

Eva Ďurková – Peter Kondrla (eds.)

*Christian Values
and
Sustainable Society*



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Christian Values and Sustainable Society

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Prof. ThDr. Patrik Maturkanič, PhD.

Prof. Dr hab. PaedDr. Jan Zimny, PhD.

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Foreword

The present volume, *Christian Values and Sustainable Society*, contains a selection of papers presented at the conference of the same name held on 17 April 2024. The publication was prepared as part of the APVV-22-0204 project and represents one of its scholarly outputs. The thematic focus of the volume is directed toward philosophical-theological and ethical reflection on selected aspects of human existence that are relevant to the discussion of sustainability in a broader anthropological, axiological, and cultural context. Particular attention is devoted to questions of human identity, conscience, responsibility, relationality, and the value-based foundations of personal and social life, as well as to the role of religiosity and spirituality in the formation of moral consciousness.

Special attention is given to reflections on the dignity and value of human life in the context of contemporary bioethical, legal-ethical, and social debates, as well as to considerations of asceticism, care for creation, and ecological responsibility within the perspective of Christian theology. These thematic areas are complemented by historical-philosophical and theological analyses of selected authors and thinkers whose work provides interpretative frameworks for a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Christian tradition and the challenges of contemporary culture.

The volume presents a thematically and methodologically coherent set of studies which, from various scholarly perspectives, seek to offer a systematic reflection on the relationship between Christian values and the concept of a sustainable society. The aim of the publication is not to formulate a single interpretative line, but rather to create a space for academic discourse that highlights the complexity, inner plurality, and philosophical-theological depth of the subject matter. The preparation of this volume was carried out in cooperation with the Institute for Humanities and Sustainability.

Eva Ďurková and Peter Kondrla
Editors

The Essential “Closure” and “Openness” of Human Identity in the Theistic Existentialism of Pavol Strauss

Peter Juan Pablo Mária Bako

Abstract

Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy has long presented man as having an unchanging being. A being that is permanent guarantees the individual a permanent identity, subjectivity, personal self, as well as his permanent human nature (essence, definition). We might say that man is essentially and substantially “closed” – without any possibility for ontological change. Existentialism, which proclaims the “openness” of human nature, radically breaks with this position. Essential identity is merely a plastic, changeable, impermanent instance – and thus, the product of subjective decisions and temporal creation. The acceptability of the philosophical ideas of Pavol Strauss in the current issue is based on the fact that the beliefs of the Nitrian thinker are, on the one hand, explicitly Thomistic, but on the other hand, his reflections fall squarely within existentialist ideas. Thus, the unique contribution of the Nitrian philosopher lies in his original attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, that is, to acknowledge the open ontological status of man without thereby disturbing his closed ontological status. Strauss tactfully distinguishes within his Collected Works between the “Real man” (closed) and the “True man” (open); between “soul” and “spirit”; between creation in the “image of God” and growth according to the inner “model of perfection”.

Keywords: Identity; Existentialism; Closure; Openness; Soul; Spirit; Image.

Introduction

According to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, no one can say: “Today I am more than I was yesterday,” just as no one can say: “Today I have somewhat died.” Either *I am*, or *I am not*. Either I have being, or I do not have being.

Being is, therefore, an unchanging, constant and *given* component of human structure. It neither departs from nor enters into it in a variable way, but rather forms and establishes it, thereby guaranteeing the selfhood, subsistence and identity of the existing human being. This identity is human – that is, identity has a rational nature, essence and definition. Being, therefore, serves as a guarantee for the human entity of both: the general human nature and the particular personal identity, subjectivity and personal *Self* or *I* [1]. Therefore, no one can say: “Today I am generally more human,” nor can one say: “Today, the individual John Bacon is more John Bacon.” Being is stable

in the entirety of human entity. Thomas Aquinas says: "Esse autem est aliquid fixum et quietum in ente," meaning "Being is something fixed and unmoving in the entity" [2]. In this sense, for Thomism, the essential identity of a person is "**closed**" – that is, it does not allow for any ontological change or alteration of being in existence.

On the other hand, we have the movement of Existentialism which advocates the essential "**openness**" of human structure and essence, because there is no stable being that would guarantee this stability [3] (p. 362). According to the father of Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, the being of a human is "what it is not, and is not what it is" [4] (p. 32). A person forms his/her being, that is, his/her personal identity, as well as his/her human nature or general essence only later, based on his/her free actions. This led Sartre to a simplified philosophical formulation: in the case of humans "existence precedes essence" [5] (p. 70). That is: the individual first *exists*, first is born, comes into the world, but it has not yet been revealed what exactly has come into the world. The individual first *is*, and only later *becomes*; only later does it acquire essence and identity. In Existentialism, the essential identity is understood as a plastic, changeable, unstable instance – and thus, as the product and result of subjective decisions and temporal creation. For existentialists, a person gradually becomes human, self-determines, auto-determines and self-creates, meaning that individuals have the power to gradually define themselves, or even to (re)create themselves. On one hand, we have the metaphysical stance of Thomism which emphasizes the "closed" ontological status of the human person and on the other hand, the direction of atheistic Existentialism which grants it an "open" – in Heidegger's words "unlocked" [3] (p. 364) – ontological status.

Strauss's unique contribution to this topic lies in the fact that his roots and beliefs are based on Thomism [6] (pp. 261-262), yet paradoxically his reflections directly align with existentialist ideas [7] (p. 83). Together they form a *Theistic Existentialism*. The unique contribution of the philosopher from Nitra, therefore, lies in his attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, that is, to acknowledge the *open* ontological status of the human being without undermining its *closed* ontological status.

1. The Existentialism of Pavol Strauss

And indeed, the existentialist statements of the thinker from Nitra are more than frequent. In a certain book, he writes: "A man only gradually becomes man" [8] (p. 368), clearly adding that this is a process of growth which is "aimed at the fulfillment of one's own being" [8] (pp. 371-372) [9]. In another publication he writes: "When a

man becomes human, he is still not human. For everyone, it is a point in the universe of time and destiny. And it is uninvocable, but always capable of a reduction. Perhaps this is why there are so many reduced people. The beginning is most clearly realized from the perspective of the end. Every life is made up of decisions, stereotypes and breaks" [6] (p. 251). In his book *Man for No One*, the thinker from Nitra openly confesses the existentialist thesis that *existence precedes essence*, when he writes: "I actually got lost within myself. And I must [...] make out of the transient Self the essence of being, from the shadow make something permanent like a statue which needs eyes for its existence in order to be able to perceive it" [8] (p. 400). In all these – and countless other – expressions, Strauss is not merely using figurative language to metaphorically emphasize the importance of one's personal development, maturation or growth. In the work *Life is Only One* the author expresses it this way: "In order not to be a metaphysical junk, a person must clarify their position in their inner universe. This will necessarily be reflected outward" [9] (p. 189). As Ján Gallik notes: "According to Strauss, man is every moment something and someone different inside himself" [12] (p. 50).

With all these statements, Pavol Strauss is, of course, not undermining or rejecting the Metaphysical-Thomistic tradition of the constant, fixed, given – in a single word: *closed* – human structure. It is as if Strauss were simply saying: "No one falls out of his essence..." [11] (p. 131). However, within this essence, the author also identifies an *open* aspect which is equally constitutive.

2. The "Real man" and the "True man"

In the publication *Ecce Homo* which also bears the subtitle "How We Become What We Are Meant to Be", Strauss states:

"The problem of man is first the problem of the *real* man, as he is, and then the problem of the *true* man, as he should be. The problem of the real man is the problem of his origin – physical, historical, and metaphysical – his existential givens, as well as his posthumous direction; in short, [it is about] the visible segment of a meteor similar to a luminous path going through the atmosphere of life. The problem of the truly true man is his ideal correction. That is, who the man is, what he has become and what he can and must be, if he is to be at all" [12] (p. 161).

When Strauss says: "The problem of man is first the problem of the *real* man, as he is, and then the problem of the *true* man, as he should be," it is clear from the context that Strauss's existentialism is by no means synonymous with boundless freedom or the free dispersion in some arbitrary illusion. No one can become an animal, an angel or some fictional character like Spider-Man just out of vanity. The *true* man, who is on the *open* road of becoming what he must become, is closely connected with "truth" — with that transcendental property always tied to being as being [13] (p. 274), and thus to reality, to the *real* man, out of which the true man emerges. In other words, existentialism arises from metaphysics, not the other way around. First, something must be, so that it can change. In the words of Aquinas: "Agere sequitur esse," meaning "action comes after being," or literally "action follows being".

On the other hand, Existentialism claims that first we *act*, first we change and only later do we realize that we *are*. In this sense, the Spanish existentialist José Ortega y Gasset asserts that man does not change; man "is change" [16] (p. 34). Likewise, for Sartre, it is not that man has freedom, but rather that "man is freedom" [5] (p. 39). In Existentialism, the subject, as the bearer of the predicate and action, does not exist. Strauss's existential reflections, however, are merely an attempt to view the human *reality* from a new perspective which, in the end, reaffirms the author's anthropological-metaphysical position rooted in Thomism [19] (p. 95). His existentialism is therefore clearly theistic, not atheistic. Indeed, it is Thomas Aquinas himself who allows us to admire the human being from the perspective of a certain "constitutive openness" to the transcendent which exists in the soul and which the Angelic Doctor calls *potentia obedientiae*, through which the individual is brought "to some higher realization to which he is not brought by a natural agent" [18].

3. "Soul" and "Spirit". Bearers of Two Different Immanent Images

Strauss – unlike Thomas – does not identify this openness with the capacities of the "human soul." He repeatedly places and categorizes it within the framework of the "human spirit" [9] (p. 370). The Thinker from Nitra thus divides the essence of man into the soul and the spirit which he distinctly differentiates. While the soul is the guarantee of the Thomistic closure of human nature, the spirit represents the existentialist "openness of spiritual systems" [16] (p. 90); while the soul embodies a *substantial form*, the life of the spirit is *amorphous* and thus without *form* (Gr. *morphê*) [18] (p. 146); while the form of the soul cannot be destroyed, only betrayed, the spirit challenges the individual to build its form – to build it from the possibilities of "the

amorphous structure on the basis of which the future man is formed" [10] (p. 207). And so, as Strauss summarizes: "Body, spirit, soul – this is the unity of man" [21] (p. 125).

The relationship between closure and openness, between the soul and the spirit, between Metaphysics and Existentialism, is further highlighted in the writings of Pavol Strauss when he distinguishes between two images that are inherently embedded in human immanence. Just as the human soul bears the image of God, so too does the spirit bear an image within itself. *The divine image of the soul* is indelible, whereas *the image of the spirit* is formable; the former reflects immutable identity, while the latter represents developmental potential. In this way, it is as if the individual experiences life in relation to two images – as if living in two worlds. The first is an expression of givenness, constrained by the limits of specific boundaries, while the second is like a liberated flight for the immanent growth of the spirit. "Living in two worlds becomes an obviousness and a stereotype. Indeed, we are here, and 'in effigie' (in image) we are there. Where our heart pulls us, is the key to unknown worlds. Even in prison, we fly through the universe. But the universe always grows within us" [9] (p. 493).

a) The image in the soul, following Thomistic reasoning, is an expression of individual fixed identity: *I am*. This fixity is based on the fact that we are created in the image of God, that is, in the likeness of the immutable God's "I am who I am." (Exodus 3:14). That is to say, if man is the image of God, and if God is *the One who is*, then the essence of man must necessarily *be*. The subjectivity of the human *I* is manifested here as an objective reality because God is the reality *par excellence*. We can summarize this with the following motto: "Deus est, ergo sum," which is simply the reversal of Strauss's order: "We are because God is."

"The inner development goes from concentration to the presence of God. From subjectivity to objectivity. I am. This is the first step. The last is in God's word on the mountain of Horeb: 'I am who I am.' In that lies the gap between our being which is only borrowed, a reflection and a shadow, and the Being which is self-sufficient and encompasses all else. And so, we are only because God is. And this profound, voiceless silence of the general divine life can fill us with power and happiness. After all, we are a part of God's being. [...] We are truly 'God's image.' We are because He is" [14] (p. 240).

b) The image in the spirit: As for the human spirit, just as we find the "image of God" in the human soul [14] (p. 240), so we find "another image" in the spirit. It is the "model

of perfection, self-sacrifice and holiness that is immanently embedded within it" [10] (p. 201) and upon which the individual is meant to shape himself. It is a kind of type, pattern or project that the human spirit carries and safeguards within its interior, to then fulfill it. Within the spirit – the spiritual immanence – lies the primordial image – the "archetype" [20] (p. 551) [21] in the form of a particular calling or vocation which adorns the spirit of each individual. From this perspective, the spirit – the "spiritual core" – manifests itself as capable of sensitivity and growth, listening and learning, decision-making and gradual development [9] (p. 364). Indeed, the human spirit is the "realm of decision-making" [12] (p. 137), a power that reveals not merely the closed aspect of human immanence but also its open aspect.

At this point, it seems that Strauss closely aligns with the personalist thinking of Karol Wojtyła, the later Saint Pope John Paul II. In his 1978 philosophical article *Subjectivity and the Irreducibility in Man*, Wojtyła points out, through phenomenological analysis, a certain constitutively open element in the human structure which – in agreement with Strauss – presents itself as the imperative of a personal task. He writes:

"In the experience [...] the personal structure of self-determination also reveals itself [...]. The dynamic structure of self-determination tells man in every case what is *given* to him and at the same time what is *entrusted* to him as a task. It is in this way that man reveals himself to himself through his actions, through the internal decisions of consciousness as one who is constantly given to himself as a task, who must constantly affirm, verify and therefore, in a certain sense, 'conquer' the dynamic structure of his Self, which is given to him in the form of 'self-possession' and self-mastery. [...] All this rich and multifaceted reality of experience is not just a certain element or aspect in our understanding of man but his true and proper dimension" [34] (pp. 1325-1326).

And indeed, for Strauss it also holds true that if an individual does not take into account this essential dimension, this openness of the spirit to its image, archetype, or model of perfection – or, in Wojtyła's words, to his "task" – and replaces it with some artificial "typology" or swaps it for "other types", for "alien projections", then he will easily "lose himself". Strauss often describes such a state as "reduced man" [13] (pp. 162-163):

"Man, influenced by external and internal invectives, gradually changes into a ruin of himself. Over time, he becomes hard to recognize. He can no longer recognize himself, for he has lost his inner

pattern. In constant confrontation with the times, he often faces continual new assaults and his internal stereotype keeps changing. He is reflected in other types, reacts in alien projections, connects with inappropriate human, social and spiritual combinations. Thus, man loses himself. However, the foundation of every individual is his spiritual essence. Man emerges from himself and can only rise within his own original archetype. When he strays away from it, he can no longer be captured by a characteristic as a definition" [20] (p. 551).

4. *The Image of the Soul and the Image of the Spirit in Harmony of Unity*

However, by distinguishing the image of the soul from the image of the spirit, the author does not intend to create space for any kind of splitting within human interiority or essence. Although the soul and the spirit are distinct spheres of human immanence, their respective images are not antithetical to each other. On the contrary, they are in a close and essential relationship, within which the image of the soul reflects indestructible life, while that of the spirit reflects life that is changeable, gradual and projective:

"The sculptor sees his idea in the boulder and chips away at it piece by piece until a figure, or his dream trapped in stone, appears. In the same way, our Creator chips away the unnecessary protrusions and coverings until God's idea emerges from us. And we must, in that process of revelation, cooperate in spirit so that the model remains in us, into which we must fit ourselves to become what we can be. First, in alignment with that original plan, in which self-awareness is part of creation that only changes forms of being and is and remains a piece of indestructible yet changeable life. We are constantly becoming man. Although our roots are still firmly planted in being" [9] (p. 370).

Strauss's "being planted in being," the closure in identity, is expressed by the soul. Openness, on the other hand, is expressed by the "process of cooperation in spirit." *The image of God in the soul* is the force that prevents us from abandoning – going beyond our identity, while *the image in the spirit* is the force that keeps us constantly dissatisfied and drives us toward the fulfillment of the personal plan of our life/existence. Both tensions, forces and images are essential, encoded in the structure of human immanence. At this point, it seems that Strauss is very close to Thomas Merton, not only because of similar life experiences but also due to their way of thinking:

"There is an instinct for novelty, renewal, the release of creative power in us. We try to awaken within ourselves a force that will truly change our lives from within. Yet, the same instinct also tells us that this change is a return to the deepest, most original and most personal part of us. Rebirth does not mean becoming someone else, but becoming oneself" [24] (p. 61).

In order to see these two images in a common substantial unity or cooperation, we could use the example of the ancient philosopher Plotinus. Although the intention of this prominent representative of Neoplatonism differs in its context, it still helps us better understand Strauss's intentions. The ancient philosopher speaks of only one original image of the soul which, however, may be covered by various unrelated layers, to the extent that it creates the impression of a completely different image — one completely different from the original. Only by removing the inappropriate additions — or in Strauss's terms: "the unnecessary protrusions and coverings" of the foreign aspect — we discover that beneath them lies nothing other than the original image, life and plan.

"But you were the whole, and because something was added to you, you became less than the whole. That which was added is not positive (for what can be added to the whole?), but is entirely negative. A person who is becoming someone is no longer the whole, because by the act of becoming, he has introduced negation. And this negation remains until it is rejected. Therefore, you grow again by eliminating everything that is foreign to the whole, and when you remove these things, the whole becomes manifest again. It does not need to come in order to be present; it is always there, and it is only your moving away from it that keeps it from appearing. However, moving away from it is not the same as leaving it behind—it is simply turning your back on it while it remains present" [24] (pp. 1165-1167).

Plotinus emphasizes that man was already everything, fulfillment, the whole, but since something beyond the whole was attached to him, he became — within his image — less. Similarly, the thinker from Nitra highlights such an essential wholeness which only the "reduced man" cannot attain. "The reduced man can never be whole; he is always just a piece of himself, for a moment, in a changing place. [...] Everything is only momentary. Even evil is only a momentary evil" [25] (p. 33).

Conclusion and Integration into the Global Context

In summary, it is true, on the one hand, that Strauss speaks here of the divine image, in the likeness of which man was created, and in this sense man, is closed in the essential immanence of his soul. On the other hand, the author speaks of the "archetype", the "primal image", the "model" or the individual "calling", and in this sense, the individual is open in his essential spiritual immanence. In the first case, the individual is guaranteed an irreducible identity rooted in the immortal soul, while in the second case, it is stated that only "beyond the limits of decision lies the identity of spirit and action" [12] (p. 370).

A similar attempt to reconcile two paradoxical positions – Metaphysics and Existentialism – can also be observed on a global level. The closed nature of substance, which does not ignore its constitutionally open side, is exemplified by the Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri. He carefully distinguishes "between two different things: substantiality and substantialness" [27] (p. 93). "Substantiality" expresses the *closure*, what does not change: the Aristotelian substance, while "substantialness" reflects the openness in the transcendental function of human structure. In this second case, however, it is not an essential openness to *any* realization, that is, "to another reality, but openness to one's own reality..." [27] (p. 69). In other words, we speak of the openness that does not allow me to become *anything* – based on current emotion, whim or mood, but (precisely) that which it is *possible* for me to become (which fits within the real possibilities of a human being). Zubiri explains:

"The human substantialness is a structurally open construct towards the reality of its own character. It is a reality that must be brought to its realization in a transcendental manner. This is the transcendental function of the structure. This structure contains a principle whose transcendental function is to constitute the human reality as if through realization; a principle through which it is constituted as realizable; a principle by which it is determined to be realized; a principle through which it becomes temporally actualized" [27] (p. 95).

At this point, Strauss certainly aligns with Zubiri. In other words, the existentialist philosophy of Pavol Strauss would be misinterpreted, if not maliciously, if incorporated into the framework of the contemporary dreadful ideological currents that uphold the unfoundedness, fluidity, capriciousness and mutability of the human essence — i. e., the depths and background of human existence. In short: "It is dreadful when life hangs on a single sentence. It is dreadful when fate hangs on a single mood. It is dreadful when the fruits of objectivity grow from the tree of subjectivity" [28] (p.

313). On the contrary, Strauss's stance, which paradoxically acknowledges either the closed or open nature of the essential identity, finds its justification in light of his anthropological-metaphysical understanding of the human structure. Such an understanding does not, in this case, question the Thomistic integrity of man's immanence, as expressed in the words: "For me, the world of the inner self is a certainty, immanence is a certainty that should not be rejected" [10] (p. 167). This is also why we consider the philosopher from Nitra and his — likely unconscious — attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable as deeply relevant and acceptable today, where Metaphysics and Existentialism often stand in radical and unacceptable opposition regarding the issue of essential identity.

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PhLic. Mgr. Peter Juan Pablo Mária Bako

Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

e-mail: pietro.bako@gmail.com

Contemplation, a Basis of Action: Josef Pieper's Virtue Ethics for Sustainable Living

Andrea Blaščíková

Abstract

This paper explores sustainable living through the lens of virtue ethics, emphasizing the integration of human potential with the broader order of creation. Drawing on the Christian philosophical reflections of Josef Pieper, it argues that sustainability is not merely a technical or utilitarian pursuit but a deeply relational and moral endeavor. A contemplative approach to reality—characterized by attentiveness, receptivity, and respect—reveals the intrinsic value of creation and humanity's role as co-creators within God's providential design. The paper revisits the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, courage, and temperance—and their essential contributions to sustainable living. Prudence enables the discernment of what is good in complex situations, while justice fosters harmony by ensuring respect and care for creation. Courage strengthens the will to act in alignment with the good, and temperance cultivates inner balance, allowing desires to be ordered for the flourishing of both humanity and the natural world. Ultimately, sustainable living is achieved through the cultivation of virtue, which transforms human action into a participative and respectful engagement with creation. This holistic vision invites individuals to fulfill their highest potential by fostering harmony with creation, contributing to the flourishing of all beings as part of an interconnected and divinely ordered whole.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics; Sustainability; Josef Pieper; Contemplation; Prudence; Justice; Christian Philosophy.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of sustainability through the lens of virtue ethics, with a particular focus on the work of Christian philosopher Josef Pieper. In contemporary discourse, sustainability is predominantly approached through scientific and technical frameworks, often emphasizing innovative solutions to pressing environmental and societal challenges [1, 2]. While such approaches have provided valuable insights, they frequently overlook the deeper, contemplative dimensions of human understanding—what Pieper refers to as *intellectus*. These dimensions are crucial for embedding ethical reflection into sustainable practices. Without this integration, sustainability risks becoming a narrowly technical or procedural endeavor, detached from the transformative influence it should exert on individuals and communities.

This paper contends that the tradition of virtue ethics—especially as articulated by Josef Pieper—offers a more holistic and meaningful framework for addressing the challenges of sustainability. Grounded in the cultivation of character, virtue ethics shifts the focus from external rules or utilitarian goals to the moral development of the person. Central to this perspective are fundamental questions such as: *Who am I?* and *How should I live in harmony with the world?* These inquiries place ethical living and social responsibility at the core of sustainable practices. By fostering virtues such as prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, individuals are empowered to approach sustainability not merely as a set of prescribed actions but as a way of being—one that harmonizes personal flourishing with the well-being of the environment and the common good [3].

Through this exploration, I aim to demonstrate that Pieper's framework of virtue ethics offers unique resources for fostering the ethical commitment and transformative mindset essential for sustainable living. First, I will elucidate Pieper's concept of virtue, emphasizing its grounding in a contemplative mode of perception, and contrast this with exploitative approaches to reality. Second, I will explore how this contemplative way of seeing is transformed into a participative way of acting in the world. Third, I will apply this framework to the four cardinal virtues. In doing so, I hope to show that in Pieper's virtue ethics, contemplation not only precedes action but also sustains and enriches it, fostering a lasting harmony with both the natural world and the broader human community.

1. Virtue in the Perspective of Josef Pieper

In the philosophical tradition revived for contemporary readers by Christian philosopher Josef Pieper, virtue is understood as *ultimum potentiae*—the highest realization of what a human being can become [5] (I-II, q. 55, a. 1 ad 1), [6]. It encapsulates the essence of humanity and the fulfillment of human potential. Virtue is achieved when an individual follows an inner prompting—a primordial impulse toward the good: "*the good is desirable*"—and heeds the primary voice of conscience: "*the good must be done*" [7]. Thus, virtue emerges as the pursuit of this innate impulse to "become" and "be," representing both the continuation of the creative work initiated at creation and the fulfillment of a person's true self. Guided by the inner impulses of reason and will, the cultivation of virtue is inseparably tied to the created order [4].

Understanding this connection between personal virtue and the reality of creation is essential. Virtue cannot be attained without cultivating a perceptive acceptance of

reality as it is. It is not about conquering or exploiting the world for personal comfort, independence, or convenience. Instead, it requires opening oneself to reality and forming a harmonious relationship with it.

In the philosophical tradition, two distinct intellectual approaches to reality are identified: *intellectus* (perception or contemplation) and *ratio* (discursive reasoning or analytical thought). *Ratio* refers to the human capacity for examination, analysis, comparison, differentiation, deduction, and proof. It is methodical, systematic, and underpins the methodology of science. *Intellectus*, on the other hand, signifies a receptive, contemplative mode of knowing: “to open one’s eyes receptively to whatever offers itself to one’s vision, so that the things seen enter into us, so to speak, without any effort or strain on our part to possess them” [8] (p. 25). Unlike *ratio*, which relies on logical operations to arrive at understanding, *intellectus* achieves an immediate insight into reality, apprehending it as it is in the present moment.

In contemplation, effort and labor are set aside, and attention is wholly dedicated to reality. The contemplative individual does not seek to exploit reality for personal gain but instead desires to perceive and relate to it fully. This form of knowing is inherently loving and unifying, with the will’s only act being its consent to what the intellect perceives in its pure vision [9] (p. 68).

Since the dawn of the modern era, *ratio*—logical and active reasoning—has become the dominant framework for approaching the world. While this mode of thinking has yielded scientific and technological advancements, it has also led humanity to treat nature as a resource to be controlled and exploited for the satisfaction of needs and desires, often at the expense of humanity’s ultimate purpose and direction [10] (p. 118). This reductionist, utilitarian mindset prioritizes efficiency, control, and material progress, while disregarding the intrinsic value of creation. The result is a fragmented worldview, where human actions become disconnected from their deeper ethical and ecological consequences.

