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Christian social ethics in Poland: Current status and its socio-historical determinants

Zusammenfassung

Der gegenwärtige Status und die gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen der Christlichen Sozialethik (CSE) in Polen sind durch den historisch-sozialen Kontext sowie die gegenwärtigen Prozesse der Säkularisierung bedingt. CSE ist Bestand der akademischen Landschaft an staatlichen und kirchlichen Hochschulen. Es gibt zwei Wege, sie zu betreiben und zu verbreiten: einen theologischen und einen interdisziplinären. Der erste ist darauf ausgerichtet, die Soziallehre der hierarchischen Kirche zu erklären und zu fördern sowie die Gläubigen in diesem Geiste zu bilden; der andere zielt in Zusammenarbeit mit anderen wissenschaftlichen Disziplinen auf eine empirische Exploration und ethische Bewertung aktueller gesellschaftlicher Phänomene ab. Derzeit handelt es sich dabei um die Energiewende, den sozialen Dialog und die nachhaltige Entwicklung. Die Forschungsergebnisse werden in einer beträchtlichen Anzahl von in Polen erscheinenden Fach- und Theologiezeitschriften veröffentlicht. Die CSE beeinflusst die polnische Gesellschaft eher indirekt, indem sie deren axiologisches und kulturelles System mitgestaltet. Gesetzliche Regelungen und systemische Lösungen, die von der CSE inspiriert sind, werden von sozial und politisch engagierten Bürgern initiiert.

Abstract

The current status and social influence of Christian social ethics (CSE) in Poland has been shaped by the socio-historical context and by contemporary secularization processes. CSE is an element of the academic landscape at state and church universities. There are two ways of practicing and propagating it: theological and interdisciplinary. The former is oriented towards explaining and promoting the social teaching of the hierarchical Church and towards forming the faithful in its spirit; the latter is oriented towards the empirical exploration and ethical evaluation of current social phenomena in cooperation with other scientific disciplines. Nowadays this concerns energy transformation, social dialogue, and sustainable development. Research results are published in a considerable number of specialist and theological journals issued in Poland. CSE has a rather indirect influence on Polish society, contributing to the shape of its axiological and cultural system. Legal regulations and political solutions inspired by CSE are initiated by socially and politically committed citizens.

1 The socio-historical context of the development of CSE in Poland

The development of Christian social ethics and its current condition has a specificity that stems from socio-historical factors. It therefore seems necessary to present these factors briefly. The Catholic Church in

Poland has been an institution strictly associated with Polish statehood and independence in the course of history. The first significant date in the history of the Polish state is 966, the year Prince Mieszko I was baptized. The building of state structures was accompanied by the spread of Christianity and the establishment of Church administration in the Polish territory. From the beginning of statehood the Church shaped the system of values and, consequently, the cultural identity of Polish society – it supported the unity of the Polish state and its independence, which was of particular significance in the times when Poland was not a sovereign state as a result of the partitions (1795–1918), during the Second World War (1939–1945), and under communist rule (1945–1989).

Because of Poland's nearly homogeneous religious structure (with Catholics accounting for approximately 95% of the population (cf. Statistics Poland 2019, 82), the term *Catholic social teaching* (CST) has been widely adopted.¹ Other denominations are Orthodox Christians (approximately 507,000 faithful in 2018 (cf. Statistics Poland 2019, 114) and various Protestant Churches (approximately 61,000 faithful in 2018 (cf. Statistics Poland 2019, 124). Besides, only a few Evangelical and Orthodox theologians conduct a small amount of research into social ethics.

