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Propheticness of the ecumenical social thought: the “Life and Work” Oxford Conference about the state and economic order¹

Profetyczność ekumenicznej myśli społecznej: oksfordzka konferencja ruchu „Życie i Działanie” o państwie i porządku ekonomicznym

Abstract

Propheticness understood as a Christian interpretation of the world’s spiritual, ideological and social challenges, is the primary dimension of ecumenical social thought. History of the ecumenical movement has many times confirmed this prophetic vision which often ran counter to or preceded dominant political and socioeconomic orders. The World Council of Churches’ model of responsible society has exemplified such a vision. Although today forgotten, a prophetic voice of ecumenism sounded at the conference of the Life and Work movement held in Oxford in 1937. The gathering, even though it took place in a gloomy time of political totalitarianism and socioeconomic crisis and in the shadow of the oncoming world war, produced a theological interpretation of the state and the economy, which later became an abundant source of ideas for the next decades of the ecumenical social teaching. The article aims to manifest the comprehensiveness and freshness of the Oxford concepts and, thereby, to demonstrate the Propheticness of ecumenical social thought. Eventually, it wishes to prove the relevance and significance of ecumenical teaching about society today. A survey of the subject literature and literary analysis is the primary method employed in the article.

Keywords: Life and Work, Propheticness, ecumenical social thought, World Council of Churches, welfare state.

Abstrakt

Profetyczność rozumiana jako chrześcijańska interpretacja duchowych, ideologicznych i społecznych wyzwań niesionych przez świat jest głównym wymiarem ekumenicznej myśli społecznej. Historia ruchu ekumenicznego wielokrotnie potwierdzała taką profetyczną

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wizję, często sprzeciwiającą się albo wyprzedzającą dominujące porządki polityczne i społeczno-ekonomiczne. Przykładem był model społeczeństwa odpowiedzialnego, sformułowany przez Światową Radę Kościołów. Profetyczny głos ekumenizmu, dzisiaj nieco zapomniany, wybrzmiał również podczas konferencji ruchu „Życie i Działanie” w Oksfordzie w 1937 r. Spotkanie, chociaż miało miejsce w ponurym czasie totalitaryzmów i kryzysu społeczno-ekonomicznego oraz w cieniu nadciągającej wojny, stworzyło teologiczną interpretację państwa i ekonomii, która stała się obfitym źródłem idei w następnych dekadach ekumenicznego nauczania społecznego. Artykuł ma na celu pokazanie wszechstronności oraz świeżości koncepcji z Oksfordu, a w konsekwencji profetyczności ekumenicznej myśli społecznej. Wreszcie, dąży również do wykazania aktualności i znaczenia ekumenicznego nauczania na temat społeczeństwa dzisiaj. Główną metodą naukową zastosowaną w artykule jest przegląd literatury przedmiotu i analiza literacka.

Słowa kluczowe: „Życie i Działanie”, profetyczność, ekumeniczna myśl społeczna, Światowa Rada Kościołów, państwo opiekuńcze.

Linkages between the welfare state and Christianity are not obvious. Churches differ in their theological approach to the idea itself and, more generally, to the scope of social reflections and actions Christians should involve in. However, when bearing in mind various positions depending on confession, theological tradition, or geographical and cultural location (to mention only a few), it would be worthwhile to highlight teaching on social commitment as it is developed in the ecumenical movement. Since its outset, ecumenism focused on issues like poverty, exploitation, unemployment, and social involvement was one of the three crucial currents of the emerged ecumenical strivings (alongside doctrinal and missionary ones). Quite often, the teaching of ecumenical bodies was surprisingly accurate and even prophetic, preceding secular conceptions.

Propheticness is a keyword here. When examining what ecumenical social thought should be, Paul Albrecht, a prominent ecumenist and a long-time employee of the World Council of Churches distinguished its three dimensions. One of them is a prophetic vision, which Albrecht described as follows: “[i]n short-hand, it is to encourage the development of an ecumenical *Weltanschauung*, or prophetic vision; a Christian interpretation of the world’s spiritual, ideological and social challenges. It means giving content to a sentence in the message of the Amsterdam Assembly *When we look to Christ, we see the world as it is.*”²

An exemplification of such ecumenical prophecy was the Life and Work conference in Oxford in 1937. Taking place in the shadow of oncoming world war II, political regimes and economic crises, the gathering became an abundant source of ideas and values that were striking around that time and that are fresh even today. This observation applies particularly (though not exclusively) to the vision of the economic order and the state, determined by the list of six criteria and

² Paul Albrecht. 1984. “Amsterdam to Vancouver – Where Are We Today in Ecumenical Social Thought?”. *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 4: 142 (137–170).

some contentions concerning relationships between such entities as state, nation, economy and policy.