A virtuous approach, rooted in *intellectus*, offers a necessary corrective to this exploitative mindset. While *ratio* is indispensable for scientific discovery and technological innovation, it must be guided by the contemplative wisdom of *intellectus* to ensure that such progress serves the common good rather than narrow self-interest. Contemplation fosters a sense of wonder and interconnectedness with creation [9] (p. 84–85). It unveils the intrinsic value of the natural world, not as a means to an end but as a reflection of a higher order. Through *intellectus*, we come to understand that sustainability is not merely a technical problem to solve but a moral relationship to cultivate.

The need for integrating *ratio* and *intellectus* becomes particularly evident in the context of modern innovation. As Hartmut Rosa [11] (pp. 15–19) observes, innovation is often celebrated as a driver of economic growth. However, this relentless pursuit frequently undermines sustainability. Industries such as automotive manufacturing, aerospace, and computing deplete valuable natural resources, including precious metals, while generating toxic waste. This highlights the urgent need to pair scientific reasoning and innovation with a broader ethical vision—one rooted in the contemplative insight of *intellectus*. By reshaping the objectives of scientific inquiry, contemplation steers it away from exploitation and toward „*spirituality-shaped environmental sustainability*“ [12]. Restoring this balance allows human creativity to align with the deeper purposes of creation, ensuring that progress contributes to the flourishing of both humanity and the natural world.

True harmony with the entirety of existence can only be achieved by cultivating the “silent perception of reality” (*intellectus*) alongside logical reasoning and scientific knowledge [6] (p. 149). Contemplation involves a conscious surrender of power and submission to a “higher power” discerned through the contemplation of creation [13] (pp. 140–143). Unlike the scientist who might distort reality through practical intentions, the contemplative seeks to perceive reality as it truly is. In this act, the contemplative reflects reality rather than extracting from it. By abandoning haste, plans, and self-serving desires, the contemplative offers their full attention to the world, forming a unity with it [14].

Deep self-knowledge and a contemplative understanding of our place in the world lead to sustainable action by restoring our connection to the whole. By addressing the fragmented and exploitative tendencies of modernity, a virtuous approach rooted in *intellectus* offers a path to ethical and ecological renewal. It enables humanity to pursue sustainability not as a technical achievement but as a way of being that reflects our highest potential.

An individual who engages in a contemplative mode of seeing—for example, recognizing the profound splendor of fresh water after quenching unbearable thirst—touches upon a deeper truth: “*Everything which is, is good, worthy of love, and loved by God*” [13] (p. 142). Such experiences, particularly when repeated, transform the individual. They cultivate an enduring sense of gratitude and reverence, reshaping one’s interaction with the world. These encounters reveal the intrinsic worth of creation—not as a resource to exploit but as a gift to cherish and steward. Over time, this way of seeing nurtures an inner disposition that aligns sustainable action with profound respect for the interconnectedness of all life.

In the next chapter, we will explore how a harmonious relationship with reality, rooted in the contemplation of one's place in the world, activates and integrates all aspects of the human person—reason, will, and emotion. This contrasts sharply with the narrower concept of sustainability, which focuses primarily on informed action and the logic of behavior aligned with scientific knowledge about the world.

2. The Contemplative Approach to Reality

A contemplative approach to reality allows us to understand the human being as part of a greater whole—a being who is not born perfect but develops through cultivating harmonious relationships with the totality of existence [8] (p. 90), [7]. These relationships involve three fundamental dimensions: knowing (seeing), accepting (loving), and co-creating. Human free activity, or co-creation, is rooted in a prior recognition of reality, its acceptance, and the subsequent fostering of its best possibilities.

Harmony arises when the will embraces what reason perceives and commands, and when reason discerns reality and directs what ought to be [15] (p. 8). However, this harmony can be disrupted when the will is dominated by passion, which obscures reason's ability to perceive reality impartially. Similarly, reason itself can become clouded by passion, perceiving only what a constrained will directs it toward. In contrast, harmony is achieved when the will aligns with reason, and reason remains attuned to reality, drawing its knowledge directly from what is [16] (p. 11–12), [17] (p. 65). In this dynamic relationship, divinely given reality, human reason, and human will interact in a profound exchange.

Reason (both *intellectus* and *ratio*), when properly attuned, recognizes that created reality is not to be conquered or exploited for selfish gain. Instead, it is to be subordinated to divine order, enabling the individual to become who they are meant to be. If the will adopts this recognition and makes it the measure of its decisions (known as the *optio fundamentalis*), the person embarks on the path of the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance [15] (p. 33).

Should a person, in freedom, fail to choose this path—fail to choose to be themselves in the fullest sense—all subsequent decisions will carry the weight of this initial failure. Such a person may fall into a habit of decision-making where actions are measured solely by their utility or personal benefit, rather than their alignment with the good. Their orientation toward prudence, justice, courage, and temperance is overturned, replaced by the principles of expediency and utility. In this state, reason becomes

subservient to self-serving calculations, and the individual shifts from pursuing wisdom and virtue to becoming a tactician or even a manipulator [15] (p. 4).

This disordered approach is vividly illustrated in the biblical parable of the rich fool:

“The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” ‘ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16–21).

The rich fool’s fundamental error lies in choosing material accumulation over inward richness. True richness emerges not from external possessions but from an active engagement with reality, a mode of seeing and knowing that transcends pragmatic self-interest. To be “rich toward God” is to cultivate this interior richness through virtue, aligning oneself with the divine order.

To illustrate the transformative power of a contemplative approach, consider the following thought experiment: Imagine walking through a garden. At first glance, you might notice the ripening pears and feel a desire for them, perhaps even enjoy eating one. At this level, your interaction with the garden is utilitarian, centered on satisfying your personal needs. However, if you linger and give the garden your full attention, it may reveal something deeper. You might begin to see it as an artist does, noticing its vibrant colors, intricate shapes, and harmonious beauty. Or, like a philosopher, you might marvel at the order and unity of the whole, and the garden becomes for you a symbol of the cosmos.

Then, something unexpected happens. As you observe, you notice a branch sagging under the weight of its fruit or thirsty birds seeking water in the summer heat. In this moment, your perspective shifts from mere observation to participation. The contemplative gaze broadens your awareness, inviting you to take part in the greater harmony of creation. You are called to act—not out of utility or self-interest but out of care for the whole.

This distinction between seeing the garden as a source of utility and seeing it as a symbol of vocation highlights the transformative potential of contemplative knowing. Silent, selfless contemplation does more than reveal what must be done; it aligns the individual with the good of the whole. This contemplative mode of seeing calls for

participation that is rooted in love and responsibility, rather than calculation and exploitation.

By grounding action in contemplative insight, one's decisions become attuned to a higher order of being. The contemplative approach, which fosters a deeper relationship with reality, transforms the way we act and live. It offers a path toward sustainable and ethical engagement with the world, not as a matter of technical efficiency but as an expression of humanity's highest potential.

3. Virtues for Sustainable Living

The traditional doctrine of the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, courage, and temperance—provides a foundational framework for addressing the challenges of sustainability. These virtues guide human behavior toward harmony with both the natural world and the human community, offering an ethical and spiritual approach to sustainable living.

3.1. Prudence: Seeing the Good in Complex Situations

Prudence, often described as practical wisdom or the "mother" of virtues, enables individuals to discern the good in specific situations and determine the best path to achieve it. Josef Pieper describes prudence as embodying *"cleanness, uprightness, openness, and impartiality of being, elevated above all difficulties and expediencies of the merely 'tactical'"* [16] (p. 15). Unlike mere strategic calculation, prudence reflects a sensitivity to reality and a commitment to justice and the common good.

The biblical story of the rich fool illustrates the dangers of imprudence. While adept at tactical thinking, the rich fool pursued his own material gain, neglecting his responsibilities to others and creation. Such shortsightedness fosters exploitation and aggression, making sustainability impossible. True prudence, however, seeks pathways that uphold justice while preserving the integrity of creation. It involves not just applying principles but also understanding the complexities of specific situations and the possibilities of those involved [18].

For example, a sustainable business leader guided by prudence might balance profitability with long-term environmental stewardship, recognizing that thriving ecosystems are essential for enduring success. Similarly, prudent policymaking considers diverse stakeholders' needs, aiming for solutions that promote both ecological health and social equity. Human development flourishes not through

domination but through the respect and actualization of potential, which naturally leads us to the virtue of justice.

3.2. Justice: Giving Each Their Due

Justice is traditionally defined as the "*firm and constant will to give everyone their due*" [5] (II-II, q. 58, a. 1). It embodies fairness, equity, and respect, not only in interpersonal relationships but also in humanity's relationship with creation. Justice requires safeguarding the planet and its resources for future generations. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, highlights this responsibility, emphasizing that "to give each their due" includes protecting the natural world as a shared heritage [19].

A just person seeks to assist others in realizing their potential. For example, a teacher committed to justice nurtures each student according to their unique abilities, helping them contribute meaningfully to society. In the sustainability context, justice extends to creating opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard, especially when they lack agency in decision-making processes. As Caniglia et al. [18] (p. 497) observe, just researchers in sustainability work to "*navigate contested processes of change in ways that attend to dynamics of participation and power toward more equitable outcomes*". Justice ensures that sustainability efforts do not exclude or exploit vulnerable populations but instead empower them.

3.3. Courage and Temperance: Inner Harmony for Right Action

Courage and temperance are essential for sustaining moral clarity and resilience in the face of challenges. Together, they cultivate inner harmony, ensuring that fear and desire do not cloud judgment or compromise virtuous action.

Courage, or fortitude, addresses fear and daring, enabling individuals to endure hardship and take risks in pursuit of the good. True courage, however, depends on prudence and justice [20]. Many activists advocating for urgent environmental action exhibit a fearless resolve but may lack the broader discernment necessary for long-term solutions. Courage without justice or prudence can lead to blind action, detached from reality's complexities. True courage is patient and measured, pursuing gradual, meaningful steps that respect the capabilities of all participants and the broader ecological context [15] (p. 129). For instance, courageous sustainability advocates may challenge powerful institutions while remaining committed to dialogue and inclusive solutions.

Temperance, meanwhile, governs the passions of desire. It cultivates discipline and self-restraint, enabling individuals to prioritize reason and virtue over immediate gratification. As Pieper observes, temperance fosters inner clarity, preventing overindulgence and allowing the individual to remain attuned to higher aims [16] (p. 11). In sustainability, temperance curtails excessive consumption and exploitation, encouraging balanced and mindful use of resources. A temperate person resists the allure of overconsumption, recognizing that unchecked desires not only harm the environment but also cloud the ability to see and act prudently.

Together, courage and temperance sustain the moral and ecological integrity needed for sustainable living. They ensure individuals remain steadfast in pursuing the good, unclouded by fear or desire, and capable of acting decisively in service of justice and prudence.

3.4. Virtue as a Framework for Sustainable Living

In confronting the shortcomings of modernity's exploitative logic, the integration of the cardinal virtues provides an essential alternative framework. A virtuous approach does not reject the scientific reasoning (*ratio*) that has driven modern progress. Instead, it reorients this reasoning by complementing it with the contemplative insight of *intellectus*. While *ratio* excels in technical calculation and problem-solving, *intellectus* offers a broader, deeper vision that fosters respect for creation's intrinsic worth.

Modernity's overemphasis on *ratio* has often led to the instrumentalization of the natural world, reducing it to a mere resource for human consumption. This approach ignores the interconnectedness of all life and disrupts the delicate balance of ecological systems. By contrast, *intellectus*—with its contemplative vision—restores an intrinsic respect for creation, revealing its inherent value beyond utility. As Larry Wapner [21] and Nathan Hensley [22] observe, such a shift not only fosters a deeper sense of interconnectedness but also inspires integrated thinking and new forms of creativity.

Through the lens of virtue, sustainability is no longer viewed as a purely technical or regulatory issue. It becomes a moral call, rooted in a way of being that aligns human activity with the deeper purposes of creation. Prudence ensures that our actions are grounded in reality and directed toward the good. Justice demands that we respect the rights of others, including future generations, and the integrity of the natural world. Courage enables us to confront challenges and endure sacrifices in the pursuit of sustainability, while temperance fosters the inner discipline necessary to live in balance with our surroundings.

In integrating the cardinal virtues into the framework of sustainability, we are reminded that true progress is not measured solely by technological advancement or economic growth. It is measured by our capacity to live in harmony with the totality of existence. By complementing scientific reasoning with contemplative insight and grounding our actions in the cardinal virtues, we can move beyond the fragmented and exploitative logic of modernity toward a more holistic and sustainable vision of life.

Conclusion

Sustainable living, as illuminated by the framework of virtue ethics, invites humanity to embrace its role within the greater order of creation. From a Christian ethical perspective, sustainability is not merely a task or technical goal but a participatory dimension of God's providential plan. Humanity is called to be free and active co-creators, engaging with creation not through exploitation but through relational care.

This vision redefines sustainability as a moral endeavor rooted in the cultivation of virtue. By fostering an attentive, receptive, and benevolent relationship with creation, humanity learns to see the world in its fullness and recognize its own place within the interconnected whole. From this contemplative awareness, virtuous action flows—not as domination or manipulation of nature, but as respectful participation in its flourishing. Prudence, justice, courage, and temperance guide this engagement, ensuring that it serves both human fulfillment and the greater good of creation.

However, the path of virtue is demanding. It requires a reorientation of priorities, moving beyond the distractions of consumerism and self-interest toward a contemplative attentiveness to reality. Virtue grows through time, education, and a deliberate commitment to align one's being with the order of creation.

Ultimately, sustainable living is less about "doing" and more about "being"—becoming the kind of person who embodies harmony with the world and its Creator. In this way, humanity fulfills its highest vocation: to foster the flourishing of all creation as part of a divinely ordered and interconnected whole.

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doc. Mgr. Andrea Blaščíková, PhD.

Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

e-mail: ablascikova@ukf.sk

Conscience as the Foundation of Sustainable Development: A Theological and Ethical Perspective

Ivan Kútny

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between sustainable development and the moral and spiritual formation of human conscience, with a particular focus on the insights provided by the Second Vatican Council. It examines how conscience, as outlined in Gaudium et spes, serves as a foundational guide for individuals and societies in navigating the challenges of modern life, including the urgent issue of climate change. Drawing on the teachings of Pope Francis, Benedict XVI, John Paul II, and other Church leaders, the article argues that true sustainability is not merely a technical or political issue, but a deeply moral and spiritual endeavor. It emphasizes that the development of a well-formed conscience—one rooted in human dignity, justice, and compassion—is essential for fostering a sustainable society that respects both the environment and the rights of future generations. By exploring the role of conscience in shaping ethical decisions and guiding personal and collective action, the article highlights the importance of spiritual renewal and education in the pursuit of a more just and sustainable world. Ultimately, it calls for a deeper integration of Christian values and moral principles into the concept of sustainable development, as a means of ensuring both human flourishing and ecological preservation.

Keywords: Sustainable Development; Conscience Formation; Second Vatican Council; Christian Values.

Introduction

The issue of a sustainable society is closely tied to development. Development and sustainability are interconnected with a wide range of crucial decisions. An individual truly understands and engages with this reality only after a personal experience with themselves.

At this point, one has the opportunity to accept and recognize the fundamental truth about humanity—that people are beings endowed with moral conscience, called to develop themselves and actively participate in building the common good, and for religious believers, also in the explicit praise of God.

Recently, the issue of sustainable development has become increasingly discussed in relation to climate change. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources [1], “human beings, in their quest for economic development and enjoyment of the riches of nature, must come to terms with the

reality of resource limitation and the carrying capacities of ecosystems, and must take account of the needs of future generations.” Slovakia’s strategy effectively builds on this concept [2].

However, despite many proclamations, the reality continues to be marked by significant destruction of nature, the killing of innocent people, and the destruction of historical and cultural monuments, caused not only by, but also exacerbated by, current war conflicts.

In this complex situation, a few important questions arise:

1. How should we interpret these political, in some ways “schizophrenic” statements and actions?
2. How can we incorporate not only Christian, but also religious Christian values into the concept of a sustainable society and its development? How can we allow individuals and communities to live in a way that aligns with basic human rights, such as the right to life, freedom of conscience, religious freedom, and freedom of expression? How can we incorporate the right to a full and dignified human life into the concept of a sustainable society?

From a Christian perspective, it is necessary for religious people to be continuously inspired by the Holy Spirit toward an innovative approach to moral life. As Chiavacci [3] (p. 341) notes, this aspect of life should not be confused with theory—moral philosophy or moral theology. After all, moral life, in its form, is higher and involves the ability “to be deeply with oneself and to dare to go further than what has already been said, thought, or lived by others.” Christianity is not a museum concept; it is “God’s ‘Life’ in the lives of people” [4] (p. 23).

In this article, we want to revisit the concept of conscience in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*. Despite the 60 years since the Council, it left us with timeless statements that we must continue to revisit. The Council is not just the Pope’s advisory body, but “together with the Pope, the Council exercises the highest authority in the whole Church” [5] (p. 33); [6] (no. 25). It is also “a gift from God for the Church and the world” [7] (no. 1770). It stands as the most significant milestone in modern Christian history. Not only did it address the pressing issues of the time, but it also left a message of timeless relevance, particularly in connection with the salvation of humankind and the broad spectrum of personal and social-church dimensions.

In the first chapter, we will explore the first part of Article 16 of the *Gaudium et spes* constitution. We will differentiate between two perspectives on conscience in this article and discuss the subsequent academic debate on how they might be linked. The

second chapter will focus on analyzing the second part of Article 16 of *Gaudium et spes*. We will address the concept of a well-formed conscience and its importance in understanding the dialogue of consciences as people seek paths to shape the world. In the third chapter, we will apply the Council's concept of conscience to the issue of sustainable development. We will demonstrate that the foundation of this development lies in the renewal of conscience.

1. Two Perspectives on Conscience in *Gaudium et Spes* 16

In 2025, we will mark 60 years since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. This milestone offers an opportunity to revisit the question posed by Pope John Paul II: How have we embraced the Council and its teachings [8] (no. 57)? Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI asks: How have we received the Logos, the Word through which all things were created and are sustained [9] (no. 8–9)? Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* [10] (no. 37), raises another pertinent question: Why do we hesitate to give or leave room for the conscience of believers, who often respond to the Gospel in the best way they can, within their limitations?

There should be no doubt about the importance of conscience in the life of a Christian. As Cardinal Newman wrote, “*Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ*” [11] (p. 248), and the Catechism of the Catholic Church echoes this by stating that conscience is integral to a person’s moral life [12] (no. 1778). However, it seems that, in practice, the rightful place of conscience is not always fully acknowledged. Voices continue to call for the restoration of conscience's rightful place both in Church teachings [13] (pp. 550–551) and in ecclesial practices [10] (no. 303). Moreover, the importance of the Second Vatican Council’s teachings continues to resonate, as emphasized by the Synod on Synodality (2021–2024).

The Council teaches that humanity, created in God's image, has the capacity to know and love its Creator [14] (no. 12). Vatican II stressed the personal encounter with God, which should be framed in the context of love and ultimate purpose [15] (p. 74). Furthermore, it affirmed that every believer, actively engaged in improving the temporal world according to the Gospel spirit, must be guided by a Christian conscience [6] (no. 36). Both religious and civil life are to be led by a Christian conscience [16] (no. 5). The Council recognized conscience as “the most secret core and sanctuary of a person” [14] (no. 16). Importantly, this inner space is not reserved solely for Christians but is accessible to all who, through no fault of their own, do not know

the Gospel, yet sincerely seek God and strive to follow His will as revealed in their conscience [6] (no. 16).

A full understanding of the Council's teachings on conscience requires interpreting it through the renewed theology of revelation in *Dei Verbum* and through an updated ecclesiology in *Lumen Gentium* [17] (p. 344). We must appreciate the anthropological vision of humanity as summarized in *Gaudium et Spes* [14] (no. 22). However, we will narrow our focus here to the theology of conscience, which underpins Article 16 of *Gaudium et Spes*. This article states:

"In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor."

In this text, two perspectives on conscience emerge: the functional and the relational. First, conscience is described functionally, as a guide to follow God's law. This is similar to the statement in *Dignitatis Humanae*, which emphasizes that "the commands of God's law are perceived and known by the conscience" [18] (n. 3). The law revealed in conscience is God's law, and adherence to it is presented as imperative.

However, the second part of the Council's formulation moves beyond the functional model and introduces a relational perspective on conscience. When the text states, "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths," it highlights the intimacy of the relationship between the individual and God. This perspective speaks not of solitude, autonomy, or subjectivism, but of a deeply intimate communion. In this "locus of intimacy," one does not merely hear a command, but engages in a dynamic dialogue with God [19] (p. 57). The relationship here is marked by an invitation and a dialogical encounter, making the voice of conscience more than a command – it becomes a call to a life of love and moral responsibility.

The Council clearly invites us to integrate these two views of conscience: one that ties conscience to the obedience of law, and another that sees conscience as a deep, relational experience of the individual before God. As Sabatino Majorano notes, the relational aspect of conscience is essential for recognizing its imperative [20] (pp. 268–269). Conscience, for Majorano, is not just a reflection of moral order or a simple

judgment on how to apply moral norms. It is a profound call to recognize the transcendent nature of the person and the responsibility to act according to divine will.

In support of this vision is the Creator's act, as stated in Genesis: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26). The Council affirms this, teaching that man was created "to the image of God," and is capable of knowing and loving the Creator, appointed to be master of all creation [14] (no. 12). We also remember that in *Gaudium et Spes* [14] (no. 14), the heart of man awaits God, who helps him discern his true destiny.

The final part of the Council's text on conscience speaks of love as the fulfillment of the law, stating, "conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor." This brings love into the very core of conscience. Love is the "first and most necessary gift" [6] (no. 42), and is called the "bond of perfection and the fullness of the law" [6] (no. 42). Love is the foundation of the dialogue of conscience and the key to understanding its moral imperative. The ultimate expression of conscience is a call to live in love – both for God and for our neighbor.

2. Dialogue of Conscience as a Path to Shaping the World in *Gaudium et Spes*

Text of Article 16 of the *Gaudium et spes* Declaration further states: "In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence, the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin."

The dialogue of conscience takes place not only in the heart of a person, where God's voice resonates, but also between all people of good will. This fundamental reality has wide application in the practical life of both individuals and society. As Pope John XXIII pointed out, there is a growing sense among people for spiritual values: truth, justice, love, and freedom [21] (no. 19). According to the conciliar statements, the sense for these values grows in proportion to fidelity to conscience. The Council did not condition the dignity of moral conscience on its objective correctness. It did not state that moral conscience gains its dignity by conformity with the objective law. Instead, the Council emphasized a relational perspective on conscience. It said that when a

person is faithful to their conscience and continuously remains in dialogue with God and their neighbor, their knowledge of spiritual values grows. According to T. Rey-Mermet [22] (p. 68), this form of seeking can be called the morality of conscience and the person.

This text also brings to light other important aspects concerning the mutual relationship between Christians and others in the search for truth. The statement “in fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth” does not merely refer to mutual respect, but to a common journey toward the same ultimate goal. The Second Vatican Council linked fidelity to conscience with the possibility of salvation. “Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life” [6] (no. 16).

Respect for the conscience of another person is not only a “sine qua non condition for respecting one’s own conscience” [23] (p. 287), but it also offers the opportunity to delve into the uniqueness of another’s conscience and be enriched by their vision and potential impulses to more effectively approach the truth. One who neglects or destroys the integrity of their own conscience not only damages their dignity and path to salvation, but also hinders the reciprocity of conscience and the solidarity of salvation [24] (p. 217). Therefore, we must also examine the concept of the correct conscience.

“Thus the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality.” The text of *Gaudium et spes* [14] (no. 16) defines the correct conscience as the good will—an effort to seek the truth and follow the objective norms of morality. Achieving objective truth is not required [25] (pp. 79–80), but rather a truth in an existential sense [24] (p. 216). So, what exactly is the specific nature of a correct conscience? How is it related to a pure heart? How does it relate to the conscience of faith?

P. Pavan, in an era when the message and teachings of the Council were strongly threatened, and therefore an extraordinary meeting of the Synod of Bishops was convened in 1985, repeatedly stated at important forums that “a conscience is correct when it is true, meaning when what it commands corresponds to the truth. But it is also correct when it is invincibly mistaken, meaning when what it commands does not correspond to objective truth but commands it because it subjectively considers it to be in accordance with the truth. It considers it to be such without any uncertainty” [26] (p. 44). An invincibly erroneous conscience does not lose its dignity: “Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity” [14] (no. 16). It

does not lose it because it remains committed to and aligned with the fundamental imperative of love and doing good [27] (p. 60). “The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin” [14] (no. 16). With these words, the Council warns against the danger of resolvable ignorance on one hand, and the clouding or blinding of conscience on the other.

According to Häring, conscience is correct when a person with a correct “heart” seeks the truth and resolves their moral problem according to the truth. It is not an individualistic conscience that rejects solidarity and the reciprocity of consciences, nor is it an ecclesial monopolizing conscience that believes it cannot or must not learn from others [24] (pp. 216–217).

D. Capone explains that the Latin term “*satagunt*” (translated into English as “to care”) was included in the text to express a person's commitment and zeal. This collective effort (care) is the effort of a community of persons with their personal values, and it is realized in the community of love (*caritas*). This love is the only way to moral and religious truth. Christians and non-Christians, animated by goodwill, create a brotherly connection in grace and the Holy Spirit, known only to God [28] (pp. 110–111). Therefore, it is possible not only to talk theoretically about a common search for truth and a truthful solution to ethical and moral problems, but also to fulfill it in practical life.

The conciliar concept of the correct conscience was of great importance in a context prone to the subjective imposition of moral objectivism or the perfectionistic consideration of ideals as commands to be immediately fulfilled. Such views reject the progression on the path to moral goodness, as well as the relationship between will and reason. Even the demands that arise from the natural law are imposed upon the will “only because such an obligation was previously acknowledged by human reason and, concretely, by personal conscience” [29] (no. 36). In some cases, when a person does not recognize the demands of the natural law through reason or conscience, it may be due to invincible ignorance.

