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## **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE CHURCH** **Christian Journey Across Human Cultures**

Theologians down the ages struggle with the questions of how far may Christianity accommodate to the conditions of the culture and of how far changes of the Church may go. Both issues are converged when asking about the relation of ecclesiological continuity and changes. What does it mean, that Church still needs transformation, and, what does it mean, that Church must be aware of its continuity? Is it possible to assess the moment when continuity is torn apart and when a change becomes a breaking-down.

It is unquestionably a deep ecumenical question. In the recently released document of the *Faith and Order Commission* the issue has been displayed in the very knowledgeable and sensitive way: “Some (churches) hold that faithfulness to the Gospel may at times require a break in institutional continuity, while others insist that such faithfulness can be maintained by resolving difficulties without breaks which lead to separation”<sup>1</sup>. Many times the same moment of the Church history seemed to be differently grasped by theologians. A number of examples confirms this finding. Yet, Philipp Melanchthon for instance, when he had written the Augsburg Confession, still one of the most important documents of the Protestant Reformation, thought about reform only. He would not recognize the process of which he was a member as a rupture of the Catholic Church.

Various confessional interpretations of continuity and changes and its impact on the ecumenical relations reflect multidimensional feature of the problem. This stems from the two main points: firstly, confessions variously assess the level of their possible enculturation and secondly, they consider in the different manner the question of how inherent and comprehensive is the deposit of faith. Both

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<sup>1</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Papers no 214, Geneva: World Council of Churches 2014, 14.

points are strictly intertwined with each other. The choice between the attitude of continuity and the attitude of changes depends on their theological self-understanding in the cultural context.

## 1. Faith and Culture in the interrelation

“The celebration of the liturgy, therefore, should correspond to the genius and culture of the different peoples. In order that the mystery of Christ be ‘made known to all the nations . . . to bring about the obedience of faith’, it must be proclaimed, celebrated, and lived in all cultures in such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled: It is with and through their own human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, that the multitude of God’s children has access to the Father, in order to glorify him in the one Spirit”<sup>2</sup>. This is only one of the passages of the modern Catholic Catechism which is referred to the notion of culture. The Catholic meaning of culture was displayed more precisely in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* of the Second Vatican Council: “The word ‘culture’ in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family”<sup>3</sup>. Culture, thus, should be recognized as the whole which consists of the some amount of integrated elements. These are ideas, norms, values and patterns, which appear in the different manner in the social life of a given community or society and which determine the life of this community or society. This is a system, which has been rightly defined by Gordon Mathews as “the way of life of a particular people in a particular place,”<sup>4</sup> even though Mathews added that this description is in the contemporary conditions insufficient when skipping another one explanation: culture is “the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket”<sup>5</sup>. The way of today’s globalized world towards a cultural uniformity (using the expression coined

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Revised Edition* [1204], London: BURNS & OATS 2006, 274.

<sup>3</sup> *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes* [53], Boston: Pauline Books & Media 1965, 34.

<sup>4</sup> G.. MATHEWS, *Global Culture/Individual Identity. Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*, New York: Routledge 2000, 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

by Swedish sociologist Ulf Hannerz)<sup>6</sup>, changes meaningfully the social reality of the human beings, consequently, it changes also the context of evangelization. Yet, apart from this process, Christian faith must still be connected to distinctive cultures in order to use them and to change them. Church from the very beginning was aware that man recognizes and grasps surrounding reality through the lenses of its own culture and preaching the Gospel in isolation from the cultural context is not possible. “St Paul’s preaching of Christ in the Areopagus at Athens (Acts 17:22-34), making use of local beliefs and literature, illustrates how the very first generation of Christians attempted to share the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, drawing upon and, when necessary, transforming, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the cultural heritage of their listeners and serving as a leaven to foster the well-being of the society in which they lived”<sup>7</sup>.

History of Christianity provides us with a countless number of examples of how faith and culture intersect each other in the process of spreading the Gospel. The arrangements of these interrelations are of different nature. On the one hand, faith may cover a given culture, using its elements to reach the members of the cultural system. On the other, faith struggles with whether a given culture or with its elements to change them according to the Christian principles. These two positions open a long list of the possible arrangements in the process of christianization.

Yet, still a wider perspective of the relation between the Christian faith and a given culture must be considered. Lot of light on this question has shed a very convincing image which was molded by the American theologian Richard Niebuhr. In his one of the famous theological book of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, entitled *Christ and Culture* he described five models indicating which position of the Christian faith against culture could be taken up in the historical development. Each of the listed models should be obviously recognized as “an ideal type” (in Weber’s meaning).

The first one of these models refers to the opposition between culture and Christianity. According to Niebuhr, in this depiction faith and culture are hostile to themselves. This is an attitude found sometimes whether in the monasticism or in the religious fundamentalism but also in many post-enlightenment ideologies<sup>8</sup>. It is labeled by the expression “Christ Against Culture”. The second position which was presented as “the Christ of Culture”, grasps Christian faith as being continuously accommodated to the highest cultural norms. “This model

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<sup>6</sup> P. SZTOMPKA, *Socjologia zmian społecznych*, Kraków 2010, 98.

