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Challenges for Theology in Secularised European Societies

Some notes on the conference “Theology between secularization, secularism and multiculturalism” (Warsaw, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, CSWU, February 21, 2014)

The European Society for Catholic Theology tries to choose topics for regional conferences that are of special relevance to the region where the conference takes place. The Polish colleagues, together with the representatives of the Committee on Theological Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences (CTS PAS) decided on “secularization, secularism and multiculturalism”, a topic that describes a contemporary experience in Poland and allows for a comparison with developments in Western European countries.

Well before the conference, the topic made one fear that very diverse opinions would be voiced during the conference. After the first two papers, however, it soon became obvious that differences were not so much the result of individual positions or theological traditions, but of the history and culture of the nations and societies in which the speakers live, and of the experiences that we have within a particular nation or society. And different experiences that we have on account of our social and cultural milieu produce different ways of searching for answers.

The conference was held in English and Polish with the help of simultaneous translation. The different approaches to the subject presented in the six papers during the conference proved both intriguing and stimulating. The following is a short and selective harvest that has been taken from very rewarding papers.¹

The first part of the Conference was dedicated to the relationship between Theology and Secularization. Prof. Dr. Jan Perszon (Nicolaus Copernicus University of Torun, Poland) inaugurated the conference and asked: “Does the

¹ Not all papers were available to me in an English version. Therefore, unfortunately, the summaries will vary in length and detail. I also would like to thank Dr. Piotr Twardy and Ivana Plocicova for their help.

Church have an antidote against secularization?” Prof. Perszon started from the fact that in Poland the unity between the government and the Catholic Church gradually got lost and brought along an elimination of religion from public discourse. Religion and Catholicism were gradually perceived as being opposed to freedom, equality and human rights in such a way that opposition to the Church seems to equal fighting for freedom. As a result, Western societies are, with some exceptions, “post-Christian societies”. The speaker concluded in his first statement that “the Church has no recipe for dealing with secularization”, but then contrasted this position with a second statement that new phenomena also allow for a new and different view of the role of religion in society in the future.

In a historical overview, the speaker referred to the process in which the relationship between Church and State changed from a clear separation of powers to the domination of the state over the religious life of its subjects and developed a friendly relationship towards the church. A break occurred during the French and the Bolshevik Revolutions. Nowadays, secularization is seen as inevitable. According to Peter Berger, religious people are like small islands in the sea of a secular culture. Yet in the 1960s a “U-turn” could be observed: 80% of the world population believe in the divine, a fact that can be interpreted also as a decrease in secularism. At least in countries outside Europe, religion is visible outside the private sphere, e.g. in political discussions, or in terrorist camps; there are prayer places in offices such as public call centres.

The new development is that religion moves from the local to the global, e.g. through Islamic revolutions and states, but also in African cultures. There is a “religious awakening”: religious leaders have started to use electronic ways of communication, there is a global information system and also financial exchange. The Islamic culture seems to have accepted the fruits of modern states without accepting the separation between religion and the state. In Western culture, this linkage is not practised, though religion touches every field of life. It is the task of religious leaders to bring the importance of religion to the public floor; religious convictions are “political” because they have social, legal, and political dimensions. Vatican II favoured a withdrawal of religion from the public sphere, but this does not mean that all developments in society are acceptable.

From the present situation, one can conclude that in the European context there are no means to overcome secularism. We have become used to privatizing our beliefs. We are giving up active participation in the religious community. A wrong understanding of tolerance prevails that leads to the fact that religion gives up its public space. Catholics after Vatican II have withdrawn from the idea of a Catholic state even in its modified version, whereas the world outside Europe (Asia, Africa, South America) is watching Europe with surprise. A public presence of religion is missing in Europe.

As a consequence, secularization, which can be defined as a “purification of social awareness from transcendence”, is increasing. Religion moves from the public sphere to the sphere of privacy. But with a look at the rest of the world, one can give the prognosis that this is a temporal situation that will be overcome in the future by re-introducing religious activities to the social and political sphere. Religion can contribute to the state: it is a political force for civilization that can create a culture that forms foundations for society and the state.

