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CAN CHRISTIANS AGREE ON MORAL ISSUES? An Insight into Nowadays Divisions

Introduction

The history of divisions in the Christendom is nearly as long as Christianity itself. During the centuries however the causes for divisions were in majority of doctrinal nature and in minority of political one. From its very beginning Christianity suffered the wounds of division caused by disagreements mainly about doctrinal matters. However in these first centuries of the Church the Christian doctrine was in constant process of elaboration and often the breaks with the rest of Christendom were caused by the lack of proper understanding of particular language and its notions. Thus the so called Pre-Chalcedonian Churches broke with the great Ecumeny of the whole Church because of incapability to adopt the doctrinal statement of the Council of Chalcedon (451) about two natures: human and divine in one Person of the Son of God, the Word Incarnate. In fact – due to the terminological insufficiency – the chalcedonian doctrine elaborated in Greek was presented to them in Syriac as backing the nestorian heresy.

In the 11th century schism between Rome and Constantinople the whole complex of theological, cultural and political reasons played the role. The same may be stated about the 16th century Reformation, where the protagonists of crucial theological question about the justification of a sinner found themselves involved – initially against their will – into political dispute between the supporters and the opponents of Rome. The doctrinal matters that still overshadow the relations between the Christian Churches never in fact touched the moral issues – these seemed to be for long out of dispute.

The twentieth century brought into light new causes of division being of doctrinal and moral nature or the combination of these two. The line of division were from then on drawn not only between the traditional Churches and Church Communities but even inside a particular ecclesial body, as shows the case of some of Anglican and protestant Churches. The incorporation of new moral/ethical approaches into the Church life used to be justified by the reinter-

pretation of biblical texts which proved to be contrary to the hitherto existing Church tradition.

1. Breakdown in the Anglican Communion

This was the case in the womb of the Anglican Communion, where new inventions on the doctrinal field coincided later with those of moral nature. The first controversies arose around the decisions taken since 1972 by consecutive Anglican Provinces to ordain the women to the priesthood. This act raised the wave of individual conversions – mainly towards the Roman Catholic Church – by the faithful attached to the traditional and biblical teaching. The same was provoked by the next step taken in many of 38 Anglican Provinces to ordain women to the episcopacy. This however stayed in the frames of doctrinal controversy. Controversial was the change to the explicit will of Christ who appointed only men to his apostolate (in canon law terms it was the absence of the proper subject of ordination, a baptized man).

The next years brought into daylight the practice of ordaining to the priesthood active homosexuals of both sex. But it was the ordinations of active gay to the episcopacy which proved to be “the straw that broke the camel’s back” and resulted in comminute fracture in the American Episcopal Church (ECUSA). Canon Gene Robinson, a gay and former husband and father, has been ordained a bishop in New Hampshire, USA, in spite of multiple protests from his own Church, from other Churches of Anglican Communion and from ecumenical partners. It is enough to say that the Episcopal Church in United States continues the policy of accomplished facts despite the efforts of the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and his appeals to refrain from introducing the innovations not accepted in the whole Anglican Communion. ECUSA and her primate, Katharine Jefferts Schori decided to escalate the tension in the Anglican Communion and in the ecumenical world by the ordination of canon Mary Glaspool (a lesbian living 20 years in the homosexual partnership) as auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles¹.

The controversies around the gay and lesbian ordination brought division deep into the Churches of the Anglican Communion. At the origin of these troubles laid the previous acceptance by the Anglicans the homosexuality as normal and equal way of life. This resulted in adjusting the life in the parishes to requirements of gay people, for example the blessing of the homosexual couples, similar in form to the traditional blessing of marriages.

