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Christian Social Ethics and Social-Ethical Thinking in Hungary

Zusammenfassung

Die Katholische Sozialethik ist die Disziplin innerhalb der Theologie, die wahrscheinlich am empfindlichsten auf das lokale Umfeld reagiert. Die Christliche Sozialethik (CSE) ist heute in Ungarn durch eine gewisse Ambiguität gekennzeichnet: Sie ist die einzige theologische Disziplin, die mit anderen akademischen Disziplinen in einen Dialog treten kann, die aber auch einer weiteren „Professionalisierung“ bedarf. Die theologisch-ethische Reflexion über soziale Fragen hat in Ungarn eine lange Tradition. Die CSE hat in den Jahren nach dem Fall des Kommunismus in Ungarn beachtliche Fortschritte gemacht und sich als eine sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb der Theologie anerkannte Disziplin etabliert. Allerdings muss sich die CSE in Ungarn noch in drei Bereichen weiterentwickeln, um ihren besonderen Platz unter den akademischen Disziplinen zu finden, um die einzigartigen Merkmale der ungarischen Gesellschaft in ihre Theorien zu integrieren und um sich für Entscheidungsträger transparenter und zugänglicher zu machen.

Abstract

Catholic Social Ethics is the discipline within theology, which is probably the most sensitive to the local setting. Today Christian social ethics (CSE) in Hungary is characterized by a certain ambiguity: it is the only theological discipline that is able to enter into dialogue with other academic disciplines, but it is also in need of further “professionalization”. Theological-ethical reflection on social questions has a long tradition in Hungary. CSE has made reasonable progress in the years after the fall of communism in Hungary establishing itself as a discipline recognized both within and beyond the realm of theology. However, CSE in Hungary still needs to develop in three areas: to find its distinctive place among academic disciplines; to integrate the unique characteristics of Hungarian society into its theories; and to make itself more transparent and accessible to decision-makers.

Catholic Social Ethics is the discipline within theology, which is probably the most sensitive to the local setting. Although it is founded upon a coherent theory which revolves around principles such as the dignity of the human person, communal solidarity and subsidiarity, it is open to development through adapting to the social challenges that arise from historic change. In the period from the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Laudato si'* (2015) we can see a constant shift of focus, not just concerning particular topics (labour, totalitarianism, globalism, environmental crisis, and so forth), but also a development

in the response to these challenges, such as the introduction of new principles for consideration (those of subsidiarity and sustainability, for example). Since this article has been written in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, we can experience an ongoing theological and social-ethical reflection about the current situation, which, in many respects, is unique in the history of mankind. The significance of such principles as solidarity and subsidiarity are discovered in the turmoil of the efforts to mitigate the malign effects of the pandemic. Owing to the novelty of this situation, an overview of the situation in Hungary cannot be provided here.

Nevertheless, this report on the state of Christian Social Ethics (CSE) and social ethical thinking in Hungary also aims to adopt the sensibility to the local and idiosyncratic that has characterised Catholic social ethics and the social teaching of the Church from its very beginning.

1 Christian Social Ethics in Hungary

CSE today in Hungary is characterized by a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, it is seen as the only theological discipline that is able to enter into dialogue with other academic disciplines. This is strengthened by the caritative-diaconal work of the church, which can be appreciated irrespective of religious affiliation. Thus, there is a high demand for social ethics as a theological discipline in Hungarian public discourse. On the other hand CSE is still in need of further “professionalization”. Although there are reputable experts in the field as well as many initiatives to propagate Catholic social teaching and to make it part of the public discourse, a well-structured professional framework for the discipline is still lacking in Hungary.

This ambiguity is due to various social and historical factors, which include the changing role of the church in Hungary and how seriously it is taken in the society; the position of Catholic tertiary institutions within the broader educational system and the room these institutions allow for the development of social ethics as an academic discipline; and also the challenges Hungarian society faces and the opportunities it provides its citizens. Although the Church might be able to offer a response to these challenges, the necessarily required academic reflection is frequently missing.

2 The Historical and Social Background

Theological-ethical reflection on social questions has a long tradition in Hungary. Topics, such as religious freedom have been discussed in the public arena and in academic circles for centuries. The importance of the topic is due to coexistence of different Christian denominations in Hungary, which resulted in the very first declaration of religious tolerance in Europe at the Diet of Torda (1568). This decree encouraged a mutual cooperation between the different Christian denominations in matters that concerned general social welfare/the general welfare of the society.

But as far as the historical memory of Hungarian society is concerned, the decisive events are the battle for independence in 1848–49, and even more so the Treaty of Trianon (The Paris Peace Treaty of 1920), the Second World War, the 1956 Revolution, the era of communism between 1945 and 1989, and finally the entrance of democracy in 1989. They not only define how Hungarian Catholics think about social questions, but also explain how they approach issues of social justice.

