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THEOLOGY OPEN TO THE WORLD: A METHODOLOGICAL ESSAY

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the transformations that have influenced Catholic theology in its relation to moral and social issues in the last hundred years, mainly from the perspective of its methodological and epistemological identity. These transformations have resulted in a theology that is open to the world, and more sensitive to the economy of salvation than abstract studies of dogmatic aspects of faith. We attempt to answer important questions regarding methodological and epistemological implications for such a theology, also sources of cognition, research methods, and, finally, the relationship to other epistemologies and fields of knowledge. Our analyses should be understood as a form of retrospection and synthesis of our previous studies (enumerated in the Bibliography) regarding the social mission of the Church, Her presence in the world, the methodological identity of the Catholic social teaching, the significance of time and history for theological reflections, and social theology as a new theological discipline.

Keywords: theology, social theology, theologies of earthly realities, methodology of theology, signs of the times, Bernard J.F. Lonergan

*TEOLOGIA OTWARTA NA ŚWIAT. ESEJ METODOLOGICZNY***Streszczenie**

Celem artykułu jest analiza przemian, które dotknęły katolicką teologię w jej odniesieniu do problematyki moralnej i społecznej w ostatnich stu latach, głównie pod kątem metodologicznej i epistemologicznej tożsamości. Rezultatem tych przemian jest teologia otwarta na świat, bardziej wrażliwa na ekonomię zbawienia niż abstrakcyjne studium dogmatycznych aspektów wiary. Autor podejmuje próbę odpowiedzi na ważne pytania o implikacje metodologiczno-epistemologiczne dla takiej teologii, o źródła poznania, o metody badawcze, czy w końcu o relację do innych porządków poznawczych i dziedzin wiedzy. Analizy zawarte w artykule należy postrzegać jako formę retrospekcji i zarazem syntezy wcześniejszych, wymienionych w bibliografii opracowań, omawiających problematykę społecznego posłannictwa Kościoła i jego obecności w świecie, tożsamości metodologicznej katolickiej nauki społecznej, znaczenia czasu i historii dla refleksji teologicznej oraz teologii społecznej jako nowej dyscypliny teologicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: teologia, teologia społeczna, teologie rzeczywistości świeckich, metodologia teologii, znaki czasu, Bernard J.F. Lonergan

“A *theology* mediates *between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion within that matrix*”¹. This sentence opens *Method in Theology* by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit, philosopher, and theologian, professor at the Gregorianum and Harvard University. Published in 1972, the book was his second *opus vitae* apart from *Insight. A Study of Human Understanding* (1957). Before it came out as a book, Lonergan discussed its subject matter in his lectures and papers before he retired. To him, retirement was, as he himself put it in the preface of *Method*, an opportunity to devote himself freely to thinking and writing². Andrzej Bronk, the best expert on the Canadian philosopher and theologian in Poland, notes that

What is attractive in Lonergan is [...] the fact that he not only exposes his ideas theoretically but invites the reader to reflect on them together and to assimilate them. While emphasizing the need for being open to reality

¹ B.J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto 1990. p. XI.

² Ibidem.

[...], he encourages readers to think independently, i.e. to take up essential questions, to look for answers to act responsibly³.

We have been inspired by this encouragement and even more so by Lonergan's concept of theology as "an ongoing process," whose method is reflected upon⁴.

Even though an essay is a literary-academic genre that is difficult to describe unequivocally, it is often perceived as a manifesto of the author, regardless of the topic he/she discusses. In this essay, our aim is to try to reinterpret transformations of Catholic theology as regards moral and social issues in the last hundred years. We shall pay attention chiefly to its methodological and epistemological identity. We adopt the fruit of these transformations, i.e. the model of theological discourse open to the world, as our model. Our academic reflection in this study should be treated as a form of retrospection and synthesis of previous studies that dealt with the social reorientation of moral theology, the methodological identity of Catholic social teaching⁵, the social mission of the Church, and Her presence in the world⁶, the meaning of time and history in theological reflection as well as social theology as a new theological discipline⁷.