¹ Por. D. WALENCIK, *Biskup lesbijka wyzwaniem dla jedności anglikanów*, <http://www.ekumenizm.pl/article.php?story=20091207125959759>

To overcome the threat of internal and permanent division in the Anglican Communion the archbishop of Canterbury proposed the acceptance by all the 38 Anglican Provinces so called “Anglican Communion Covenant”². The covenant aims to put the order into the doctrinal basis of Anglicanism and to preserve it from the threats of breaking the communion by introducing into the Church life any elements non conform with the Anglican tradition. However what could be salutary for the Anglican Communion has been immediately rejected by the primate of ECUSA, Katharine Jefferts Schori. In the pastoral letter to her province she rejected the covenant, describing it as an instrument of control, serving the centralization of power in the Anglican Communion”³.

Another initiative in favour of preserving the Gospel values in the Anglican Communion has been undertaken by the biggest African province, Nigerian one and its primate archbishop Peter Akinola. In consecutive meetings from 2003 to 2005 there were organized a forum of 20 (from 38 existing) Anglican Provinces which took the name of the Global South⁴. Besides the African Provinces the Global South joined these from Asia, Pacific and Middle East. The provinces of the Global South initiative declare the attachment to the traditional moral values based on the Bible teaching and radically dissociate itself from the gay ordination and from the blessing of unisex couples. After the publication by Rome the papal apostolic constitution *Anglicanorum coetibus*⁵ the Steering Committee of the Global South issued a document called *Pastoral Exhortation*⁶. The authors of this document state common with the Roman Catholic teaching about the human sexuality, but the solution for the Anglicans see not in joining the ordinariates, but in the come back to biblical moral teaching and in the adoption of the Anglican Covenant.

“As Primates of the Communion and guardians of the catholic and apostolic faith and order, we stand in communion with our fellow bishops, clergy and laity who are steadfast in the biblical teaching against the ordination of openly homosexual clergy, the consecration of such to the episcopate, and the blessing

² *The Anglican Communion Covenant*. http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/docs/The_Anglican_Covenant.pdf

³ Por. M. ZIEMKOWSKI. *Episkopalna pięćdziesiątnica trwa?* <http://www.ekumenizm.pl/artic-le.php?story=20100607205804543>

⁴ *Statement of the Primates of the Global South in the Anglican Communion, 2 November 2003*, http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/blog/comments/statement_of_the_primates_of_the_global_south_2_Nov_2003.

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Apostolic constitution «Anglicanorum coetibus» Providing for Personal Ordinariates for Anglicans Entering into Full Communion with the Catholic Church*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apc_20091104_anglicanorum-coetibus_en.html

⁶ GLOBAL SOUTH PRIMATES STEERING COMMITTEE: *A Pastoral Exhortation to the Faithful in the Anglican Communion 2009*, http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/blog/comments/pastoral_exhortation

of homosexual partnerships. We also urge them, as fellow Anglicans, to continue to stand firm with us in cherishing the Anglican heritage, in pursuing a common vocation, in expressing our unity and common life, and in maintaining our covenanted life together”⁷.

Anglican Bishops from the Global South touched also the heart of the matter which is the preservation by the Church the intact apostolic teaching without introducing solutions which cannot be confirmed by the Holy Scripture and Church tradition. In the communiqué from the third meeting of the Global South they stated:

The Catholic faith is the universal faith that was “once for all” entrusted to the apostles and handed down subsequently from generation to generation (Jude 3). Therefore every proposed innovation must be measured against the plumb line of Scripture and the historic teaching of the Church. (...) The local church expresses its catholicity by its devotion to apostolic teaching, its attention to prayer and the sacrament, its warm and caring fellowship and its growth through evangelism and mission (Acts 2: 42–47)⁸.

2. Unusual biblical hermeneutics

The famous rule of the 16th century Reformation, the *sola Scriptura*, for nearly fifth centuries provided to the societies formed by protestant Churches the solid base on which the moral teaching could be formulated in conformity with previous ages and with the rest of the Christendom. Being the absolute norm of faith and morals – *norma normans non normata* – the Holy Scripture could not be perverted in its fundamental meaning. In the 20th century however even this rule has been broken in favour of free, that means any interpretation of biblical teaching. New conclusions could then be derived from the biblical text – all for adjusting the reading of biblical message to the new types of deeds and behaviour. This introducing of new conclusions issued from the Bible shows the new hermeneutical approach where the Bible serves for justification of so called “modern developments” in the societies and no more for indicating the right line of belief and behaviour. During one of the ecumenical conferences held in Great Britain the organisers offered to the participants a workshop on the “Hidden gay friendships in the Bible”⁹. The protests from some participants of the conference pointing that it would be absolutely pervert use of the sacred text of the Bible were practically ignored.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Third Trumpet: Communiqué from 3rd South to South Encounter*, http://www.global-southanglican.org/index.php/blog/comments/third_trumpet_communique_from_3rd_south_to_south_encounter