The article aims to manifest the comprehensiveness and freshness of the Oxford lessons and, thereby, to demonstrate the propheticness of ecumenical social thought. It seeks to show that Christian Churches, when cooperating, have created a vision of society which, though regarded as too idealistic, confronted the then-prevailing orders and ideologies and was a driving force for the next decades of social reflection of the ecumenical movement. Eventually, it wishes to prove relevance and significance of ecumenical teaching in society today. Churches, likewise in the time of the Oxford conference, still have much to say about just, peaceful and wellbeing society.

The article consists of three chapters. The first describes the Life and Work movement, with special emphasis on presenting its two gatherings in Stockholm and Oxford, respectively. The second chapter outlines a timeline of the development of social policy theory and welfare ideas and aims to contextualize the teaching of the Oxford conference in order to emphasize the brightness of the ecumenical vision. The third one examines specific issues, such as the criteria of economic order and the theological theory of the state, as exemplifications of ecumenical social thought. Literature survey and literary analysis is the main method used in the article.

1. From Stockholm to Oxford: the Christian message to the world

There is a vast amount of literature describing and documenting the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work; therefore, there is no point in repeating basic historical information. Instead, one may briefly outline some specific traits of this ecumenical body and its significance for ecumenism. Constituted in 1920 during an initial meeting in Geneva, the movement hugely influenced the Christian quest for unity in the interwar period and contributed to establishing the World Council of Churches after the war. The central points in its history were two conferences held in Stockholm in 1925 and Oxford in 1937, respectively. In the interim, after the meeting in the Swedish capital, the movement functioned as the Continuation Committee, and in 1930, its members established the Universal Council of Life and Work.

Both conferences had their specific features. The first took place soon after the war when unhealed wounds and mutual distance still affected relationships between participants. In addition, delegates from different countries differed in terms of theological mindset, views on the recently ended war, and even behaviour. These contrasts picturesquely drew Lynn Harold Hugh in his first-hand

report from the conference: “[T]he German delegation represented what to the Anglo-Saxon groups was a strange and baffling point of view. There was moral vigour and spiritual depth, and often the very greatest intellectual subtlety and dialectical ability in these German addresses. But the sense of social Christianity as men have dreamed of it and worked for it in England and America since the days of Maurice and Kingsley, of Josiah Strong and Walter Rauschenbusch was entirely absent (...) The French group was characterized by a bright and winged clarity of speech. There was often a sympathy for groups outside the immediate circle of organized Christianity which expressed itself with an almost lyric eagerness (...) The British group carried itself with great urbanity. There was constant intercourse between its leaders and members of the American group.”³

This extended quote helps depict the mood of the conference. Certainly, apart from the national differences, the war memories still overshadowed the gathering. Yet, on the other hand, despite prevailing crisis in Europe, the gathering raised great expectations and offered ecumenical hope. First, it took place in the middle of the then Swedish political life: the participants were received by the king and the queen of Sweden; they were guests of the city of Stockholm while the festive banquet in the city hall; they celebrated the worships in the Stockholm cathedral; all this contributed to the promotion of the ecumenical movement. The second sign of hope was the visible presence, although sparse, of the Orthodox delegates. Third, it was the gradual but continuous overcoming of the barriers between participants. Stockholm was a great achievement, paving the way for the further emergence of ecumenical institutions.

The conference sessions were organized around six commissions. The titles of final reports of their works show what the main field of interest was: the Church’s obligation in view of God’s design for the world; the Church and economic and industrial problems; the Church and social and moral problems; the Church and international relations, the Church and Christian education, methods of cooperative and federative efforts by Christian communions. In many areas, there emerged divergences between delegates, whether in theological or historical, or social areas. Nevertheless, in the case of the latter, the spirit of the Social Gospel prevailed and determined the social teaching of the ecumenical movement in the following years.