Our previous publications have been an opportunity to creatively develop our reflections, and what emerges from these publications is a theology that is open to the world, more sensitive to the economy of salvation than an abstract study of dogmatic aspects of faith. Thus, this is a theology that is closer to Lonergan's "process". Finally, such a theology "mediates" *between* culture, the world, civilization, and religion. In this way, it covers the entire transcendent reality. *This is a theology for which*, as Joseph Ratzinger aptly remarked, the Church remains "a living subject possessing a concrete content"⁸. As such, it cannot develop theological concepts without reference to the contemporary world, current events, without engagement in the history of human beings, their inspirations, and structures of social life they create. It is exactly the contemporary history of the world and man that constantly inspires theology. It is there that theology is born⁹.

³ Krytyczne wydanie „Insight” Bernarda Lonergana SJ (1904-1984), „Roczniki Filozoficzne” 39-40:1991-1992, fasc. 2, pp. 149-150.

⁴ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵ *Nauka społeczna Kościoła w poszukiwaniu własnej tożsamości*, Warszawa 2013.

⁶ *Kościół obecny w świecie – posłany do świata. Teologiczno-społeczne aspekty posłannictwa Kościoła w świecie po Soborze Watykańskim II*, Lublin 2003.

⁷ *Teologia a czas. O znaczeniu czasu we współczesnym dyskursie teologicznym i antropologicznym*, „Verbum vitae” 37(2020), no. 2, 169-180.

⁸ J. Ratzinger, *The nature and mission of theology: essays to orient theology in today's debates* Joseph Ratzinger; transl. by Adrian Walker, San Francisco 1995, p. 61.

⁹ M.-D. Chenu, *Un théologien en liberté. Les interviews. J. Duquesne interroge le Père Chenu*, Paris 1975, pp. 124-125.

We will also endeavor, though briefly, to answer vital questions regarding methodological and epistemological implications for such a theology, as well as its sources of cognition, research methods, and finally its relationship with other epistemologies and fields of knowledge. Our attempt to address the above questions will refer to a specific scope of theological research that can be conventionally called social theology or theology of social life. The definition we adopt in this paper is broad. At the same time, this definition puts things “in order” as it encompasses the entire social reflection of the Church with a particular emphasis on its theological thread. It is present in theologies of earthly realities, in social moral theology, pastoral theology, or in the Catholic social teaching which is developed within the theological current.

1. TOWARDS A SOCIALLY ORIENTED THEOLOGY

We do not intend to reconstruct historically this phenomenon which is new in Catholic theological thinking. This would be no easy task due to the character of this phenomenon: its various strands and emphasis, its lack of clear methodological assumptions, and even voices questioning its relevance.

This social theology may be constituted in various ways: as an autonomous theological discipline that remains connected with moral theology, pastoral theology, and social teaching of the Church, or as some kind of theology of the world (also called theologies of earthly realities), contextual theologies or genitive theologies (*Genitiv-Theologien*). These various conceptions notwithstanding, the existence of this theology is a fact, and it already has a history in contemporary theological reflection¹⁰.

On the other hand, one must bear in mind that social issues have been undertaken in the Catholic theological reflection from the very beginning. Fragments or entire monographs have been written at least since the Neo-Thomist reform in moral theology, or even since the period of manualist moral theology. It is within this context that the treatises *De Justitia et Jure* were written. They constituted a vital part of the theological and moral synthesis¹¹. Sadly, their approach was often narrow, superficial, and, above all, negative. They boiled down to showing the way Christians should live so that, while living in the world and being engaged in earthly matters, we do not lose our ultimate destiny. They shared an entirely individualistic outlook on morality that originated from medieval nominalism. This morality saw man as an individual who before God is concerned for the salvation

¹⁰ H. Waldenfels, *Die Theologie in der Vielfalt ihrer Kontexte*, “Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie” 128 (2006), no. 1, pp. 81–102.

¹¹ J. Querejazu, *La moral social y el Concilio Vaticano II. Génesis, instancias y cristalizaciones de la Teología moral social postvaticana*, Vitoria: Eset 1993, pp. 23–62.

of his/her soul, entangled in individual cases of conscience, the solutions of which were determined by casuistry¹².

In this context, demands for renewal were raised more and more explicitly. However, it was only the Second Vatican Council, the expression of the Church's self-awareness and its longing to reach out to the contemporary world, that essentially contributed to the dynamic growth of social reflection within specific theological disciplines. This resulted in new methodological and epistemological challenges.

