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Doing Christian Social Ethics in the Czech Republic

Zusammenfassung

Christliche Sozialethik in der Tschechischen Republik ist in den Kontext einer stark säkularisierten Gesellschaft eingebettet. Der Dialog der theologischen Sozialethik mit einer Gesellschaft, die den Kirchen gegenüber meistens skeptisch eingestellt ist und zugleich nicht einfach als atheistisch beschrieben werden kann, stellt eine spezifische Herausforderung für die tschechische Theologie dar. Die Christliche Sozialethik ist folglich – in vielerlei Hinsicht – herausgefordert, die Grenzen des ‚eigenen Hauses‘ zu überschreiten. Im ersten Teil des Aufsatzes wird der historische, soziale und kirchliche Kontext in den Fokus genommen. Dann werden die aktuelle Situation im Bereich der akademischen Lehre der Christlichen Sozialethik an den tschechischen staatlichen Universitäten vorgestellt und die nach 1989 erschienenen wichtigsten Buchpublikationen in Christlicher Sozialethik präsentiert. Abschließend werden einige Herausforderungen für christlich-sozialethisches Arbeiten in Tschechien formuliert.

Abstract

Christian social ethics in the Czech Republic is embedded within a highly secularized society. Since this society is mostly sceptical towards the Churches, but can nonetheless not be seen simply as atheistic, the dialogue that theological social ethics has with society is a specific challenge for theology in the Czech Republic. Christian social ethics is therefore faced with having to cross its own borders in several ways. I will focus in the first part of this article on the historical, social, and ecclesial context. I will then present the current situation in teaching Christian social ethics at state universities, as well as the most relevant publications in Christian social ethics published in the Czech Republic since 1989. Finally, I will outline some challenges for doing Christian social ethics in the Czech Republic.

Christian social ethics is currently taught at all three Faculties of Catholic Theology in state universities in the Czech Republic. We can even say that Christian social ethics is an integral part of theological studies in the Czech Republic – and not only in the study of theology, but also in other disciplines that are taught at Faculties of Theology. If we look at recent developments, we can see that this situation is not a matter of course at all. To achieve a better understanding of the situation of Christian social ethics in the Czech Republic, I first focus on the historical, social, and ecclesial context that is relevant for our theme. I will then sketch the current situation of teaching Christian social ethics at state universities, and present the most relevant publications in Christian social

ethics published in the Czech Republic and in the Czech language since 1989. Finally, I will outline some challenges for doing Christian social ethics in the Czech Republic.

1 Context

In order to describe the context in which social-ethical work is embedded, it is necessary to take a brief look at the recent history of the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic. During the communist period, the Catholic Church lived in extremely restricted conditions and under strict state supervision and control. Theology had very limited access to international theological debates. The only official institution with theological education was the Faculty of Catholic Theology at Litoměřice in northern Bohemia, where priests were trained for all Czech dioceses. Moreover, according to more recent research on church history, the Catholic Church was little prepared after 1989 for the rapid political and social changes that would ensue. On the one hand, this meant that the Church could not prepare itself for the new situation due to the prevailing political conditions, since it lacked experience. Only the oldest generation knew what things had been like before 1948, when the Church lived in 'freedom'. However, the experience of this generation could not be directly transferred to the new situation of a plural society in the 1990s. On the other hand, we can claim, as most studies on the subject do claim, that Christians in 1989 have in the main not prepared themselves for these changes, since they underestimated that the political changes could come so fast. This attitude affected not only bishops and clergy, but also other groups such as the so-called underground Church and individual dissident groups (see Balík/Hanuš 2007, 325). Christian social ethics and Catholic social teaching were not part of theological training during the communist period in the seminary at Litoměřice. Information on social ethics and social teaching of the Church came to the Czech Republic especially through samizdat literature, which "addressed small but important groups of Christian intellectuals, whose reflections were influenced by the contents of Catholic social teaching" (Šrajer 2009, 51).