However, the conciliar concept of the correct conscience can be distorted from the opposite side, as pointed out by Joseph Ratzinger [30]. After the Council, voices began to spread questioning the imputability of war criminals. It was argued that if they were sincerely convinced of the truth of their actions, as they themselves claimed, based on the laws of the time and their patriotic duty, they acted in good conscience. According to Ratzinger, however, this interpretation overlooks certain aspects of the Council's teaching as well as Church tradition. He highlights the words of St. Paul, stating that

even pagans, without the law, knew what God expected from them (Rom 2:1–16). If the dignity of a person lies in their conscience, then every person can see God's truth, and not seeing it is a sin. If we do not see the truth despite the fact that “every human being, endowed with conscience and responsibility, experiences an inner call to do good” [31] (no. 39) and thus reject evil [14] (no. 16); [9] (no. 9), it is because we do not want to see it. In this case, the “good will” required for a correct conscience is lacking. The conscience of a person who suppresses the ability to see the truth, according to Ratzinger, becomes inaccessible both to God and to people. It no longer listens to the depth and intimacy of the heart, but to the extended opinions and superficial beliefs of their social surroundings. In this way, they trample on *anamnesis*—the ability to recognize what their heart truly longs for. Therefore, while it is never a fault to follow a deeply held conviction, it is also a duty of conscience, guilt may lie deeper. “Not in the act performed at the given moment, not in the momentary judgment of conscience, but in the neglect of one’s being, which has made me deaf to the voice of truth and its inner prompts. Therefore, even criminals who act based on their conviction are guilty.” [30] (p. 120).

3. Renewal of Conscience as a Basis for Sustainable Development

The Second Vatican Council recognized a direct connection between human willfulness, which replaces fidelity to conscience, and the spread of lies: “But often men... have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator” [6] (no. 16). In a similar vein, Ratzinger expressed that the silencing of conscience “leads to the dehumanization of the world and to mortal danger” [30] (p. 107). Conscience loses its core—its dialogue with God—and, as a result, loses the correct scale of values, without which sustainable development remains only a dream [30] (p. 170). Similarly, Pope Francis believes that the dulling of conscience has a broad impact on the human world. He is convinced that if we close our consciences to the cry of the poor, our efforts for sustainable development will turn into mere “green rhetoric” [32] (n. 49). The Magisterium places the renewal of conscience at the center of our attention when it comes to today’s urgent issues. Hidden within them is much that needs to be purified, as well as falsehoods that express human willfulness. Therefore, the final chapter will address the nature of the formation and renewal of conscience.

In the first chapter, we showed that the Council emphasized the relational dimension of conscience—human conscience experiences a relationship that manifests as an invitation to dialogue from God. In the second chapter, we clarified how all people

participate in this relationship through fidelity to conscience in addressing many of today's issues. Parallel to these two relationships, we can also consider the renewal of conscience—its beginning is the Holy Spirit, but human educators also participate in it in various ways.

Conscience should be a beacon on the path of the individual and humanity toward their ultimate goal. On this path, the individual is accompanied by God, His love, and His specific grace. According to B. Häring, anyone who places “law and moral duty first in the education and formation of conscience, and only secondarily points to Christ’s grace, would distort the righteous order and jeopardize the authenticity of Christian conscience. Living in Christ means being drawn to Him and the Father through the Spirit; it means entering into a life that is a praise and a thanksgiving. Grace and faith are primary” [33] (pp. 299–300); [34]. After all, we are “not under law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14). John Paul II also confirmed that conscience is such a personal and transcendent reality that “no human authority has the right to interfere with a person’s conscience” [35] (no. 1). “To man, created to the image of God, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of conscience” [36] (no. 36); thus, the Holy Spirit is the guarantor of the most authentic formation of conscience.

This, however, does not mean that one cannot appeal to another person’s conscience or declare the necessity of its proper formation, indeed, co-formation. Responsibility for the co-formation of conscience is not merely an obligation alongside many others, but a unique task. It concerns the “irreproducible originality that characterizes each human person” [34] (p. 282); [28] (p. 108). It also concerns the realization of their fundamental choice – *intentio finis* [37] (p. 837)—that “yes” of the will, which is spoken and by which one commits to progress on the path of truth and love. In this sense, conscience can be compared to the lamp of the body, which is the eye. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is written: “If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matt 6:22–23). Without the proper religious expression of the relationship with God, conscience would be like a voice without words, a candle without a flame. “Conscience receives its truth from Christ, who is the Truth and the Light” [33] (p. 268). Indeed, in the context of the Gospel, Christ is the truth of man (John 8:32).

“The formation of conscience is compromised if a thorough religious education is lacking” [35] (no. 3). This follows from the very thirst of the human being for fulfillment and from their natural ability to recognize what symbiotically aligns with this desire. The seeds of this light within us must be cared for as the beginning of piety

[38] and the spirituality of the individual. Moral conscience cannot fail to also be spiritual conscience [39] (p. 81).

The Second Vatican Council called for the co-formation of conscience [18] (no. 14); [14] (no. 53); [16] (no. 20), as did the successors of Peter [35] (no. 3); [40] (no. 18), including Francis [10] (no. 37, 42, 222, 302, 303); [32] (no. 214) and many others. Christian thinking of the faithful and properly formed consciences, in connection with the wisdom and confrontation of expert experiences, helps to present solutions more carefully in delicate issues and situations [14] (no. 52). It appears that conscience must be co-formed in all its dimensions [41] (pp. 77–93) – 1. in its core, which is the relationship with the Transcendent; 2. in values – their recognition and living within the community, but given the limits of our experience, also in their safe teaching by the Church, which by Christ's will is the teacher of truth and must teach the Truth, i.e., Christ [18] (no. 14); 3. finally, in the prudent search for solutions in concrete situations [42]. Thanks to such a holistic and layered formation of conscience, the individual can better understand their existence and dignity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of sustainable development is deeply intertwined with the moral and spiritual development of individuals and societies. As we navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing world, it becomes clear that true sustainability cannot be achieved without a foundation built on moral conscience, grounded in both human dignity and a deeper spiritual understanding. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council, particularly the concept of conscience as a personal and transcendent guide, offer profound insights into how we can approach these challenges with integrity and wisdom.

The recognition of our moral responsibility to one another and to the environment calls for a deeper alignment of our actions with the values of justice, compassion, and stewardship. Christian teachings remind us that this process is not just about human effort but also about being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, allowing us to embrace a life of innovation, transformation, and service to the common good. A well-formed conscience is essential to this journey, as it not only helps us recognize and honor the inherent worth of every human life but also compels us to consider the needs of future generations.

Ultimately, sustainable development is not just a matter of addressing external challenges like climate change, but also an invitation to cultivate an inner

transformation. By renewing our consciences, we can create a society that truly reflects the values of life, freedom, and love, and where the common good is pursued in harmony with the natural world. As we continue to confront the pressing issues of our time, the call to return to the principles outlined in *Gaudium et spes* serves as both a reminder and a guide for building a world that is truly sustainable, just, and compassionate for all.

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prof. Dr. Ivan Kútňy, PhD.

e-mail: ivankny@gmail.com

Otherness as an Ethical Challenge for a Sustainable Society: Religious Sources of Tolerance and Understanding

Peter Kondrla

Abstract

The paper analyses the phenomenon of otherness within the context of a globalised and pluralistic society. It demonstrates that growing cultural diversity, the internationalisation of education, and digital environments create situations in which encounters with difference become part of everyday experience. The text emphasises the role of schools as key spaces for shaping attitudes towards otherness, particularly in the context of curricular reform, integration, and international educational projects. At the same time, it highlights the ambivalent impact of digital media, which expand exposure to diversity while simultaneously contributing to social polarisation. The second part of the paper explains why the acceptance of otherness is psychologically demanding and often gives rise to defensive attitudes. Historical and cultural factors further reinforce the tendency to distinguish between what is perceived as “one’s own” and what is considered “foreign.” The final section interprets religion as a potential source of tolerance and social cohesion, especially in relation to Hans Küng’s concept of global ethics. The paper concludes by arguing that otherness itself is not the problem; rather, the challenge lies in cultivating mechanisms of understanding and the capacity to live together in a pluralistic environment.

Keywords: Otherness; Diversity; Globalisation; Inclusive Education; Cognitive Biases; Religious Tolerance; Global Ethics.

Introduction

In today’s world, we are experiencing an unprecedented pace of social and cultural change. On a daily basis, we come into contact with diverse value frameworks, ways of life, and cultural traditions that naturally intersect in both our personal and professional environments. Otherness has thus become a common part of everyday life—it is present in social interactions, workplaces, schools, and the public sphere. The key question, therefore, is not whether difference exists, but how we are able to engage with it. A fundamental challenge of our time is learning how to live together without conflict, seeking effective forms of communication, and developing approaches that foster mutual understanding and respect.

1. Otherness in a Globalised World

Globalization represents a complex process of deepening global interconnectedness across economic, cultural, technological, and social domains [1] (p. 64). In general terms, it is understood as a set of changes through which events, values, or ways of life originating in one part of the world influence people in other regions more rapidly and more intensively than in the past [2] (p. 8). In the scholarly literature, globalization is traditionally divided into several dimensions: the economic dimension (market liberalization, mobility of capital and labor), the cultural dimension (the spread of symbols, customs, and media across national borders), the political dimension (the emergence of supranational structures and international regulations), the technological dimension (digitalization and internet networks), and the social dimension (accelerated mobility of people and ideas). Each of these dimensions simultaneously creates conditions for more intensive contact with otherness [3] (pp. 33–36).

This interconnected world naturally leads to the growth of plurality, that is, the coexistence of multiple cultural, value-based, and religious systems within a single society. Plurality in itself does not imply conflict; it merely denotes the presence of several legitimate ways of life and modes of thinking within a shared social space. One of its consequences is the expansion of diversity, understood as the concrete heterogeneity manifested in languages, customs, traditions, social norms, and individual identities. Diversity is not only a descriptive account of differences—it also creates new opportunities for learning, innovation, and social enrichment. At the same time, however, it requires the capacity to understand and accept perspectives different from one's own [4] (pp. 2–5).

In the context of globalization, encounters between different worlds thus become an everyday experience. Not only migration, but also routine travel, digital environments, and international cooperation contribute to the interweaving—and at times the collision—of cultural patterns. This situation gives rise to the need to develop competencies that enable constructive responses to difference: not merely the avoidance of conflict, but the active fostering of understanding within a pluralistic and diversified society.

The school represents one of the most prominent environments in which the plurality of contemporary society is manifested in concrete terms. Children entering the educational process bring with them diverse cultural experiences, linguistic backgrounds, different learning paces, and specific educational needs [5] (pp. 3–5). The curricular reform in Slovakia reflects this reality by defining integration as one of its key pillars. Integration does not signify only the formal inclusion of pupils with special

needs; rather, it constitutes a broader pedagogical framework that supports the integration of learning content, interdisciplinary connections, cooperation among teachers, and flexible organization of instruction in order to meet the needs of a diverse student population. In this sense, integration does not imply uniformity; on the contrary, it involves the creation of an educational environment that recognizes diversity as a natural and integral part of the learning process [6] (pp. 4–7).

In parallel with these developments, the importance of the internationalization of education is increasing, bringing additional layers of otherness into schools [7] (pp. 12–15). International mobility programs, partner schools, Erasmus+ projects, and cooperative partnerships enable pupils and teachers alike to gain experience in diverse cultural contexts and to directly encounter different approaches to work, communication, and problem-solving. Schools thus become spaces of intensive intercultural contact, in which teachers are expected to demonstrate not only subject-matter expertise but also social and cultural competence. At the same time, international projects support the development of inclusive approaches, as they frequently address issues of equal opportunities, democratic participation, and the prevention of exclusion.

The teacher therefore assumes the role of a guide between worlds that naturally intersect within the school environment. Teaching is no longer limited to the transmission of knowledge; it increasingly involves creating a safe climate, fostering dialogue, and helping pupils to understand diverse perspectives. In this way, the school becomes a space where integration, diversity, and internationalization converge in everyday practice, and where pupils' attitudes toward living together in a pluralistic society are gradually formed.

The digital environment fundamentally transforms the way in which people come into contact with otherness. Social networks, online platforms, and visual media provide young people with access to an immense range of lifestyles, identities, cultural expressions, and worlds of opinion that would never intersect in an ordinary physical environment. This constant exposure to diversity creates the impression of an endless pluralistic space in which new identities, communities, or value systems can be discovered at any time. At the same time, however, the digital world operates on the principle of algorithmic sorting: users are gradually enclosed within so-called digital bubbles that reinforce their beliefs, preferences, and stereotypes [8] (pp. 9–12).

Despite this visible diversity, polarization paradoxically emerges, as algorithms tend to privilege content that elicits emotional responses—often conflictual or provocative in nature [9] (pp. 87–90). Young people thus observe hundreds of fragments of other

people's lives on a daily basis, yet without the contextual depth necessary to understand otherness in its broader and deeper dimensions. When they subsequently encounter real differences at school, in the workplace, or through direct personal interaction, the confrontation may be far more intense than the seemingly open digital environment would suggest. Digital otherness is therefore double-edged: on the one hand, it enhances the visibility of diverse identities; on the other, it fosters rapid judgments, reductive evaluations, and diminishes the capacity for patient, face-to-face dialogue [10] (pp. 31–35).

For educators and parents alike, this situation creates a new challenge. It is no longer sufficient to address cultural and social diversity only in the offline world; it is also necessary to reflect on the ways in which children and young people form their perceptions of otherness in digital environments, and how these perceptions subsequently shape their interactions in real life. The cultivation of digital literacy, critical thinking, and the ability to interpret online content thus becomes an indispensable component of education aimed at fostering respect for and understanding of otherness in the twenty-first century.

Otherness today constitutes a stable and inescapable part of everyday reality—in schools, workplaces, digital spaces, and personal relationships. It is not a phenomenon that can be eliminated or bypassed, as it arises from the inherent plurality of the contemporary world. Attempting to fight against it is counterproductive, leading only to tension, conflict, and the reinforcement of prejudice. The real challenge is not to eliminate differences, but to learn how to live with them in ways that promote understanding, cooperation, and social cohesion. The capacity to accept diverse lifestyles, values, and identities is therefore a key competence of the twenty-first century and a prerequisite for a pluralistic society to function without unnecessary barriers or fears. Otherness need not threaten us; it can enrich us, provided we approach it with openness and a readiness to understand.

2. Why Do We Struggle with Otherness?

Although we live in a pluralistic society, the ability to accept otherness is not something that comes naturally to human beings. Our responses to difference are to a large extent shaped by evolutionary factors—over thousands of years, humans have been conditioned to distinguish between what is “one's own” and what is “foreign,” often equating this distinction with safety versus potential threat. This deeply embedded mechanism means that encounters with the unfamiliar tend to trigger rapid

emotional reactions even before any rational assessment takes place. The brain has a propensity for reflexive responses: what we do not know is often perceived as a risk. For this reason, otherness is frequently associated with uncertainty, fear, or inner tension—not because it is objectively threatening, but because our nervous system interprets unfamiliar stimuli in this way.

From these evolutionary roots also emerges a wide range of psychological processes that complicate the acceptance of otherness in everyday practice. Among them is the tendency to rely on cognitive shortcuts—rapid evaluative mechanisms that conserve mental energy but at the same time distort reality [11] (pp. 20–30). Stereotypes, prejudices, and simplified categories enable the brain to navigate a complex world, yet they often lead to inaccurate judgments about people who differ from us. Another important factor is confirmation bias, that is, the inclination to attend primarily to information that confirms one’s pre-existing beliefs, thereby making otherness appear even more “foreign” than it actually is. As a result, individuals naturally gravitate toward what is familiar and avoid that which disrupts their established understanding of the world.

The tension associated with otherness should therefore not be interpreted as intolerance in the sense of a moral failure, but rather as a natural component of the human psyche. The challenge for society is not to suppress this emotional reaction, but to learn how to work with it: to slow down, to interpret situations consciously, and to replace intuitive fear with an effort to understand. It is precisely at this point that space opens up for education, dialogue, and the cultivation of attitudes.

When encountering difference, individuals often experience rapid, intuitive reactions rooted in our evolutionary heritage. In the past, survival was closely linked to the ability to quickly distinguish between what was familiar—and therefore perceived as safe—and what was foreign, which could represent a potential threat. This ancient defensive system has not disappeared; it remains an integral part of our neuropsychological architecture. A key role in this process is played by the amygdala, a small structure within the limbic system responsible for processing fear, threat, and rapid emotional decision-making [12] (pp. 163–170).

The amygdala responds to stimuli more quickly than conscious, rational thought. When we encounter someone who appears different—through appearance, behavior, cultural expressions, or language—the amygdala may trigger a so-called fight-or-flight response: increased heart rate, tension, reflexive rejection, or avoidance. At this stage, the reaction does not yet constitute a conscious attitude toward an individual or group, but rather an automatic biological response of the brain, which interprets the

unfamiliar as a potential risk. This explains why even in modern societies, where diversity is natural and legitimate, initial reactions to otherness can be surprisingly defensive.

This mechanism is not an expression of hostility, but of evolutionary conditioning. Problems arise, however, when rapid emotional reactions become the sole mode of interpreting reality. If no space is given to rational reflection, initial tension can develop into prejudice, avoidance, or even hostility. For healthy coexistence, it is therefore crucial to consciously “slow down” these reactions, allow the cognitive components of the brain to engage, and recognize that difference is not a threat but a natural part of society.

The human brain is designed to simplify orientation in a complex world. It processes vast amounts of information daily and therefore relies on cognitive shortcuts that allow for quick and energy-efficient evaluations. These shortcuts, however, have a downside: they lead to oversimplification of reality and the creation of categories that often fail to reflect the individual complexity of human beings. Stereotypes arise precisely from this need to classify and generalize. They are mental patterns that attribute characteristics of entire groups to individuals, regardless of their personal reality. Although they may stem from partial experience, their generalized nature makes them inherently distorting.

When these rapid mental categorizations combine with emotional reactions, prejudices emerge—attitudinal positions based not on personal experience but on entrenched representations that individuals adopt from their social environment [13] (pp. 62–65). Prejudice can thus be understood as a stereotype “charged with emotion.” Its persistence is significantly reinforced by confirmation bias, the tendency to seek out and attend to information that confirms existing beliefs while ignoring information that contradicts them. In this way, individuals become enclosed within mental bubbles, in which otherness ceases to be perceived as a real person or community and instead becomes a symbol of threat or disruption to one’s own world.

Cognitive shortcuts are therefore natural and necessary for survival, yet they can also become sources of misunderstanding, discrimination, and social conflict. A key societal challenge lies in learning to consciously recognize moments when rapid judgments replace rational evaluation, and in deliberately slowing down these processes. Developing critical thinking and the ability to reflect on one’s own prejudices is a fundamental prerequisite for the authentic acceptance of otherness in everyday life.

Societal attitudes toward otherness did not arise by chance; they are the result of a long historical development in which difference was frequently associated with threats to stability, identity, or power. Already in antiquity, communities were organized around strong cultural and religious frameworks, and anything that deviated from them appeared disruptive. In many historical periods, otherness was perceived as a disturbance of order: foreign cultures, languages, or religions were interpreted as risks to communities striving to maintain unity and control over their social space. This pattern of rejection was transmitted across centuries.

A turning point came with the Enlightenment, which emphasized the universality of human reason and the idea that all people share the same rational nature. At the same time, however, it preserved the notion of a unified identity that the ideal human being was expected to embody. Reason became the measure of humanity—and those who did not conform to this norm could easily be labeled as “irrational,” “backward,” or “civilizationally underdeveloped.” Enlightenment universalist ideals thus opened space for equality, but simultaneously generated new forms of exclusion: instead of the original distinction between “us” and “foreigners,” a new division emerged between the “rational” and the “irrational,” underpinning paternalistic and colonial approaches to otherness.

Modern history has demonstrated that the desire for uniformity can escalate into extreme forms. Totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century sought to suppress everything that deviated from the ideological framework—from cultural difference and political opinions to personal identity itself. The pursuit of “purity” and unity led to persecution and violence, illustrating how dangerous it can be when a society perceives otherness as a threat rather than as part of its own life.

These historical experiences have left a deep imprint on collective memory. Even today, despite living in democratic and pluralistic societies, emotional reflexes toward difference are shaped by centuries-old patterns of “us” versus “them” [14] (pp. 254–257). Otherness can therefore appear problematic even in the absence of any objective reason. Understanding this historical background helps to explain why we sometimes struggle to come to terms with difference—and at the same time opens space for its conscious acceptance.

The cultivation of responses to otherness represents a complex process in which individuals gradually overcome their primary, evolutionarily rooted dispositional reactions. Effective functioning in a pluralistic society requires the ability to regulate affective impulses and to create space for deliberative, cognitively mediated evaluation of situations. The first step is the capacity to decelerate immediate

perceptual judgments—to recognize that an intuitive aversive reaction to a different stimulus arises from limbic activity and does not necessarily correlate with real threat. This “cognitive distancing” enables the activation of prefrontal brain regions and subsequent reflective reinterpretation of encounters with otherness.

The cultivation of attitudes toward difference is also conditioned by the ability to contextualize. This involves a process of hermeneutic understanding, in which individuals seek to decipher the underlying meanings of different cultural practices, symbolic expressions, or value orientations. Otherness thus ceases to be an amorphous, unpredictable phenomenon and becomes a semantically anchored component of social reality. At this point, a transformation of the initial affective response occurs—from defensive reluctance toward an open, inclusive attitude.

An inseparable part of this process is the development of a normative culture of respect, grounded in the recognition of the dignity of the other person rather than in conformity or unconditional agreement. Dialogue—understood as an interpersonal discursive framework—plays a crucial role in this context: it does not aim at uniformity of opinions, but enables mutual interpretation and the reduction of intercultural tension. A society that cultivates these mechanisms is characterized not only by plurality, but also by cohesive integrity, which constitutes a fundamental condition for stable coexistence in a heterogeneous environment.

3. Religion, Otherness, and Tolerance

Religion represents one of the most robust normative systems shaping value orientations, ethical convictions, and the identity-related self-understanding of individuals and communities. In a pluralistic environment, different religious paradigms naturally encounter one another, each possessing its own hermeneutical language, semantics of the sacred, and conceptualization of the good. In such a context, religious tolerance acquires fundamental importance—understood not as indifferent acceptance of everything, but as the capacity to acknowledge the legitimate existence of other spiritual traditions without the need to delegitimize or marginalize them.

Modern religious thought increasingly emphasizes the complementary character of ethical principles across confessional boundaries. Most world religions operate with archetypal values such as respect for life, solidarity, truthfulness, and justice—values that may be regarded as a minimal moral consensus necessary for coexistence in a multicultural environment. This “ethical substratum” creates space for interreligious

dialogue, conceived as a discursive encounter of interpretative traditions rather than a syncretic dissolution of identities.

A key mechanism of religious tolerance is dialogue, which does not presuppose the relativization of one's own faith, but rather a willingness to enter into a hermeneutical process with the other. Dialogue is a form of communication that allows for the articulation of identities without aggressive assertion, while simultaneously fostering interpersonal and intercultural empathy. Its goal is not conversion, but understanding—the capacity to perceive another tradition as a coherent and value-legitimate system. In this sense, dialogue functions as a tool for the de-escalation of prejudice and the reduction of religiously conditioned conflicts.

Religious communities thus play an ambivalent, yet potentially highly constructive role. On the one hand, they may reinforce rigid boundaries of identity; on the other, they possess a strong potential to cultivate a *habitus* of tolerance—that is, the ability to live in conditions of divergence without the loss of one's own tradition. When religious communities develop a reflexive approach to their own doctrines and emphasize ethical principles that transcend confessional divisions, they can become “laboratories of tolerance”: spaces in which otherness is accepted not as a threat, but as a constitutive element of human plurality.

The concept of a Global Ethic, formulated by Hans Küng, represents one of the most significant intellectual attempts to create a normative framework enabling the coexistence of a religiously and culturally diversified humanity. Küng starts from the conviction that the modern world is characterized by the simultaneous plurality of traditions, which necessitates a shared ethical “lowest common denominator” that transcends confessional particularisms. His core claim is expressed in the iconic thesis: “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.” This formulation highlights that religious traditions are not only bearers of identity, but also socio-political actors with a real impact on societal stability [15] (pp. 1–6).

Küng's global ethic is not a project of unification or syncretization; rather, it explicitly respects religious diversity. Its aim is not to create a single global religious doctrine, but to identify interconfessionally shared ethical postulates with transcultural validity. These include principles such as respect for human dignity, nonviolence, solidarity, and justice. Küng does not understand these principles as abstract moral imperatives, but as practical ethical commitments that form the foundation of social cohesion in a global context.

The project of global ethics may be interpreted as a metanormative framework that enables communication across religious boundaries. It creates space for interreligious discourse in which traditions do not negate one another, but enter into a reciprocally enriching dialogue [16] (pp. 235–240). This model supports the emergence of a “culture of tolerance” that understands otherness not as a deficiency, but as a legitimate alternative. At the same time, it reflects the fact that in a globalized world no tradition can impose its norms as exclusively binding without regard for the plurality of others.

Küng’s concept is also significant for the broader social context—from educational systems to intercultural communication. It offers a normative infrastructure that can function as a preventive tool against polarization, radicalization, and fundamentalism. By building consensus at the deepest level of moral commitments, it prepares the ground for sustainable coexistence in a heterogeneous society.

Religious communities have the potential to function as important agents of social cohesion, as they possess stable value systems, ritual structures, and symbolic resources that shape the identities of their members. When these resources are interpreted in an inclusive manner, they can foster a habitus of tolerance that transcends the boundaries of a single confession. Religious environments provide a framework for the internalization of ethical norms of a universal character—respect for life, mutual solidarity, truthfulness, justice, and forgiveness. In the context of intercultural and interethnic interactions, these norms can function as bridging values that mitigate social tension and promote intersubjective understanding [18] (pp. 7–12).

Religions also function as significant interpretative communities: they provide narrative frameworks through which individuals understand the world, human suffering, the meaning of life, and the boundaries of good and evil. These narrative structures can become powerful sources of tolerance if they allow for a positive reinterpretation of otherness as a legitimate form of existential experience. In such cases, religious identity does not serve as a source of separation, but as a platform for interpersonal empathy that expands the horizon of understanding beyond the boundaries of one’s own group.

The space of religious community can also act as an accelerator of social change at the practical level. Pastoral, charitable, and community activities often create interaction zones in which people from diverse social and cultural contexts meet. These activities have the potential to deconstruct stereotypes and reduce prejudice through direct contact, which—according to contact theory (Allport)—is one of the most effective tools for overcoming intergroup tensions [19]. Religious communities can thus

function as environments of positive socialization that promote prosocial behavior and contribute to the building of a peaceful and tolerant society.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of otherness is an inseparable part of the dynamics of the contemporary world, which is moving toward ever greater plurality and interconnectedness. The construction of a sustainable society, however, presupposes not only technological or economic solutions, but also value-based and ethical transformations in the ways we perceive one another. This contribution has shown that a key factor for stable and peaceful coexistence lies in the ability to overcome intuitive fears of difference and to transform them into cultivated understanding, reflection, and dialogue.