The second presentation by Prof. Dr. Gerhard Kruip (University of Mainz, Germany) offered a very different perspective: in Germany, historical developments in recent centuries have made it possible for church representatives, engaged lay people and politicians to cooperate freely. While participating in political activities, nobody needs to justify him or herself for defending Christian values, as long as they do not discriminate against minorities. The paper given by Prof. Kruip had the title: “The aid that the Church receives from the present world’ (GS 44) – Encouragements and challenges of secularization for the Catholic Church at the beginning of the 21st century.”

The speaker started by explaining the different notions of secularization. The concept of secularization can be used to describe the general loss of importance of any religion in society (e.g. Eastern Germany); a sort of “de-christianization”, namely the loss of importance of Christianity in a given society; a form of “de-catholicization”, namely the decline of Catholic influence – but not of Christian influence as such (e.g. Latin America); a “de-ecclesiasticalization”, namely the decline of the importance of Church structures, Church organizations and ritual practices for the believers (e.g. Ireland); or a “de-clericalization”, namely a reduction of the power of the clergy within the Catholic Church (e.g. Philippines, small Christian communities). The difficulty of pinning down the processes of secularization in general terms consists in the variety of situations that make clear that modernization does not automatically lead to secularization, and also in measuring it.

The reasons for secularization are partially based in the history of the Catholic Church in Europe and in core values of Christian Faith, such as for example the dignity of the human person, the equality of all human beings (Gal 3,28), and the esteem of human rationality as participating in God’s reason. In spite of these common features, there are notable differences between the processes of secularization depending on whether churches form part of the traditional order of a society or not, whether churches offered resistance during social and political developments or supported them (e.g. their role during revolutions), whether Churches exist in symbiosis with political power or not, whether Churches form a nucleus of national identity against oppression from inside or outside, whether Churches present subcultural identities because there are

different religious denominations in conflict with each other and/or with ideological movements (e.g., communism). The more strongly a religion is dependent on non-religious factors, the more probable is its loss of influence if the political system changes. Other factors that can cause secularization are migration processes, economic development, which seems to undermine religious practice, secular education and mass media. Two decisive factors underlying these developments are the functional differentiation in which the religious sphere becomes an independent sphere in society and thereby loses influence and relevance but gains autonomy, and individualization through which individuals depend less on traditions and conventions and act more according to their own experience and judgement. As a consequence, the value system changes: there are fewer societal values that refer to duties towards others (e.g. obedience) and more values based on duties towards oneself (self-realization, autonomy, authenticity). Churches need to encourage authenticity, and persons who represent the Church should speak and act in an authentic way. The speaker drew the conclusion that only those Churches will be attractive to modern citizens that are open to the personal experiences of individual persons, and respect their pursuit of autonomy and the value of authenticity as expressed in daily life as well as in social forms of living religion. Catholic identity should be understood as “dialoguing identity”.

The document *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II shows ways of appropriating this task: It explains the need to be attentive to the world (no. 1-4), gives a positive view of modernization (no. 7), individualization (no. 17), and functional differentiation (no. 36), and shows the need to learn from the modern world (no. 40-42.44). After explaining in which fields a dialogue between the Catholic Church and society is urgently needed, Prof. Kruip concluded with the thesis that if the Church denies acculturation and sticks to former, historical ways of adaptation to feudalism and absolutism, it risks contradicting its own core values and threatening its own credibility. On the contrary, the Church needs to become a “learning organization” that includes both a reconversion to the gospel by all its members and a reform of its organizational structures.

The second part of the conference dealt with the relationship between theology and secularism. The first presentation in this section was given by Prof. Dr. Jacek Salij (CSWU) and was entitled: “‘And He, the gangster and emigrant, is thinking to return?’ Will this remark by Adam Mickiewicz come true?”

The speaker started with a quotation from the “Philosopher and God-emigrant” of Adam Mickiewicz in which he asks whether God, of whom “our mouths always speak badly”, really wanted to return. By quoting Mickiewicz’s verse, the speaker challenged the “dogma” of the current “illuminated” agnostics

and atheists and their intellectual command that societies should act “as if God didn’t exist”. From their perspective, faith and religious institutions look like purely human inventions, irrational or even harmful and out-dated.