Reception of the theology of the Second Vatican Council was hampered by political circumstances in the 1960s and 1970s in the Czech Republic. There were several initiatives, including important ecumenical initiatives,

during the brief period of some political *détente* in the late 1960s and in the immediate aftermath of the Council. These initiatives also coincided not rarely with the considerations of those priests who had been imprisoned in the 1950s, who often left prison with thoughtful theological and pastoral concepts that overlapped with Council decisions. These hopeful developments were brought to an end by the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 and by the so-called normalization that followed. While there was enthusiasm for the Second Vatican Council among Catholic intellectuals and many groups of the underground Church, and while liturgical reform quickly prevailed, we should consider its reception by the Czech Catholic Church as a whole in the communist period soberly. Balík and Hanuš (2007, 301) argue that, for “many priests active in pastoral ministry, the Council represented something distant, something that took place elsewhere, in another part of the (free) world, something that could have some influence, but that the home Church must nevertheless live and survive differently”. In addition, lecturers in the Faculty of Theology in Litoměřice had little opportunity to follow current theological debates during the communist era.

After the fall of communism, bishops and the official hierarchy focused on building a complete ‘Church infrastructure’ (including religious orders, educational institutions, free Church media, etc.), but also on the difficult and long negotiating with politicians with regard to new legal relations between state and Church, and the restitution of expropriated Church property. This was made all the more difficult because the actors involved, including newly appointed bishops, inevitably lacked experience. People’s sympathies towards the Churches shortly after the fall of communism (reflected in the first census in 1991) were more a ‘seasonal fact’ or expression of resistance to the outgoing regime than the expression of a conscious religious faith. Scepticism, indifference or open hostility to the Church, whose roots long predate communist period, soon spread again.

The Catholic Church “entered the era of freedom certainly not as a unified organization” (Nešpor 2010, 114). Rather, it was “a plural organism that united the most diverse positions and opinions” (Balík/Hanuš 2007, 325). Only the underground Church represented a colourful organism, containing groups with different theological emphases, pastoral orientations, and life experiences, and often with no or very little knowledge of each other. Differences between individual currents in the post-1989 period were evident especially with regard to the reception of

the theology of the Second Vatican Council and to the future orientation of the Church in freedom. At one pole were rather liberal groups, who wanted and demanded dialogue with society or the continuation of the decisions that the Council had made in 1965; at the other were conservative forces that called for 'the good old days'. The latter saw in the period since 1989 the chance to relativize the decisions of the last Council and hoped to draw directly in their theology on pre-conciliar times and became dominant forces at the renewed Faculty of Catholic Theology in Prague after the Velvet Revolution. In the 1990s, the administration of the Faculty gradually dismissed theologians who theorized and taught in a way that deviated from 'expected guidelines'. Full-time courses in theology were limited to candidates for priesthood, and only an abbreviated form of study was made available to lay students. This lasted until 2002 and had a strong impact on the education of priests. No course on Christian social ethics was offered within the framework of theological studies in Prague until 2002. This only changed with the deep reforms to theological studies in Prague in 2002/2003, when theological social ethics became an integral part of theological studies.

Petr Křížek and others (Křížek et al. 2003) repeatedly emphasize in their analysis of the development of the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic after 1989 that the situation in the Czech Republic demands a great commitment on the part of the laity. Since Czech society is mostly sceptical towards the churches, but can nonetheless not be seen simply as atheistic (see Štica 2016), the dialogue that theology has with society is a specific challenge for theology and for Christians in the Czech Republic, as it is dialogue with non-believers, with people of other faiths, and with people on the margins of the Church (see Štica 2015). That such dialogue is something that people are interested in is shown, for example, by the great popularity of the books written by Tomáš Halík, who is trying to engage in such dialogue. This capacity for dialogue with society requires openness and competence on the one hand, and good education on the other. It is no coincidence that, after accepting the Templeton Prize in 2014, Halík announced that he would invest the prize money in an educational project focusing on this issue. This brings us to Christian social ethics as a theological discipline.

2 Teaching

Christian social ethics is now taught within theological studies at all three Faculties of Catholic Theology and is compulsory course in undergraduate studies. Moreover, in addition to the full-time theology study programme at the Prague Faculty, lay people are also trained in so-called combined study programmes that are comparable with the full-time courses. These semi-distance learning courses (Bachelor and Master's programme) include two full days per month and intensive self-study. Similar programmes exist at other Faculties of Theology. Christian social ethics plays an important role in the Master's programme "Theological Studies" at the Faculty of Catholic Theology in Prague and is a major subject within the curriculum. In addition, the Faculty of Catholic Theology in Prague introduced a Master's programme in Applied Ethics in 2010. Christian social ethics is of fundamental importance in this programme as well. This programme offers not only introductory courses in social ethics (such as introduction to Christian social ethics, history of Catholic social teaching), but also several courses in applied ethics, which are to be assigned to the domain of social ethics (such as political ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, etc.).