In this process, religious traditions play an exceptional role: they possess normative resources capable of shaping a tolerant habitus and strengthening the ethical commitments necessary for life in a diversified society. The concept of global ethics further suggests that religion can function as a bridge rather than a barrier—it can be a space that provides a shared minimum of values for peaceful and sustainable coexistence [20] (pp. 5–9).

The future of a sustainable society therefore also depends on our capacity to understand otherness not as a threat, but as a source of enrichment and as an inevitable part of social reality. The acceptance of difference thus becomes not only a personal competence, but also a social and spiritual task that fundamentally contributes to peace, stability, and the value integrity of today's world.

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prof. PhDr. PaedDr. Peter Kondrla, PhD.

Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

e-mail: kondrlap@gmail.com

Reflection on Family Education in the Orientation to the Value System of the Young Generation

Andrea Lesková and Zuzana Uličná

Abstract

The contribution is a reflection on the need to shape the proper value foundation of the current young generation in the context of globalization processes. By pointing out significant shifts in individuals' value orientations as well as changes in the value world of families, it emphasizes the idea that without values, it is very difficult to raise, educate, guide, and support a young person in their personal growth and the cultivation of their personality. The question of values remains relevant and incites the search for new paths to a meaningful life. The formation of an individual's personality primarily derives from the family. The atmosphere of the family, its value foundation, and its prevailing paradigm are largely related to the quality of the approach to other people and the surrounding world. A harmonious, functioning family does not produce so-called "homeless" individuals or "orphans" of living parents; rather, it is a place of safety, certainty, and acceptance—a place where parents set boundaries for behaviour and, finally, a place where serious social problems can be solved in the most effective way.

Keywords: Family; Family Education; Values; Value System; Youth.

Introduction

There is perhaps no doubt about the formative role of values. It is precisely the socialization-educational process in which a person gradually becomes acquainted with the basic attributes of values and, at the same time, learns that the paths to achieving them are different. Value is an expression of what a person focuses on, what he considers important and what his efforts are directed towards. Man as a recipient, creator and source of values presents his value orientations and attitudes externally through the implemented decisions for which he bears responsibility. Value orientation is part of the interpersonal and intrapersonal relational framework of each person, as Koldeová writes, and it significantly influences both one's view of oneself and the individual's relationships with the social environment. An individual value system is inherent to every person, but one cannot overlook the societal value system and societal perspective that emphasize the objective validity of individual values, goals, and ideals [1] (p. 120). In this context, we are talking about the need to align individual interests with the interests of society, which offers considerable space for

discussion. Each environment, of course, is characterized by different degrees of favour towards certain needs. Within education, it is possible to present certain values preferred by society to the individual, but the final decision rests with him. "For authentic choice and the adoption of values, every person must rediscover values, recognize them, take a stance towards them, and ultimately make a free decision for them" [2] (p. 78).

1. Family education and values through the lens of research practice

The dynamics of significant social, economic, cultural, and spiritual changes reflect the designation of the present time as an era of paradoxes. The easy and immediate availability of information intertwines with a lack of orientation, chaos, and inadequate interpretation. Thanks to the internet and new communication technologies, we as individuals are connected across continents, becoming part of a world that McLuhan described as a global village. "We are gradually leaving the era of mass media and entering a time of social online networks, which serve as the foundations for interpersonal relationships," writes Šoltés [3] (p. 42).

From the perspective of perceiving the contemporary world and the situation of youth within it, the results of quantitative questionnaire research focused on various aspects of the lives of young people (high school students) in today's society, conducted by the Centre for Research on Ethnicity and Culture (2021), show that young people are very aware of the speed of changes and the pressure that follows. Up to 80% of high school students declare difficulties in adapting to the rapidly changing world, which is subsequently reflected in their overall sense of happiness. As Šoltés aptly notes, happiness does not grow at the same rate as technology. Compared to the 1960s, we consume three times more energy, but we are certainly not three times happier. There is an increase in existential problems, depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts. Getting rid of technology is, of course, not the path or challenge of the present, because the question of attitude toward technology is a question of attitude toward oneself [3] (p. 51-52).

The results of the aforementioned survey confirm that the time spent online by high school students is surprisingly considerable. Approximately one-third of them spend more than 6 hours a day on social media. An interesting finding is that civically active young people spend less time on social media. Ninety percent of high school students perceive social media as a good tool for maintaining relationships with friends. However, this is associated with a certain pressure because, if they were not on social

media, they would not fit in with others, which is confirmed by up to 70% of them [4]. In this context, it appears important to seek ways for youth to achieve an adequate balance between online and offline worlds and related activities. Ongoing social changes are reflected in the value system and vice versa. In this regard, it would be possible to present a relatively rich argumentative spectrum concerning the general decline of morality, the general relativization of norms and values in society, which is associated with a kind of destabilization and lack of grounding for many people today, as well as the loss of important anchors within their thinking and actions. The interpretation of many values and norms is alternative, permeated with individualism. In the context of the announced changes, there are also shifts in preferences in the hierarchy of values applied in upbringing. Regarding shifts and changes in the domain of values, post-1989 has seen an upward mobility of value orientations such as acquiring property, money, materially securing the family, consumption, luxury, and entertainment. This reflects a clear orientation toward a consumer lifestyle, especially under the influence of advertising and media. Solidarity, quality of interpersonal relationships, respect for authority, education, refinement, belonging, civic activity, and general human trust are showing declining social value, as noted by Poláková [5].

The findings of Koldesova's research focusing on values and value orientations of adolescents in Slovakia and Germany show that in ideal value representations, material values are of medium importance for adolescents, while material values in terms of creating a favourable impression are of high importance. However, the preference for possessions, finances, and good economic security is characteristic not only of young people, who can be negatively influenced by advertising, consumerist lifestyles, the availability of negative role models, but also by the social uncertainties and negative emotions aroused by the current economic situation. A positive finding of Koldeová's cited research is the preference for universal human values among adolescents (health, love, friendship, and family), among which the value of love and friendship is proclaimed as a very significant value [1].

Life has always brought certain dangers and risks. Under the dictate of mass fashion, patterns and values change. Many people lose orientation in the existing system of values and resign. Especially where there is a multitude of opinions, attitudes, behaviour patterns, and subcultures, the positive influence of family is crucial. The family is the primary base for the formation of values. At the same time, it is necessary to develop values that reinforce the family, not those that divide it. The works of many authors analysing the issue of changes in families in a parallel changing society present view that the current family and the related family upbringing find themselves in

crisis. Is this really the case? In any case, the current family is in a relatively challenging situation. Although it itself undergoes significant changes, it is undoubtedly an important institution helping individuals cope with social changes. Questions about the prognosis and prospects of family, family life, and family upbringing are of course relevant in the context of the present time, drawing attention from experts in various scientific disciplines as well as the broader public. The future is a matter for society. In the interests of society, attention should therefore be drawn to what will enable the family to be a natural life-giving framework. The formation of a person's personality primarily stems from the family. The nature of parents and family influences the nature of children and society. If children are guided through life by a mother and father with integrity, they will have a significantly easier life in adulthood. Ethics is not a matter of doubt, and truth is not confused. Such children are better able to maintain a steady course. Integrity, in fact, protects us. It tells us who we are when we are hidden from the eyes of others. It radiates from our lives in the form of inner light, and people can easily tell whether they can trust us [6] (p. 57-59).

Healthy families produce healthy citizens who do good not only for themselves but also for society. If we consider the family to be a good, we must cultivate and protect this good. It is also important to note that in the family, we learn not only to seek personal good but also the good of others, the good of the group, the good of society. The family is the primary and basic space for respecting human dignity, building trust in oneself and in institutions, and learning cooperation and responsibility. It is here that upbringing plays an irreplaceable role as the most effective alternative for shaping a person's thinking.

Conclusion

Education in the family, understood as the fundamental space for the child's socialization, develops the basic personality dispositions within the child. These dispositions are manifested in the child's ability to engage in social relationships and subsequently to develop them. The child gradually acquires the ability to control themselves, thereby gaining the dispositions for social realization. The overall character of education and socialization determines the quality of the personality that is its result. The family primarily provides the child with models for imitation and identification. It conveys the essential model of social interaction and communication within a small social group. It integrates the child into a certain way of life and presents specific social demands and norms. The goal of family education is to lead the child to

internalize these norms. This means that it is not just about the external performance of learned practices, which become automated in the child's upbringing, but also about understanding and accepting one's own actions. An indispensable prerequisite for entry into the wider social environment is a sufficient and stimulating starting position for the child, so that the child not only learns to assert and defend his own demands, but also acquires and develops the ability to respect the demands and claims of others in the sense of genuine respect for human beings. According to Kimmel a fulfilling childhood is not the result of chance. It is a colourful mosaic created by the careful hands of loving parents, who always keep the overall picture and finished product in mind. According to the quoted author, if we fail in education, it is usually because we fail to see the individual small components that complete the "big picture". Children have three dimensions: physical, intellectual, and abstract (soul), which are interconnected, and it is the responsibility of parents to maintain the balance of all their children's needs [6] (p. 174).

There is no ideal family; such a thing cannot be found in the world, but being born and growing up in a healthy and functioning family is ideal. In a family that serves as both a support and encouragement for the individual, providing the opportunity to love and be loved. This is the foundation for the harmonious development of the child's personality.

Finally, we present brief suggestions for activities on the topic "The Family I Live In," which were developed in participation with students of ethics education.

Activity No. 1: **The Best Parenting Style**

Keywords: **family, parenting style, asking questions, cooperation**

Focus of the Activity: Each of us has been raised in a different environment and with a different parenting style. Every upbringing has left its mark on us. There are several parenting styles, but the focus is on selected ones: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, neglectful, and respectful. Students should recognize the importance of choosing the right parenting style. They should also be aware of the pros and cons of each parenting style and their impact on the child.

Course of the Activity: After explaining the issue of the implementation of the aforementioned parenting styles, their basic attributes will be displayed on an interactive whiteboard so that students can see them. The teacher will then give students 10 minutes to choose what they consider the best style and prepare their defence for it. Subsequently, each student will state which parenting style they chose, and they will form small groups based on the same choice of parenting style. The

groups will then compare their defences of their choices and agree on a unified argument – students will have 15 minutes for this.

One student from each group will present their prepared defence, and the other students will ask them various questions. This will continue until each group has presented. If a group has more than 6 students, they will be divided into more groups, even if they have the same parenting style.

Activity No. 2: **How do we help each other at home?**

Keywords: family, knowledge, tolerance, relationships, rules

Focus of the Activity: This activity is aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of one's own family. It involves applying social skills within the family (for example, being empathetic, communicating openly and sensitively, being assertive). Healthy unhealthy criticality. Reflection on one's own criticality within the family. Understanding parents and siblings, fostering good relationships in the family, tolerance, and respecting authority, as well as sibling relationships. Respecting the rules of the game (rights and responsibilities) within the family.

Course of the Activity: The teacher begins by outlining the importance of rules in the family. The family consists of our closest people, with whom we share time and living space. To function well together and coexist harmoniously, there must be certain rules in the family. The teacher then hands out blank papers to the students. On the right side, the students write how "others in the family take care of me," and on the left side, they write "how I take care of other members of the family." Students are encouraged to gradually provide examples of help within their family. The following guiding questions may be helpful: How is love and care expressed in our family? In what ways do we help each other? In what situations is our help needed in the family? Do we help at home often? If so, how?

Activity No. 3: Family Portraits

Keywords: creativity, artistic creation, collaboration, self-awareness, significance of family

Focus of the Activity: Students discuss their families together and create artistic portraits that represent their family. Students can use various materials, such as paints, pencils, pastels, paper, and so on. The goal of the activity is to allow students to express and support their creativity in understanding the significance of family.

Course of the Activity: Students will be divided into groups and will talk about their families. They discuss how their families function and what is most important to them.

Each group will then create an artistic portrait that represents their family. The portrait can be either abstract or realistic. Once the groups finish their portraits, they will present them to the other students. They will discuss what they liked and did not like about the portraits.

Activity No. 4: Family Tree

Keywords: family, values, collaboration

Focus of the Activity: Students will create a family tree that includes all members of their family. They will learn about their relatives and their relationships. They will also discuss the values that are important to their family, as well as how these values are passed down from generation to generation.

Course of the Activity: Students will gather information about their relatives, bring photographs, and create a family tree using paper and colours. They will then present their family to each other and discuss what values are important to them. They will try to identify common values and discuss whether and how these values connect different generations.

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PhDr. Andrea Lesková, PhD. – Mgr. Zuzana Uličná, PhD.

Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

e-mail: aleskova@ukf.sk, ulicna.zuzka@gmail.com

The Influence of Religiosity on the Acceptance of Selected (Christian) Values and Norms

Ondrej Štefaňak

Abstract

The presented sociological study deals with the acceptance of selected (Christian) values and norms in contemporary Slovak society. Specifically, it analyzes the attitudes of Slovaks towards selected life values (family, friends, work, free time, religion and politics) and selected marital-family norms (prohibition of sexual cohabitation before marriage, homosexual behavior, contraception and abortion). It deals mainly with the differences between individual categories of Slovaks with regard to the following indicators of religiosity – religious declarations, confessional declarations and participation in religious services. The contribution is based primarily on the results of two representative sociological researches, which were carried out in 2019 and 2020.

Keywords: Religiosity; Christianity; Values; Norms.

Introduction

The acceptance of life and moral values and norms is influenced by many and various factors, which may be more or less interconnected. Sociologists study, measure, describe and classify them. The influence of education, family, friends, immediate environment, school, workplace, media and also religiosity is underlined most often. [1] (p. 88) In the outlined context, in the presented paper I want to focus on the issue of the influence of religiosity on the acceptance of selected (Christian) values and norms in contemporary Slovak society. We will seek answers for following questions: Does such an influence exist? Is it statistically significant? Is it directly or indirectly proportional?

Specifically, we will present the sketched issue on the attitudes of Slovaks towards selected life values and moral norms. We will verify the assumed differences between individual categories of Slovaks with regard to the following independent variables, respectively indicators of religiosity – religious declarations, religious affiliation and attendance at religious services. Marginally, it can be noted that the contribution refers primarily to the results of two representative sociological researches that were carried

out in 2019¹ and 2020². The whole article is composed of one short theoretical and two longer empirical parts: 1. Relation between religion and morality; 2. The influence of religiosity on selected life values; 3. The influence of religiosity on selected moral norms.

1. Relation between religion and morality

Before presenting the relevant empirical analyses, a few reflections about the issue of relation between religion and morality should be written. The well-known Polish sociologist of religion and morality, J. Mariański, claims that in contemporary societies, clear cause-and-effect relations between religious and moral attitudes are questioned. Many people who have left religion behave in a way that deserves moral acceptance. Rejection of God does not automatically become the cause of an immoral life, just as religious faith does not guarantee morally good behaviour. People are slowly moving away from the idea that a moral value of person is identified with a professed religious worldview, and only believers or churchgoers can be good in a moral sense. [2] (p. 68)

In reflections about relation between religion and morality, two extreme views can be distinguished: identification and separation. According to some thinkers, morality is not possible without connection with religion (moral norms would lose their binding power without religion). This view is contested by other thinkers who claim that religious justifications are not necessary for the acceptance of moral values and norms. According to them, moral capital is created not only thanks to religions, but also thanks to many other social factors.[3] (pp. 339-342) From empirical researches on the topic of relation between religion and morality, resp. religious faith and moral behaviour, we know that most of contemporary people are inclined to the opinion that „religious faith helps in correct behaviour, but also without it people can behave morally“.[4] (pp. 57-62)

The ongoing changes in the relationship „religiosity-morality“ make the dialogue between religious and secular worlds more and more important. [5] (p.297) In contemporary world, moral issues are increasingly becoming the subject of various

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1. It was a representative questionnaire survey of the value orientations of Slovaks, which was carried out as part of the project APVV-16-0116. The basic set was the Slovak population as a whole. A sample set consisting of 1000 respondents of different sex, age, residence and education from all Slovak regions was selected from the basic set using the quota method.
 2. It was a representative questionnaire survey of the religiousness of Slovaks, which was carried out as part of the project APVV-17-0158. The basic set was the Slovak population as a whole. A sample set consisting of 1000 respondents of different sex, age, residence and education from all Slovak regions was selected from the basic set using the quota method.

professional discussions and conferences. At the same time, they are a permanent part of all major religious traditions, such as: Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity or Islam. [6] (431-436) From the above mentioned, it is clear that religion and morality are closely connected. Religion sets moral standards and wants them to be identified with the universal patterns of moral behaviour. [7] (p. 158) In the outlined context, we can ask to what extent the moral teaching of religious organisations has an influence on contemporary morality – especially on morality of their members, believers, resp. churchgoers – and to what extent is it losing an importance? [8] (p. 229)

2. The influence of religiosity on selected life values

Interest in the issue of life values has its origin in fact that values play an important role in the process of individual and social development of person. However, various discussions about values are usually marked by many questions and ambiguities. Above all, the term „values“ means the goals of action as well as attitudes in relation to these goals. Values represent not only the goals of mutually coordinated actions, but they are the basis for the meaning of life and the maintenance of social order as well. They also have a legitimizing function in relation to norms, while a specific norm can be legitimized through several values. [9] (pp. 68-69)

In connection with the described issue, R. Inglehart distinguishes two dimensions of changes of life values, which depend on economic development, education, modernization and the phase of postmodernity. The first dimension includes transformations within the scale: from traditional models of family, education, institutions and authorities, especially religious ones – to secular-rational values that emphasize individual success, efficiency and independence. The second dimension represents a transition from an orientation to material values, associated with the need for physical and economic security – to an orientation to post-material values, which find their expression in the need for self-realization and self-expression, in the importance of quality and comfort of life, and also in the internal, spiritual aspects of religiosity. [10] (pp. 177-212)

Above outlined transformations of life values in the postmodern world certainly do not bypass Slovakia. In order to reveal their hierarchy in the perception and life of Slovaks, in a representative survey from 2019, respondents were asked to evaluate the following life values: family, friends, work, free time, religion and politics. Thus, in the mentioned list, there were life values that had a concrete character – as such they represented certain concrete goods, perceived as the goals of human action. The

importance which was attributed to these values the respondents evaluated according to the scale: very important, mostly important, not very important, not important at all, I can't say or I don't want to say. Empirical results, which communicate the importance and hierarchy of selected life values for the studied Slovak population, are placed in table 1.

Table 1. Attitudes to selected life values (in %)

Categories	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Family	91,2	6,6	1,4	0,4	0,4	100,0
Friends	45,4	45,8	7,5	0,9	0,4	100,0
Work	39,8	45,6	10,3	3,2	1,1	100,0
Free time	44,7	48,6	5,3	1,0	0,4	100,0
Religion	17,0	25,3	23,7	29,6	4,4	100,0
Politics	4,1	24,3	44,3	23,6	3,7	100,0

Legend: A – very important; B – mostly important; C – not very important; D – not important at all; E – no answer.

If we take into account the highest („very important”) and moderate evaluations („mostly important”), the following hierarchy of life values in the perception and life of the Slovaks surveyed can be presented: family (97,8%), free time (93,3%), friends (91,2%), work (85,4%), religion (42,3%) and politics (28,4%) – according to the highest evaluations („very important”): family (91,2%), friends (45,4%), free time (44,7%), work (39,8%), religion (17,0%) and politics (4,1%). The first four values obtained more than 80% acceptance, thus situated within the boundaries of the so-called cultural obviousness (they were important for more than 80% of studied population). The exceptions from this point of view were religion and, above all, politics, which were very or mostly important for less than half of examined Slovaks – religion was situated within the boundaries of labile values (it was important for 40% – 59% of studied population) and politics within the boundaries of almost unaccepted values (it was important for 20% – 39% of studied population). [11] (pp. 105-108)

Based on the presented empirical results, it can be said that Slovaks desire especially a stable and peaceful life in the circle of family and friends, they want to enjoy enough free time and interesting work – preferably far from big politics. One cannot fail to notice that the value „religion” obtained a relatively low evaluation among surveyed Slovaks. In the hierarchy of selected life values, it was found in the fifth out of six positions, while it was situated within the boundaries of so-called labile values. The

obtained empirical results are a certain signal not only for Christian churches in Slovakia. Although Slovaks to a relatively large extent declare their religious faith, belong to Christian churches, generally accept various religious truths and realize various religious acts, in the hierarchy of life values many other facts come before religion.

For a comparison of specific categories of the studied Slovak population with regard to the available religious characteristics – in this case, religious affiliation and attendance at religious services – in table 2 I present exclusively the percentages of those for whom the analysed life values were very or mostly important. In this way, we can find out the answer for the question whether and to what extent religiosity influences the acceptance of selected life values of Slovaks?

Table 2. Attitudes to selected life values (in %)

Categories	Family	Friends	Work	Free time	Religion	Politics
Religious affiliation						
With religious affiliation	98,3	92,9	86,0	93,6	55,3	31,1
Without religious affiliation	98,0	88,0	85,6	94,4	9,6	22,0
Attendance at religious services						
Regularly	100,0	95,8	86,0	93,5	95,8	33,2
Irregularly	97,4	92,2	89,1	95,8	57,3	31,8
Rarely	96,8	91,0	86,8	92,1	31,2	29,1
Never	97,5	89,0	81,9	92,3	8,8	24,1
Total (N = 1000)	97,8	91,2	85,4	93,3	42,3	28,4

Legend: The data are not summarized up to 100,0%, because the presented indicators relate only to those respondents who declared that described life values are very or mostly important.

Considering the religious affiliation, it can be concluded that people with religious affiliation valued more often than people without religious affiliation exclusively value „religion” – at least at a statistically significant level ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,525$). Among other life values, people with religious affiliation valued slightly more often family ($p = 0,272$), friends ($p = 0,114$), work ($p = 0,072$) and politics ($p = 0,056$). On the other hand, people without religious affiliation valued slightly more often free time (0,149).³ Slight percentage differences can be seen especially in the case of the

3. Statistical tests relate to the whole tables of concrete variables – not only to selected indicators, presented in a common table.

correlation of the highest evaluations („very important"): family (92,5% – 89,2%), friends (46,0% – 43,2%), work (41,9% – 32,4%), free time (42,2% – 50,4%), politics (4,8% – 2,4%).

Similarly, in the case of attendance at religious services, it should be said that people who attend religious services more frequently valued more often than people who attend religious services less frequently exclusively value „religion" – at least at a statistically significant level ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,498$). Among other life values, more frequent practitioners valued slightly more often family ($p = 0,129$), work ($p = 0,143$) and politics ($p = 0,074$). On the other hand, less frequent practitioners valued slightly more often friends ($p = 0,159$) and free time (0,227). Slight percentage differences can be seen especially in the case of the correlation of the highest evaluations („very important"): family (93,0% – 92,2% – 91,5% – 89,3%), friends (42,1% – 51,0% – 46,0% – 44,4%), work (39,3% – 46,9% – 40,2% – 35,3%), free time (37,9% – 45,8% – 43,9% – 48,8%), politics (6,1% – 5,2% – 2,6% – 3,3%).

To conclude the description of the meaning of selected life values in the perception and life of surveyed Slovaks, it is necessary to say that they care primarily about family, free time, friends and work. Such values as religion and especially politics play a less important role in their lives. It can also be argued that more religious people (members of religious groups, resp. more frequent churchgoers) value more often than less religious people exclusively religion. They value the other analysed values more or less at the same level. Of course, it is possible and probable that if we had a longer list of life values, statistically significant differences would show up in more cases. Finally, it can be added that only among regularly practicing Slovaks religion situated within the boundaries of the so-called cultural obviousness (it was important for more than 80% of them).

3. The influence of religiosity on selected moral norms

Moral norms (standards) are very closely related to life values (goals). On the one hand, specific moral norms are legitimized through several life values. On the other hand, specific life values are protected by several moral norms. [13] (pp. 37-41] In the following lines, on the basis of representative research from 2020, I will present a closer look at the attitudes of Slovaks towards four selected moral norms – specifically those that protect the value of life (prohibition of abortion and contraception) and the value of family (prohibition of sexual cohabitation before marriage and homosexual behaviour). The attitudes that the respondents could declare towards the above

mentioned behaviours were as follows: It is morally allowed; It depends on the situation; It is morally not allowed; It is difficult to say. Empirical results, which communicate the attitudes of studied Slovaks towards selected moral norms, are placed in table 3.

Table 3. Attitudes to selected moral norms (in %)

Categories	A	B	C	D	Total
Abortion	35,2	37,5	19,7	7,6	100,0
Using contraception	66,6	18,5	8,1	6,8	100,0
Sexual cohabitation before marriage	67,1	16,2	8,9	7,8	100,0
Homosexual behaviour	32,9	22,2	27,7	17,2	100,0

Legend: A – It is allowed; B – It depends on the situation; C – It is not allowed; D – No answer.

Based on the obtained empirical results, it can be said that the most often accepted from analysed moral norms was the prohibition of abortion – 57,2% of Slovaks considered artificial termination of pregnancy to be absolutely or relatively not allowed. In second place situated the prohibition of homosexual behaviour – 49,9% of Slovaks considered such behaviour to be absolutely or relatively not allowed. In third place situated the prohibition of contraception – only 26,6% of Slovaks considered using contraception to be absolutely or relatively not allowed. Finally, in fourth place situated the prohibition of sexual cohabitation before marriage – only 25,1% of Slovaks considered such behaviour to be absolutely or relatively not allowed.

If we take into account exclusively the unconditional acceptance of the analysed moral norms, then the hierarchy is as follows: the prohibition of homosexual behaviour (27,7%), the prohibition of abortion (19,7%), the prohibition of sexual cohabitation before marriage (only 8,9%) and the prohibition of using contraception (only 8,1%). In the outlined context, it can be argued that the first two moral norms (prohibition of abortion and homosexual behaviour) were situated within the boundaries of almost unaccepted norms (they were absolutely binding for 20% – 39% of studied population) and the other two moral norms (prohibition of using contraception and sexual cohabitation before marriage) were situated within the boundaries of the so-called negative cultural obviousness (they were absolutely binding for less than 20% of studied population). [11] (pp. 105-108)

In summary, it can be said that the selected moral norms were accepted by surveyed Slovaks in varying degrees – a little more often norms protecting human life and

traditional family (prohibition of abortion and homosexual behaviour) and very rarely the so-called sexual norms (prohibition of using contraception and sexual cohabitation before marriage). Marginally, it can be noted that an important aspect of moral orientations is the belief about absolute or relative nature of moral norms (standards). In the opinion of many sociologists, the second of listed types of moral orientations is becoming increasingly popular in postmodern societies. [14] (p. 248) In the outlined context, it can be said that the average indicator of absolute acceptance of described moral norms among studied Slovak population was only 16,1%, partial acceptance 23,6% and non-acceptance up to 50,5%, which also confirms above mentioned thesis. For a comparison of specific categories of the studied Slovak population with regard to the available religious characteristics – in this case, religious declarations, religious affiliation and attendance at religious services – in table 4 I present exclusively the percentages of those for whom the analysed moral norms were absolutely binding. In this way, we can find out the answer for the question whether and to what extent religiosity influences the acceptance of selected moral norms of Slovaks?