First the protagonists of women's ordination searched in the Bible its justification. Then the time came to justify the gay and lesbian partnership and to prove it not only normal but also applicable in the Church life. What can stand in the queue? Why not euthanasia in the disguise of mercy, why not abortion in the disguise of care for women, why not war in the disguise of justice and peace-making? Such use of the biblical text is not only the desacralization of what used to be sacred for all Christians. It is also the relativisation of biblical teaching and subsequently of morals. This inevitably must and does constitute the new lines of division between the Churches and inside the ecclesial bodies.

3. Unilateral decisions

To begin with the Edinburgh conference of 1910, through the bilateral and multilateral dialogues between the Churches and the work of the WCC we have in today's world a great network of ecumenical encounters and dialogs. All these dialogs are – of their nature – aimed to approach and then to reach the visible unity of one Church of Christ. In the same time we can notice how this legitimated goal often discords with the process of inner decision-making which proves to be totally regardless of the partners in the ecumenical dialogues. If we consider that we are – as the Christian Churches – in “imperfect, though existing communion”¹⁰ with each other, nothing that happens in one Church is meaningless for another. Decisions made by one ecclesial body interact with the rest of the Christendom. No one now can exist as an isolated island. Yet, with bitterness we can observe, how especially the Churches originated in the 16th century Reformation consider themselves entitled to introduce new theological and moral rules non conform with the tradition of the Church and regardless of the rest of the Christendom.

A great murmur spread all around the ecumenical world after the publication of Pope Benedict's apostolic constitution *Anglicanorum coetibus*. The pope and the Roman Catholic Church were so easily accused of anti-ecumenical attitude, even of the comeback of unionism. In the same time almost no one

⁹ “Gay and lesbian friendships in the life of the church. Leaders: Keith Sharpe and Harvey Gillman. Session 1. Hidden gay friendships in the Bible - led by Professor Keith Sharpe. This session will explore a series of passages taken from both the Old and New Testaments in order to uncover the hidden gay lives, identities and relationships which have been neglected, concealed and sometimes intentionally distorted over time. It is hoped that the challenge to established assumptions which this analysis represents will provide a useful basis for the wider discussion of diversity in the Church (...)", <https://ief-oecumenica.home.pl/english/pdf/workshops.pdf>

¹⁰ To use the expression of blessed pope JOHN PAUL II from his encyclical letter *Ut unum sint* (Encyclical letter «*Ut unum sint*» of the Holy Father, John Paul II on commitment to ecumenism, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1995.) 11, 45, 84, 96.

seemed to notice, that the provinces of the Anglican Communion – similarly to many protestant Churches – have introduced unilaterally the changes in the Church life contrary to the oldest common tradition, upheld by the Catholicism and Orthodoxy. These Churches consider themselves to have the right to do this (often even in voting by the simple majority, even in doctrinal matters) and do accept any critics of being anti-ecumenical in their deeds. Sometimes their leaders – as did Katharine Jefferts Schori, the primate of ECUSA – they refer to the leading by Holy Spirit. Can we not ask, if the Holy Spirit may be the spirit of division? Can He prompt one part of Christianity against another one? Surely not! What kind of spirit then do the ideas dividing the Churches come from?