Christian social ethics (CSE) has a long tradition in Poland. The lack of sovereign statehood and the lack of possibilities of conducting independent research as a result of the partitions delayed the development of CSE in Poland as compared to the countries of Western Europe. During the period of the partitions, socially committed Catholics were focused mainly on practical activity. They were inspired by Christian social thought, developed from the beginning of the existence of the Church – for instance, in a variety of more or less formalized Catholic social associations (cf. Majka 1988, 27–280; Strzeszewski et al. 1981). It was not until Poland regained independence in 1918, after 123 years under Prussian, Austrian, and Russian rule, that institutional conditions emerged for the development of scholarly social reflection from a Catholic perspective (cf. Żaryn 2020). The key role in this process was played by the professors of the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), established in 1918, such as Aleksander Wóycicki, Ignacy Czuma, Czesław Strzeszewski, and Antoni Szymański (cf. Wódka/Fel 2020, 9). As early as that,

1 In this text, I will use the term Christian social ethics (CSE) as a synonym for Catholic social teaching (CST).

Antoni Szymański, an intellectual mentor to Stefan Wyszyński – holder of a prewar doctorate from KUL, subsequently Primate of Poland and the spiritual leader of the nation in the communist Poland – endeavored to establish a strong community of CSE scholars, one that could be regarded as a school of CSE (cf. Fel/Wódka 2013). This idea did not materialize until the postwar period, when Strzeszewski put it into practice. This happened in extremely difficult circumstances of surveillance and persecution launched by communist authorities both against Church institutions and against the individuals associated with them. After the Second World War, Poland was probably the only country of the Eastern Bloc in which CSE was practiced institutionally, with research, lectures, and publications devoted to it. KUL played an instrumental part in this, as it was Poland's only university independent of the communist authorities. Building on the prewar tradition, Strzeszewski began to conduct research, give lectures in CSE, and educate specialists in this field at that university. He gathered a circle of students and associates practicing CSE on an interdisciplinary basis while at the same time specializing in other social disciplines, such as sociology, human rights science, political science, economics, and social philosophy (incl. Władysław Piwowarski, Joachim Kondziela, Franciszek Mazurek, Józef Majka, and Jan Krucina). He developed a unique model of CSE and created a scholarly community known as the Lublin *School of Catholic Social Teaching* (cf. Mazurek/Skwierczyński 2006). The prototype for the school's CSE perspective was the model found in the lectures given by *Stefan Wyszyński*, who had special powers in the Church in Poland, granted to him as the Primate of Poland by the Holy See. He was the indisputable moral leader of the nation and the formal leader of the Church. A strong advocate of the development of CSE, he supported research and teaching at KUL and in seminaries. One of his initiatives was to commission Czesław Strzeszewski to prepare a CSE textbook, which was subsequently published in Paris under the pen name of Stanisław Jarocki (1964) and then smuggled to Poland. Strzeszewski also authored extensive studies on the history of CSE and monographs devoted to issues such as human work and property (Strzeszewski 1978; Strzeszewski 1981).

Until the end of the twentieth century, most academic teachers of this discipline at university faculties of theology and in seminaries had been educated at KUL. Apart from studying theology, they received thorough education in social sciences. Jan Krucina and Józef Majka – Strzeszewski's

students – took up work at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław and established a strong CSE center there in the 1970s and 1980s. At the Academy of Catholic Theology in Warsaw (transformed in 1999 into Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, UKSW), CSE has been developed since the 1990s by Aniela Dylus and Henryk Skorowski (1996). The above centers have engaged in intensive international scientific cooperation, mainly with scholars from Germany and Austria. They have also become the main locations where future generations of specialists receive their education.

Currently, CSE academic teachers are mainly theologians without additional university education in social sciences. As a result, there are two ways of practicing CSE in Poland. The first of these can be equated with the Church's social teaching or social theology. It consists primarily in analyzing, interpreting, and propagating the social teaching of the Church, but frequently without an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural reality. This is particularly characteristic of CSE as practiced at theological faculties (cf. Dylus 2021, 24). This type of approach especially serves the purpose of disseminating the social teaching of the Church through pastoral work. This is quite important, given that Poland has a well-developed pastoral care system reaching out to the majority of society and, additionally, to various social categories and professional groups, including Catholic politicians, local government officials, and social activists. The other way of practicing CSE developed at KUL and UKSW consists in exploring the current problems of social and economic life by means of modern empirical research tools, which provides descriptions and scientific explanations of current reality, and in subsequently subjecting them to ethical evaluation against the criteria set out in CSE. This way of practicing CSE is clearly interdisciplinary in nature. It was advocated by Wyszyński (2020) and developed in Poland by Strzeszewski in the school he established. In this perspective, CSE refers to a separate theoretical and practical discipline, characterized by both immutability and developmentality (cf. Piwowarski 1993). What is immutable are the values CSE rests on. The discipline nevertheless develops in two ways. It develops as a result of external factors, together with the changing socio-cultural reality, regarding which it formulates ethical evaluations and proposals for reform. This developmental nature of CSE implies both the need to comment on entirely new phenomena and the evolution of the form of communication to ensure compatibility with the currently comprehensible cultural code. Its *internal* development