In this context, theologies of earthly realities emerged as an exceptional phenomenon. They were the result of the Church meeting the world, the engagement of the time of salvation and the time of earthly history. Undoubtedly, these theologies were the manifestation of the noble movement of the protagonists of the Church's renewal, the deeper awareness of the isolation of Christian thought from the world. And yet it was only in the beginning that this introduction of new issues (directly related to social life) into "old" theological structures aroused the enthusiasm of those disappointed with the previous obsolescence of Christian thought, its remoteness from the growth of social movements in the world¹³.

Retrospectively, the emergence of theologies of earthly realities may be compared to the image of pouring new wine into old wineskins (cf. Lk 5:37). Surely, numerous concepts related to them may raise doubts and are not reconcilable with the official social teaching of the Church. However, their merit lies in making contemporary theology sensitive to the pulse of our times, the dignity of man, and the authenticity of Christianity. We should recognize values present in these theologies, values that should be characteristic of every theology: emphasizing the community of ecclesial people in their journey through the world to *pleroma Christi*¹⁴. While writing about these theologies, Battista Mondin makes an interesting remark: they should not be treated as a kind of partial theologies or reflections on some particular human activity in the light of Revelation but as *fundamental theologies* in the sense that a given human activity (politics, work, enjoyment, etc.) may be seen as a hermeneutical tool that helps us understand and express revealed truth¹⁵.

¹² F. Greniuk, *Katolicka teologia moralna w poszukiwaniu własnej tożsamości*, Lublin 1993, p. 178.

¹³ More on this issue in: *Constructio et consecratio mundi – zapomniane idee teologii rzeczywistości ziemskich* (part I). "Roczniki Teologiczne" 55:2008 fasc. 3 pp. 63–77; (part II): 1(56):2009 pp. 81–92.

¹⁴ J. Krucina, *Spór między katolicką nauką społeczną a teologią polityczną*, "Collectanea Theologica" 42:1972, f. 2, pp. 39–51.

¹⁵ *Storia della Teologia*, vol. 4, Bologna 1997, p. 701.

2. THE CHURCH AND MAN IMMersed IN TIME AND HISTORY:
 “TOWARDS HISTORICAL THINKING IN THEOLOGY”

Time, a dimension of being, has always fascinated man and science¹⁶. Nevertheless, it seems that it is the last two centuries that have contributed mostly to reflections to which contemporary theology cannot be indifferent¹⁷. These reflections led to the discovery of historical thinking, including the historical nature of thinking and understanding. Until modern times (and in Ancient Times and the Middle Ages in particular), cognition was perceived as ahistorical, timeless, and spaceless, similar to the nature of the soul or spirit.

Historical thinking was for a long time on the margin of reflection in theology as well. Since the times of St Justin, through Origen, the entire Christian Neoplatonism, then St Thomas Aquinas and scholasticism until the Second Vatican Council, theology was based on the assumption that the reality it speaks about is ideal, divine, eternal, and unchanging, i.e. it is “ahistorical”. Consequently, people used to believe that historical knowledge does not lead to any truth, and since it is relativistic, it is utterly anti-theological¹⁸. Also, such theology perceived man outside or above history, at least when it spoke about his/her spiritual dimension. In this context, historicity was thought to be something negative, heading toward nothingness, the degradation of being, a form of alienation or objectification of spirit, as relativism, indeterminacy, or amorphousness.

Introducing historicity into theological analysis was a gradual process. First, it happened in Protestant theology, then, more broadly, in Catholic theology. Both the Evangelical and Catholic schools in Tübingen played a special role in this respect¹⁹. What used to be quite often neglected and thought to cloud our reasoning (historicity, temporality, time), now stood in the very center of Catholic thought.

What was more and more coming to the fore was the view that Christian theology is not about ideas and abstracts but specific beings and situations, not so much about God Himself but rather man in relation to God, not about an “unchanging” world but one that is influenced by history. The gradual rapprochement between theological and historical thinking and cognition led to an interesting

¹⁶ The author discusses this issue in his other publications, which are referred to in further analyses in this paper: *Historyczność jako wewnętrzna zasada myślenia teologicznego*, in *In Persona Christi. Księga na 80-lecie księdza profesora Czesława S. Bartnika*, ed. Krzysztof Gózdź, vol. 2, Lublin 2009, pp. 377–384; *Teologia a czas*, op. cit., pp. 169–180.

¹⁷ P. Liszka, *Wpływ nauki o czasie na refleksję teologiczną*, Wrocław 1992, pp. 14–21.