<sup>7</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> A. McGRATH, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea. The Protestant Revolution. A History from the Sixteenth Century To the Twenty-First*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge 2007, 314.

argues that the Christian faith represents what the world values most dearly and its aim is to adjust and accommodate the Christianity to be in tune with cultural norms”<sup>9</sup>. The next approach is very close to the previous one, but it acknowledges that culture must be subordinated to Christianity. This is thus the reversal of the second approach: the human ideas and norms must be accommodated to Christianity. This model was named “Christ Above Culture”. The fourth position, well depicted in the Luther’s Two Kingdom Doctrine, claims, that the Christianity must be embedded in the spiritual as well as in the secular reality. The Lutheran principle of *simul iustus et simul peccator* demands to think about man as being involved in the sinful world and simultaneously being saved thanks to God’s grace. Yet, this ambiguity leads to the tension between both realities. This approach was labeled with the expression of “Christ and Culture in Paradox”. And the last model, which was expressed as the “Christ the Transformer of the Culture” assumes, that secular culture should be converted in order to be more and more Christian. “Here Christ is seen as converting people within their cultures and societies, not apart from them”<sup>10</sup>.

## 2. Missionary nature of the Church in the changing cultures

Niebuhr’s fifth approach is the closest one to the ecumenical standpoint presented in the *The Church. Towards the Common Vision*. Its main specific has been contained in the missionary nature of the Christianity and Church. “Since these origins, the Church has always been dedicated to proclaiming in word and deed the good news of salvation in Christ, celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and forming Christian communities”<sup>11</sup>. Mission is deeply embedded in the nature of the Church, what was clearly stressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “As the ‘convocation’ of all men for salvation, the Church in her very nature is missionary, sent by Christ to all the nations to make disciples of them”<sup>12</sup>. Yet, as was expounded above, the mission of the Church must be somehow connected to the culture in order to be intelligible. And, the missionary mandate of the Church, expressed by the words of Jesus: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Matthew 28:19)”, must always consider that human culture undergoes changes, in both the geographical and historical dimensions. There is not only one human culture but

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>11</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [767], 192.

there are a number of cultures which increase and decrease, develop and regress according to the social and geographical conditions. And “no culture remains isolated forever, and none remains forever unchanged”<sup>13</sup>. That’s why the issue of the cultural as well as social changes is theologically of high importance. Church, according to its missionary mandate must spread the living words of the Gospel across the changing cultures in order to make them moving forward the Kingdom of God.

Again, the category of “Christ the Transformer of the Culture” is also the closest to the ecumenical attitude due to their universalistic reference. The truth of the Gospel enters within the cultural systems and changes their elements from inside. This is obviously often a longstanding process which spreads across generations. Yet, many historical proofs derived from the comparative analysis of history of a given society and culture witness that the Great Command effects the cultural development even though this culture whether appears to be, or is, hostile to the Christian truth.

Culture is living in the society or community in the mutual relationship, as it is on the one hand its way of life and on the other it is impacted by various conditions of geographical and historical features. As being so deeply intertwined it must be referred to the social perspective. And according to all its concepts and interpretations, society is to be grasped in a perpetual movement. Its institutions may diversify and their number may increase, they may be replaced and their arrangement may be changed. A number of possible changes is infinite. The natural dynamic of the social life effects also its standing transformation, and, consequently, transformations of the culture of a given society.

This perpetual social movement is reflected in a different manner in the culture. One can set out many arrangements of how a culture and social changes are interrelated. William Ogburn, for instance, in the one of the famous, however many times criticized sociological concepts claims, that the transformations of culture do not keep the pace with the changing material conditions. This causes the “cultural lag”, of which the core claim is a delay of the non-material culture relative to the material culture, since, according to Ogburn, “culture has two aspects: material and non-material. But the material parts develop more rapidly than the non-material aspect in every culture. In Indian society, for example, culture is changing very rapidly in the sphere of fashion, architecture, communication, in comparison to in the sphere of religious ideas and attitudes. The religion lags behind than material aspect. It is this faltering action, which is termed as cultural lag”<sup>14</sup>. Generally speaking, cultural lag, thus, occurs, when a part of the given culture transforms more rapidly than another.

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<sup>13</sup> D. BRINKENHOFF, S. ORTEGA, R. WEIRD, *Essentials of Sociology*, Belmont: Wadsworth 2011, 47.

<sup>14</sup> K.N. DASH, *Invitation to the Social and Cultural Anthropology*, New Delhi: Atlantic 2004, 28.

The issue of the cultural lag might be obviously discussed. Notwithstanding, it displays somehow various and deep connections between social and cultural changes. Culture must be always considered in its interrelations with the society and history. When we consider every society as being involved in the history, its changing nature appears trenchantly. Consequently, it refers to the culture, when we describe it as the way of life of the given society. This assumption must be included into the missionary mandate of the Church in order to make it more efficient.