Table 4. Attitudes to selected moral norms (in %)

Categories	A	B	C	D
Religious declarations				
Deeply religious	63,6	33,6	50,0	53,6
Religious	23,0	8,8	6,0	31,9
Connected with a religious tradition	11,3	2,7	1,6	20,4
Indifferent or non-religious	2,6	0,4	1,8	15,7
Religious affiliation				
Catholic Church	24,0	10,9	9,7	30,7
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession	8,7	4,8	4,8	20,2
Without religious affiliation	5,5	0,6	2,2	15,5
Attendance at religious services				
Regularly	58,1	27,2	35,1	48,7
Irregularly	20,5	6,8	3,7	27,9
Rarely	7,8	2,6	3,3	22,8
Never	6,0	2,1	1,4	18,7
Total (N = 1000)	19,7	8,1	8,9	27,7

Legend: A – Abortion; B – Using contraception; C – Sexual cohabitation before marriage; D – Homosexual behaviour. The data are not summarized up to 100,0%, because the presented indicators relate only to those respondents who declared that described behaviours are not allowed.

Regarding religious declarations, statistically significant differences were noted in all analysed cases: abortion ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,302$); using contraception ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,278$); sexual cohabitation before marriage ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,334$); homosexual

behaviour ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,195$).⁴ In accordance with the stated research hypothesis, along with increase of declared religiosity, acceptance of described moral norms grew significantly – especially in the case of the prohibition of abortion (the percentage difference between the extreme categories was up to 61,0%) and in the case of the prohibition of sexual cohabitation before marriage (the percentage difference between the extreme categories was up to 48,2%). In the presented comparison, the category of deeply religious differed the most, which accepted the described moral norms significantly more often than the others – especially the prohibition of abortion.

Similarly, in the case of religious affiliation, it is necessary to confirm statistically significant differences in all analysed cases, although a little weaker: abortion ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,200$); using contraception ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,156$); sexual cohabitation before marriage ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,135$); homosexual behaviour ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,153$). Among the selected confessional categories, the described moral norms were most often accepted by members of Catholic Church, followed by members of Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, and least often by people without religious affiliation – especially in the case of the prohibition of abortion (Catholic Church – 24,0%; Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession – 8,7%; without religious affiliation – 5,5%) and in the case of the prohibition of homosexual behaviour (Catholic Church – 30,7%; Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession – 20,2%; without religious affiliation – 15,5%).⁵

Finally, from the point of view of attendance at religious services, statistically significant differences were noted in all analysed cases as well: abortion ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,309$); using contraception ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,276$); sexual cohabitation before marriage ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,321$); homosexual behaviour ($p < 0,0005$; $V = 0,177$). In accordance with the stated research hypothesis, along with more frequent participation in religious services, acceptance of analysed moral norms grew significantly – especially in the case of the prohibition of abortion (the percentage difference between the extreme categories was up to 52,1%). In the presented comparison, the category of regular churchgoers (at least every Sunday) differed the most, which accepted the described moral norms significantly more often than the others – in particular the prohibition of abortion.

4. Statistical tests relate to the whole tables of concrete variables – not only to selected indicators, presented in a common table.

5. Categories „Roman or Greek Catholic Church”, „Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession” and „Without religious affiliation” were created from methodological reasons. Only in these cases did correlation-statistical analyses make sense (their number exceeded the limit of 100 respondents, which was not fulfilled in the case of members of other religious groups).

To conclude the description of the acceptance of selected moral norms (standards) in Slovakia, it is necessary to say that their acceptance is relatively low – especially absolute acceptance. It can also be argued that more religious people (stronger believers, members of religious groups, resp. more frequent churchgoers) accept all four analysed moral norms significantly more often than less religious people – in particular the prohibition of abortion, but also the other described prohibitions. This fact communicates about significant influence of religious faith and practice on the acceptance of moral norms of this kind. Although even in the case of deeply religious people, or regularly attending at religious services, it is not about „perfect (absolute, universal) acceptance” – especially in relation to the prohibition of sexual cohabitation before marriage and using contraception – after all, it can be argued that experienced faith, or participation in religious services bears fruit in the attitudes of religious people. Finally, it can be added that not a single moral norm was situated within the boundaries of the so-called cultural obviousness – only in the case of deeply religious people the prohibition of abortion situated within the boundaries of strongly accepted norms (it was absolutely binding for 60% – 79% of them).

Conclusion

After presenting several correlation-statistical analyses, we can confirm that religiosity has a statistically significant effect on the acceptance of selected moral norms (standards), but it did not affect the acceptance of selected life values (except the value „religion”). More religious people accepted the analysed moral norms significantly more often and the analysed life values approximately as often as less religious people. Of course, it is possible and probable that if we had a longer list of life values or moral norms, statistically significant differences would be noticed in more cases.

In the outlined context, it can be added that other empirical researches confirm the positive influence of religiosity on the acceptance of various life values (e.g. morality, solidarity, forgiveness, humility or social usefulness) [15] and various moral norms (e.g. the commandments of the Decalogue, the prohibition of giving and receiving bribes, tax lies, silence when another is wronged or appropriation of found things). [17] Overall, it is necessary to say that there are relatively close relationships between religiosity and morality, while the nature and strength of these relationships varies depending on the analysed issue. T. Mądrzycki, for example, claims that according to some indicators, religiosity and morality are mutually independent – it means the implementation of one of them does not affect the implementation of the other (e.g. in the case of altruism or so-called social sins); according to other indicators, there is a

positive relationship between them (e.g. attitudes towards marriage-family morality or bioethics); and still according to other indicators there is a negative relationship between them (e.g. in the case of tolerance or prejudice). [16] (pp. 76-77)

Reflecting the described issue, we can conclude, together with well-known Polish sociologist of religion and parish W. Piwowarski, that the correlation-statistical analyses presented above communicate about „attitudes” (views, opinions) and „declarations”. Both of them have a verbal character, which means that it is not known how much they correspond to the real state. We do not know to what extent the declared life values and moral norms are implemented in everyday life. Nevertheless, it can be accepted that they express at least the readiness of respondents to live according to declared principles – it means according to declared life values and moral norms. [1] (p. 89) Within the limited scientific competence, it is necessary to remember that sociology does not provide us with a complete picture of the reflected issue and requires help of other scientific perspectives. [18] (p. 107)

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doc. PhDr. Ondrej Štefaňak, PhD.

Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

e-mail: ostefanak@ukf.sk

Devaluation of the Value of Life in the Jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights in the Aspect of the Right to Assistance in Dying

Bogna Wach

Abstract

Until recently, life was a fundamental moral value grounded in the Christian heritage, protected in the constitutions of states and in regional and universal systems of human rights protection. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 1950 contains the right to life of everyone in Article 2. Respect for the objective value of life was expressed by the abolition of the death penalty in all circumstances in Protocols 6 and 13 to the Convention. The right to life is the basis for the existence of all other rights and freedoms. However, in the matter of bioethical issues, life ceased to be basic and inviolable. For example, in the issue of ending life, there has been a radical change from the unconditional protection of life to the right to self-determination. Since the first case of Diane Pretty v. Great Britain in 2002, it has been argued that everyone has the right to die, i.e. how to decide when and how we will end our lives. The right to life has been shifted from the sphere protected by the state to the private sphere. The objective right to life was gradually replaced by the right to dispose of one's own body based on a subjective assessment of the quality of one's own life. The only protection against abuse was the ability to express the will to end one's own life.

Keywords: Right to Life; Euthanasia; Physician Assisted Suicide; Self-Determination.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the change in the perception of the right to life in the aspect of legalization of physician assisted dying in the form of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. The right to life as an unchangeable and fundamental value, the existence of which is a condition for the enjoyment of all other rights and freedoms of the individual, has been protected by the universal human rights system of the United Nations with a global reach, the cornerstone of which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right to life occupies an identical position in regional human rights systems, which take into account the specificity of a given region (continent) and are created in order to raise the standard of protection provided for by the universal system. The most effective instruments have been adopted in Europe. Their genesis is related to the experiences of World War II. A special role is

played by the Council of Europe, within the framework of which the European Convention on Human Rights was adopted – containing the rights and freedoms of the individual, in which the right to life plays a key role. The Convention also establishes an extensive mechanism for compliance with the obligations and rights and freedoms contained therein by the Member States through the establishment of control bodies, which are the Committee of Ministers and the European Court of Human Rights. It is the judgments of the Tribunal which are the subject of analysis in this article that are an example of a change in the perception of the perspective of the right to life in the aspect of assisted death from objective value to subjectivization, i.e. making the protection of the right to life an exclusively private sphere. The individual decides whether his life is worth continuing, while the role of the state is only to guarantee that his decision is understood in a conscious way and free from coercion.

1. The right to life as a natural right

Human rights are, first and foremost, universal moral rights that bind all people in all places and times, regardless of whether they are legally enforced or not [1], (p. 283). They do not and should not depend in any way on the situation of the person to whom they refer. These are rights that the individual is entitled to only by virtue of being a human being [2], (p.169). Human rights are norms with the most general formulation in the legal order, and at the same time they have the highest impact.

Human rights have their source in natural law. Their task is to express the inherent dignity of the human being in the system of legal norms, and not only in the system of moral norms. Legal norms use a sanction for non-compliance with the rights and freedoms of an individual, and thus make human rights enforceable [3] (p. 12-130).

Quoting the opinion of Michael Freeman, it should be noted that the reason for the renaissance of the concept of human rights was the reflection on the atrocities committed during World War II. Two philosophical currents that undermined the concept of natural rights, i.e. utilitarianism and scientific positivism, did not explain the evil inherent in totalitarian systems. The language of human rights has become more appropriate for these considerations. Thus, the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was written in order to protect against the repetition of atrocities committed during World War II [4] (pp. 42-43, 450). In the preamble of this document we read: “Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind” (UDHR).

At the same time, despite the reference to the concept of natural law, the concept of "natural rights" was replaced by the concept of "human rights". The declaration does not invoke the disputed foundations of the law of nature. Instead, it seeks consensus at the level of principles without consensus on values or beliefs. The very concept of human rights has no philosophical basis. The declaration did not impose obligations on states, but set models for them that they should achieve in their legal orders. It contains moral and political principles that can be called universal. Before World War II, there was no international law for the protection of human rights. The declaration had a great political and legal impact on the UN member states. At present, regional systems of human rights protection draw on the models contained in the UDHR. Its 2nd article, which states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" which is an expression of egalitarianism and universalism [4] (pp. 46-47)..

The Declaration itself does not refer to a specific philosophical concept. The concept of human rights is above philosophical dilemmas and disputes. Statutory law organizes human rights into a certain system at the universal, regional and national levels, but it is not a source of human rights, but it only confirms their validity. According to M. Freeman, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights restores the validity of the concept of natural law, but in a modern version [4] (p.54).

According to C. Fred Alford [5] (p. 128), in order to avoid seeing the rights listed in the UDHR as a political compromise⁶, it is better to view human rights as a supplement to the natural law. That is, human rights are categories of rights-duties that we are obliged to fulfill by virtue of natural law. Leszek Kołakowski put it this way:

"Human rights are the modern version of natural law theory There is no substantial difference between proclaiming the 'right to life' and stating that natural law forbids killing" [6] (p. 214).

One of the basic human rights is the right of an innocent person not to be directly killed or maimed. This right is violated when one makes the death or mutilation of another

⁶ It should be recalled here that the Canadian lawyer John Humphrey, who prepared the draft of the bill, was based on a comparative analysis of national constitutions. During the work, 1233 individual amendments were rejected. The UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on 10 December 1948 with 48 votes in favour, 9 against, and 8 abstentions (Freeman, op. cit., pp. 44-45).

person the object of his action. It justifies the norm prohibiting targeting non-linear soldiers, even in just wars, as well as the norm prohibiting abortion, euthanasia or the killing of hostages [7] (p. 12).

According to Javier Hervada's views, the right to life belongs to man by virtue of his nature. Life is a good resulting from the existence of man, and this results in the obligation of other people to respect this good. The right to life is proper to all people at every stage of human history[8] (p. 73, 82-84). John Finnis believes that life is a fundamental value corresponding to the pursuit of survival, and what is more, this pursuit is independent of cultural circles. Individual cultures differ in this respect only in the ways in which to ensure the survival of the individual and the community [9] (pp. 163-164).

Moreover, the right to life is not something abstract. The life of every human being is real and concrete. An attempt on life is not a violation of the abstract, but of the concrete, the existence of every human being [8] (p. 94). Human life is a fundamental good, irreducible to other goods, respect for it does not mean naïve vitalism. Everyone has the right to the protection of life, regardless of whether he or she is an old, seriously ill, disabled or helpless person [10](pp. 65, 73) [11](pp. 41, 51, 231).

The inviolability of life as one of the most important principles of the natural law should be the basic argument used in the dispute related to euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. The normative status of human life must have an objectively conditioned source and should not be the result of conventions or subjective opinions [10] (pp.83, 155). According to Craig Paterson, the *raison d'état* is to secure the life of the individual and this is what gives the state legitimacy to act. Natural law provides moral and political standards in relation to statutory law. If we abandon these standards and the justification of the statutory law is only the preferences of the majority, it may mean that certain groups of people who will not be able to defend themselves will be exposed to abuse. Taking a life, regardless of the premises, is an evil [10] (165-167).

2. The right to life as a fundamental human right

The right to life protects the life of every human being, which is a fundamental value that occupies a superior position among all other human rights. The preservation of life is a condition for the enjoyment of all other rights and freedoms. The right to life is the core of all human rights [12] (p.103).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 3 contains the provision "everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person". The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, which was adopted on the basis of the Declaration and adopted by a UN General Assembly resolution [13]⁷ in Article 6 states: "Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life". The right to life is the only right that can be described as "inherent" in every human being, as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights does. Human Rights Committee⁸ monitoring the observance of the provisions of the Covenant by the States Parties, in General Comment No. 6 of 1982, defines the right to life as the supreme right [14]. The states parties to the Pact are obliged to protect the life of every individual under their jurisdiction. Moreover, it is the duty of states not only to refrain from deliberate actions aimed at depriving an individual of life, but also to take active measures in this sphere (e.g. crime prevention) [15] (pp. 106 and 108).

2.1 The limits of the protection of life

The issue of the right to life is related to problems with determining the beginning and end of life, i.e. the boundaries where its protection begins and the degree of admissibility of medical interference in its origin and end. None of the treaties of international law contain definitions such as life and death. This issue remains at the intersection of such fields as law, biomedical sciences, ethics and religion. The complexity of this problem is exacerbated by the development of medical sciences and technologies, which allow interference in the duration of human life and its quality.

In the issue of legalization of physician assisted dying (in the form of euthanasia and assisted suicide) there is a heated discussion, marked by references to Nazi crimes

⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, form the International Bill of Rights. All of the above-mentioned acts of international law are part of the universal system of human rights protection.

⁸ The Human Rights Committee is a Geneva-based body of independent experts that monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by the States Parties to it. The Committee's work promotes the exercise of civil and political rights, resulting in numerous changes in law, policy and practice. The weakness of this system is that countries do not respect the Committee's recommendations. At present, the Committee has no possibility to improve the effectiveness of the implementation of its recommendations and decisions.

committed as a result of the so-called T-4 action, i.e. a program of killing chronically ill people, physically and intellectually disabled people and children affected by developmental defects. This program was implemented in the Third Reich and the territories occupied by it during World War II [16].

Article 6 of the ICCPR protects life, regardless of whether it concerns healthy or terminally ill people. This is indicated by the terms used in Article 6(1), referring to "every" human being, and the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of life of "anyone". However, the problem is the scope of protection under Article 6 in a situation where the state legalizes any form of medically assisted death.

To date, the Human Rights Committee has addressed the problem of euthanasia when considering the interim report of the Netherlands in 2001 and 2009 [17] and Switzerland in 2009. In 2001, the Netherlands became the first country to legalize euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. The Committee stressed that in the case of legalization of activities aimed at deliberately shortening human life, it is necessary to develop a rigorous control mechanism to determine whether life is protected in a manner consistent with Article 6 of the ICCPR. The Committee's concerns concerned the possibility of abuse in the assessment of the conditions for the admissibility of euthanasia, i.e.: the patient's suffering is unbearable and there is no chance for improvement of his condition, the patient has been duly informed about his illness and treatment alternatives, the patient's request must be voluntary and permanent, the request can be submitted by a person who is over 12 years of age (parental consent is required). In addition, the Committee was concerned about the premise of the admissibility of euthanasia for minors and the fact that the review of the procedure of shortening life are carried out only *ex post* by review committees. The Committee further stressed the lack of judgement by the courts to rule out manipulation and abuse [18] (p. 5-6). Given the relatively large number of procedures and the lack of cases of reporting to the prosecutor's office, the situation is worrying[19]. In addition, the Committee demanded that the Netherlands clarify the practice of carrying out euthanasia on newborns with disabilities, considering such actions to be inconsistent with Article 6 of the ICCPR [20](p. 7) [21] (p.8) [22].

On the basis of the General Comment of the Committee No. 36 of 2018, the state's obligations under Article 6 of the ICCPR may also be fulfilled if the state limits or excludes criminal liability for physician assisted suicide or euthanasia. However, it is necessary to balance the conflicting rights of the individual – in this case, the right to autonomy (making a decision about the time and manner of one's own death) and the protection of life. The countries – parties to the ICCPR are obliged to prevent suicide

and this applies to people who have found themselves in a particularly difficult situation. The increased obligation to protect life applies to people whose freedom has been restricted (e.g. those in prisons, juvenile detention centres and orphanages, mental health centres, military camps, refugee centres). On the other hand, in countries where it is permissible to end the lives of adults suffering from terminal illnesses, experiencing physical and mental suffering, and wishing to die with dignity, it is necessary to ensure maximum protection against abuse. This protection should consist in providing institutional safeguards as to whether the requirement of the patient's informed and pressure-free consent to the procedure has been met, and in guaranteeing proper control and monitoring of the implementation of the requirements set out in national laws [23].

Article 6 cannot be interpreted as the right to die, i.e. that the right to life does not include the freedom of an individual to decide about the time and manner of his death [15] (pp. 165-167).

The Committee's recommendations for the states – parties to the ICCPR in matters related to the end of life at the request of a sick person – formulates an opinion on caution in the case of legalization of this type of practice and the creation of an effective security system. The exclusion of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide from criminal liability is not a violation of the obligations of states contained in Article 6 of the ICCPR. Therefore, the principle of the protection of life is not absolute in this case. When decriminalizing medically assisted death, respect must be made between competing values such as life and autonomy of decision. Although the Committee mentions guaranteeing voluntary decision-making by patients, the fact that an exception to the principle of protection of life is allowed is worrying, all the more so as it concerns people who are particularly vulnerable and vulnerable to abuse. Why is a breach in the protection of such a fundamental value allowed in the case of the sick, while at the same time suicide prevention in prison is recommended and the death penalty is gradually abandoned?

2.2 Evolution of the protection of the right to life in the Council of Europe system

In order to try to answer the above issue, let us follow the examples of case law of the European Tribunal of Human Rights, which is part of the regional system of human rights protection. Regional systems are created in order to increase the standard of protection provided by the universal system (UN).

As already mentioned, the events of World War II showed that human rights mechanisms at the national level (in the constitutions and laws of individual countries) proved ineffective. That is why a system based on mutual control of individual European countries has been developed. The first step was the creation of the Council of Europe in 1949. In 1950, the European Convention on Human Rights was adopted, which is the basis of the protection system within the CoE. The ECHR expresses fundamental human rights and freedoms, indicates their limitations and establishes the obligation of the signatory states to respect them. The Convention establishes bodies that can assess whether states respect the rights and freedoms expressed therein. These are the Committee of the Council of Ministers and the European Court of Human Rights. The basic form of review is an individual complaint to the European Court of Human Rights (Article 34 of the ECHR). The right to lodge a complaint is available to anyone who claims to have been the victim of a violation of the rights guaranteed by the ECHR. This is a fundamental guarantee of the effectiveness of the system of human rights protection provided for in the Convention [24] (*Loizidou v. Turkey*). This essential mechanism makes every person the subject of concrete and direct international powers. Very often, the Court's judgments are not limited to one country. They form a whole line of case law and then they are addressed to all states-parties. If the source of the violation of the provisions of the Convention was an act of individual application of the law (decision or judgment), the national authorities should resume the proceedings before the authority that issued the final decision. If the reason for the violation of the Convention is the content of a national normative act, the enforcement of the judgment should consist in amending or repealing this act. In practice, states modify existing legal acts or even introduce changes to constitutions [25][26] (pp. 236-238. 242) (*Incal v. Turkey*).

There is no consensus among the member states of the Council of Europe in the ethical, scientific and legal fields. In such cases, a wide margin of appreciation applies. It follows from the fact that, in cases related to particularly sensitive issues of a moral nature, in which it is not possible to speak of agreement between the Member States on a single ethical concept, each of them adopts its own solutions in national legislation. The European Court of Human Rights stated that it is not possible to find a uniform concept of morality. A wide margin of appreciation in these cases applies when there is a conflict between the public and private interests or between the rights guaranteed by the Convention. This applies especially to such problems as: abortion, euthanasia and physician assisted suicide, assisted reproduction techniques, sex reassignment or legalization of same-sex marriages. It should be remembered that the margin of appreciation is not unlimited and it is within the competence of the Court

to verify whether the restrictions imposed by the authorities in a given Member State are consistent with the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights [28] (*Handyside v. UK*, § 48), [29] (pp. 71-72).

2.3 The right to life in the European Convention on Human Rights

The essence of Article 2 of the ECHR is to establish the obligation to respect and protect human life (the right to life), and in particular to introduce a prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of life by the state or its officials. The authors of the Convention remembered not only the tragic experiences of World War II, but also various types of criminal practices of authoritarian regimes existing in the world at that time.

It should be added that over time, the death penalty was also removed from the European legal space under the Protocols amending the ECHR, i.e. Protocol 6 of 1983 and Protocol 13 of 2002.

The jurisprudence of the ECHR confirms the special rank of the order to protect life and the place of this value in the ECHR. "Article 2 (art. 2) ranks as one of the most fundamental provisions in the Convention - indeed one which, in peacetime, admits of no derogation under Article 15. Together with Article 3 (art. 15+3) of the Convention, it also enshrines one of the basic values of the democratic societies making up the Council of Europe" [29] (*McCann and Others v. UK*, § 146-147). The right to life is considered to be a necessary starting point for the enjoyment of all other rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Convention [30] (*Pretty v. UK*, § 14, 37 and 65), [31] (*Koch v Germany*, § 51). It is also the only right that the judges of the European Court of Human Rights have defined as the protection of the 'sanctity of life' [30] (*Pretty v. UK*, § 65)".

However, the right to life (as in the ICCPR) is not absolute [3] (p. 264), in the conditions of modern society – there may still be situations justifying the deprivation of life, as mentioned in point 2 of the discussed article (it is permissible to take life in defence against unlawful violence, in order to perform a lawful arrest or prevent the escape of a person deprived of liberty), in actions taken in accordance with the law to suppress riots or insurrection) [21] (p.2). The special importance of the right to life is reflected in the fact that it is not subject to a derogation under Article 15(2) of the ECHR [32] (p. 735). Even in the event of war or other public danger threatening the life of the nation, the state cannot evade its obligation to comply with Article 2 [33] (p. 3).

Life, which is a protected good, while the above-mentioned legal acts, including the ECHR, do not define the scope of its protection. It can be said that life is the duration

of a human being, but it has not been defined when it has its beginning (consequently, whether it is protected during pregnancy or after birth) and at what moment its protection by the state should end. Thus, a European consensus on the legal status of embryos and fetuses has not been reached, leaving the States Parties a wide margin of appreciation in determining the moment when this protection arises[34] (*Vo v. France*, § 82). Similar problems are created by determining the moment when the state's protective obligations cease. Can the decision of the person concerned result in the public authorities abandoning actions to protect the life of that person? [35] (pp. 128-129).

The subject of the right to life is "everyone". There is no doubt, however, that this subject – which results from the essence of the right guaranteed by this provision – is (every) human being understood as a living human being. Since life is in fact a physiological and biological state, human mental and intellectual abilities have no legal significance. Characteristics such as age, sex, race or citizenship, which may affect the status of an individual in the community [33] (p. 4), are irrelevant. According to Bartosz Brożek, the expression used in the Convention (*everyone, toute personne*) should not be reduced only to the concept of a person. If we adopt a descriptive approach, a person has certain characteristics, such as: "the ability to feel and reason, self-awareness and autonomy, the ability to imagine the future". On the other hand, in the approach of axiological theories, "ethical value is something primary. In this approach, one is a person regardless of one's psychological characteristics" [36] (pp. 48-49). Adopting the first assumption would exclude from protection, e.g. people in a persistent vegetative state (PVS), people with severe intellectual disabilities, *nasciturus* or even infants. On the other hand, the adoption of the original ethical value of every human being leads to problems with a rational solution to the conflict of the right to life of two people, e.g. a threat to the life of a pregnant woman. The easiest way to assume is that the right to life applies to every human being (natural person), regardless of any of their characteristics.

The Convention does not provide a definition of life that is protected under Article 2. In most of the states parties to the Convention, no answer has been found to the question from which the protection of the right to life begins. Nor is there any consensus on a European scale on the legal and scientific definition of the beginning of life [34] (*Vo v. France*, § 84), [37] (*Evans v. UK*, § 77), [38] (*A. B. C. v. Ireland*, § 237). The Court refers to the concept of a wide margin of appreciation available to national authorities in determining the moment when legal protection arises. According to the Court, an unborn child is not an entity directly protected by Article 2 of the

Convention. His right to life, if it existed, would be limited due to the rights and interests of his mother [39]. At present, the Court takes the view that the unborn child belongs to the human species and begins to receive protection as a result of the development of science and research in the field of genetic modification, assisted procreation, or experimentation on embryos, and that the potential for its existence and to become a person requires a certain degree of protection due to the principle of dignity [34] (*Vo v. France*, § 80, 82, 84).

Determining the moment when the state's protective obligations cease remains equally problematic. And here the question arises whether the decision of the person concerned may result in the abandonment of actions by the public authorities to protect his life.