However, it is an integral part of Christian faith in salvation that we accept the Church, which is a gift from God as the gift of the Redeemer’s presence among people. Popular ideas about the coming end of Christianity are based on the agnostic thesis that there is no action by God through Christianity. On the contrary, according to José Casanova, a deeper de-Christianization of Christian communities seems to be just a hypothesis and not an empirical fact. Also saying that former Europeans were more religious than their present descendants is a hypothesis which has not yet been proved. Such a wrong understanding of secularization is linked to the myth that the evolution of humanity can be described as an evolution from superstition to rationality, from faith to atheism, from religion to science. Yet, already in Holy Scripture there are many examples of a massive abandoning of belief in the true God. By referring to the biblical story of Elijah (1 Kings 19.14) who realized that abandoning faith was not as massive as it seemed to be, the speaker asked that we should not misinterpret the situation of faith today. However, he also warned that though the situation of faith is probably not as bad as it seems, it could easily deteriorate by psychological manipulation. If those who in reality are running ahead listen too much to the interventions of those following behind, they might be afflicted by doubts and gradually lose their drive.

The paper referred also to a second aspect of secularization: sometimes de-Christianization originates right within Christians themselves when they are afraid of admitting that they are Christians, e.g. by refusing to affirm publicly that the words “You shall not kill!” mean “You shall not kill EVER!”, or that marriage is meant to last until death and not until spouses get bored. In such cases, they accept being non-believers in order to conform with currents in society and, in the end, contribute to building a world without God.

By referring again to testimonies in the Bible, e.g. that even before Good Friday many of Jesus’ followers left (John 6.66), the speaker emphasized that if even in those times Christ built his Church upon the few that remained, there is surely no generation that does not suffer from some kind of de-Christianization.

The speaker added some points he wanted to underline: First that the Catholic Church would turn into a parody if the number of followers was more important than the truth of God given by Christ. This is why the Catholic Church will not change its teaching about the Holy Trinity or about Christ as the unique Redeemer. Similarly, the Catholic Church would stop being the Church of Christ if it changed its teaching on the indissolubleness of the marriage or its attitude towards abortion and euthanasia in order to increase

their membership numbers. This would mean that the Church is adapting its moral teaching according to the expectations of people.

Those Christians who remain faithful to Christ can deepen their faith. Even those who leave sometimes shortly afterwards become believers. Consequently, all these reflections invite us to see the secularization process that is ongoing in some of the Central European Countries in a positive perspective. Within a non-Christian framework, many evangelical truths, e.g. that everybody is good in his nature, can still be voiced, and claims such as that everybody has the right to live, the right to freedom and other human rights, can be more easily called for when they are formulated in a secularized version.

Even if the scenario is such that our Christian civilization is near to collapse, this can be an important step for Christianity, because undoubtedly the general crisis of a Christian civilisation is linked to a crisis of faith that will lead to a new flourishing of true faith. By quoting a famous expression linked to the history of Warsaw, the speaker ended by saying: “*Fortuna variabilis, Deus mirabilis*” (Fortune is variable, God is miraculous).

The second presentation of the second part of the conference by Prof. Dr. Stephan van Erp (Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands) was entitled “The Sacrament of Public Life. On Divine Promise in Secular Culture”.² This paper, which was read by Prof. Pierre van Hecke in the absence of the author, started from the assumption that theology, if it wanted to engage with public life in secular society, should offer “a view of God’s presence in the secular”. Whereas in the secular context, divine presence usually is regarded as unknowable or is seen only as a theme for theology, public theology aims explicitly at studying publicness and the visibility of meaning in society. The term “public theology” goes back to Martin Marty, who in an article published in 1974 applies it to a narrow understanding of civil religion. In this sense, the word refers to a particular religious tradition that comments on public affairs in a normative and prophetic manner and holds a critical position over against nation and society.