The gathering in Oxford happened in different and even more difficult circumstances. It was a time of economic crisis, unemployment, and first of all, bloody totalitarianism, or, at least authoritarian regimes. Moreover, it was the time of rapid secularization, one accompanying various ideologies that gradual-

³ Lynn H. Hugh. 1962. The Conference at Stockholm. In *The Christian Century Reader*. Eds. Harold E. Fey, Margaret Frakes, 150. New York: Association Press.

ly conquered hearts and minds of Europeans. Such secularization was not only an obvious result of ideologies like communism or fascism, it was either a derivative of radical nationalism on the one hand or growing crass scientism on the other.⁴ Aubrey, who also took part in the gathering, noticed that “Secularism was a bugaboo of the whole conference which was never clearly examined, but served as a sort of Machiavellian external enemy to weld the group together.”⁵

By the time of the Life and Work World Conference on Church, Community and State, Oxford, 1937, the ecumenical movement had mobilized the theological and intellectual resources which would enable it to come to grips with the realities of rising totalitarianism. Such thinking helped the churches to face the challenge of the oncoming war and its aftermath. The conference’s motto, “Let the Church Be the Church”, was supposed to pay attention to a conviction that Church must not be merged or entangled with any ideology; instead, she must be a critic of each secular world order. When observing growing political tensions and aggressions between European countries, participants of the conference sought a common Christian theology of the state. If in contemporary ecumenism, it is ethics that divide Churches, in Oxford, ecumenists were about the divisions and misunderstanding in regard to the Church-state relationships.

The post-conference report confirmed that the state is a historical reality to which it is ascribed the highest authority in the political sphere. However, on the other hand, the state is subordinated to the authority and will of God; it aims to uphold law and order, it is called to serve the people living in its boundaries. All in all, the state is not an ultimate source of the law; instead, it is a guard and advocate of the law, which God gave. For Christians, it is God who is the supreme and ultimate authority.⁶

Since the conference was taking place in the shadow of what was happening in Nazi Germany, there was much said about the necessary distinguishment between state and nation. Ecumenists in Oxford emphasized that both entities must not be subjugated to each other. Nation, and, more precisely, one’s belonging to a nation, ought to be regarded as God’s gift to human. Yet, concomitantly, they warned that as with every gift, it can be misused, or employed to render evil. Each sort of national egoism, which uses the idea of the nation to oppress other nations, or national minorities living within the borders of a given national state, is a misuse of God’s gift.

⁴ Paul Bock. 1974. *In Search for a Responsible World Society. The Social Teaching of the World Council of Churches*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 36.

⁵ Edwin E. Aubrey. 1937. “The Oxford Conference 1937”. *The Journal of Religion* 4 (17): 380 (379–396).

⁶ Bock. 1974. *In Search for a Responsible World Society. The Social Teaching of the World Council of Churches*, 31.

Similarly to Stockholm's conference, the schedule of Oxford was (apart from plenary sessions and worship) divided into five commissions, of which themes clearly depicted the main fields of interest of the gathering. Each group involved "about eighty delegates to discuss respectively: Church and Community (Volk); Church and State; Church, Community, and State in Relation to the Economic Order; Church, Community, and State in Relation to Education; and the Universal Church and the World of Nation."⁷ Participants of the conference's work remembered longstanding and apparently hopeless discussions, adamant standpoints, and finally joyful moments of mutual understanding and agreement. The final reports prepared by each section witnessed the overcoming of confessional and national biases and high competencies of delegates in Theology and social science. Moreover, the conference was far from Christian triumphalism; rather, it emphasized the faults and shortcomings of Christians in the mission to the world. This feature of the gathering expresses the relation by Aubrey: "Every report contained an acknowledgement that the Church's failure in her duty was a contributory factor both in the present problems and in the rise and anti-Christian movements. The general tone of the reports was one of contrition coupled with a determination to speak a more independent message born of greater faith in the Christian gospel; while specific problems were handled with varying degrees of realism but always with concrete reference."⁸

This general outline of the Oxford 1937 aimed to introduce into a more specific question of the ecumenical teaching on the role and nature of the good state, with special emphasis on the social policy and welfare idea. Yet, before examination of them, context needs to be outlined, set by the short presentation of the theory of social policy, social problem and welfare – having hope that it helps to highlight the prophetic voice of ecumenical social teaching for the oncoming decades.