Thus, suicide is not a punishable act, but states have a duty to take preventive action in this regard against persons under their jurisdiction [40] (*Keenan v. UK*, § 88-89), [41] (*Kiliñç and Others v. Turkey*, § 40), [42] (*Trubnikov v. Russia*, § 89), [43] (*Schevchenko v. Ukraine*, § 56), [44] (*Salgýn v. Turkey*, § 76), [45] (*Yilmaz v. Turkey*, § 55), [46] (*çoşelav v. Turkey*), [47] (*Mosendz v. Ukraine*, § 80), [48] (*Predevedentsevy v. Russia*, § 93–94), [49] (*Marro and Others v. Italy*). This also applies to people in prisons and other places of detention. Officers in these institutions are required to take elementary precautions to eliminate risks, m. because in such places there is a risk of self-aggression, including suicide attempts, [50] (*Mižigárová v. Slovakia*, § 89), [51] (*Eremiášová and Pechová v. Czech*, § 110), [52] (*Robineau v. France*).

2.4 ECHR's jurisprudence in cases of medically assisted death⁹

The first case of assisted suicide considered by the Court was the case of British citizen Dianne Pretty in 2002. The applicant, who suffers from an incurable neurodegenerative disease, did not obtain permission from the British authorities to release her husband from criminal liability in order to help her end her life. MS Pretty, citing a violation of Article 2 (right to life) and Article 8 (right to private life) of the Convention, argued that as a person who cannot commit suicide on her own due to a medical condition, she has no possibility of taking her own life in a safe and painless manner. In her view, Article 2 protects not only the right to life, but also the right to choose whether or not to stay alive (*Pretty v. UK*, § 35). In its jurisprudence, the Court

⁹ The selected case law applies only to people who expressed their will to end their lives. Due to the limited scope of this article, it does not cover the cases of persons who could not express their decision (e.g. ECHR Judgment 2.06.2015, *Lambert v France*, Application no 46043/14).

has recognized the primacy of Article 2 as a fundamental provision of the ECHR. It guarantees the right to life, without which the exercise of all other rights and freedoms would lose its meaning [30] (*Pretty v. UK*, § 37), [26] (p. 323), [53]. Article 2 does not refer to the quality of life or how a person is to treat his or her life. Above all, however, it cannot be read as a right to die, nor as granting an individual the right to choose death. Thus, in the Court's view, there is no right to die, either at the hands of a third party or with the help of a public authority (30) (*Pretty v. UK*, § 39-40). In the further part of the judgment, the Court states that the guarantees invoked by the applicant under Article 8 protecting the right to private life can be interpreted as the right to self-determination (personal autonomy). And on the basis of this guarantee, a person can refuse to undergo treatment that could save or prolong life. As a result of the development of medicine and the possibility of prolonging life, many people do not want to be forced to prolong life in old age or physical or mental disability. In this case, the Court found no violation of Article 8 because the UK law prohibiting assisted suicide protects the lives of the most vulnerable individuals from abuse. In this case, the principle of the sanctity of life was given primacy over the right to self-determination[30] (*Pretty v. UK*, § 61, 67-79 and 74). However, according to Gregor Puppink and Claire de la Hougue, the ECHR opened the door to shaping a later line of jurisprudence in favour of the right to self-determination under Article 8 in cases concerning euthanasia and assisted suicide [32] (p. 738).

Another case in which the Court dealt with the issue of assisted suicide was the 2011 case *Haas v. Switzerland* [54] (*Haas v. Switzerland*). In Switzerland, assisting in suicide is not a punishable act, as long as it is not carried out for selfish reasons (Articles 114 and 155 of the Penal Code). However, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court stated that such action cannot be part of medical practice, as it is contrary to the goals of medicine. The applicant, Ernst G. Haas, who had suffered from bipolar disorder for twenty years, wanted to end his life painlessly. He unsuccessfully applied to dozens of psychiatrists for a lethal dose of sodium pentobarbital. The applicant alleged a violation of Article 8 of the Convention (right to private life).

The Court has confirmed that an individual's right to make an informed decision about how and when to end his or her life is an aspect of the right to respect for private life within the meaning of Article 8 of the ECHR [54] (*Haas v. Switzerland*, §51). At the same time, the Convention is a whole, so Article 2 imposes on the authorities the obligation to protect defenseless people from actions that may threaten their lives (including suicide). In Switzerland, as a suicidal-friendly country, it is particularly important to develop procedures to protect against hasty and ill-considered suicide

attempts, in this case by obtaining a prescription from a doctor. This is also to protect public health and safety and prevent crime. The establishment of an appropriate procedure serves to ensure that the decision to end life corresponds to a real will to end it[54] (Haas v. Switzerland, § 56-58). If we accept the assumption of a positive obligation of the state to make it possible to commit suicide, it becomes not only a freedom, but also a right ([54] (Haas v. Switzerland,, § 69)! Ultimately, the Court rejected the case, finding the Swiss state's conduct to be consistent with the provisions of the Convention.

Another milestone in the change in the ECHR's line of jurisprudence is the 2012 case Koch v. Germany [31]. In this case, a German citizen asked the authorities to obtain a lethal dose of medication to enable the suicide of his paralyzed wife. The German authorities rejected his request without a substantive examination of the case, because assisted suicide and euthanasia are prohibited in Germany. As a result, in 2005 the couple left for Switzerland, where assisted suicide was committed.

Ulrich Koch invoked Article 8 before the ECHR. The Court dismissed the complaint because the applicant did not have standing to rely on the rights of his wife [31] (Koch v. Germany, § 81). At the same time, the Court emphasised that it was very important for the national authorities to examine the merits of the case [31] (Koch v. Germany, § 71-72 The German authorities did not foresee that they would have to justify the policy of prohibiting euthanasia and suicide prevention.

In the 2013 case of Gross v. Switzerland [55] of 2013, the applicant was an elderly woman who did not suffer from any incurable disease. She demanded that the Swiss authorities give her a lethal dose of barbiturates in order to commit suicide. Before the Court, she invoked a violation of Article 8 by the Swiss authorities by preventing her from deciding how and when she should end her life [55] (Gross v. Switzerland, § 38). The Court agreed with the applicant and, as in Haas, held that the right mentioned by the applicant is one aspect of the right to respect for private life, provided that the individual is free to exercise and act in accordance with his judgments (55) (Gross v. Switzerland, § 39), [53] (Haas v. Switzerland, § 51), [31] (Koch v. Germany, § 52). In the case in question, the ECHR stated that the Federal Supreme Court referred only to the ethical guidelines issued by the Swiss Medical Association (prescribing barbiturate only to a terminally ill person) and did not submit any other material containing standards of conduct in similar cases. The applicant was in a state of anguish due to the uncertainty as to the outcome of her claim. The lack of sufficient and clear guidelines in Swiss law on the issue of obtaining a prescription for lethal doses of drugs was a violation of Article 8[55] (Gross v. Switzerland, §§ 65-67, 69).

In this case, the Court not only recognized the existence of the right to decide about one's own death, but also expressed its opinion on the scope of such rights – here, the conditions for obtaining a prescription, so that this right does not turn out to be illusory. The ECHR did not directly address the material aspect of the issue of assistance in dying, but it made a kind of evasion by assessing the procedural aspects, or rather the lack of them. Nevertheless, even such a judgment imposes on the State the establishment of appropriate procedures that provide guarantees for the end of a person's life in accordance with his or her will [32] (pp. 744-745).

The 2022 case [56] (*Mortier v. Belgium*) was the first case involving a state where euthanasia and physician assisted suicide has been legal since 2002 and taken in the case of a person with a mental disorder [56] (*Mortier v. Belgium*, § 125). According to the current law, a person who is in a state of continuous and unbearable physical or mental suffering resulting from an illness or accident can apply for a shortening of life. The request of a patient capable of making a decision must be thoughtful and voluntary. After submitting an application for the procedure, an opinion of an independent doctor is needed (in the case of mental illness, an additional consultation is provided), and a one-month waiting period is also set. The whole process is subject to *ex post* evaluation of the 16-person Committee. The Belgian law does not set a minimum age limit for applying for shortening life, moreover, the illness does not have to be terminal, so a person with a mental illness can apply for euthanasia [56] (*Mortier v. Belgium*, § 50-51).

The applicant, Tom Mortier, whose mother (G.T.) had suffered from depression for 40 years and was euthanised, alleged that the Belgian State had infringed Article 2 of the ECHR because, in his view, the national authorities had not taken appropriate measures to protect G.T.'s life. Moreover, the Commission's review was, in his view, ineffective (56) (*Mortier v. Belgium*, § 11).

In its judgment, the Court not only confirmed its previous line of jurisprudence on the existence of an individual's right to end his life under Article 8 of the Convention. What is new in this ruling is that the decriminalization of assisted death in countries that have decided to do so does not undermine the protection of the right to life. The right to death cannot be derived from Article 2, but neither can it be interpreted as a prohibition on euthanasia [56] (*Mortier v. Belgium*, § 138). Therefore, euthanasia and physician assisted suicide do not constitute a violation of human rights [58]. Belgium's law does not infringe Article 2 of the Convention as long as it contains mechanisms to prevent abuse [56] (*Mortier v. Belgium*, § 69 and 139). It is therefore very important to guarantee the conditions in which a person wishing to undergo euthanasia can make

a conscious, well-thought-out and unpressured decision[56] (Mortier v. Belgium, § 146). It is for the national authorities to assess whether assisted death can be provided within their jurisdiction in accordance with the above requirement. That is, the decriminalization of euthanasia, even if the person requesting this procedure does not suffer from a terminal illness, is, according to the opinion of the ECHR, consistent with the Convention [59].

However, the Court found an infringement of Article 2 because it had been shown that the system of *ex post* control was not sufficient. It does not ensure the independence of the Commission (the doctor who performed the euthanasia of G.T. was also the chairman of this body). In addition, it was found that the criminal proceedings conducted at the request of the applicant were protracted. The Belgian State has not created any other type of guarantee to provide a stable legal framework for the end-of-life procedure on demand, e.g. the court's consent to carry out such a procedure[56] (Mortier v. Belgium, §171-172, 177-180).

The most recent case involved Hungarian human rights lawyer Dàniel Karsai in 2024 [59] (Karsai v. Hungary). Like Dianne Pretty a quarter of a century earlier, he suffered from a neurodegenerative disease that ended in inevitable paralysis along with the loss of the ability to communicate. The applicant asked for help in ending his life, unwilling to wait until he was trapped in his own body [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 14). Since the law in Hungary prohibits both euthanasia and assisted suicide, the applicant invoked Article 8 of the Convention to argue that it is not possible to leave on his own terms[59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 135). In addition, he argued that Hungarian law discriminates against patients on the basis of their condition, as patients who depend on life-support systems can discontinue their treatment and thus end their lives in accordance with the applicable law [60]. The Court considered whether Hungarian law had struck the right balance between the protection of the applicant's interests in the form of assistance in dying and the objectives pursued by the prohibition of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 134, 142, 151). The Court has already found that the applicant's interest in having access to PAD relates to core aspects of his right to respect for his private life. Moreover, it finds it incontestable that these values assume particular importance in the context of those terminally ill patients who see PAD as the only means of ending their suffering [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 140), dismissed the complaint by a majority of 7 votes to 1. Taking into account the "considerable margin of appreciation" [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 152) that States have in determining whether assisted dying should be permitted and how it should be regulated, the Court found that by maintaining a general prohibition

on assisted dying, the Hungarian authorities did not exceed that margin [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 167). The Court agreed that the general prohibition pursued several legitimate objectives under Article 8(2), namely to protect the lives of vulnerable persons at risk of abuse, to maintain the ethical integrity of the medical profession, and to protect the morals of society with regard to the meaning and value of human life" [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 137). The prohibition of physician assisted dying was not a disproportionate means to achieve these goals. In reaching this conclusion, the Court took into account the risks of abuse associated with physician assisted dying, the potential wider societal implications of the procedure (including the potential for jeopardising the doctor-patient relationship) and the policy choices associated with its provision (including the allocation of resources to adequately train those who would provide physician assisted dying, and concerns about the coherence of the national criminal law system in the event of decriminalisation of physician assisted dying) [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 176). The Court avoided determining whether withdrawal or refusal of treatment was analogous to physician assisted dying, instead focusing on the fact that even if they were analogous, such a difference in treatment was objectively and reasonably justified[59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 176).

The Karsai ruling, combined with the earlier Mortier decision, is of great importance for countries such as the UK, which is currently considering whether to legalize physician assisted suicide for terminally ill people with a life expectancy of six months or less. These judgments make it clear that States can allow and ensure physician assisted dying, while respecting their obligations under Article 2, provided that there is a sufficiently robust system in place to guarantee the elimination of possible abuses [60].

The Karsai Court found that eligibility criteria – such as the requirement that a person must have an incurable disease with a limited life expectancy – "can be viewed as reflecting the delicate balance to be struck between respect for human dignity and the right to self-determination on the part of patients with full mental capacity who wish to die, and the risks involved in allowing PAD beyond a narrowly defined scope. [59] (Karsai v. Hungary § 148). In addition, the Court has recognized in § 150 [59] (Karsai v. Hungary, § 150) that assisted death systems may be limited to terminally ill patients with refractory symptoms and that extending physician assisted death beyond patients "who are not dependent on life support may give rise to further challenges and a risk of abuse", thus justifying the distinction between categories of persons based on their health status in order to access physician assisted dying.

It follows from the above passages in *Karsai* that the Court is clearly open to States restricting access to physician assisted dying for a small group of people and will accept that such differential treatment reflects the 'delicate balance' that States can achieve within a 'significant margin of appreciation'. The Court confirmed that euthanasia and suicide do not violate the prohibition of deliberate deprivation of life laid down in Article 2 of the European Convention and indicated that these practices fall within the scope of privacy guaranteed by Article 8 and that States may authorize them, provided that "appropriate and sufficient safeguards are adopted to prevent abuse".

As regards the main question raised in that case, concerning a possible obligation on States to legalize such practices in the context of the right to respect for private life (Article 8), the Court answered in the negative. In supporting the prohibition of physician assisted suicide, the Court noted that "social implications and the risks of abuse and error entailed in the provision of PAD are of great importance".

It also considered that states have a "significant margin of appreciation" in this area, given the highly sensitive moral and ethical nature of the issue and the fact that most Member States still prohibit the practice under criminal law. States can therefore continue to prohibit euthanasia and physician assisted suicide under criminal law in their own countries, and can even prosecute those involved in these practices abroad against their own nationals. In conclusion, the Court stated that this issue must remain open "having regard to the developments in European societies and in the international standards on medical ethics in this sensitive domain."

In addition, the Court very clearly emphasized the importance and necessity of "high-quality palliative care, including access to effective pain management", which it described as "essential to ensuring a dignified end of life" [59] (*Karsai v. Hungary*, § 153-158). This case is the first time that the Court has placed such emphasis on palliative care in its end-of-life case-law and presented it as falling within the positive obligations of States. This decision may seem cautious, as the Court indicates that it does not want to act faster than society by brutally imposing a new human right to voluntary death.

3. Has the value of life been devalued?

According to Gregor Puppink [61] (pp. 105 and 107), the Court's jurisprudence in cases concerning the "right to die" has evolved from the absolute protection of life in *Pretty's* case, through the recognition of the choice of one's own death as part of the

right to private life, to the right of the individual to decide how to end his or her life, provided that he or she is free to form his or her will in this regard[54] [31] (Haas and Koch cases). Article 8 has taken on a new meaning, and with it the concept of quality of life. Because many people don't want to experience the deteriorating physical and mental condition associated with age or illness. Decriminalization aims to give individuals a choice to avoid what they believe would constitute an undignified and suffering end to life [56] (Mortier v. Belgium, § 137).

Respect for human life, which was the cornerstone of the Convention, has been reduced to the principle of self-determination (autonomy). In the case of physician assisted dying, it is the individual who decides what is good for him. Only the degree of freedom to make decisions determines whether one can demand the termination of life. Subjective desires became a source of subjective rights in place of natural law. Respect for the right to life depends only on the will of the individual. Individual feelings become the most important. In countries that have legalized euthanasia, the role of state authority has been limited only to ensuring the conditions preceding the procedure, the most important of which is the conscious and unpressured decision of the patient [56] (Mortier v. Belgium § 153). Therefore, it is not the life that is protected, but the will of the individual. According to the ECHR, autonomy protects the "personal sphere of every human being" [64](K. A. and A. D. v. Belgium, § 83), [63](Godwin v. UK, § 77), [62] (Sørensen and Rasmussen v. Denmark, § 54)[30] (Pretty v. UK, § 61) and simply defines "the ability to conduct one's life in a manner of one's own choosing [30] (Pretty v. UK, § 62). Only the individual determines the rights to which he submits himself [61] (p.108). As a result, actions cease to be objective, the good of the individual becomes the most important, and even the most irrational desires can be given the value of a norm.

The result of this peculiar privatization of morality is the decriminalization of practices previously prohibited, in this case the termination of the life of the person suffering at his or her request. According to G. Puppink, the jurisprudence of the ECHR shows that the decisive factor in such delicate issues as assisted procreation, surrogacy, abortion or physician assisted dying is not moral norms, but social support for the prohibition or legalization of such practices. Social support is decisive in moral matters. In the field of privacy, the Court does not accept absolute moral prohibitions. States are obliged to establish procedures allowing for at least motivated concessions, e.g. conditions for obtaining a prescription for a lethal dose of medicines. In this way, the absolute ban on physician assisted suicide in Germany was condemned [31] (Koch v. Germany).

The objective right to life, in which acts of advice, assistance and accompaniment in suicide were a violation of the most important public interest and were excluded from the private sphere, was transformed into the right to die. The only condition is that the decision can be freely expressed and acted upon [54] [31] (Pretty v. UK § 65, Haas v. Switzerland § 51, Koch v. Germany § 52, Gross v. Switzerland § 58). The basic value became the will of the individual. In this way, the right to die can be granted to anyone who wishes to do so. Even the criterion of health is eliminated. In the Pretty and Karsai cases it was a terminal illness, in the Haas and Mortier cases it was a mental illness, but in the Gross case it was only old age and fatigue with life! Only the patient's decision-making ability is protected by pointing to the risk of abuse inherent in systems facilitating access to assistance in dying [54] [56] (Haas v. Germany § 54 and 58, Mortier v. Belgium § 63, 146, 153).

Life has been reduced only to the individual's assessment of its quality, if it has a low one it can be terminated, [30][31] [55] [59] (Pretty v. UK § 65, Koch v. Germany § 51, Gross v. Switzerland § 58, Karsai v. Hungary § 91, 95). It therefore does not even have biological value, because biology is only a support for consciousness.

Life and its protection were the cornerstone of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, which were a reaction to the crimes of totalitarian regimes. René Cassin, one of the fathers of the 1948 Declaration, rejected euthanasia even if it was to be seen as a peaceful and gentle death. Because doctors should not have power over life and death. The death penalty was abolished in the member states of the Council of Europe. Emphasis is placed on suicide prevention for people in prisons and other closed centres. However, in cases of physician assisted dying in the last 20 years, the ECHR has found that they do not constitute a violation of the right to life [56] (Mortier v. Belgium, § 137), and the individual has the right to decide how he or she can end his or her life. However, how can we fail to see that the practice of euthanasia is contrary to the principle laid down at the head of the Convention, according to which "no one shall be deprived of his life intentionally". Exceptions, such as self-defense, are exhaustively listed, but no exception to euthanasia is provided for in the Convention, not even a possible death request by the person concerned. This is an issue raised by Judge Serghides in an opinion separate from Mortier [65] (Serghides § 4 and 5), referred to by Judge Wojtyczek in Karsai [66] (Wojtyczek § 3) when he writes that any form of euthanasia or the legal framework surrounding such a practice would not only have no legal basis in the Convention, but would also be contrary to the fundamental Convention right to life. "The right to life is inalienable and cannot be waived by a request to obtain

euthanasia or medically assisted suicide. Article 2 excludes any implicit "opt-out-of-life" clause".

Taking into account the growing number of Council of Europe countries that have legalized (or are considering) forms of physician assisted dying, it is highly likely that there will be more cases before the ECHR regarding the compatibility of such systems with the Convention. While the Court's recent case-law has confirmed that authorizing physician assisted dying is not in itself incompatible with the State's obligations under Article 2, in *Karsai*, the ECHR did not find that States have a positive obligation to facilitate access to euthanasia or physician assisted suicide. Nevertheless, the ECHR "reiterated that the Convention must be interpreted and applied in the light of present-day conditions" and there is a need for "legal measures" (i.e. restrictions on physician assisted dying) "to be kept under review, having regard to the developments in European societies and in the international standards on medical ethics in this sensitive domain" [59] (*Karsai v. Hungary*, § 167). It is therefore possible that further cases may end up with states having an obligation under Article 8 to provide access to physician assisted dying. In the meantime, the Court left it up to the Member States to determine, within their "considerable margin of appreciation", whether physician assisted dying should be permitted and, if so, to what extent (60).

It is dangerous for human rights to make their content and protection dependent on changes in mentality and legislation. This relationship makes them variable and relative. Such an evolutionary approach is even contrary to the role attributed to human rights, which were established after World War II to establish principles against which the permissibility of various practices and laws can be assessed. The role of human rights is to set boundaries for practices and changes, even if they are adopted by the majority, and not to adapt to them in order to perpetuate them. The evolutionary approach taken by the Court leads to the idea that physician assisted suicide is a human right depending on the number of countries that have legalized it, which is philosophically absurd. This means that the content of human rights is dependent on political life.

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Dr. Bogna Wach, PhD.

Akademia im. Jakuba z Paradyża w Gorzowie Wielkopolskim

e-mail: bwach@ajp.edu.pl

Spirituality, Asceticism, and Care for the Environment as a Christian Enrichment of the Idea of a Sustainable Society

Bogdan Zbroja

Abstract

This article explores the concept of a sustainable society from a Christian perspective, highlighting the role of spirituality and asceticism in the responsible use of resources. A detailed analysis of biblical and theological texts shows that human beings – created in the image and likeness of God – serve as stewards of earthly goods and are thus responsible for their prudent management. Christian asceticism, viewed as a conscious reduction in consumption, can enrich the idea of sustainability by providing a deeper spiritual motivation. Consequently, the paper presents a vision of integral ecology, which combines care for the planet with spiritual growth and social solidarity.

Keywords: Spirituality; Asceticism; Environment; Christianity; Sustainable Society; Economy of Enough; Ecotheology; Biblical Theology.

Introduction

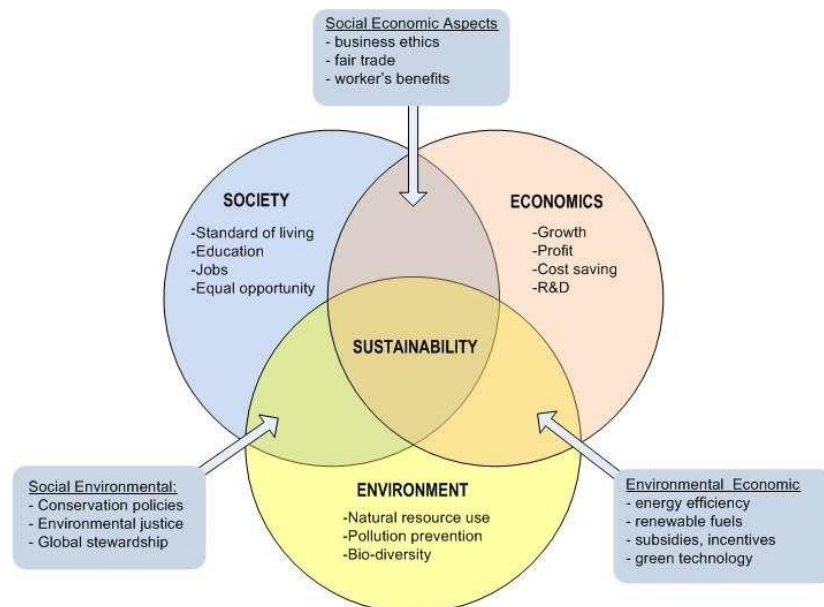
The concept of a sustainable society – aimed at balancing economic development, human well-being, and environmental protection – has become one of the key topics in contemporary academic, political, and ethical debates. This idea arises from the conviction that excessive exploitation of natural resources, coupled with uncontrolled consumption, leads to global ecological, economic, and social crises. In a sustainable society, founded on harmonious relations between humanity and nature, it is not enough merely to introduce legal regulations or technological innovations. Equally important is a mental and axiological transformation, which encourages people to view the world not as a mere object of exploitation but as a shared environment for many living beings. From this perspective, a Christian viewpoint becomes particularly interesting. The Christian tradition offers a rich reflection on the responsible use of material goods, while also underscoring the spiritual dimension of the human person, transcending a purely materialistic understanding of reality. A key emphasis here is on asceticism - the practice of moderation and inner discipline in the use of resources. Christianity also proposes a vision of the human person as a “steward” of creation,

called to protect the world rather than to subjugate it ruthlessly. The aim of this article is therefore to show how spirituality and asceticism can enhance and enrich the basic idea of sustainable development by adding a transcendental and more holistic dimension to it.

1. The Sustainable Society – A Conceptual Outline

1.1. The Relationships Between Humanity, Nature, and the Economy

In the fields of social science, environmental science, and economics, the sustainable society is generally understood as the intertwining of three key factors: humanity, the natural environment, and economic mechanisms. [1] The pursuit of balance among these spheres is intended to prevent uneven development that could cause planetary degradation and aggravate social inequalities.



Source: [2]

Humanity – Environment

In this framework, ecological awareness plays a central role. Modern civilization, shaped by industrialization and urbanization, often becomes disconnected from nature, losing the original sense of harmony with the environment. Wealthy Western societies generate ever-increasing amounts of waste and pollution, frequently overlooking the fact that ecosystems have limited regenerative capacities. Less affluent communities face not only pollution but also a lack of access to basic resources such as clean water or adequate food.

For this reason, global responsibility for the common good becomes essential, understood as the protection of the planet and its biodiversity, as well as solidarity with developing countries afflicted by the consequences of climate change (e.g., droughts, floods, or extreme temperatures).

Humanity – Economy

Economic growth - heavily emphasized in most contemporary states - carries both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, it can help combat poverty, invest in infrastructure, and develop new technologies. On the other, without proper oversight, it can lead to worker exploitation, environmental devastation, and unjust distribution of goods. A particularly troubling issue is the dependence of many economies on cheap labor from poorer countries and the exploitation of their resources (e.g., rare earth metals essential for IT technology or battery production). Such global practices undermine the ideal of just commercial relations.

