. Social morality, informed by Christian values, provided support to believers in the following dictates of their conscience, though it never reached recognition as their ultimate, objective moral reference. In Catholicism, this title has always been granted to religious authorities: first of all the Scriptures, but also natural law and the Magisterium of the Church. As a consequence of secularisation, these objective points of reference for individual consciences of believers have been challenged. In the course of the last several dozens years, Christian morality, and the so-called widely accepted moral standards, have been growing glaringly apart. The Christian world view disappears from social morality. At the same time, each of the just mentioned religious authorities have been subjected to critical evaluations. The historical-critical method in Biblical exegesis suggests that moral injunctions in the Bible were conditioned by concrete social and cultural circumstances. As such, they are quite inapplicable today, in a totally different world²⁰. Belief that all humans have the same moral obligations, anchored in their common nature (defined as natural law), have been challenged by critics of metaphysics and had to face the charge of falling into naturalistic fallacy²¹. Teaching of the Church

²⁰ Fundamentalistic approach to moral norms contained in the Bible, claiming that they are not affected by the passage of time and therefore always applicable, is as ill-considered as its polar opposite, arguing that all they meant to signify was the Gospel in action in concrete place and time of history. One should distinguish between the moral norms that are timeless and unchangeable, and the culturally conditioned ones.

²¹ The charge that in her justification of moral norms by appeal to natural law the Church employs naturalistic arguments and falls into biologism, does not bear closer scrutiny; at least not in confrontation with the recent teaching of her Magisterium. Suffice it to quote a sentence from John Paul's II encyclical letter *Veritatis splendor*, used in the context of the normative dimension of human corporeality: "(...) natural inclinations take on moral relevance only inso-

on morality – defined as the external norm for individual conscience – and her call to the obedience of faith toward the Church’s teaching office, confirmed by the Second Vatican Council²², is sometimes dismissed as an unacceptable attempt to convert the moral autonomy of the believer into a heteronomy, unworthy of a thinking man²³. Certainly, a critical evaluation of the religious authorities was needed. One should not fail to notice its positive effects. In many instances, it allowed to shake off their historical overload and facilitated the search for more accurate ways of addressing modern challenges. In this context then the transformations we are witnessing today, which can be interpreted as development of a more conscious faith and moral personal maturity and – by implication – civic responsibility, merit a positive assessment.

Criticism of religious authorities, however, has deeply undermined their credibility, with the resulting overemphasis on the role of individual conscience. When we use the word “overemphasis”, we do not question the rule that man should always act in accord with his conscience, and never against it, because only in this way is he able to preserve his moral integrity. What we do want to say is that such a far-reaching challenging of the religious point of view, or restraining it within the sphere of private interpretation, makes believers look for their points of reference in the so-called public morality, which is not infrequently a secular one or, sometimes, outright anti-Christian. Eventually, the moral outlook of the majority of society is awarded with what the religious authorities had been robbed of. But, it begs a question: Are there any convincing grounds for talking about secular morality versus religious morality? Would it not be better to make a clear distinction between what is rational in morality and what is irrational, and judge everything else accordingly? In theory, it is just like that; Christian morality claims to be rational. Theoretically, Christian moral norms can be comprehended and accepted by non-believers. In practice, however, what is the condition of the mind when it wants to judge rationality of moral norms? Is it not a perfectly conceivable thing that one and the same act may seem impeccably rational to a Christian, but utterly irrational to a non-Christian? Or *vice versa*?

far as they refer to the human person and his authentic fulfilment, a fulfilment which for that matter can take place always and only in human nature”. VS 50.

²² GS 50–51.

²³ Teachings of the Magisterium of the Church probably receive the most radical and far-reaching criticism of all. Usually, it is greeted with reserve rather than credence. S. ERNST, *Grundfragen theologischer Ethik. Eine Einführung*, Kösel: München 2009, pp. 127–131. It seems that the key to a correct understanding of the teachings of the Magisterium is an ability to make precise distinctions between its various utterances, taking into account their particular attributes, importance and binding nature regarding the obedience of faith.

Taking human rights, “standards reached once and for all” (*einmal erreichte Standards*) as objective points of reference for individual conscience will not do either. Even though, at first glance, they do seem fitting in very well with the Gospel. But in a world where everybody “has the right to develop and discuss new human rights norms and to advocate their acceptance”²⁴, they fall prey to amendments, negotiation, lobbying and media manipulation. They are too problematic and unreliable to pass as truly objective points of reference for Christian conscience.

The attempts of some moral theologians to assign greater value to individual moral choices by suggesting that it is all about “actually lived convictions” of one’s conscience (*faktisch gelebte Gewissensüberzeugungen*), for which he is ready to bear consequences, may invite considerable interest, but need not command assent. From the formal point of view, this proposal is all correct. But it is far from unassailable in that it leaves the question of a truly Christian moral point of reference unanswered. A terrorist, for example, may have a perfect feeling of “actually lived convictions” of his conscience.