2.1 Between the Two World Wars

This is one of the reasons why CSE became a driving force behind many positive social changes between the two world wars, first taking the necessary theoretical steps on the basis of *Rerum Novarum*, and then urging social reform, especially in the form of educational and land reform (Petrás 2015,12). Unfortunately, except for a short time after WWII, there was no place for a new generation of social ethicists to carry on this progressive line in Christian social thought. This was due to communist oppression, which erased theological thinking from academic institutions. Although a handful of seminaries could still operate, a true exchange between theological and secular academic thought was not possible during the 40 years of communism.

2.2 Socialist Gagging

The persecution of religious bodies was aimed at depriving them of the means by which they could shape society in any way whatsoever. Church-maintained schools were closed and public religious assemblies

were banned or regularly inspected by the state's apparatus of oppression, primarily represented by the secret police. The Catholic and Protestant churches nevertheless managed to maintain their presence in Hungarian society both in traditional (e. g. the parish system) and novel (e. g. underground movements) ways (Bögre 2002, 39–40). The new position in which the church found itself resulted in a continual reflection upon the role of Christians, their faith and their church in the society, whose outcomes ranged from martyrdom to an enforced cooperation with the state (Bertalan 2018). Although there were some attempts to forge an academic dialogue between Marxism and Christian theology, these were controlled by the state and almost invariably concluded with the message that Christians were obliged to be loyal to the socialist state and be active in building a new, more humane society (cf. Goják 1976). Despite these restrictions, the church carried the memory of an alternative social order throughout the decades of communism. It became a church of the martyrs and the poor and achieved a certain stability even when forced to the fringes of the society.

It is not surprising that international contacts between theologians became increasingly precious in the decades of communism. Hungarian theologians, and those working in the field of social ethics, were helped enormously by their fellows in western countries, especially from German-speaking ones, who provided them with resources indispensable for their teaching. Although we cannot speak of a theory in social ethics that was peculiarly Hungarian, ongoing debates in western theology were known to Hungarian theologians, despite the fact that they worked in isolation and had little chance to do research or publish their writings.

2.3 After 1989

Miklós Tomka put it neatly when he said that since the downfall of communism in 1989, “the victims have begun to rebuild their own system. The creation of a democratic, pluralist society does not start from scratch, however. It must be built on the remains of the past” (Tomka 2005, 7). This was especially true for theology in Hungary after the change of regime. The socialist system collapsed without providing any sense of catharsis in its wake: communism did not have its Nuremberg trials and the brave new world had its instabilities. It was not the land of milk and honey (Máté-Tóth/Mikluscák 2000). There was a religious boom in the first

years, and the church started to rebuild its expropriated institutions. The expelled religious orders could return, and church-maintained schools and institutions of higher theological education could reopen. But after 40 years of oppression, the church and academic theology had to face the debris left by the country's communist past. The return to political power of the former state party, the conflicts that surrounded the reopening of church-maintained schools all put the church in a difficult position. Tertiary theological education returned, but faced enormous challenges, such as the lack of well-trained qualified teaching staff and a professional administrative system.

2.4 Consolidation

In the last decade, church institutions – both social and educational – have gone through a process of consolidation. The current FIDESZ-Christian Democrat coalition sees the churches as partners in enhancing the common good, especially in the spheres of charitable work and education. This is not only due to the government's respect for the historical contribution the church has made to Hungarian society. It is also the recognition of the need for the social resources that the Christian churches may offer the country, where civil society tends to be rather weakly organized.

This process of consolidation is also felt in the world of academic theology. What is still needed is not only practical answers to the major social challenges within the Hungarian society, but also the participation of Hungarian theologians in theoretical discussion and debate. For better practice entails sound theory.

3 Teaching and Publication

Today Hungary has one Catholic university (Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest) and nine colleges of tertiary theological education maintained by the Catholic Church. The latter have the same rights as universities and issue the same degrees, although they have only one faculty. All Catholic institutions of higher education are sponsored by the state to the same degree as state universities. All the colleges have a seminary for the training of priests, except for the Episcopal Theological College of Pécs, where only lay students study.

3.1 Teaching Social Ethics in Hungary

Social ethics is an organic part of theological training at all of these institutions. It is a separate subject from moral theology, although the person teaching the two subjects is often identical. As is the case in other theological disciplines, social ethicists have found it difficult to participate in public discourse about social-ethical matters. Professors responsible for the teaching of social ethics in Hungary have mostly been clerics who, owing to the shortage of priests, have also had to fulfill pastoral duties. Thus, it has been a shortage of both institutional and personal resources that has stood in the way of Christian social ethicists from taking part in discussions and debates.