2. The development of social policy and social problem theory as the context for the Life and Work's vision of society

Of course, Oxford's theory of the socioeconomic order is not the most significant discovery in the area of social politics. Nevertheless, both the criteria of the good state and the possible errors of the theological teaching on society and politics proved the highest competencies of the participants and their orientation in the then social discussions on the future of the state. It will be more

⁷ Aubrey. 1937. "The Oxford Conference 1937", 389.

⁸ Aubrey. 1937. "The Oxford Conference 1937", 391.

apparent when juxtaposed with the theory of social policy. Let's remind some basic facts about its history. The first foundations were laid already in the 19th century: Although the term "social policy" was coined by Charles Fourier, it was Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl who introduced it (German: *Sozialpolitik*) to the social reflection when publishing in 1854 the book "Die Naturgeschichte des Volkes als Grundlage einer deutschen Sozialpolitik". Then a group of economists and historicists established the Association for Social Policy (*Der Verein für Sozialpolitik*), a think-tank that examined linkages between economic growth and social problems. Bismarck's Germany was the first state in the world that has established social security system.

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, a social policy meant both policymaking and systematic reflection on the social order. The range of issues and perspectives spanned from the labour questions, social inequalities and deprivation entailed by the rapid economic growth to particular social problems. The last point requires more attention, due to at least two reasons: first, the theory of social problem was the primary tool for social policy; second, its origins traces back to the end of the 19th century and the social involvement of the Protestant Churches in the USA, even if the latter was based on the theological and ethical foundations.

Theoretical approaches to the social problem were developing at the beginning of the 20th century. For instance, Charles Ellwood distinguished four categories of social problems: socialist, which reflected the economic class relationships; pacifistic, which considered links between nations; eugenicist, which focused on the relations of the generations; and feminist, which was about the relations of the sexes.⁹

More light on the development of the social problem theory shed the typology of Earl Rubington and Martin Weinberg. They drew the historical line of thinking about what the social problem would be and distinguished seven successive epochs (or, as they wrote, "ways of looking at the problem"¹⁰). The oldest was the perspective of social pathology: whereas society was regarded as a living body, social problems were supposed to be the symptoms of its illness.¹¹ Hence, the main fields of interest were such themes as criminality and a succession of patterns conducive to criminal behaviour. One can easily conclude that this perspective is based both on the organic and evolutionary thinking about society (which

⁹ Hillel Schwartz. 1997. "On the Origin of the Phrase *Social Problems*". *Social Problems* 44 (2): 287.

¹⁰ David Weiss. 1977. "Review: The Study of Social Problems by Earl Rubington, Martin Weinberg". *Teaching Sociology* 4 (2): 217 (217-219).

¹¹ Earl Rubington, Martin S. Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17.

were prevailing at that time). Thus, human behaviour was explained in terms of the confrontation of biological and social factors, or healthy and sick parts of society.

The perspective of social disorganization was the next. Social problems were considered to be the result of various processes of modernity, such as urbanization, industrialization, migration, technological progress, breakdown of social bonds, the emergence of a bureaucratic society based on procedures.¹² Classic sociological contentions, such as Durkheim's anomy, Cooley's schema of primary and secondary groups, or Tönnies' clash of community and society, were about the rapid change of social life and one's inability to meet the conditions of modern society. It became evident that social disorganization affected individual biographies and entails pathologies disorganizing society.

Value conflict was the perspective addressing the results of the Great Depression in the 1920s and 1930s and different approaches to the solutions implemented to a given problem. Sociologists (and politicians) observed that such differences derived from the adopted values. Hence, societies faced an increasing value conflicts, of which reverberations distorted social relationships, and, in consequence, political consensus in the field of social policy.¹³

Moreover, the value conflict perspective adopted the following assumptions: that social problem may be caused by objective grounds or subjective opinions about possible threats to the values around which a given society is organized; that a given case is not a social problem when not intersubjectively regarded as such by the society in which it occurs (even though other societies may think differently); that cultural values matter for objective conditions acknowledged to be the problem; that cultural values make some solutions of the social problem unacceptable when being not in concert with the prevailing values and beliefs; that the value conflict regarding social problem may be double-stages: even if society may declare given case or process to be a social problem, they may differ in the proposed solutions to it. Hence, the theory of social problems ought to research not only objective conditions of the social life but also address subjective values and beliefs.