One may wonder at a discrepancy between Christian moral standards and the so-called “generally accepted” ones. But what is even more puzzling are the ever more frequent examples of the lack of discrepancy between the actually lived morality of believers and non-believers. There are two possible reasons for this state of affairs: either the Gospel has permeated society so thoroughly that one cannot discern any dissimilarity in behaviour of its Christian and non-Christian members (if this is the case, then the opinion of the majority should become the reference point for Christian morality); or the Christians themselves have so successfully got rid of Christian values from their daily business that the discrepancy between their faith and their actually lived morality does not trouble them any longer. It is hard to escape the impression that putting excessive emphasis on the capacity of conscience to judge for itself, coupled with equally overhasty devaluation of religious points of reference, namely the Scriptures, natural law and teaching of the Church on morals, may well engender moral confusion and trivialisation of Christian moral standards. It may not be long in waiting when a social *min-*

²⁴ The Yogyakarta Principles expose human rights to danger of modifications in whichever direction their authors manage to get public support for. See *Yogyakarta Principles*, no. 27, in: http://data.unaids.org/pub/manual/2007/070517_yogyakarta_principles_en.pdf (accessed on 14.01.2015).

imum morale is advertised as the *proprium christianum*²⁵. Religious points of reference for Christian conscience are a whole lot more than the so-called “expert opinions”. When it comes to making moral choices, the latter may be treated with equal respect and attention and followed or rejected according to the merits one is inclined to assign them. With the former, Christian man or woman does not have such far-reaching liberty. Using St Paul’s language, they express *typos didachēs* (cf. Rom. 6:17), the binding form of life informed by faith, knitted together with the kerygma about the Good News and the liberating and transforming power of God.

4. Conclusion

In the face of numerous transformations in the sphere of morality in today’s world, the most fundamental question that needs to be posed is actually not (as one might at first expect it to be) about the reaction of the Church and all her members to all that. It would be a rather uncreative and – in the pejorative sense of the word – conservative one. The inquiry should go in the following direction: Do Christians know what they want to give to society? Are moral theologians aware of their contribution to the ethical discourse? Are they really prepared to offer it to society?

In biblical language, Christianity, i.e. every single Christian, be it professional theologian or layman, has a prophetic mission to fulfil. It implies readiness for contestation. There are two options available to Church and moral theologians. The first one is the strategy for minimising losses by shielding the community of believers from the most destructive ideas promoted by those members of society most hostile to Christian morality. It would imply concentration on the issues that mount the gravest assault on Christian morals with an admission that destructive influence of lesser issues is unavoidable. Another option is the endorsement of so-called “political correctness”, that is, welcoming talks on popular issues and avoiding sensitive ones and limiting the whole debate and preaching to less controversial subjects. Both options are problematic. The first one sooner or later ends up in a ghetto, or with a sect mentality syndrome. The second option often transforms their followers into “court prophets”, feted by the mainstream groups, but in fact trivial and utterly

²⁵ The state of morals of the most economically developed countries invites re-examination of the conclusions of a moral theological discussion on *proprium christianum*, which took place nearly half a century ago.

useless. Is there the third option? It seems there is, though its contours are yet to emerge.

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Wiara i moralność

Współczesne przemiany i wezwania w perspektywie polskiej

Streszczenie

Zmiany dokonujące się w świadomości moralnej społeczeństwa polskiego na przełomie XX i XXI w. dotyczą z jednej strony miejsca chrześcijanina jako jednostki i Kościoła jako wspólnoty w nowoczesnym społeczeństwie pluralistycznym, z drugiej zaś wewnętrznego obszaru moralności chrześcijańskiej i jej stosunku do ogólnie przyjętych w społeczeństwie standardów moralnych. Krytycznie trzeba ocenić próby zamknięcia chrześcijańskiego światopoglądu do sfery prywatnej i wewnętrznego obszaru Kościoła. Tak jak ludzie inaczej wierzący oraz niewierzący, chrześcijanin również ma prawo do swobodnego wyznawania istotnych dla siebie wartości i przekonań moralnych. W kontekście dokonujących się zmian warto zwrócić uwagę na jeszcze jedno zjawisko, mianowicie na zmianę rozumienia i definicji takich podstawowych pojęć etycznych, jak sumienie i prawa człowieka. Docenienie indywidualnego sumienia zarówno w kontekście wewnątrzkościelnym, jak i społecznym nie musi oznaczać indywidualizmu i subiektywizmu, jeżeli tylko uznany zostanie zewnętrzny punkt odniesienia dla sumienia jednostki, niezbędny dla wychowania, a także samowychowania moralnego jednostki. W kontekście społecznym są nim prawa człowieka, jednak problemem staje się coraz bardziej ich zakres oraz próby ich redefinicji. W kontekście wspólnoty wierzących obiektywizującym punktem odniesienia są autorytety religijne, jakimi są Pismo Święte, prawo naturalne oraz doświadczenie moralne Kościoła wyrażone w nauczaniu Magisterium. Mimo krytyki, jakiej w epoce posoborowej zostały poddane te religijne punkty odniesienia, zachowują one swoje znaczenie.