This has changed considerably in the last decade, primarily due to the fact that theology, and especially Christian ethics, has gained the interest of the public more than earlier on. Catholic ethicists are invited today to represent a Christian social-ethic perspective at academic forums, as well as in the media. Moreover, the number of academics working in CSE has grown, many of them researching the social teaching of the Church regarding a particular matter. This is certainly a positive development; nevertheless, this discourse is often restricted to a consideration of the history or the principles underlying the social teaching of the Church without any reference to local challenges issues.

3.2 Cooperation with Other Disciplines

A cooperation between social ethics as a theological discipline and other academic disciplines has emerged at two tertiary colleges. The Episcopal Theological College of Pécs aims at a combination of social ethics with bioethics at its annual international summer school and in the research and teaching organized around it. In recent years the topics they discussed have been at the intersection of the two disciplines (e. g. Poverty and Health, Potentials of Ageing, Africa: Bioethical Approaches to a Continent).¹ The Sapientia College of Theology in Budapest also aims

1 <https://pphf.hu/afrikarol-tartanak-nyari-egyetem-et-a-pecsi-puspoki-hittudo-manyi-foiskolan/>

at combining two disciplines in its further-training program, “Christian Social Principles in the Economy” in cooperation with experts in both theology and economics.²

3.3 Publications

After 1989 the number of publications in the field of social ethics has risen rapidly. The major documents concerning the social teaching of the Church have been published with commentaries (Goják/Tomka 1993). Several books have also been published with the aim of providing orientation for students of theology, for example: *Gazdaság és erkölcs (Economy and Ethics)* (Muzslay 1993) and *Az Egyház szociális tanítása (The Social Teaching of the Church)* (Muzslay 1997), both written by István Muzslay SJ; and *Az Egyház társadalmi tanítása (The Social Teaching of the Church)* by Ferenc Beran and Vilmos Lenhardt (Beran/Lenhardt 2003). Arno Anzenbacher’s textbook on CSE has also been translated into Hungarian (Anzenbacher 2001).

Church institutions and foundations have also supported the publication of material that treats the social teaching of the Church, as well as Christian democratic ideas. The commission *Iustitia et Pax* (now called *Caritas in Veritate*) of the Hungarian Bishops Conference was also one of the motors that supported publishing. Also, foundations like the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Hanns Seidel Foundation, and the Barankovics István Alapítvány sponsored and organized publications in the field of CSE. Leading politicians, economists, academics and theologians took part in this discourse sponsored by these foundations, which allowed the academic discipline CSE to enter the public sphere.

There is no Hungarian journal dedicated solely to CSE. Theological journals such as *Mérleg*³ and *Távlatok*⁴, however, often publish articles in the field. The series “*Erkölcsteológiai Tanulmányok*” (*Studies in Moral Theology*) is also an important forum for the exploration of social-ethical matters. Journals that deal with related disciplines, for example, law (*JURA, IAS*), sociology (*Acta Sociologica*), politics (*Kapocs*) and

2 <https://www.sapientia.hu/hu/tanulmanyiugyek/kepzesek/kereszteny-tarsadalmi-elvek-a-gazdasagban>

3 www.merleg-digest.eu

4 www.tavlatok.hu

criminology (*Határrendészeti tanulmányok*) are also more than willing to accept articles about the social teaching of the church. Series of books devoted to the ethics programs of Catholic institutions of higher education also treat Catholic social ethics.⁵

Today one of the most important forums for catholic social teaching are the yearly “Kattárs” (Catholic Social Days) festivals, which combine academic exchange with the goal of popularizing the social teaching of the church.⁶ The social institutions and the charity organizations of the church can also publicize their activities at these events. A different city hosts “Kattárs” each year, making it part of their yearly festival program. The combination of academic exchange, popularization, community building and arts cultural events (concerts, exhibitions) creates a platform to connect with a broader, more composite audience.