Christian social ethics is also a compulsory course at other Faculties of Catholic Theology, both within theology studies and within other subjects that are studied alongside theology at both Faculties. The main focus in Olomouc (Moravia) and České Budějovice (South Bohemia) is on charitable and social work, where Christian social ethics also occupies a significant place.

3 Publications

Publications on Christian social ethics that have been published in the Czech language since the Velvet Revolution can be divided into four areas: a) manuals/study texts; b) doctoral and postdoctoral theses (*habilitation*); c) texts published by the Czech Bishops' Conference Working Group for Social Questions; and d) other important publications in the field of Christian social ethics.

a) *Manuals/study texts*. The situation on the Czech book market, which is very small when it comes to theology, is not unsatisfactory with regard to manuals and study texts in Christian social ethics. There have been at

least four introductory books on Christian social ethics published since 1989, three of which are translations from German. Chronologically, these are: Wolfgang Ockenfels' brief treatise on Catholic social ethics (1994); Bernhard Sutor's book that, drawing on Catholic social teaching, provides a comprehensive discussion of political ethics (1996); and Arno Anzenbacher's *Křesťanská sociální etika: úvod a principy* (*Christian Social Ethics: Introduction and Principles*), which focuses on the methodology, foundations, and principles of Christian social ethics, describes its philosophical context, and offers a historical overview of Catholic social teaching (2004). The second edition of the book, published in 2015, contained a short addition by Jindřich Šrajer, who describes developments in Christian social ethics and Catholic social teaching between 2004 and 2015 (see Šrajer 2015). Besides these books, there is also a book by Cardinal Reinhard Marx, *Das Kapital* (2013), which targets a wider audience.

The only introduction to Christian social ethics published since 1989 and written by a Czech author is by Cyril Martinek, who is not a theologian. Martinek (1998) presents the historical development, principles, and criteria of Christian social ethics, and deals especially with issues of democracy and economy. The book is based mainly on ecclesial documents, but also pays attention to selected thinkers (Michael Novak, Oswald von Nell-Breuning, Rich DeVos, Lester Thurow). It is no coincidence that the only original Czech monograph has been written by a non-theologian. Those involved in Christian social ethics in the Czech Republic immediately after the revolution were mainly academics outside theology (besides Cyril Martinek, there was, for example, the economist Lubomír Mlčoch). Since then, theologians from abroad (Albert-Peter Rethmann in Prague and Helmut Renöckl in České Budějovice) have made an important contribution to anchoring Christian social ethics at the Faculties of Catholic Theology in the Czech Republic. Both pay special attention in their research to socio-ethical issues. It was only since about 2008/2009 that there has emerged a generation of Czech theologians who have graduated in theological ethics with a focus on Christian social ethics.

b) *Doctoral and postdoctoral theses.* As the theological community is relatively small in the Czech Republic, it is not surprising that there is a limited number of doctoral and postdoctoral theses in Christian social ethics published in the Czech language. Socio-ethical doctoral and postdoctoral theses that were published as books in the 2009–2018 period focused on the following: the social thinking of Michael Novak (see Míčka 2009), ethical reflections on the fight against terrorism and

the ethics of war (see Holub 2009), ethical issues related to migration and immigration policy (see Štica 2010a; 2010b), and global governance (see Míčka 2018). The issue of migration and migration ethics should be mentioned in more detail. Albert-Peter Rethmann founded the *Centre for Migration Studies* (CMS) at the Faculty of Catholic Theology in Prague in 2003. This Centre ran several interdisciplinary projects between 2004 and 2014, which led to public events and conferences as well as book publications.¹

c) *Publications published by the Czech Bishops' Conference Working Group for Social Questions*. Specific activities and publications are linked to the Czech Bishops' Conference Working Group for Social Questions. We can divide its activity into two periods. In the first, it worked under Lubomír Mlčoch on the Letter on Social Issues in the Czech Republic entitled *Pokoj a dobro – Peace and Good* (see ČBK 2000). In addition to the Czech edition, the letter was also published in German and English (see ČBK 2001). One of the main features of this document is the critical view that it takes on the processes of transformation since 1989, which were characterized in the Czech Republic by a rapid transition to a market-based economic system and, at the same time, by absence of a firm legal order at the beginning of the economic transformation (see also Šrajer 2009, 51–52; see also Myant 2003). The document attracted an unexpectedly high level of attention. The most important points of the public debate concerning the social letter were captured in a text published two years later (see ČBK 2002). The social letter *Peace and Good* is the only more extensive social-ethical letter that the local Czech Catholic Church has published since the revolution.