4. Need of credible witness

We have to admit that in the ecumenical dialogues there already are some common statements elaborated that refer to the moral and ethical questions. Let us quote the document prepared by the ARCIC II: *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church*¹¹, of 1994 or this prepared by the Churches dialoguing in the frame of the Faith and Order Commission and Justice, Peace and Creation team of the WCC: *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, esp. the part *Costly Obedience*¹² of 1996. We could also refer to the local ecumenical dialogues, as e.g. in Germany¹³.

These few documents existing on the “ecumenical market” touch in fragments the vast field of moral and ethical questions. They are however the examples of the work of specialists – the work almost unknown to the great public. What we need now are the common statements of Churches’ authorities, being short, prepared in understandable language and largely presented to the faithful of the Churches and to all the people of good will. The new situation we are living now requires much more clear and homogenous response from these Christian Churches who are attached to uncorrupted biblical moral teaching.

¹¹ ANGLICAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION, *Life in Christ. Morals, Communion and the Church. An agreed Statement by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*, London 1994.

¹² Published in the book *Ecclesiology and Ethics. Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, eds. T.F. BEST, M. ROBRA, Geneva: WCC Publications 1997.

¹³ Common declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church in Germany on abortion: *Gott ist ein Freund des Lebens. Herausforderungen und Aufgaben beim Schutz des Lebens. Gemeinsame Erklärung des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz*, hrsg. vom KIRCHENAMT DER EVANGELISCHEN KIRCHE IN DEUTSCHLAND UND VOM SEKRETARIAT DER DEUTSCHEN BISCHOFSKONFERENZ, Gütersloh 1989; common declaration of both Churches on euthanasia: *Im Sterben: Umfängen vom Leben. Gemeinsames Wort zur Woche für das Leben 1996: "Leben bis zuletzt - Sterben als Teil des Lebens"*, Gemeinsame Texte 6, Gütersloh 1996.

Pope John Paul II so often underlined the need for common witness of all Christians. In his encyclical *Ut unum sint* he quoted his predecessor, pope Paul VI from his adhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*: «At this point we wish to emphasize the sign of unity among all Christians as the way and instrument of evangelization. The division among Christians is a serious reality which impedes the very work of Christ»¹⁴.

Nowadays and in the future the common witness to the world of the whole Christianity will decide of its internal strength. In the same time the partition of the unvoiced and incoherent teaching about faith and morals – as we can see it happening now – weakens and will weaken the range of the Gospel proclamation. The world today needs clear and sane guidance in the moral matters. It is the responsibility of Christianity as a whole to provide it!

Here we have to ask the question if the common witness of the whole Christianity is possible? What are the fields in which we need to find common response for the safeguard of inner unity and efficiency of external testimony? The approach to the life coming to the world and going, that is moral evaluation of abortion and euthanasia; the perceiving of human sexuality, including the evaluation of homosexuality or artificial fertility regulation; moral and ethical evaluation of the matters connected to the biomedical engineering, i.e. *in vitro* fertilisation and genetic manipulation or transgenic hybrids; at last the approach to the inseparability of marriage and to the definition of marriage as the union of persons of opposite sex – these questions largely discussed inside the societies are missing the answer that would be one, coherent and what is the most important: common for the whole Christian world.

The divided Christianity is unable to speak unanimously. With the great simplification we could say that the line of division goes mainly between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches from one side and the Protestant Churches from another. This classification is however very simplistic and provisional, as inside the Protestant Churches we can find the whole spectrum of approaches and moral evaluations of the same question. This causes that the line of division goes not only between the Churches, but across the particular Church.

The quoted complex of questions does not only interacts with the social life, but causes far-reaching repercussions in the religious life of Church communities, bringing on forum of discussion e.g. the question of ordination of practicing gays or blessing the unisex couples. When we want to project the possibility of common Christian witness in moral and ethical matters we are unfortunately unable to issue unambiguously positive or negative judgement. Everywhere there, where the Christians try to transgress the differences that divide them and give

¹⁴ *Ut unum sint*, 98.

the clear message of their faith and the moral requirements derived from that faith, we can welcome the common witness to Christ and the Gospel values. But everywhere there, where the Christians value more their own – often very perverse – interpretations of the Gospel teaching that the same rule of faith and the moral requirements derived from that faith, we have to diagnose the anti-witness to Christ and even scandal.