The perspective of deviant behaviour refers to the sociological theory of Robert Merton, one of the most prominent representatives of sociological functionalism. Merton sought to address two questions: first, whether a given phenomenon is objective or subjective, second whether it is of individual or social concern. In his theory, Merton applied the concept of anomy when arguing that in some circumstances an offence is nothing but a normal reaction and the anomy consists in

¹² Rubington, Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*, 52.

¹³ Rubington, Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*, 88.

a discrepancy between cultural norms and purposes on the one hand and abilities of the society's members to act according to these norms and values.¹⁴ Moreover, the definition of a social problem is about a convergence of social standards and reality.

Fifth, the labelling perspective puts even more emphasis on the subjective (or rather intersubjective) aspect of a social problem. Rubington and Weinberg when starting to present this approach, stated that "central to the labelling perspective is the notion that social problems and deviance seek to study the process of and responses to social differentiation (...) A social problem and social deviation is defined by social reaction to an alleged violation of rules and expectations. This perspective focuses on the conditions under which behaviours or situations come to be defined as problematic or deviant."¹⁵ Hence, a social problem can be fluid: it can cease to be one when society no longer considers it a problem. Moreover, defining a given behaviour as a deviation or a problem is a matter of power – only those who exercise power can effectively "label."

The critical perspective is the sixth: it was rather a range of perspectives that confronted the crises in both social policy and social thought: it was recognized that the former could not effectively confront social problems, and the latter was assumed to be unable to view social structures and processes comprehensively. "Crises call into question the ability of older viewpoints to offer either understanding or remedial action. These are the kinds of social and cultural circumstances that gave rise to the critical perspective."¹⁶

Social constructionism is the last perspective, added in the last version of Rubington's and Weinberg's book. It "advanced the radical subjectivist perspective on the sociology of social problem"¹⁷ (and, as such, it was closely bounded with the labelling approach; it is, indeed, its radicalization). "[C]onstructionists argued that the true subject of the sociology of social problems lay in finding out how people arrived at the definition of a social problem, how they fashioned their complaints, claims and demands into a process of defining activities, and who responded to these activities."¹⁸

This outline of the social problem theory shows the changes in the social consciousness of the processes and conditions that affect the wellbeing of a given society. It depicts a transition from more objective to subjective thinking about what constitutes an undesirable state of the social order and what means should

¹⁴ Rubington, Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*, 130.

¹⁵ Rubington, Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*, 180–181.

¹⁶ Rubington, Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*, 234.

¹⁷ Rubington, Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*, 286.

¹⁸ Rubington, Weinberg. 1995. *The Study of Social Problem. Seven Perspectives*, 292.

be applied to oppose it. It also helps us realize how did the universal (in the sense of applying to all member of society) welfare idea become the driving force of social policy, first in the West, then in the global dimension, given, for instance, the social entitlements of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

One can still remind some historical facts concerning the welfare. The subject literature regards William Beveridge as one whose research and proposals initiated the welfare state. In 1942 Beveridge published the book “Social Insurance and Allied Services” (so-called “Beveridge Report”), in which he proposed an establishment of a system of actions to alleviate social inequalities. Instead of hitherto merely temporary solutions implemented in crises, he suggested building a state system of benefits for livelihood resilience. In such a perspective, state, based on uniform premiums, was meant to ensure health care, pensions and decent housing conditions.

Beveridge was not the only one who proposed the welfare policy. Such prominent economists like John Maynard Keynes and many others shared this vision. Subjectivism regarding social problems mentioned above, also referred to the idea of welfare and, more generally, to wellbeing. Richard Morris Titmuss, another famous researcher of social and welfare policy, paid attention to the fact that the welfare idea brought about the “transformation of the social consciousness.”¹⁹ According to Titmuss, the welfare idea creates a new society where social relationships loosen dependency on the economy. Social welfare is, therefore, a factor of social transformation, yet, on the other hand, it is determined by the growing complexity of modern society and the increasing division of labour. There is another historical perspective of welfare discerned by Titmuss, which is that as “societies become more complex and specialized, so do systems of social welfare. Functionally, they reflect, and respond to, the larger social structure and its division of labour.”²⁰

Thus, the more the idea of welfare was prevailed, the more spheres of social life were embraced by it – as Titmuss noticed, a new society was emerging, the one which would deal with what it regarded as undesirable, wrong, or dangerous. Sociology reflected it. For instance, in the 1970s, Peter Townsend published his famous study about poverty and suggested that it ought to be understood in a broader and more relative manner. He argued that “a distinction must be drawn not just between the actuality and perception of poverty, but also between nor-

¹⁹ Richard M. Titmuss. 1987. Social Welfare and the Art of Giving, In *The Philosophy of Welfare*. Eds. Brian Abel-Smith, Kathleen Titmuss, 113. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. (113–127).