4 Current Topics

Many of the topics CSE is concerned with are also part of public discourse in Hungary. One example is the subject of environmental crisis – in Christian terms, the protection of the created world –, as discussed within and beyond the bounds of the church. *Laudato si'* received a very positive favourable response in Hungary, which resulted in many environmental initiatives within the church and beyond. A good example is the series of talks organized by the “Párbeszéd Háza” (House of Dialogue), a training center run by the Jesuit Order in Budapest, which focused on both the pope’s encyclical and the documentary, *Demain (Tomorrow)*.⁷ The thoughts expressed in *Laudato si'* are also echoed in the speeches of János Áder, the president of Hungary (Áder 2020). But it would be unjust to say that the protection of the created world was a topic that

5 Ethics series published by the Episcopal Theological College of Pécs: *Az élet kezdete és vége. Bioetikai és szociális tanulmányok* (2019); *A teremtés értéke – Az ember méltósága* (2017); *Kettős hatás: Helyettesíthető-e az etika matematikával* (2015); *Az egyház a család szolgálatában* (2014); *A remény jelei a krízis idején* (2013); *Család és fenntarthatóság* (2013); *Für eine Kultur des Lebens* (2010); by Sapientia College of Theology: *Az igaz/élet felé, Mit üzen Neked az Egyház Társadalmi Tanítása?* (2015); *Emberközpontú gazdaság, Szakkönyv az etikus és fenntartható gazdasághoz* (2017).

6 kattars.hu

7 <https://parbeszedhaza.hu/esemeny/aldott-legy-teremtesvedelmi-programorozat>

began to be discussed within the church in Hungary in 2015. Already in 2008 the Conference of Hungarian Catholic Bishops published one of its most detailed documents, which had the title *Our Responsibility for the Created World* (MKPK 2008). It was written in an academic style and was accompanied by a collection of articles on environmental issues (Baritz 2008). It was accompanied by two other booklets that offered advice concerning the teaching (Lów 2008) and pastoral application (Nobilis 2008) of the ideas formulated in the document.

The two social letters distributed by the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference also met with approval, since the issues they raised concerned Hungarian society as a whole. While the letter entitled *Toward a More Just and Brotherly World* (MKPK 1996) focused on the challenges Hungarian society had faced since the change of regime, the later document named *Renewal in Love* addressed "four significant problems of our time: population crisis, the situation of education, poverty and the questions raised by mass movement of people" (MKPK 2019). The bishops' conference has done so on account of the 52nd International Eucharistic Congress, which will take place in September 2021 in Budapest: They have connected seemingly secular issues to a theological event, in order to give an example of how faith and religious practice can serve as a guide to social-ethical reflection. Moreover, this short letter succeeds in combining successfully local issues with global concerns.

The problems addressed by the document belong to the field of CSE; however, their thoughtful analysis from a social-ethical perspective has yet to be carried out. Disproportionate incomes, the exodus of young people to richer countries in the west, as well as the future of smaller nations and of languages spoken by fewer people are problems faced not only by Hungarians, but by many other central European countries. This is also true with regard to the (growing physical) distance between different generations of the same family, which has been caused by the phenomenon of increasing geographical mobility, and also the situation of Roma people in Hungarian society. These are questions which should be the concern of CSE.

Beyond the letter itself, there are many other issues which social ethicists in Hungary might address. The issues mentioned above are open to further elaboration. For example, the future of smaller nations and of the languages spoken by a much smaller number of people entails a much greater level of solidarity with Hungarian communities, who found themselves outside the political borders of Hungary after World War I.

Their right to preserve their identity and language should be raised as a social-ethical concern.⁸ The changing labour market is also a topic in need of a more detailed social-ethical analysis. Disproportionate incomes, the exodus of young people to richer western countries, but also the influence of work conditions on families and the decisions they are called upon to make about having children need to be discussed with special attention to the situation of Hungarian circumstances. The situation of Roma people, and also of people groups living in small, less developed settlements in Hungary should also be discussed in a much more differentiated manner.

CSE should not only approach these social problems as material for criticism, but also as openings for improvement. Solidarity with Hungarian communities living outside the borders of Hungary, the changing labor market, and Hungary's large Roma population hold many potentials for development. This is also true for international support, which holds many potentials for help and solidarity.

5 Conclusion

CSE has made reasonable progress in the years after the fall of communism in Hungary establishing itself as a discipline recognized both within and beyond the realm of theology. Further progress is nevertheless required in three areas. The first is to consolidate not just CSE as an academic discipline, but also to distinguish social ethicists from academics working in other disciplines. They should be seen as addressing issues in the field of social ethics from the particular perspective of Christian tradition and practice. The second is that social ethicists in Hungary need to pay far more attention to the local characteristics and the peculiarities of the society. In particular, making more use of the insights provided by sociological research in the country. The third is that they should make their work more transparent and accessible to decision-makers, whether they should happen to be politicians or representatives of the church. By putting into practice these three suggestions CSE working hand in hand with the social teaching of the Church, will more easily be able to make the move from theory into social praxis.

8 The biggest Hungarian communities outside Hungary are in Romania (1.5 million), Slovakia (500.000), Serbia (300.000), Ukraine (170.000), Austria (70.000), Croatia (17.000), and Slovenia (10.000).

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