The author took Matthew 13.44, the story of the treasure that is found and hidden again, as a framework of interpretation. In the light of this passage, the secular world is described as “a field in which a treasure is hidden and where everything ultimately happens in order ‘that the Scriptures might be fulfilled’”. In this way, doing public theology means discovering the sacramental structure of public life. This presupposes that Christians take opportunities to participate in the public domain in modern secular democracies and to converse with other citizens on issues wider than religious matters in order to “ethically guide, repair,

² This summary is based on the written form of the paper and contains some literal quotations from the manuscript.

or resist those developments that have proven to be deceptive, unjust or misdirected". Instead of practising a sectarian withdrawal from the secular world as a form of a 'theology of resentment', theologians should engage with democracy and all kinds of societal issues.

The author suggested that a public theology in search of a theological locus in the world would actually profit from a retrieval of a sacramental ontology. He proposed starting from a rereading of Edward Schillebeeckx' sacramental theology, and his metaphysics of presence. Schillebeeckx had learned from Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895-1990) and Yves Congar (1904-1995) that "God is not present to the world in and by the Church alone". Rather it is God's continuing presence to the world that is perceived, expressed and thus re-enforced by the Church. The author referred to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, that formulates that the Church is 'like a sacrament', 'a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race' (no 1). Since Christ was himself the sacramental encounter with God, a Christocentric sacramental view can be applied that sees the Church and the world referring to each other. Therefore it is a central task of the Church and of theology "to gather and seek to embody the present message of God's promise that lives among people".

Schillebeeckx confronts secular culture with the challenging statement that the secular itself can become a sacramental space. The author introduced the "idea of proportionality" by saying that "loyalty to Jesus' message is not preaching the same message, but participating and intervening in the contemporary context in the same way Jesus participated and intervened in his context." In this way, sacraments do reveal "what the world truly is and what our lives as human beings truly are, ... just as Jesus Christ was not divine because he was less human, but because he was truly human." Therefore, "the ultimate goal of public theology is not to mediate the gospel of the past to a godless contemporary world, but to show how this contemporary world itself is the space for the nearness of God's reign."

By referring to Agamben's "Sacrament of language", the author argued that the original understanding of "sacrament" that referred to swearing an oath could serve as a possible approach to a sacramental understanding of public life. He concluded that theology "could offer secular culture a view of God's coming presence in public life: an ongoing relationship confirmed and maintained by a politics of trust, a sacramental performance that will not suggest it could make God's presence itself visible. On the contrary, to retrace the original, intrinsic connection between trust and devotion in the oath, the sacrament of public, secular life should be a sign of the invisibility it lives from and towards."

In the third section of the conference, two presentations were given on the theme of "Theology and Multiculturality". The first presentation of this section

was made by Prof. Dr. Kalina Wojciechowska (ChAT) who dealt with “Limits of Inculturation – The phenomenon of multiculturalism in Biblical Theology”.

After describing traditional and sociological visions of multiculturalism, Prof. Wojciechowska showed that religious faith can have an integrative effect. In the times of the Babylonian Captivity, the model of society was shaped by a deliberate separation of one cultural entity from another, by explicitly avoiding interactions. However, the story of Ruth shows how a person who is bound to two different cultures starts to reflect on how values that are characteristic of one’s own culture can be lived in a different culture, and how living in between cultures can be possible. Such an openness to interaction with another culture contrasts with the Old Testament vision of religious and cultural identity in which even universal salvation can be thought only as a process of belonging or returning to the one God Yahweh (Is 45.21-22).

However, New Testament texts show a more positive vision of inculturation and multiculturalism. Inculturation is presented as an important task for Christianity that requires a refined strategy of balancing the key values of the society of origin and the most important values of the society into which one desires to inculturate oneself. The text of the Septuagint can serve as a good example for such a process. Such a process can be shown to be possible on the grounds of the common nature of all human beings that allows the spread of the gospel in spite of racial, cultural and geographical differences (see Acts 17.18-33), or on the grounds of the self-reflection of the human person that allows for an existential knowledge and a personal experience of the sacred (Acts 9.3-6).

The sixth and last presentation by Prof. Dr. Lieven Boeve (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium) was called: “‘New Times New People’: Christian faith and theology in a post-Christian and post-secular context”.