²⁰ Titmuss. 1987. Social Welfare and the Art of Giving, 114.

mative and individual subjective of group perceptions”²¹, and, when summing up his reasoning, he proposed his “alternative and more objective conception”, that might be founded on “relative deprivation (...) the absence, or inadequacy of those diets, amenities, standards, services and activities which are common or customary in society. People are deprived of the conditions of life which ordinarily define membership of society. If they lack or are denied resources to obtain access to these conditions of life and so fulfil membership of society, they are in poverty.”²²

Townsend’s observation gradually affected social policy in Western countries. Such epistemic transformation of awareness of social problem and the scope of welfare was also reflected in the 1970s French political discussion on the meaning of the social exclusion. Having been employed first by the French politician René Lenoir (1974) in the book “Les exclus”, the notion soon prevailed in social policy worldwide, even though it was understood slightly differently, depending on country and political mindset. It paid attention to the multifaceted nature of undesirable social circumstances and looked at social needs far more than just poverty. When ordering its intricate semantic scope, the Polish sociologist Edward Wnuk-Lipiński distinguished four kinds of social exclusion: from the participation in the sphere of the economy (a permanent lack of livelihood on the level which is acknowledged to be subsistence minimum in a given country); from the participation in the civil sphere (a lack of basic contact with the organizations of civil society); from the participation in the sphere of politics (an estrangement from political decisions due to the lack of competences); and finally, from the participation in the sphere of axiology (a lack of internalization of prevailing moral norms, and in consequence, a difficulty to discern between good and evil in both one’s social environment and one’s own conduct.²³

Obviously, the above chapter is too short to comprehensively outline the timeline of the development of thinking about social needs and duties of the state. However, it would be neither possible nor necessary. This nod to the social policy and welfare theory had one goal: to create a background for the achievements of Oxford conference in terms of social teaching on the ecumenical movement. It highlights, indeed, how the ecumenical movement advanced in its observations and proposals to build a better, more just and more welfare society, more even, that ecumenism preceded in some fields, a “secular” sociology and political studies.

²¹ Peter Townsend. 1979. *Poverty in the United Kingdom. A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*. Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 49.

²² Townsend. 1979. *Poverty in the United Kingdom. A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*, 915.

²³ Edward Wnuk-Lipiński. 2005. *Socjologia życia publicznego*. Warszawa: Scholar, 275–277.

3. Oxford's criteria of the good state and economic order

As described in the first chapter, the conference in Oxford was mainly about the relationships between Church and state and about secularism. The latter included the issue of religious freedom when determining an attitude that later would be a reference point in the teaching on the religious freedom of the World Council of Churches. Nevertheless, in light of the purpose of this article, the most crucial were the thoughts regarding economic order.

The conference in Oxford echoed the thinking that could be described as a specific theological elitism, one which based on the observation that the lessons from the Sermon on the Mount cannot be addressed to the whole of society; rather, they are to be understood and confirmed by a tiny group of people who are Christ's disciples. Just they create a theological elite of people who, in various ways, seek the realization of social justice and thus uphold and develop Christian society.²⁴ Christians, who are aware of their calling, need to find groups able to influence social structures and relationships and, hence, to shape economic order, in which those who exercise power are subdued to mutual control; they are controlled by the institutions of the state, and they control the state itself. Certainly, dialectic theology by Karl Barth and Christian realism by Reinhold Niebuhr reverberate in such a thinking.

Theological elitism seems to be convincing either today, perhaps even more than while the Oxford was taking place. It might be regarded as a valuable contribution to the Christian – therefore ecumenical – social teaching, made by the Life and Work gathering. Formation of such a general opinion need to be proved by more detailed cases that are particularly interesting when viewed from the perspective of social policy and the idea of welfare.