5. Unity in faith – basis for consent in morals

The question of unity of the Church cannot be however concentrated only on the moral and ethical matters, how therefore important they are and will be. The visible unity of the Church goes far beyond the consent on the moral issues and requires also the organic unity of faith. Thus the doctrinal matters cannot be neglected in any attempt to restore the One Flock of One Pastor. What we could call the ecumenism in its horizontal dimension will never be full or stable, if it lacks the essence, which is the unity in faith, which is the vertical dimension. Both are inseparable, as the same faith gives the same foundation and the deepest possible justification for doing good and avoid evil. What is more, the horizontalism, if adopted, could easily disturb the search for full visible unity of the Church giving the false conviction of unanimity.

Then what we have to do is to continue the hard work of both doctrinal and moral/ethical dialogue, not neglecting any of its components. As the practice of the ecumenical dialogues shows up to now, it is a difficult way, but not hopeless. We already have some achievements, to quote even the common declaration about the teaching on justification¹⁵ signed between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation, and co-signed later by the World Methodist Council.

We have to continue then the ecumenical dialogue in both its dimensions: vertical and horizontal. The true ecumenical dialogue should primarily lead to the common rediscovery of the truth, and never to any kind of establishing the truth, of elaborating it or reaching the compromise. The true dialogue has nothing to do with negotiating the common position, where each party wants to force oneself upon another and to make the less concessions possible. This is because we cannot reduce the requirements of the Gospel to any kind of necessary minimum, a common basis recognized by all the Churches and ecclesial Communities.

¹⁵ *Kirche und Rechtfertigung. Das Verständnis der Kirche im Licht der Rechtfertigung. Gemeinsame römisch-katholische/evangelisch-lutherische Kommission*, Paderborn – Frankfurt am Main 1994.

Such a dialogue contains its inner dynamics, its existential dimension. The truth is personal, as Christ himself is the Truth, so the search for unity belongs to the proper essence of being a Christian. So the ecumenical dialogue is “an imperative of Christian conscience”¹⁶, and it is something that inevitably ought to be taken and accomplished by Christians

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Disagreement among the Christians on moral and ethical issues constitutes nowadays a serious threat to unity. From what we have said above it becomes also clear that every manipulating the biblical truth resulting in adopting the solutions contrary to the traditional Christian teaching constitute a serious threat to the unity and faith itself. The time has come for the Churches to intensify their efforts in order to save, where still is – and bring, where still is not – the visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Czy chrześcijanie mogą być zgodni w sprawach moralnych? Spojrzenie na współczesne podziały

Streszczenie

Historia podziałów w chrześcijaństwie jest niemal tak dawna, jak samo chrześcijaństwo. W minionych wiekach przyczyny podziałów miały w większości charakter doktrynalny, niekiedy zaś polityczny. W wieku dwudziestym na światło dzienne wypłynęły nowe przyczyny podziałów: doktrynalne i moralne oraz ich złożenia. Linie podziału pobiegły już nie tylko pomiędzy tradycyjnymi Kościołami i Wspólnotami kościelnymi, lecz i wewnątrz poszczególnych organizmów kościelnych, jak to pokazał przykład niektórych Kościołów anglikańskich i protestanckich.

Włączenie w obieg życia kościelnego nowego podejścia do zagadnień etyczno-moralnych zwykło się przy tym usprawiedliwiać odmienną i niejednokrotnie przeciwną, do dotychczas istniejących w tradycji kościelnej, reinterpretacją tekstów biblijnych. Wprowadzanie nowatorskich konkluzji z interpretacji tekstów biblijnych wskazuje na nowe podejście hermeneutyczne, wykorzystujące Biblię do legitymizowania tzw. nowoczesnego rozwoju w społeczeństwach, nie zaś do odczytywania właściwej wiary i linii postępowania.

¹⁶ *Ut unum sint*, 8, 15.