¹⁸ K. Macheta, *Teologia historyczna*, in: *Historia i Logos*, edited by K. Macheta, K. Gózdź, M. Kowalczyk, Lublin 1991, pp. 264–278.

¹⁹ M. Leube, *Geschichte des Tübinger Stifts*, Stuttgart: Steinkopf 1954; J.R. Geiselmann, *Die katholische Tübinger Schule. Ihre theologische Eigenart*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1964.

encounter of history with dogmatic theology in the shape of the so-called theology of history. As a result, theological thinking began to lose much of its traditional ahistoricism, and historical thinking went far beyond mere ascertainment of past facts and became rather one of the ways of our self-knowledge. The concept of what should be the subject of theological investigation shifted from structural or metaphysical to existential. Subsequently, the process initiated by the theology of history covered the entire theology which started to deal with specific, that is historical human existence. The main representatives of this current were Karl Rahner, Piet Schoonenberg, Oscar Cullmann, Joseph Ratzinger, Walter Kasper and in Poland Czesław Stanisław Bartnik. It influenced the Second Vatican Council during which it was suggested, among others, to transform the traditional theology of ideas into teaching about the history of salvation²⁰.

3. NEW COGNITIVE CATEGORIES AND PARADIGMS

Obviously, theological reflection regarding temporal reality is always secondary to the main subject of theology. It is a kind of complement. The supernatural world is the primary and direct subject of theology. It speaks about the world indirectly, through the transcendent mystery. Above all, theology speaks about the relationship between temporal realities to God, Christ, the Kingdom of God, the Church, and the human being. As such it never dogmatizes its statements. However, it may be extremely inspiring both for the official teaching of the Church and human thinking that aims at important transcendent truths regarding the creation of the world, its greatness, our communion with the world, human dignity, social life, the mission of the Church and the meaning of Her engagement in various spheres of temporal life²¹.

It is a kind of dialogical theology in which supernatural truths are combined with earthly truths, and the Gospel is translated into values that are significant for our earthly life. Such a theology corresponds with the development of reflection on the temporal profile of Christianity and the processes of secularization and laicization that affect it in various ways. This theological thinking avoids theologization of secular science as well as the secularization of theology and the breakdown of the two fields of cognition and knowledge as if there were no, even secondary, points of contact. This theology gives us essential cognitive categories and paradigms that may be helpful while revealing the foundations of the social mission of the Church and Her social doctrine. They also help when we reflect on the relationship between theological discourse and the reality of human cognition.

²⁰ Macheta, *Teologia historyczna*, op. cit., pp. 264–265.

²¹ Gocko, *Nauka społeczna Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 26.

In our analysis, we are going to discuss some of them: *signum temporis* as, in a way, the new *locus theologicus* of the entire Catholic theology after the Second Vatican Council; *sub luce Evangelii* as the criterion for reading these signs of the times and *autonoma iusta* as a regulative principle between theology and the world of human cognition²².

The theology of the signs of the times evolved during Vatican II and was further developed as part of the reception of the Council teaching. On the one hand, it may be interpreted as a response to the epistemological postulate of Catholic theology to look in a new way at the origin of theology. On the other hand, such a theology shows that the scope of theological discourse has expanded to various areas of human existence (especially moral social theology, Catholic social teaching, or pastoral theology). It is there that the category of the signs of the times is especially “put to use”. The growth of the idea of the signs of the times, similarly to the theology of earthly realities, resulted from a deep conviction that theology cannot ignore the broad, current context of a given issue. If it does, it becomes a hermetically sealed theoretical system.

As the signs of the times, we should acknowledge all phenomena, which due to their general properties and high frequency, are typical traits of a given era and the manifestation of the expectations and aspirations of the people who live in this era. “They are the *reality* in itself in which we live in specific circumstances of time and place”²³. This reality, however, often appears as a farrago of God’s action and human action, the latter being tainted with sin. That is why the theology of the signs of the times emphasizes the insufficiency of merely reading a specific situation without its deep discernment *sub luce Evangelii*²⁴. Recognizing and explaining the signs of the times should, therefore, be done in the light of the faith and *sub luce Evangelii*, that is in the spirit of Christian kairology.