New working practices were introduced under the leadership of Jindřich Šrajer SDB, which took the form of workshops involving academics, practitioners, and political actors, as well as public appearances and conferences. The working group has also edited various publications in recent years. Besides new books translated from foreign languages (almost exclusively from German again), it has edited publications by an interdisciplinary team of authors on the 50th anniversary of two important ecclesial documents on social ethics – the Second Vatican Council's

1 The most recent publications of the Centre were focused on: sociological insights into the life of Muslim migrants in the Czech Republic (see Pavlíková 2012), Russian minority in the Czech Republic (see Sládek 2014), and current ethical issues of international migration and immigration policy (see Štica 2014).

pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (see Šrajcer/Kolářová 2015) and social encyclical *Populorum progressio* (see Šrajcer 2017). In both cases, the team of authors tried to ‘update’ the message of both ecclesial documents in the light of current ethical challenges and different perspectives.²

d) *Other important publications in the field of Christian social ethics.* There have also been several publications in the field of Christian social ethics that we cannot include in any previous category. Two thematic areas emerge in several publications. First, economic ethics. We can divide these publications into two categories here, too – translated books and original publications by Czech authors. Concerning the first category, these are (again) the works written by German authors in the 1980s, which filled the empty map of Czech literature on social ethics after the Velvet Revolution. Besides several shorter publications by Manfred Spieker and Karl-Heinz Peschke, we should mention the introductory books by Arthur Rich (1994) and Bruno Molitor (1998). Several books by Czech authors have also been published: for example, those of Lubomír Mlčoch, whose books focus on the ethical dimensions of the economic transformation in the Czech Republic (see Mlčoch 2000) and on the economics of trust and common good (see Mlčoch 2006). We should also mention the work on ethical relations in economics of the Protestant theologian and economist Jakub Trojan (see Trojan 2012).

The second thematic area that various authors have repeatedly addressed is the relationship between human rights and the Christian tradition. These publications range from reflections on the idea of human rights in the Czech spiritual, and especially Czech Protestant, tradition (see Trojan 2002), through an interdisciplinary perspective grounded in the historical sciences (see Hanuš 2002), and up to the presentation of the current international debate on human rights in theological ethics (see Štica 2013).

4 Conclusion

Christian social ethics is now firmly embedded in academic theology, although in some cases it only managed to secure a solid position rather recently. There are currently ‘some new movements’ in doing

2 Another publication reflecting on various issues raised by Pope Francis’ *Amoris laetitia* is currently being prepared for publication.

Christian social ethics in the Czech Republic. For example, the Czech Bishops' Conference Working Group for Social Questions, which brings together both theologians focused on Christian social ethics and expert non-theologians interested in ethical issues of politics, the economy and ecology, is one of the important platforms for the development of Christian social ethics. This chance to cooperate is also very important because research in social ethics is somewhat hampered by the academic system in the Czech Republic, which sees academic staff with relatively high teaching loads. It is evident that the relatively small community of theologians in the Czech Republic is necessarily dependent when it does social ethics on cooperating closely with experts from non-theological disciplines. Christian social ethics is therefore challenged to cross its own borders, which means here not only the borders of its own discipline, but also borders of country and language. It is only through intensive exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experience with expert non-theologians and with theologians from other countries that scholars can do justice to the complex task of pursuing a theological ethics that is commensurate with our time. Dialogue necessarily presupposes active participation. This process comprises several things: listening; absorbing the discussion that is taking place in one's own social, religious, cultural, ecclesial, and academic context; and making an active effort to contribute to this international process of dialogue.

There is still a need for social ethics to be more involved in the public space, which can happen, for example, in the form of short public statements or position papers,³ or of public appearances and publications addressed to a wider audience. The key challenge for theology in the Czech Republic is to pursue dialogue with the largely secularized society, and to participate more in public debates about ethical issues. A precondition of fruitful dialogue is that Christians do not strive to create an 'anti-society' or 'parallel society'; on the contrary, they should express their opinions in the plural civil society as active participants.

3 The Czech Commission *Iustitia et Pax* has published several short position papers on various social and ethical issues in the last few years.

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