The speaker first described the accelerating process of secularization in Belgium during the past 30 years that has led to a context marked by detraditionalisation, plurality and difference: only 50% of Belgians declare themselves to be Catholics, whereas 32.6% consider themselves as not belonging to any religious denomination, while at the same time not declaring themselves to be atheists (who form a group of 9.2%). Unlike what has been thought so far, secularization in this context does not describe a path to unbelief, but to a religious pluralism that is not clearly defined. Of all Catholics, 72% are non-practising Catholics, and of the younger generations of Belgians born after 1984, 24% are unchurched in the first and 45% in later generations. Yet among these only 25% are atheists, all the others are interested in some kind of spirituality. The loss of influence of the Church on society is interpreted according to Niklas Luhmann as a consequence of functional differentiation in society: The Church no longer has control over the social subsystems like politics,

economy, law, education and science. As a second point, the privatisation of decision-making makes it possible for individuals to decide matters in different subsystems independently of each other.

Consequently, a change in how people deal with faith can be noted. Christian faith is present but “is no longer the obvious, accepted background that grants meaning”, and modernisation does not lead to the disappearance of religious faith but to its pluralisation. There is no clear line from practising Catholics to atheist Humanists, but rather there is a plurality of positions influencing each other. Traditions do not disappear, but they no longer transfer naturally from one generation to the next. Religious traditions are challenged to think of themselves in relation to difference and otherness, and as challenged to dialogue with other truth claims. Also individual identity is no longer assigned, but needs to be actively taken. However, this does not lead necessarily to individualism: it is also possible to take a decision to act for the common good.

These socio-cultural processes have as a consequence that Christian identity formation is ‘interrupted’. People become aware of the fact that their choices – at least in principle – could have been very different. It is important for any religious identity construction, therefore, that one does not simply oppose the interruption “favouring a discontinuity between faith and context”, nor indiscriminately welcome it by “accentuating the continuity between faith and context”. Rather, Church, theology and individual Christians should both open themselves to the interruption and, at the same time, challenge some of its presumptions or consequences in a way that holds together continuity and discontinuity.

As a consequence, Christians need the competences to freely choose, reflect about and argue for the choice they make: “Christian identity is not a possession but stands out to be continuously re-engaged.” It “concerns the opening of oneself towards the truth of a tradition and its identity constructing capacity” and “instigates a process of continual re-contextualization of the Christian tradition in dialogue with the changing context: both being interrupted by it, and interrupting it.” In this way, Christians are enabled and called to develop a self-critical, reflective and also self-confident Catholic identity.

The contributions of the conference offered a differentiated perspective on the secularisation process in European countries. It seems that the best explanation for this process available at present is the one given by Niklas Luhmann. With the help of his approach one can explain the secularisation process as a process of differentiation of societal subsystems, in the course of which functions that traditionally belonged exclusively to the Church are alternatively offered by subsystems independent of the Church, so that citizens need to make choices with regard to every single subsystem (e.g. primary education, school formation,

religious education, marriage, leisure, worship, work, burial). In this way, the Church visibly loses spheres of influence in public realms. However, this development is not to be matched with a loss of faith in society: there is no direct line leading from secularisation to atheism, and there have always been forms of religious crises. However, the varieties of existing attitudes of faith – from a close to a more distant Catholic faith – are increasing. This is even more obvious in other continents.

In order to keep Catholic faith in Europe strong and to allow for Catholic identity formation, the Church and its members need to reflect continuously about the core issues of Catholic faith along with the developments of secularised societies by dialoguing in a way that allows us to listen carefully to new insights and proposals, to build up the competence to rethink Catholic truth in answer to those new challenges and to analyse critically and appreciate or, if necessary, criticize new options and alternatives in society. By engaging in decision-making in all societal fields, Christians can help find the treasure of the promise of faith even in purely secular contexts and situations.

To build up this competence among all Catholics, the Church is called upon to provide space for sincere and deep discussion of personal insights and experiences in an exchange with Catholic tradition among members of the Church, and encourage authentic expressions of faith. Theology is called upon to take up the challenges provided by new developments and by the variety of belief practices in society, checking feasible ways of dialoguing, distinguishing arguments and options and giving reasons for authentic forms of believing and acting. It seems as if it is no longer possible to teach theology as a knowledge system unless it is explained and guaranteed by experience and faith practice in the context of a given society. By using Karl Rahner's famous expression and changing it slightly, one can arrive at the judgment that "the theologian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all".

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