also takes place, consisting, among other things, in attaining a deeper understanding of moral justifications, which sometimes results in the formulation of new socio-ethical principles or even new rights of the human person (cf. Sozańska 2019, 31).

The ideas present in CSE were very much alive in Poland in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, CSE often constituted the ideological underpinning for the work of the underground opposition, based on which the Solidarity social movement emerged. The movement initiated activities that led to the fall of communism and the political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Polish society expected that the new order would be established based on these principles – in other words, Polish people expected the implementation of the *social market economy* model. The strong influence of CSE on public opinion and political elites found expression in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of April 2, 1997, in which there are numerous references to CSE. With the years – due to the emergence of different models and views of social life, particularly in the form of the neoliberal perspective on economy and social life – the attractiveness of CSE has diminished. The ideas of CSE are still present in this pluralistic landscape, where they sometimes interpenetrate with other ideological proposals. They are debated, but they are only one of many proposals under discussion.

2 The situation and institutional framework of practicing CSE in Poland

The current classification of sciences in Poland distinguishes fields and disciplines. In the official division, the field of *theological sciences* includes only one discipline: theology. CSE is not formally distinguished as a separate discipline within theology. The formula used to define researchers' interest is: *specialist in Catholic social teaching*. Catholic social teaching is also referred to as a *subdiscipline*.

The formal status of CSE at higher education institutions and universities in Poland varies considerably. Theological faculties exist at only six state-owned universities: in Katowice, Opole, Olsztyn, Szczecin, Poznań, and Toruń. Due to the small number of students and the costs, few staff are employed full-time at these faculties. Moreover, at nearly all of them (except the one in Toruń), CSE-related structures (departments, institutes) have been closed down.

Also, theological faculties at Church-owned universities have only a few CSE departments; the discipline is usually practiced by scholars who at the same time work in the field of moral theology. This is related to the relatively small number of students and classes at these faculties, which, in a way, forces academics to simultaneously work in different research areas. A positive exception among the theological faculties run by the Church is the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław, where there are two CSE departments. At theological faculties, specialists in CSE cooperate especially with scholars working in the fields of moral theology and pastoral theology. They usually focus on the interpretation of doctrine and less often engage in research on current social reality. With secularization on the increase, theologians practicing CSE remain confined to their own circle and find no space for interdisciplinary cooperation with representatives of non-theological disciplines.

There are also two institutions in Poland that function outside the academic structures. The first of these, the Tertio Millennio Institute, established by Maciej Zięba and run in close cooperation with scholars from the USA, particularly from the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D. C., educates social leaders, organizes international summer and winter schools, seminars, and workshops, and conducts research focused on civil society. An important goal of this institute is the popularization of CSE among young civil society activists. The other non-academic institution is the Social Observatory in Wrocław, established and operated by the local archdiocese. It is directed towards research on current social problems as seen from the perspective of CSE and towards documenting and popularizing the achievements of CSE.