Therefore, it is crucial that the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* adopted, from the methodological and formal point of view, *the light of the Gospel* as the hermeneutical basis for explaining the signs of the times. This is confirmed by formulas repeated in various ways in the Constitution, for example: *sub evangelii luce* (no. 4); *sub lumine Christi* (no. 10); *sub hoc lumine* (no. 11); *in lumine huius revelationis* (no. 13); *sub luce revelationis* (no. 23); *sub lumine verbi divini* (no. 44); *sub luce evangelii* (no. 46, 50, 63). It is essential to point out that this text of the Council constantly uses the formulas *sub lumine* or *in lumine* (*evangelii, revelationis, verbi divini itp.*), and never the formula *ex lumine*.

²² More on this issue in: Gocko, *Kościół obecny w świecie*, op. cit., pp. 206–125.

²³ Cf. Propositio no 5 (*Post disceptationem de muneribus familiae christianae in mundo hodierno, 24 X 1980*), in: *Enchiridion Vaticanum*, vol. 7, no 699.

²⁴ S. Moysa, *Znaki czasu a rozeznanie duchowe*, “Collectanea Theologica” 47(1977), f. 4, pp. 23–44.

This consistent choice appears to be crucial for interpreting the signs of the times, as well as for understanding another important category that defines the relationship between theology and the world of human knowledge, i.e. the principle of proper autonomy of temporal realities (*autonomia iusta*). Firstly, we must note that (temporal) state of affairs should be perceived not “from” Revelation, but “in” Its light. This means that such truths, and truths regarding human coexistence, do not result directly “from” the Gospel, but, rather, they should be understood in “Its” light. Moreover, the economy, social life, culture, and other so-called earthly realities should have real autonomy. The realness and meaning of their autonomy come from the essence of these realities, and not from the reality of faith or the Gospel. As a reality in the order of creation, prior to transcendent reality, it is one of the constitutive determinants of human existence, just like historical and temporal reality²⁵. In this context, Wilhelm Weber notes that in the field of temporal matters of which *Gaudium et spes* speaks, the Church’s preaching and theological reflection should be preceded by accurate knowledge of these matters. Moreover, the Gospel is then not the source of cognition (*ex evangelio*), but rather cognitive assistance, as *removens impediens (in or sub lumine evangelii)*²⁶.

A CONCLUSION

Reflection within the theology of the signs of the times and emphasizing the necessity to discern them *sub luce Evangelii* had a significant impact on the methodology, including epistemology, of theology. It was indispensable to reflect on some of its methodological assumptions and modify the shape of specific propositions, which resulted in theology opening itself to the world. New methodological schemes that referred to such categories as *sub luce Evangelii*, *sensus fidei*, or the signs of the times, started to replace the deductive paradigm which was characteristic of the theology before Vatican II. Also, they encouraged us to draw not only on specifically Christian sources but also non-theological ones, connected with the development of anthropological disciplines. In many studies, the interpretative key was now of practical and anthropological character. Man, understood as the one who triggers historical events, became the starting point of all reflection. The development of appropriate cognitive tools specific to individual theological

²⁵ A. Losinger „*Iusta autonomia*”. *Studien zu einem Schlüsselbegriff des II. Vatikanischen Konzils*. Paderborn 1989, pp. 120–121.

²⁶ *Anfragen an die Soziallehre der Kirchen nach dem Konzil*, in: idem, *Person in Gesellschaft. Aufsätze und Vorträge vor dem Hintergrund der christlichen Soziallehre (1967–1976)*. München-Paderborn-Wien 1978, p. 48.

disciplines turned out to be very important. Similarly, a successful attempt to develop new forms of transmitting theological content (a new language of theology).

It should be stressed that in this constant reference to the contemporary situation what matters is a theological outlook, and not only a temporal interpretation of the signs of the times. In this perspective, as Enrico Chiavacci aptly points out,

The entire reality [...] is not only the object of direct interest of the Church and theology, it is also *locus theologicus*. For a theologian the entire experience of the human family (in terms of organization and living together) is important. It is there, in all the drama of this experience, that we can and should seek ways of better understanding the Gospel²⁷.

In this paper, we have focused mainly on the genesis of the new vision of theology as the one open to the world. This theology emerged immediately before the Second Vatican Council. The conciliar or post-conciliar documents of the Magisterium, such as the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, the encyclicals *Fides et ratio* and *Lumen fidei*, or the exhortation *Evangelium Gaudium* were its subsequent milestones.

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²⁷ *La dottrina sociale cristiana: dalla filosofia alla teologia*. in: *Rerum novarum (1891–1991). Cento anni di insegnamento sociale della Chiesa*, Bologna 1992, p. 40.

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