Economy – Environment

From a long-term perspective, there is a growing awareness of the need to harmonize economic development with respect for ecosystems. The drive for rapid and maximum profit, pursued without regard for environmental consequences, depletes soils, pollutes water and air, and ultimately lowers the quality of life.

The principle of sustainability thus calls for circular economy approaches, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, investing in renewable energy sources, and promoting pro-environmental consumer attitudes. Simultaneously, “green innovation” in industry is stressed to maintain competitiveness without destroying the planet.

1.2. Practical Challenges and the Need for a Change in Mentality

Calls for a sustainable economy and society demand not only technical solutions or international legal frameworks but, most importantly, a change in mentality. A *culture of consumerism* inclines many people to constantly raise their living standards, without reflecting on the impact on communities and ecosystems. Meanwhile, the principles of sustainable development encourage: Environmental education from an early age, to foster a sense of responsibility for the planet in children. Prudent consumption and a lifestyle of moderation - wasting food and resources (e.g., water) reveals a lack of awareness and empathy toward others. Cross-sector collaboration - science, business, and politics should form joint initiatives for a green transition. Respect for local

communities - with an understanding that global actions (including resource extraction) can threaten the survival of entire regions and cultures.

SSI Structure		
Dimension	Category	Indicator
Human Wellbeing (HUW)	Basic Needs	Sufficient Food
		Sufficient Drinking Water
		Safe Sanitation
	Personal Development & Health	Education
		Healthy Life
		Gender Equality
	Well-balanced Society	Income Distribution
		Population Growth
		Good Governance
Environmental Wellbeing (ENW)	Natural Resources	Biodiversity
		Renewable Water Resources
		Consumption
	Climate & Energy	Energy Use
		Energy Savings
		Greenhouse Gases
		Renewable Energy
Economic Wellbeing (ECW)	Transition	Organic Farming
		Genuine Savings
	Economy	GDP
		Employment
		Public Debt

Source : [4]

Without a deep transformation of attitudes - both at the individual and institutional levels - even the best-conceived sustainability projects may prove ineffective. In this regard, Christianity can make a substantial contribution by offering ethical and spiritual motivations that foster inner change and responsible management of earthly goods.

2. The Spiritual Dimension of the Human Person and Sustainable Development

2.1. The Christian Understanding of the Person and Transcendence

Since antiquity, Christianity has taught that the human being unites both material and spiritual dimensions. According to biblical teaching, a person cannot merely focus on fulfilling temporal needs but also seeks to discover life's meaning and a relationship with God. Hence emerges the concept of transcendence, which holds that the human being surpasses the boundaries of earthly existence.

Spiritual Dimension: The New Testament repeatedly notes that man does not live by bread alone (*cf. Mt 4:4*). [4] (pp. 66-67) This suggests that human longing goes beyond simply satisfying biological needs. **Search for Meaning:** By nature, humans strive to know the truth, formulate moral norms, and establish relationships with others. A religious interpretation sees in these pursuits a sign of God's existence as the source and goal of human life. **The Dignity of the Person:** From the Christian viewpoint, every human being is created in the image and likeness of God (*cf. Gen 1:27*), [5] a dignity that transcends historical, economic, or social conditions, thereby implying a profound ethic of respect for life and freedom.

In the context of a sustainable society, acknowledging this spiritual dimension means that attending solely to material well-being is insufficient. One must also consider moral, intellectual, and religious development, guarding against reducing a person to the role of a mere "consumer" or "asset" within an economic system.

2.2. A Supernatural Sense of Responsibility

According to biblical teaching, humanity is not only a part of nature but also its "steward" (*cf. Gen 1:28*). [5] (p. 168) This dominion over the world takes on the character of entrusted responsibility, implying: **Dominion with Respect:** Humanity's dominion over nature should not be a brutal exploitation or plundering of natural goods but a conscious use of them in trust before God and for future generations.[6] (no. 37) **Moral Obligation:** From a Christian perspective, every act that affects the environment becomes an ethical action that either builds or disrupts creation's order. **A Communal Dimension:** Humanity is not a solitary "owner" but operates within a human community and in relation to other living beings. Catholic social teaching underlines that the environment is a common good requiring nurture and protection, especially for the vulnerable and for future generations. [7] (no. 159)

This "supernatural responsibility" bestows a moral and spiritual character on efforts toward sustainable development. It is not merely a rational requirement to safeguard resources for future generations but also a manifestation of deep reverence for the Creator and His work.

3. Asceticism and Economics: Toward an “Economy of Enough”

3.1. Moderation in the Use of Goods

Various religious traditions practice asceticism, understood as the renunciation of certain comforts, goods, or pleasures to gain deeper spiritual freedom. Christian asceticism does not merely consist of monastic austerities or corporal mortifications; it primarily entails moderation and the ability to forego excess. In the context of contemporary consumerism, this teaching is highly relevant: Renouncing Excess: Today’s market offers an unlimited range of goods and services, continually promoted by the media. Asceticism here means consciously limiting oneself, thereby combating the waste of resources and energy (*cf. Lk 12:18-20*). [8] (pp. 687-688) Spiritual Value: Moderation fosters inner discipline and freedom. Thus, an individual is not enslaved by desires nor convinced that happiness depends on acquiring more possessions. Social Good: Reducing consumption in highly developed societies can facilitate a more equitable global distribution of goods and reduce waste of food, energy, and raw materials.

The Gospel passages on storing up worldly goods (*Lk 12:18-20*) or laying up treasures in heaven (*Mt 6:19-20*). [4] (pp. 158-159) reflect criticism of a life that blindly pursues wealth. In this sense, Christian spirituality indicates that material riches in themselves do not guarantee happiness and may even lead to blindness and isolation from one’s neighbors.

3.2. The Economy of Enough and the Community of Goods

The concept of an “economy of enough” (sometimes termed *economy of sufficiency*) is gaining traction among theologians and economists alike. It promotes resource management that satisfies basic human needs while preserving ecological balance. Fundamentally, it draws on an ethic of moderation and solidarity with the poor: The Principle of “Enough”: More is not always better. An economy perpetually fixated on increasing GDP can wreak havoc on the environment and exacerbate inequalities, whereas meeting fundamental needs is key to social well-being. Community of Goods: The biblical tradition underscores the idea that “all things were held in common” (*Acts 2:44-45*), [9] (p. 608) which can be interpreted as a model of deeper social solidarity. In modern societies, this does not advocate absolute communism but a more equitable sharing of resources, particularly for the most vulnerable. A Global Perspective: The economy of enough cannot be confined to a single nation or region; markets and

production processes are globally interconnected. Supranational regulations and institutions are needed to oversee flows of capital, resources, and commodities, guarding local communities against exploitation.

Christianity - especially in its social dimension - has long stressed the concept of the common good, indicating that the economy should serve the human person, not vice versa. In this spirit, asceticism can be viewed as a path toward a fairer distribution of resources and the preservation of a planet with finite reserves.

4. Environmental Care as Part of Christian Spirituality

4.1. Respect for Fauna and Flora in Light of Biblical Teaching

Biblical literature contains many passages emphasizing respect for creation. One of the most symbolic is the account of the multiplication of loaves (*cf. Jn 6:12*), [10] (p. 89) in which Jesus instructs the disciples to collect the leftover pieces so that nothing is wasted. This straightforward instruction contrasts sharply with the widespread squandering often witnessed in today's mass production of food.

A Culture of Avoiding Waste: It is a significant aspect of the Christian ethos, manifested in the recommendation to manage resources sensibly and to honor both the food itself and the labor of those who produce it. **Biodiversity Protection:** When Jesus speaks about the shepherd and the sheep (*Jn 10:10*) [10] (pp.170-171), it can be interpreted not only in a spiritual sense (the community of believers) but also ecologically. A good shepherd *protects* the flock, ensuring safe pastures and sustainable land use. In parallel, a contemporary society should safeguard biodiversity and ecosystems. **Reverence for Creatures:** Numerous biblical passages affirm the value of nature as God's handiwork (*cf. Ps 8*). Following this tradition, Christian spirituality holds that concern for flora and fauna is not solely a biological imperative but also a moral and spiritual duty, rooted in the belief that the world was created by a good and wise God.

Modern theological approaches to ecology, known as *ecotheology*, increasingly highlight the need to integrate spirituality with environmental stewardship, viewing the natural world as "the Book of Creation," in which one can perceive traces of God's presence and wisdom.

4.2. Family and the Community as the Natural Environment for Human Development

The natural environment is not the only sphere of interest to Christian spirituality. Social surroundings - ranging from the family to local communities, parishes, nations, and the international community - are equally crucial. The Gospels provide numerous examples in which Jesus emphasizes healthy interpersonal relationships (e.g., *Lk 11:11-12*) [8] (pp. 631-632): The Family as the Basic Cell of Society: In Christian teaching, the family is viewed as the setting where faith, values, and traditions are transmitted. Its stability and harmony shape an individual's ability to form broader social bonds. Intergenerational Relationships: Respect for elders and the duty to raise children align with the concept of a sustainable society where no age group or social class is neglected. Civil Society: Engagement in local public life - solidarity with neighbors and joint environmental initiatives (e.g., cleaning forests, creating community gardens) – are tangible ways to practice the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor. Communities of Faith: Historically, parishes, Catholic movements, and ecumenical initiatives have offered forums for shared reflection and practical activities aimed at environmental protection and assistance for the poor. Inspired by *Laudato si'*, many local churches have launched ecological programs (e.g., limiting plastic use, recycling education, installing solar panels).

In this way, Christian spirituality inspires both care for the natural ecosystem and the cultivation of a “*relational ecosystem*” that is essential for personal fulfillment and the stability of social structures. [8] (pp. 631-632)

5. The Christian Enrichment of the Sustainable Society

Within the context of sustainability, Christian spirituality can be viewed as a valuable enrichment and complement to secular ecological and economic concepts. It contributes several fundamental values:

Reevaluating Life Goals

From the Gospel perspective, the ultimate purpose is not simply economic growth or consumption but the integral development of the human person (material, psychological, and spiritual). This hierarchy of objectives can motivate individuals toward self-restraint and self-control in the quest for wealth.

Solidarity and Mercy

Christianity places strong emphasis on empathy, especially for the poorest (*cf. Mt 25:35-40*). [9] (pp. 148-149) Globally, this fosters the recognition that environmental

protection and social justice are interdependent: the destruction of ecosystems impacts developing regions most acutely.

Humility Toward Creation

Although unique within the order of creation, humans are also dependent on nature. Christianity calls for an acknowledgment of this dependence and respect for the boundaries set by natural laws. Practical humility involves recognizing that Earth's resources are finite.

The Spiritual Meaning of Sacrifice

Changing one's lifestyle (e.g., reducing car travel, lowering meat consumption, or using fewer raw materials) is often seen as a sacrifice. The Christian tradition imparts a deeper meaning to such self-denial, linking it to conversion and concern for one's neighbor (*cf. Mt 25:31-46*).

Eschatological Hope

Christianity proclaims faith in the final renewal of all creation by God (*cf. Rom 8:19-22*) [11](pp. 1439-1440). Such eschatological hope can inspire believers to engage in environmental initiatives, viewing them not merely as duties but as cooperation with God's plan of salvation and transformation of the world.

Conclusion

The current ecological, economic, and social crises make it clear that the prevailing model of development, founded on unrestrained consumerism and expansion, leads to irreversible environmental damage and growing social inequality. The idea of sustainable development, focused on balancing the relationships between humanity, nature, and the economy, certainly addresses these challenges. Nonetheless, introducing a **spiritual and ethical dimension** – as offered by Christianity – can greatly strengthen motivation and guide efforts toward a deeper transformation of hearts and minds.

Christian spirituality affirms that human beings are not merely biological organisms or economic units but persons of unique dignity, capable of conscious choices and moral responsibility. Asceticism, understood as moderation in the use of goods, teaches "enoughness" and a sense of the common good. Consequently, a sustainable society emerges not merely as an external legal or economic system but also as a way of life and a testimony to a mature vision of humanity.

Integrating the Gospel message with modern ecological and economic strategies yields a proposition of integral ecology, in which environmental care goes hand in hand with spiritual growth, social solidarity, and respect for future generations. Grounded in a biblical understanding of humanity as a steward of earthly goods, this perspective can inspire people of different faiths and worldviews to build a better - more just and more sustainable - world.

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ks. dr hab. Bogdan Zbroja, prof. UPJPII

Faculty of Theology, The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

e-mail: bogdan.zbroja@upjp2.edu.pl

The Limits and Contributions of Simone Weil's Mysticism to Christian Thought

Róbert Sarka

Abstract

In the lecture Limits and the contribution of Simone Weil's mysticism to Christian thought, we present some of the ideas of the French philosopher in the period approximately 1936-1942, when she was attracted to Catholicism. One of her contributions were the theoretical reflections on compassion presented by the author and the testimony of her personal life. She also left wonderful reflections on the kenosis of Christ, an image of the persons of the Holy Trinity as friends, and suggestions for the development of interreligious dialogue. Despite the fact that she experienced mystical experiences and knew Catholicism, in the end she did not join the Catholic Church due to her strong individualistic nature. Here are her limits very apparent, along with the misunderstanding of God's Revelation and the election of the Jewish people. Despite this, her images and reflections can paradoxically help bring some dogmatic truths closer and encourage in spiritual life.

Keywords: Mysticism; Compassion; Christianity; Trinity.

Introduction

Among the remarkable figures of French philosophical and theological thought is Simone Weil (1909–1943), who devoted herself seriously to Catholicism roughly in the years 1937–1940. Although she never became a Catholic, her thought nevertheless remains inspiring for Christianity. Simone Weil has her critics, who regard her as a fanatic, but she also has her admirers. It cannot be said that before the Second Vatican Council her intellectual universe directly inspired Catholic thought. Demonstrating something of that kind is not the aim of this paper. Rather, we intend to take a look into some of the “drawers” of her mind, some of which time has proven right. At the same time, this will also be a critical reflection on her mysticism. From a methodological point of view, the paper will move on the borderline between theology and the study of religion.

1. Simone Weil: A Mystic of Compassion

The Jewish philosopher Simone Weil strongly identified with the suffering and the destitute from her earliest childhood. At the age of five, she refused to eat sweets; from her child's perspective, the reason was that French soldiers at the front during the First World War did not have any sweets either.

In her twenties, driven by compassion, she interrupted her work as a teacher for one year. She took a job as a factory worker at the Renault automobile plant in order to experience firsthand the harshness of industrial labor and its psychological impact on workers. She described these experiences in the text *The Experience of Factory Life* [1, pp. 21–41]. She was forced to leave this work because of bronchitis and to return to teaching [2, pp. 15–151]. She then left for the Spanish Civil War and took the side of the anarchists. There, despite her fragile health, she became a cook at the front in Catalonia. This experience opened her eyes to the atrocities of war and led her to a deep conviction that the only possible way to resolve conflicts is through peaceful negotiation [3, pp. 145–153].

After her departure to England, where she fled after Germany occupied France, she refused to eat more than her compatriots in Nazi-occupied France. She eventually died in London in 1943 at the age of thirty-four, among other illnesses also from malnutrition [2, p. 151]. Her death at such a young age was certainly caused, at least in part, by her extreme compassion for the suffering of others. Another French philosopher remarked about her: “Her heart is capable of stopping for something that happened on the other side of the world” (Simone de Beauvoir) [3, p. 150]. Someone wrote on her grave: “My solitude nourished me at its breast... and the sorrow of others unto death” [2, p. 153].

She was not the only one in the French intellectual milieu who became, perhaps even pathologically, attached to the suffering and misery of the world. Her compatriot and partial contemporary, the writer Léon Bloy (1846–1917), also suffered greatly and developed a peculiar relationship to misfortune. He writes: “Instinctively, I loved misfortune. I think I inherited this trait from my mother, from her passionate and dark Spanish soul; what attracted me most to Christianity was the immense pain of Christ, that magnificent, transcendent horror of His Passion. The unheard-of dream of a woman who fell in love with God and demanded from Him a paradise of torments, who wished to suffer eternally for Jesus Christ and thus understood blessedness. To me, then and now, this seems like the noblest of human thoughts” (from *Letter to My Fiancée*, November 1889) [4, p. 32].

There is, however, an important difference between the two. Whereas Léon Bloy finds in suffering a kind of almost masochistic pleasure, Simone does not contemplate the

misery of the world aesthetically, nor does she take delight in it. She believed in the beauty of the world and in the possibility that, through her own suffering, she might become its redeemer [3, p. 17]. She longed for this beauty. For her, beauty was a path to God—but not only that. The beauty of the world was also, for her, a reason for engagement in the struggle for a better world. She firmly believed that human beings could achieve this. She did not, however, take divine grace into account, because for her the engaged human being himself seemed to be that grace. Here she departs from the Christian (and perhaps also Jewish) understanding of the redemption of the world. For Christians, there is only one Redeemer: Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the emphasis on beauty as a path to God is very timely and relevant. It has appeared in the pastoral orientation of the new *Directory for Catechesis*, which promotes the *via pulchritudinis*, a path that is not separated from goodness and truth. The text states:

“§ 109 Beauty is always and inseparably permeated by goodness and truth. Therefore, contemplation of beauty awakens in the human person feelings of joy, pleasure, tenderness, fullness, and meaning, and thus opens him or her to transcendence. The path of evangelization is the path of beauty, and therefore every form of beauty is a source of catechesis. By showing the primacy of grace, which is manifested especially in the Blessed Virgin Mary, catechesis presents the lives of the saints as true witnesses of the beauty of faith; it highlights the beauty and mysteries of creation; it discovers and appreciates the immense and extraordinary liturgical and artistic heritage of the Church; it values the highest forms of contemporary art; it focuses in a concrete way on the infinite beauty of God, which is also expressed in human works, and it leads those being catechized to the beautiful gift that the Father has given in His Son” [5, p. 85].

Weil’s deep compassion was certainly also fostered by her mystical tendencies. She probably experienced several mystical states, even ecstasy [3, p. 35], for in her mysticism of compassion there also appears a hint of nuptial mysticism, which sounds rather strange coming from the mouth of this emancipated and solitary woman:

“Between the human being and God there is no relationship other than love. Our love for God must be like the love of a woman for a man, who does not dare to express it by any proposal, but is only waiting. God is the Bridegroom, and He must come to the one whom He has chosen, to speak to her and take her with Him. The future bride must only wait” (*Free Reflections on the Love of God*) [3, p. 189].

Compassion thus became for Weil a kind of magnet on her path toward Eastern religions, above all toward Buddhism, in which compassion constitutes the very essence of Buddhist spirituality.

2. Simone Weil: The Anarchist

Simone Weil was a “genial” eccentric who, as mentioned above, maintained friendships with Marxists, anarchists, and Catholics alike. Weil’s contacts with anarchism and Marxism accompanied her strong social sensitivity throughout her life and did not leave her until her premature death. Anarchist tendencies can be observed in her *Note on the General Suppression of Political Parties* [6], in which she essentially argues against the very existence of political parties. Many of her remarks remain strikingly actual. To more than one disappointed contemporary Slovak voter, it might seem as though she were speaking directly from the heart, even though her conclusions are certainly not fully acceptable in every respect.

Weil identifies three purposes of a political party, which, as she writes, “...is a machine for the manufacture of passions. A political party is an organization constructed in such a way as to be able to exert collective pressure upon the thinking of every human being who is a member of it... Its first and in fact its only purpose... is its own growth, and that without any limit” [6, p. 13]. Through this coercive approach, a political party betrays the expectations of its voters and “...kills in the soul the sense of truth and justice” [6, p. 18]. The power of political manipulation crushes in citizens the sense of discernment between good, justice, and truth.

Weil offers an alternative in the decentralization of social life. This alternative is also to include conscious labor. Here Weil clearly alludes to her experience in the working-class environment, when she experienced a kind of unconscious, automatic state on the assembly line—something that, in Marxist terms, leads to the alienation of the human being from himself and from his surroundings. For her, work is something sacred, which must not turn a human being into an automaton. Undoubtedly, this is a Marxist idea, yet at the same time a true one.

In the present day, we can observe the pressure of political parties in the context of “information warfare,” in the power of the media, which are able to turn amateurs into politicians overnight—for example, in our context, the elections of the last two presidents; or in the way people from newly formed political parties have entered parliament and even the European Parliament, despite having previously achieved nothing in politics for Slovakia. There are probably foreign interests and influences

behind some of these developments, certainly also media and money that finance everything. Politicians then cease to pursue the interests of the people and no longer follow truth, justice, and the good, but rather the interests of sponsors who helped them to power and will also lead them to enrich themselves.

Another question concerns the decentralization of society, about which Weil dreams. This is a romantic dream of anarchists, who long to realize it. But where can one find people who, by their modest example, would be willing to give an impulse for the emergence of a different society from the present one [3, p. 104]? Another question is: what should such a decentralized society look like? Would it be composed of small communities? Weil poses these questions, yet at the same time there is a great deal of idealistic dreaming in her answers.

The desire for power and control is one of the strong temptations that persistently lure the human being. It is still a consequence of original sin, whose radiation has not disappeared from human society. Even if this anarchist dream were to come true, how long would such a decentralized society endure? George Orwell's *Animal Farm* [7] has shown in a tragicomic way the gradual decay of the ideal of anarchist *égalité*.

3. Simone Weil: A Hebrew — Anti-Judaic?

Simone Weil had a profoundly Jewish character: extraordinarily intelligent, socially sensitive, protesting against injustice in an almost prophetic manner through her life, deeply empathetic toward suffering—and yet she did not feel herself to be Jewish. In 1941 she wrote to the journalist and right-wing politician Xavier Vallat (1891–1972): “I myself do not consider myself Jewish, because I have never entered a synagogue, my free-thinking parents raised me outside the reach of any religious practice, I feel no affection, no attachment to the Jewish religion; from early childhood I was nourished by Greek, Christian, and French tradition” [3, p. 34].

Paradoxically, she did not know Jewish religion and thought, although, as we indicate below, she must have known at least some Kabbalistic ideas to some extent. She did not understand the Old Testament, nor the New, and often interpreted them in her own way. “What we call idolatry is to a large extent a fiction of Jewish fanaticism. All nations of all times have always been monotheistic... True idolatry is evil desire... The idol of the Hebrews is not made of metal or wood; it is race, nation, a thing that is equally earthly” (*Letter to a Religious*) [1, pp. 178–179].

She speaks in an explicitly anti-Judaic manner: “...Israel participates in God and in divine truths just as much as most surrounding nations (India, Egypt, Greece,

China)... The belief that God can command terrible and cruel unjust deeds is the greatest error we can commit in relation to Him" (*Letter to a Religious*) [1, p. 177].

According to Simone, Christianity too is at fault because the first disciples of Jesus—Jews—misunderstood Christ and His command to go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel, on the basis of an ineradicable nationalism. Through their mission, the European nations were allegedly torn away from their ancient heritage [1, pp. 187–188]. Perhaps a new exegetical approach, which she did not know, would have helped her. Simone never fully uprooted Judaism from herself intellectually, even though it seems that in one of her last works, *The Need for Roots*, she identifies herself more with her French belonging [8].

Her Jewish origin manifested itself in her interest in the question of the *mysterium iniquitatis*, the mysterious presence of evil that rules in the world. For her, this evil is not a scandal but, paradoxically, a path to God and to His relationship with the world, which is again founded on *kenosis*. "The existence of evil in this world is far from being proof of the non-existence of God. It reveals to us the truth about God. Creation is not, on God's part, an act of self-expansion, but an act of withdrawal, of renunciation (emphasis by the author). God and all creatures together are less than God alone. God accepted this diminishment. He emptied a certain part of being from Himself (emphasis by the author). Already by the act of creation He renounced His own divinity; therefore the great John says that the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world. God allowed the existence of things other than Himself, which are infinitely less than He. By the creative act He denied Himself: we too, on the basis of Christ's command, must deny ourselves. God denied Himself for us in order to give us the possibility to deny ourselves for Him. This response, this echo, whose rejection or acceptance depends on us, is the only possible justification of the mad love of the creative act. Religions that have understood this renunciation, this voluntary distancing and self-effacement on the part of God, His apparent absence and hidden presence in this world—such religions are true and express, in different languages, the great Revelation. Religions that represent a divinity who exercises his power everywhere he can are false. And even if they are monotheistic, they are idolatrous" (*Forms of the Implicit Love of God*) [1, pp. 51–52].

"God created the universe and agreed that within it He would not exercise His power, although He could, and that instead of Him there would rule, on the one hand, the mechanically necessary connection with matter (including the psychic matter of the soul), and on the other hand, the autonomy that is the essence of thinking persons" [1, p. 61].

Very similarly, Bloy writes: “God seems, by some mysterious and incomprehensible decree of His eternal will, to have commanded Himself not to exercise until the end of time His direct right of a master over servants or of a king over subjects. If He wants to win us, He must seduce us, because if His Majesty does not please us, we can reject Him, let Him be slapped, scourged, and crucified to the applause of the lowest rabble. He will not defend Himself by His power, but only by His patience and His beauty...” [4, p. 271].

These statements about God’s withdrawal and renunciation of part of His power and “presence” when He created the world are a Kabbalistic idea. The first to formulate it was the Kabbalist Isaac Luria (1536–1572) [9, pp. 63–64; 10, pp. 353–404] with his concept of *tzimtzum* [11, pp. 70–74]. It is the first act before the creation of the world: the idea of God’s contraction within Himself, which manifests itself as divine self-limitation. The infinite God thus created a kind of “as if” empty space. This empty space was finite, because it was defined in contrast to infinity. According to tradition, it had the size of a dimensionless point in the midst of the Absolute. This empty space is similar to a circle or a sphere, and only within it did the created worlds come into being, which indeed bear traces of the divine world, but are distinct from God [12, p. 65]. “The process of emanation begins with self-denial, self-disappearance, leaving free space—first a tiny point—into which, gradually, one after another, myriads of radiated, then created, and finally completed worlds entered” [13, p. 56].

God performed the contraction by withdrawing into Himself in order to make room for the existence of the world, which thus was to receive a relative autonomy. This Kabbalistic idea was also adopted by the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926). We shall leave aside the question of whether this theological hypothesis can be accepted without reservations. In any case, *tzimtzum* is also present in Simone Weil’s reflections. Religiously, she was closer to Kabbalistic Judaism than she herself wished to admit.