In terms of formal status and the scope of research, the situation of CSE is the best at the Catholic universities and at the pontifical university. In Poland there is one Catholic university with full rights of a public higher education institution (the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, KUL), a pontifical university run by the Church (the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, UPJPII), and a state-owned university with church faculties (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, UKSW). At these universities, CSE is located at the faculties of social sciences, where CSE departments function. This discipline is practiced in an interdisciplinary manner, in cooperation with social sciences, mainly with sociology, political science, social work, and family studies. At KUL, research is centered on the issues of migration (cf. Fel et al. 2022), social problems (cf. Lenart-Kłóś 2020), human rights

(cf. Mazurek 2001; Wódka 2015), just socio-economic order (cf. Fel et al. 2019), and sustainable development (cf. Marczak 2021). At UKSW, scholars conduct studies into human rights, particularly the right to religious freedom (cf. Mazurkiewicz 2022), and into political and economic ethics (cf. Dylus 2016a; Dylus 2016b; Gierycz 2021). Scholars from the UPJPII focus on the ethical dimension of war and peace (cf. Zwoliński 2003) and social policy (cf. Mazur 2018). This requires social ethicists to be competent in other disciplines (and to have formal qualifications in the form of academic degrees in social sciences), but at the same time opens up areas of interdisciplinary cooperation and offers a possibility of exerting ethical influence on the resolution of current social problems.

In Poland there is an association of CSE academic teachers, who meet annually at scientific conferences devoted to a particular social problem of the present day and to the current issues of the association and the CSE community. The latest ones have concerned issues such as the new populism, intellectual property, the precariat, and poverty. The outcome of these conferences is published in the *Meetings of Academic Teachers of Catholic Social Thought* series. Fourteen volumes have been published so far (cf. Burgoński 2012; Tułowiecki 2014; Fel/Adamczyk 2015; Marczak/Mazur 2017; Dylus/Sowiński 2018). The universities also organize many scientific conferences on the current social issues discussed in CSE. These are usually interdisciplinary events, with participants including specialists in disciplines outside the humanities.

Several specialist academic journals and popular science periodicals in CSE are issued in Poland. Some of them are entirely devoted to publications in CSE, while in others such publications occupy only a part of each volume. The former include the Polish-Italian journal *Spoteczność. Studia, prace badawcze i dokumenty z zakresu nauki społecznej Kościoła* (Society: Studies, Research Works, and Documents in Church Social Teaching), issued in Poland by the *Civitas Christiana* association and in Italy – as *Societa* – by the Giuseppe Toniolo Foundation. Apart from reporting the results of Polish research, one of its advantages is the regular presentation of Italian Catholic social thought. The latter type of journals includes *Roczniki Nauk Społecznych* (Annals of Social Sciences), edited at the KUL Faculty of Social Sciences, and *Chrześcijaństwo – Świat – Polityka* (Christianity – World – Politics), published by the UKSW Institute of Political Sciences. Moreover, CSE issues are present in numerous theological journals that do not specialize exclusively in CSE. There are also regional periodicals devoted to these problems, such

as Lower Silesia's *Nowe Życie*. The few publications on Evangelical and Orthodox social ethics are usually the outcome of research conducted by Catholic theologians working in the field of ecumenical theology and appear in ecumenical journals, such as *Studia Oecumenica*, issued at the University of Opole. Texts in the field of CSE can also be found in Catholic popular science periodicals, such as *Więź*, *Znak*, and *W drodze*.

3 Institutional presence and public influence of CSE

CSE is present in the structures of Polish Bishops' Conference in the form of the Social Council, consisting of experts working in the field of CSE and in other social sciences. The Council takes a stance on current social problems, inspiring and drafting the social documents issued by the Episcopate. In some dioceses, for example in Katowice and Poznań, there are also social councils appointed by the local bishops. Another institution propagating CSE is the Catholic association *Civitas Christiana*, which has numerous regional branches throughout the country. Each year in Warsaw it organizes the Catholic Social Teaching Festival, with participants from Poland and from abroad, including entrepreneurs and politicians. Regional branches undertake many educational initiatives in their respective towns and cities. Other local associations engage in such activities too.