### 3. Culture as a cultivated field of the Church

The history of Christianity argues that the particular cultures of the christianized societies transformed themselves in a different manner and to a different degree. Yet, culture was (and still is) both an aim of the Christian mission and an instrument to achieve the salvation. This is the aim in light of the truth about man's creation on the image of God: "Of all visible creatures only man is 'able to know and love his creator'. He is 'the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake', and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life"<sup>15</sup>. As an inherent part of the human life, culture belongs to the order of creation and as such should be recognized as being intended by God. The next passage of the Catechism expresses it directly when claiming that: "This law of human solidarity and charity, without excluding the rich variety of persons, cultures and peoples, assures us that all men are truly brethren"<sup>16</sup>. The diversity of cultures is thus a paradoxical way to unity. God's command to bring the earth under man's control refers also to the culture and shows that Christian attitude means to take care about the world and to arrange worldly order for the God's blessing and human happiness. Yet every Christian in the Lord's prayer calls daily: "Thy will be done: on earth as it is in heaven". This is why culture must be declared to be the aim. And at the same time, for Christians culture is an instrument, of which main task is to bring the people to the Christ's salvation.

This twofold relation of culture and Christianity opens a space for the answer on how far may faith be converged with culture. In light of the theology of creation, culture might be compared to a cultivated field, on which working is always a challenge. And the need of Christians involvement in culture doesn't permit going on holiday. This is a standing, patient, and difficult work to transform particular components of various cultural systems into the common Christian background, with respecting their diversity. This is why Christian churches must

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<sup>15</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [356], 91.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* [361], 92.

consider themselves in the perspective of continuity. “The condition of change is not meant to obscure the enduring meaning of Jesus Christ and his Gospel: ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’ (Heb. 13:8)”<sup>17</sup>. This continuity is embedded in the christological perspective of the Church and in the missionary call of Jesus.

Yet, Christianity has crashed many times in the history with the hostility of the culture, particularly, when these cultures were arising from various ideologies. These were and often still are the stumbling blocks on the way of Christian transformation. Charles Taylor, for instance, is right, when insisting that the culture of modernity is hostile to the theistic heritage<sup>18</sup> of Christianity and the narration of the culture of death displayed in the encyclicals of John Paul II appears to be well embedded in the social phenomena. When one discusses various contemporary cultures, one can see how far they are diverged from the Christianity. Yet, we must still distinguish between culture and ideology. The latter is only one part of the former, even though it often plays a primary role in the processes of creating a culture. This is why Christianity must be always ready for the Christian *Kulturkampf*. Christ’s call to be the light of the world and salt of the earth doesn’t mean that Christians should disentangle themselves from the human cultures. Christian churches are called to this patient work to preach the word of Gospel and to present the community of Christ to the people. This way of doing was shown by Jesus in the answer on Peter’s ask: “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’” (Matthew 18:21-22).

In light what was said above, the question on continuity and change of the Church appears to be the two sides of the same coin. Church, in order to fulfill his missionary command, must duly transform itself. Continuity of the church assumes its changes. As a theandric reality, Church move forward the Kingdom of God across the history and cultures.

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Theological approach towards the culture plays more and more important role in the ecumenical striving for unity. Firstly, ecumenism is looking for unity in the reconciled diversity. Many differences between Christian churches are embedded in the given cultures even though these were developed on the theological back-

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<sup>17</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> T. ROWLAND, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vaticanum II*, New York: Routledge 2003, 88.

ground. This enables Christians to engage in the transformations of particular cultures in order to be more united on the journey to Christ. And secondly, Christian must commonly face many challenges derived from the contemporary cultures. These efforts help to strengthen the common Christian identity.

### **Ciągłość i zmiana w Kościele. Chrześcijańska podróż poprzez kultury**

#### Streszczenie

Zagadnienie ciągłości i zmiany w Kościele ściśle łączy się z problemem kultury i pytaniem, jak dalece chrześcijaństwo ma podejmować dialog z kulturą ludzką. Kultura w życiu społecznym pełni fundamentalną rolę, obejmując systemy wartości, idei, wzorów zachowań i norm, przez które człowiek rozpoznaje rzeczywistość. Misja Kościoła, by być zrozumiała i skuteczna, musi więc dokonywać się w kulturze, wykorzystując tworzoną przez nią rzeczywistość symboliczną. Dlatego też Kościół powołany jest do uczestnictwa w kulturze, wykorzystując ją jako narzędzie ewangelizacji i ujmując ją jednocześnie jako zadanie. Kultura, jako rzeczywistość społeczna, podobnie jak społeczeństwa jest w ciągłym ruchu i podlega ciągłym przemianom. W konsekwencji więc, Kościół musi dostosowywać swą misję do zmieniających się warunków. Ciągłość jest więc spleciona ze zmianą, w ten sposób, że zmiany Kościoła zapewniają ciągłość jego misji. Jako rzeczywistość teandryczna, Kościół podąża więc ku Królestwu Bożemu przez historię i kultury.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kościół; ciągłość; zmiana; kultura; chrześcijaństwo; ekumenizm.

**Keywords:** Church; continuity; change; culture; Christianity; ecumenism.