She had a relationship to other religions similar to that of today’s so-called theological pluralists, and also to that of some Jewish philosophers of her time. She wrote: “Every religion pronounces the Lord’s name in its own language” [1, p. 79]. Similar statements of tolerance toward religions were voiced in her time by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), who found support for them in the Bible. Buber sees a contrast in views of religion between the prophet Micah on the one hand, and Isaiah and Amos on the other. The prophet Micah saw in pagan religions only eternal idols, with which Buber disagrees. For Isaiah and Amos, however, the pagan gods are mirror images of

the true God, “and then the path of the nations leads to Him precisely through them” [14, p. 82].

In the case of both Weil and Buber, these are very timely ideas, which should indeed lead to a deepening of dialogue with non-Christians and to a more courageous acceptance of the mysterious action of God also in other religions. The present-day contact of the Catholic Church with other religions since the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council is not, admittedly, as explicitly generous as in Weil’s case, but instead of aggressive confrontation it is based on interreligious dialogue. Dialogue, however, must not lead Christians (nor Jews) to passivity with regard to mission, evangelization, and proclamation, and above all it must not deny faith in the special Revelation of God. Weil apparently did not accept the exclusivity of Revelation given to Jews and Christians, underestimated it, and toward the end of her life perhaps even rejected it.

4. Simone Weil and the Kenotic God

Among the central concerns of Simone Weil was also the question of the existence of God. Her path to God did not lead through intellectual speculation, but through mystical experience. “The essence of her thought may be expressed as follows: complete detachment, the destruction of the self, so that God may act in the soul. The human being hands over his or her humanity to God so that through this humanity he or she may enter into relationship with another. Her teachers are Meister Eckhart and Saint John of the Cross” [3, pp. 36–37]. The destruction of the ego—a mystical death—is not a concept far removed from Buddhism, with which, incidentally, contemporary interreligious dialogue often operates precisely through the experiences of these mystics.

Weil calls this detachment and destruction of the ego “decreation”; this is what theology and spirituality know under the name of *kenosis* when applied in the spiritual life. According to Weil, “the human being is capable only of ‘negative work,’ especially of purification and emptying. The highest degree consists in true and real ‘decreation’ of the ego, which is to be transformed from an egoistic subject into a universal spirit, expressed in Hindu terms, from *aham* to *ātman*” [15, p. 338]. For her, *kenosis* is the following of God *par excellence*, when she writes: “In a certain sense, God renounces being everything. We must renounce being something. This is our only good” [16, p. 54].

She continues: "He emptied Himself of His divinity. We must empty ourselves of our false divinity with which we were born. Once we have understood that we are nothing, the sole goal of our entire effort becomes to become nothing. For this goal we suffer and accept our suffering; for this goal we act; for this goal we pray. My God, grant that I may become nothing. The more I become nothing, the more God can, through me, love Himself" [16, p. 55].

She also reflects on kenosis in God Himself, in thoughts that approach those of the Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), who worked at the theological institute in Paris. The philosopher writes: "Not only the Passion, but Creation itself is, on God's part, a renunciation and a sacrifice. The Passion is only their fulfillment. Already as Creator, God emptied Himself of His divinity. He becomes a slave. He subjects Himself to necessity. He humbles Himself. His love preserves in free and independent existence beings that are different from Him, different from the good — wretched beings. Out of love He delivers them to misfortune and sin. For if He did not abandon them, they simply would not be. His presence would deprive them of being, just as a flame burns a butterfly" (*Free Reflections on the Love of God*) [3, p. 183].

She is fascinated by decreation as a path to true identity, to opening oneself to divine love. She wrote profound words: "To empty oneself of one's false divinity, to deny oneself, to renounce in imagination one's central place in the world, to recognize all points of the world as equally central, and the true center as being outside the world, means to consent to the fact that matter is governed by mechanical necessity and that the core of every soul is freedom of choice. This consent is love" (*Forms of the Implicit Love of God*) [16, p. 62].

This is the path to God. Decreation, however, is not only the search for God, but also letting oneself be found by God. "If we refuse to attach our love to anything in this world, if we remain motionless, seek nothing, persevere without movement in expectation, it is quite certain that God will come to us. The one who seeks rather interferes with God's action than facilitates it... How could we seek God, since He is above, in a dimension into which we cannot penetrate?" (*Free Reflections on the Love of God*) [3, p. 191].

Is this a very high degree of mysticism that Simone attained, or do these ideas arise from her rebellious nature, from planning nothing? It is certain that she precisely captures the path of the mystics: to be obedient to God by renouncing one's own will, one's own self. In this obedience, Weil also discovers her path to identity: "If a rational creature is completely obedient, it becomes a perfect image of the Almighty to the extent that belongs to it" [1, p. 76].

Her understanding of obedience, however, differs from the Christian one in one respect. For her, obedience consists rather in the liquidation of the person as such, which brings her closer to Eastern mysticism. To remove the person has the scent of Buddhism. In Christian obedience, however, it is not a matter of renouncing the person. The Christian renounces egoism through obedience, but not the person, because in the essence of love between God and the human being there is a relationship of persons, not the evaporation of the person into emptiness. It is possible that, alongside Eckhart and Angelus Silesius, Eastern mysticism also influenced her.

In Weil's thought one can observe wanderings in the study of religions, which makes her a pluralistic mystic. In Hinduism, the belief prevails that God manifests Himself in various forms, both personal and impersonal. She comments on this view: "As the Hindus say, God is both personal and impersonal. Impersonal in the sense that His infinitely mysterious way of being a Person differs infinitely from the way in which a human being is a person" (*Letter to a Religious*) [1, p. 189].

Elsewhere she approaches a more impersonal notion through a kind of intuition: "...God Himself is more than God and creation together. This seems evident at least when we think of God as a being. But we should not think of Him in this way. When we think of God as love, we shall feel the miracle of love, uniting the Son with the Father in eternal divine unity and also in the separation of space, time, and the Cross" (*God's Love and Affliction*) [1, p. 133].

She also believed in the tri-personal God, using a beautiful image of the Trinity as friendship: "Pure friendship is the image of the original and perfect friendship of the Trinity, which is the very essence of God..." (*Forms of the Implicit Love of God: Friendship*) [1, p. 99]. "God creates and knows Himself in a perfect way; we produce and know objects outside ourselves in a wretched way. But God is above all love. God first of all loves Himself. This love and friendship is the Trinity. Between the poles that are united by the relationship of divine love there is more than closeness. There is infinite closeness, identity. Yet through Creation, Incarnation, and Redemption there is infinite distance... Lovers and friends have two desires. They desire to love one another so that one may enter into the other and they may be one being; they desire to love one another in such a way that their union is not weakened even if each is at the opposite end of the Earth. Everything for which the human being vainly longs in this world is in God perfect and real. All these unreal desires are in us as a memory of our destiny and are good for us only when we cease to hope for their fulfillment" (*God's Love and Affliction*) [1, p. 114].

Despite the fact that she accepted and expressed this mystery better than the neo-scholastic dogmatic manuals of her time, she ultimately did not allow herself to be baptized. In a letter she wrote to her spiritual father Vidal, with whom she maintained contact, she justifies, in a rather confused text, her refusal of baptism by her resistance to the power of the Church. She claims that her vocation is to be a Christian outside the Church, Catholic by name [1, p. 76]. Thus, she gave preference to her independence over the truth she had come to know.

5. Simone Weil as a “Yurodivy”

In various religions there appear individuals who remain members of their tradition, yet at the same time set themselves apart from it—not by proposing a doctrine of their own, but above all through an idiosyncratic spiritual practice. They become a provocation, a bad conscience for their fellow believers. In Hinduism, tantrics may be included in this group. Here we are no longer dealing merely with individuals, but with a sect that stood out within the conglomerate of diverse Hindu religions. Some of them broke taboos: they ate meat, even meat from corpses, meditated in cemeteries, and so on. André Van Lysebeth understood tantra as a reaction to the caste-based religion of the Aryans. He demythologizes Nazi notions of an allegedly highly developed Aryan civilization which, after its invasion of India, supposedly brought “light” to more “primitive” races. In many respects, their invasion led to the opposite—to a regression of Indian culture. The Aryan system resulted in the enslavement of women, who were reduced to the status of slaves. The aim of Hindu marriage was not love, but the begetting of sons. An Aryan husband could cheat on his wife with impunity. In Aryan families, they tried to marry off their daughters as early as puberty, because they were in danger of being raped by their father or brothers [17, p. 86]. Tantra was a reaction to the Aryan system. Some spiritual schools in India, and tantra belongs among them, despise asceticism and seek freedom through pleasant things and sensual pleasure. The teaching in the *Kularnava Tantra* (VIII, 107) claims that union with the deity is possible only through bodily union and pleasurable satisfaction. Unlike ascetic systems, tantrics accepted the body as a temple.

In Buddhism, such spiritual rebels appear in Zen Buddhism, where they rejected conventions and drove Buddhism toward extreme nihilism. They provoked by ceasing to meditate, which forms the basis of Buddhism; or they said: “If you meet the Buddha, kill him!” Some married, although this was forbidden to monks. This was meant as a protest against the fact that women had no access to Buddhism in some schools, and also against an overly speculative religion. “Zen was by no means speculative; it was

a practical approach for a thinking, active Chinese individual. It emphasized spontaneity and naturalness and did not contradict the Taoist approach to nature. It fostered a healthy distaste for institutionalism. Monks of Zen schools fed and clothed themselves, thus differing entirely from the great monasteries of rival sects that owned land. Zen teaching, which was wholly independent of scriptures and doctrines, destroyed all marks of subject and object and often moved in a frivolous manner, resembling play and paradox" [18, p. 29]. It must be added, however, that these were radicals—not all Zen Buddhists take such a "rebellious" approach.

In Judaism, this rebelliousness appears in so-called prophetic symbolic action. These were gestures, dramatizations, often without words or accompanied by words, by which the prophets—often provocatively—sought to draw attention to God's message. The prophets acted "madly" in order to awaken attention to the call to repentance.

Christianity too knows the "madness" of the so-called *yurodivy*, the "fools for Christ" inspired by St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor 4:10). They were Eastern Christian ascetics who provoked and behaved as if mad in order, through their conduct, to draw attention to some vice. For example, on Good Friday they would provocatively eat sausages in public in order to point to corruption in family relationships, hatred, unforgiveness, usury among people, and the like. In Western Christianity, a certain yurodivy-like manifestation vis-à-vis rationalist, liberal, and perhaps also neo-scholastic theology was Pentecostalism—the Pentecostal and charismatic movement.

There is something yurodivy-like also in Simone's life. Her gestures of solidarity, her exhausting labor among workers, her participation in the Spanish Civil War—these are seemingly senseless gestures, as among Zen Buddhists. Yet her "foolishness" is not the same as in other forms of "spiritual" foolishness. The spiritual foundation of her foolishness is the imitation of divine foolishness, as she writes: "When the madness of love takes hold of a human being, it entirely transforms his actions and thoughts. It is akin to God's madness... The criterion of things that come from God is that they have the character of something foolish - except for the loss of the capacity to express truth and to love justice" [3, p. 24]. The driving force for her was God's foolish, unconditional love for the human being. She is therefore not merely an academic philosopher, but also a mystic and a practical philosopher who lives what she reflects upon, says, and writes. This foolishness takes possession of her life and throws her into extremes. In the end it led her to loneliness and premature death.

At least for a certain period, she was inspired by Jesus Christ, whom she perceived as the one who acts even today through the compassionate human being: "To transfer

one's own being into an afflicted person means to take upon oneself for a moment his affliction, to assume voluntarily that whose very essence consists in being imposed by force or against one's will. This is something impossible. Only Christ has done it. Only Christ can do it, and those whose soul belongs to Him without reserve. When they transfer their being into another afflicted person, in reality they do not place their own being into him, for they do not have it; they place into him Christ Himself. Almsgiving practiced in this way is a sacrament, a supernatural act in which the human being, the living Christ, places the real Christ into the soul of the afflicted Christ. It is not only a symbol - if it is bread - it is a banquet. It is not only a symbol or an agreement, but a literal translation of the words of Christ Himself. He says: 'You did it to me.' Christ is therefore present in the afflicted, the hungry, or the unclothed person... Christ is present in the person who gives in a perfectly pure way; who, then, could be Christ's benefactor if not He Himself? In the end it is understandable that only the presence of Christ can truly place compassion into a soul" (*God's Love and Affliction*) [1, p. 130]. A remarkable thought—and yet...

6. Limits

When, at the end of this paper, I reflected on Simone Weil, the portrait of the Košice-born Blessed Sára Salkaházi (1899–1944) kept coming to my mind. One can notice a physiognomic similarity between the two women: their faces with almost masculine features, short haircuts, glasses with strong lenses. Both were socially engaged with great compassion. Both were intellectuals, although the former journalist Sára did not reach the intellectual depth of Simone. Sára was a bohemian type: she smoked, liked to go to cafés, loved Gypsy music. Simone moved among anarchists. Both searched for a long time. Sára did not finish this search even after entering religious life. She constantly struggled with character flaws, for example with smoking, and in her honesty she was not afraid to admit this in her diary. Simone sought solutions intellectually in various philosophical schools and religions, but it seems she did not find them. She brought many beautiful ideas and intuitions, for example the image of the persons of the Holy Trinity as friends, which theologians can also make use of. And yet, something in her life remains immature, and this should not be overlooked by enthusiasts in Christian circles.

True mysticism ultimately leads to understanding. Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), in his long essay *Conoscenza e comprensione* (*Knowledge and Understanding*, 1956) [19], makes a distinction between knowledge and understanding. Knowledge is not identical with understanding. According to him, knowledge is when a person is able to incorporate

a new experience into a system of concepts whose substance is formed by old experiences. Knowledge can still be expressed in concepts. Understanding is inexpressible and cannot be achieved experimentally in a laboratory. It is an immediate, direct contact with what is new, with the mystery of our existence. The path to understanding is uprooting oneself from one's own culture, from language, in freedom from emotions [19, p. 160].

As an example, Huxley mentions Simone Weil, who, in his view, was unable to detach herself, to uproot herself—in simpler terms, from the ego—and thus did not reach understanding, but only pseudo-understanding. She used to be extraordinarily aggressive when someone opposed her views. She was unable to give up anything. Theoretically, she knew that it is necessary to undergo what she herself calls *decreation*, which is mystical death, that is, the death of the ego, but in practice she did not accomplish it [19, pp. 161–162]. One can hardly do anything but agree with him. Huxley primarily expected Weil to end in a mysticism similar to Eckhart's and to Eastern practices, that is, in imageless contemplation. Weil, however, remained immersed only in intellectualism, which she vehemently defended [19, p. 164]. Huxley apparently did not know about her paranormal experiences. As it turned out, however, they did not advance her further spiritual development.

Sára cannot be called a mystic in the strict sense of the word, and yet she walked the path of bridal mysticism: she called Jesus nothing other than the Bridegroom. Simone Weil also knows something about bridal mysticism, about the union of the soul with God, and yet there is something postmodernly immature in her—she refuses to have a spiritual home. She refuses not only the Catholic Church but also Christ's sacraments. An eternal individualist who left no school behind her. The shower of her confused criticism of Catholicism only portrays a typical weakness of intellectuals who want to have an overview, to be above everything, to criticize everything and to belong nowhere. Like a postmodern adolescent mentality that is afraid to take upon itself the responsibility of belonging to a community. It builds a private, mostly syncretistic spirituality. Simone remained torn: "I am not a Catholic, although—what I am about to say as a non-Catholic must certainly seem presumptuous to any Catholic, but I cannot express myself otherwise—nothing Catholic, nothing Christian has ever seemed foreign to me" (Letter to Georges Bernanos) [3, p. 146].

Sára was in love with Jesus. She understood that union with Him means to be like Him: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Therefore she asked her superior to be allowed to offer her life for the community. And God granted this, when members of the fascist Arrow Cross

(Nyilash) executed her on 27 December 1944. Even before the sacrifice of her life, she had to die spiritually, in the spirit of Jesus: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:24–25). She brought her spiritual development to completion by identifying her life and death with the crucified Christ.

Simone was on the way; she attempted mystical death, so that the ego might die in her. But her individualism, her belonging nowhere, convinces me that her effort at decreation did not succeed. She may have become a tragic female heroine, similar to the case of the rich young man (cf. Mt 19:16–22), who kept everything that was required for salvation and yet did not follow Jesus in order to find peace of heart. Simone did not grasp the *kairos* and fled from an important choice. Toward the end of her short life, after her stay in the USA and then in London, she devoted herself more to Taoism than to Christianity.

To present her as a model of fidelity to conscience is not appropriate. Her choice was not a matter of conscience, as the above-mentioned letter to Bernanos testifies. She perceived where she would find the truth, but she did not accept it. Yet if you do not want to belong anywhere, you are a sign for no one. Nevertheless, for a Catholic theologian her reflections on mystical death, on the Holy Trinity, on the mystery of God, on sacrifice, and on compassion lived in practice remain inspiring.

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doc. ThDr. Róbert Sarka, PhD.

Faculty of Education, Catholic University in Ružomberok

e-mail: sarka.robert1@gmail.com

Sensus Communis in the Historical-Theological Thought of G. K. Chesterton

Peter Mišovič

Abstract

The article reflects on the paradox of contemporary human existence in the context of the digital age, which, despite unprecedented material progress and technological development, is increasingly accompanied by a decline in mental well-being. Drawing on insights from psychiatry, particularly the work of Anders Hansen, it highlights the tension between the human pursuit of happiness and the rising prevalence of anxiety and depression. In response to this situation, the study turns to the thought of G. K. Chesterton, especially his concepts of paradox and sensus communis (common sense), as key interpretative tools for understanding the human condition. The paper argues that common sense represents not only a rational capacity but also a space where the human and the divine encounter one another. Through Chesterton's perspective, mythology, philosophy, and Christianity are interpreted as stages in humanity's search for meaning, with Christianity understood as their fulfilment rather than synthesis. Particular attention is given to the communal dimension of faith and its relevance in an era marked by virtual relationships and increasing loneliness. The article concludes by emphasizing the therapeutic and anthropological significance of common sense, community, and faith, which together offer a meaningful framework for human flourishing in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Age; Mental Health; G. K. Chesterton; Sensus Communis.

When observing developments in human society, we may, from a historical perspective, describe the twentieth century as a period of “rapid leaps.” This expression captures the fact that through skill and intelligence human beings have acquired knowledge and various achievements that in earlier history appear only in a rudimentary form, or survive merely as phenomena that today's means share only in name. For example, since ancient times we know that humans used the horse as a “means of transport,” whereas today the horse fulfils its role rather as a hobby, a sport, or only rarely as a working tool. With the invention of the combustion engine, we still speak of “horsepower,” but now as a unit expressing the performance of a mechanical force.

After various technical revolutions in the history of humankind, today the notion of the digital revolution resonates most strongly—a field that has not yet been fully explored in all its implications, and yet whose benefits we already use on a daily basis.

We may state that in developed countries, from a historical point of view, people live better than ever before. On the other hand, however, there is the fact—observable especially among young people—that although people live better in this sense than ever before, their mental health often pays a “price” for these means, to the detriment of their well-being. The Swedish psychiatrist Anders Hansen, a well-known author of several international bestsellers on mental health, poses precisely this question in his book *Good News About Anxiety*: “Why do we feel so bad when we have it so good?” [1]

We will not engage with this work in depth; instead, we will select only a few facts from a synthesis of the author’s medical practice published in 2021, when the first edition appeared. In Sweden, every eighth adult takes antidepressants. The World Health Organization states that 284 million people suffer from anxiety disorders and 280 million from depression. [1]

Certainly, there may be many reasons for these disorders or mental illnesses. However, in the context of the present issue of “having a good life,” a key point is the human desire for happiness, or for a happy life—which, paradoxically, at first glance seems the easiest to attain, yet at the same time the most difficult to become truly aware of.

Closely connected with the above-mentioned issue is the question of to what extent Christian faith and its moral content influence a sustainably healthy society in today’s “digital age.” Can faith in a personal God and a relationship with a personal God still be meaningful today, when human beings form many of their relationships virtually?

In seeking answers, we may draw inspiration from the reflections of the English journalist, Christian writer, and thinker G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936). He is not only a figure of the “Catholic world,” but also a world-renowned author of many works that require a more attentive reading, while at the same time, through their attractiveness, they can appeal to a broad public. The author himself does not consider himself a scientist, nor does he wish to write systematically like one. He is a spontaneous writer who “writes as he thinks.”

Chesterton responds to many intellectual and philosophical currents present at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His way of thinking is not merely a synthesis of acquired knowledge; rather, his personal life story—marked also by a period of nihilism—makes his presentation of Christianity all the more illuminating, as a source of Truth and joy in everyday life. In Chesterton’s works we may therefore admire not only a high level of philosophical and theological reflection, but above all

their applicability to ordinary human life, for which they are intended. Particularly helpful and inspiring in this regard are his works *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*.

G. K. Chesterton employs in his works several key concepts that function for him as constructive elements of the human being as such. One of the indispensable ones is the notion of *sensus communis* (English: *common sense*)—sound judgment, or, in our idiomatic expression, “healthy peasant reason.” This is not merely a clichéd expression of ordinary human experience, but also a source of religious experience; for Chesterton, the story of humanity is just as fascinating as the story of God’s coming into this world, since God chose the human path. *Sensus communis*, or common sense, is thus the place where the human meets the divine, where the human being differs absolutely from the rest of creation, and yet even more profoundly from the Creator.

In this perspective, common sense may therefore be understood not only as a fact given to the human individual, but also, in a certain way, as a “written story of the human being,” which for Chesterton is not a cluster of random events, but the first expression of reason—that is, of free will. At this point, we may briefly return to the above-mentioned issue of the search for happiness. The aforementioned physician and psychiatrist A. Hansen points out that the pursuit of happiness in itself makes little sense. Happiness consists rather in moving toward something that transcends us. To be happy, therefore, is not only the result of an activity, but also the very journey toward a goal. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that expecting a constant feeling of happiness is unrealistic and may have precisely the opposite effect on the human person [1] (p. 196).

The foregoing reflection on the human being and happiness may sound paradoxical; yet paradox itself is present throughout both the story of humanity and the story of the Son of Man. It is precisely Chesterton who is regarded as the “prince of paradox,” for whom paradox represents a characteristic mode of expressing his thought.

Starting from paradox as a fact that “accompanies” human life, we also find in Chesterton an understanding of Christianity as such. The aforementioned search for happiness (or for the meaningfulness of life) is historically outlined in mythology, which, according to the author, is an expression of this search and, based on available historical sources, is given only to the human being. The richness and diversity of myths and mythology as such is not, according to Chesterton, a denial of this human endowment; on the contrary, it confirms its originality also in its historical, religious, and cultural dimensions. Within it one can also observe an important symbolism of heaven and earth, which not only represents the reality of creation or religious or

mythical ideas about deities, but at the same time also expresses the human perception of time and space.

At first hearing, this line of thought may seem disturbing; however, according to Chesterton, the emergence of myths is a product of the healthy rationality of the human being (or of mental health), since, in his view, only a psychologically healthy person possesses the capacity for imagination.

If we wish, in this sense, to evaluate or understand the Christian faith adequately, it is necessary to take a healthy distance from it. By this the author does not mean that it should be abandoned, but rather that one should gain a better, sharper perspective. This “perspective” is already present in the very separation of heaven and earth, where we can observe a certain “absence” of God—not His non-existence, but a particular mode of inaccessibility experienced by the prophets of the Old Testament. On Mount Olympus one would hardly look for an empty divine throne; yet this absence of God is best expressed in the images of the Old Testament, where the prophet sees God as if gazing into the distance.

Chesterton understands this process of forming mythology or philosophy as a kind of journey—a search that cannot fully satisfy the human being and his desire. According to him, this fulfilment is brought only by Christianity, which brings myths and legends to completion while at the same time answering the questions proper to philosophical reflection. It is therefore not a synthesis or a form of syncretism, but a completion and fulfilment. It is precisely to the “people of mythology”—the shepherds—and to the “people of philosophy”—the wise men from the East—that this mystery of God and humanity is granted to be known first.

From what has been said so far, we may conclude that God reveals Himself to a community and that the relationship with Him is to have a communal character. Even in the times of the Old Testament, when He speaks through the prophets, He addresses His words to the community. In the New Testament we find no difference in this respect: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ...” (Heb 1:1–2). Thus, not only faith itself, but also its communal dimension gives the human person in every age the possibility to rediscover his or her own value and to find answers to the fundamental questions of existence within the rich Tradition of the Church.

In conclusion, we may state that preserving *sensus communis* may seem more difficult today than in the past; yet if we speak of human nature, which remains unchanged, then ultimately every age is a *kairos* in which God reveals and manifests

His tenderness toward the human person. Even from a medical perspective, the situation is no different. As A. Hansen states at the end of his work: “Anxiety and depression often represent a protective mechanism. They are a normal part of human nature and are not a sign that we are ill. Nor do they represent character flaws. Memories are changeable, and that is how it should be. The possibility of talking about traumatic events in a safe space helps to reshape memories and reduces their threatening character. Lack of sleep, long-term stress, a sedentary lifestyle, and excessive viewing of edited photos of other people on social media can be interpreted by the brain as a signal that ‘we live in a dangerous world’ or ‘I am not good enough.’ The brain’s response then comes in the form of dejection and the need to withdraw. It seems that loneliness contributes to many illnesses, but even small changes in behavior can bring positive results. From a health perspective, it is better to have a few close friends than a large number of more distant acquaintances.”

Finally, from what has been said so far, we can also discern the therapeutic function of common sense: the human being has the capacity and the tendency to place events into stories that are coherent and that give meaning to his or her own life. It is not healthy for a person to identify himself or herself with an illness, because in doing so one creates a kind of “instinct of fate” that may become self-fulfilling. Experiencing feelings of anxiety does not mean that the entirety of one’s human personhood is nothing but anxiety, or merely one’s diagnosis. Nevertheless, therapy is very important. The human body is made for movement. Without movement it becomes deformed and weakened, not to mention the impact this has on a person’s mental health. And yet we often see how people prefer to take medication and withdraw from the world—and ultimately even from themselves—behind the screen of a computer or a mobile phone.

Thus, the body is made for movement, but the spiritual dimension requires integration into community and the discovery of the meaning of life. Without a rational sense of meaning in life—even if one accepts that one does not always have to be happy—life becomes merely a tragedy and a vicious circle. In this sense, Christian faith does not offer merely a kind of therapeutic function of community or of knowledge about God, but mediates a real experience of God as He truly is: “And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him” (1 John 4:16).

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ThLic. Peter Mišovič

Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology of Cyril and Methodius, Comenius University
Bratislava

e-mail: misovic6@uniba.sk

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