The ideas of CSE are deeply ingrained in Polish culture. They continue to be disseminated through pastoral care and preaching. With Sunday Mass attendance at 36.9% before the coronavirus pandemic, in the fall of 2019 (cf. Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego SAC 2020, 24), its influence is still considerably large. According to the latest sociological research, the Christian system of values is recognized even by nonbelievers (cf. Trzebiatowska 2021). On the other hand, social proposals emerge that are based on other systems of values, frequently secular ones. Poland's case seems to support the assumptions of the theory of primary and secondary ideologies, formulated by Bernd Wegener and Stefan Liebig (1995) based on international comparative studies of perceived social justice across countries that included post-communist ones. According to this theory, the way of perceiving social justice is determined by the values characteristic of particular societies, specific to the religions dominant in their past that are deeply rooted in their culture. The fact of Polish culture being permeated with Christian values has recently manifested

itself in people's spontaneous engagement in helping war refugees from Ukraine. Support has been provided to approximately 3 million refugees – there was no need for refugee camps, as Polish people mainly received these people in their own homes.

The socio-economic system in Poland is based on the ideas of CSE. The key principles and values promoted by CSE, such as the dignity of the human person, subsidiarity, solidarity, common good, social market economy, and family protection, are stated in explicit terms in the Polish constitution of April 2, 1997. Their actual implementation, however, depends on the ideological orientation of those currently in power. In recent years, the realization of the demands of CSE is visible in the solidaristic social policy, especially in family policy (according to Eurostat, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children was 26.6% in 2015 (cf. Eurostat 2016) and 17.0% in 2020 (cf. Eurostat 2020) and in decreasing the disparity between the richest and the poorest social strata, for example through tax reduction – including a considerable reduction for those with the lowest income – and by increasing the minimum wage. Also, energy transformation activities are based on balancing the social sphere, the economic domain, and the natural environment, as recommended by CSE.

The social influence of CSE in Poland tends to be indirect. It takes place not through provisionally proposed solutions, but through the contents of CSE gradually becoming ingrained in the religiously homogeneous society, internalized, and only subsequently applied in legal regulations, institutional solutions, and social work. Neither institutional Church propagating its social teaching nor scholars working in the field of CSE, presenting the results of their research and their recommendations, have direct causative power that leads to their prompt application.

4 Main challenges for CSE in Poland

Though partly the same as in other European countries, the current challenges for CSE in Poland have a specificity associated with the historical determinants of socio-economic development and with the current socio-political situation. One such challenge is the issue of energy transformation. Poland is facing the task of finding stable sources of energy that will replace coal and other non-renewable resources. What seems to be a realistic alternative is atomic energy, which, however, arouses

ethical controversy. A big ethical challenge is the social division that has emerged in recent years, running across the national, regional, parish, and even family communities. It stems from the sharp political conflict between the opposition and the ruling camp, which sometimes makes it impossible effectively to pursue even the obvious goals of the common good. Therefore, what seems to be important is the need for dialogue between different social groups and the search for points of contact with groups that have a different ideological orientation. Another necessary element is competent commitment on the part of both academics and community activists, encompassing not only CSE but also the assumptions of other ideological perspectives.

After years of neoliberal policy and trickle-down theory, despite the considerable progress made in recent years, disparities in development between the country's regions and between social strata remain a challenge. The development of medical sciences and biotechnology brings many challenges in the ethically sensitive area of biopolitics. In this context, it is essential to increase the interdisciplinary character of CSE, especially when practiced at theological faculties. Its assumptions include cooperating with and using the achievements of other disciplines, particularly social ones, whereas its practitioners often rely mainly on the doctrinal teaching of the Church. Despite the intensifying secularization, CSE practiced in cooperation with representatives of other disciplines and in dialogue with socially committed Catholics has considerable potential and enjoys popularity. Its personnel resources, however, are currently insufficient to fully respond to interest it inspires and to the needs that arise.

Also, broadening international cooperation, at least in the European continent, may facilitate effective research on the ethical aspects of new phenomena. A favourable circumstance for undertaking such activities is the current science policy of the Polish state, in which strong emphasis is placed on internationalizing research and the publication of its results.

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