The starting point is the critical approach to capitalism: it is regarded as the order that “challenges the purpose of God by setting up class distinctions as obstacles to fellowship by developing irresponsible power concentrated in a few hands, by enhancing acquisitiveness, by denying the chance to men to serve God through a daily task, by accentuating the control of impersonal forces over human effort, and by fostering international economic rivalry as a potent cause of war.”²⁵ Obviously, ecumenists in Oxford rejected communism as the counterpart of capitalism; nevertheless, they viewed communist postulates as an impetus to self-examination of Christian Churches. All in all, the Oxford conference might be regarded as one which paved the way for the social teaching of the

²⁴ Bock. *In Search for a Responsible World Society. The Social Teaching of the World Council of Churches*, 61.

²⁵ Aubrey. 1937. “The Oxford Conference 1937”, 391.

World Council of Churches in the first decades.²⁶ Approaches to capitalism and communism have reverberated particularly in the idea of a responsible society, which was determined in the first General Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948.

When criticizing capitalism and rejecting communism, ecumenists gathered in Oxford proposed their idea of the good economic order. Of course, they stemmed from the contentions that state is a historical necessity which, however, must not be absolutized or even deified (as it was already mentioned). Instead, the state ought to be based on the list of six criteria that determine a given economic system (and, one needs to add, state). These are as follows: “opportunity for every person for free and full development of his capacities; the duty and the right to work; freedom from barriers of class and race in human fellowship; adequate protection of the family, the aged, and the sick; proper conservation and use of natural resources for the benefit of all; and responsibility for the social consequences of individual property in view of its social origin.”²⁷

It is astonishing, even today, how comprehensive and mature Oxford’s vision was. The list above proved that the delegates were aware of the significance of social institutions and labour division, the dangers of alienation in labour and economism, the need for ecological protection, and the protection against deprivation and discrimination due to any reasons. The criteria revealed a proper balance for the sake of goodness of individuals, community, and social institutions, and a proper place of economy and policy (as the ways to organize human social life).

The Churches are called to promote these criteria, not only by teaching them, but also by relying on them in their own institutions. Hence, the Churches must be a visible sign of this vision: “Not only must the Church continually apply these tests to the economic life of the community. It must also set its own house in order as an owner of property and an employer of labour, and overcome in its own fellowship the barriers of class and race, thereby bearing its first witness to the Gospel by its own example.”²⁸

Moreover, the Oxford conference identified two errors that might be committed when applying Christian ethics to social order. The first stems from the pessimist view of human beings and a conviction that corrupted nature entailed the sinfulness of the social order. This approach may cause a socio-ethical indifferencism that applies Christian ethics to merely interpersonal relationships. The second one stems from the simple identification of a specific socio-economic

²⁶ Julio de Santa Jana. 1981. *Solidaristisches Teilhaben an den Kämpfen der Armen und Unterdrückten*. In *Genfer Zwischenbilanz. Werkstattberichte von Mitarbeitern des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen*. Ed. Christfried Berger, 176. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

²⁷ Aubrey. 1937. “The Oxford Conference 1937”, 391.

²⁸ Aubrey. 1937. “The Oxford Conference 1937”, 392.

model to the theological category of the Kingdom of God: it, in turn, may entail an attitude of Phariseeism, the belief that the way to achieve the Kingdom of God means the fulfilment of law which is determined by this model. Both errors were observed in the Churches teaching then; both are committed today as well.

Later, theologians often discovered such distortions of the ecumenical social thought. Actually, the charges of politicization of Christianity within the World Council of Churches or accusations about the promotion of Christian socialism were about the concerns expressed in Oxford. Yet, in light of the article's purpose, both conferences of Life and Work ought to be remembered mainly due to the prophetic teaching about Christian involvement and contribution to socio-economic order. Their significance may be considered in the two points of reference: the ecumenical movement itself and the development of the theory of social policy and welfare. In the first point, Life and Work movement drew the direction of the later ecumenical social teaching, with particular reference to the distinctiveness of the Christian model, and the appealing to the biblical meaning of such values as human dignity, justice, and peace. In the second, both conferences (however Oxford in particular) were astonishingly "modern" in their visions of the role of the social policy, the state, and the idea of welfare. The six criteria (tests) of the good socioeconomic order were the best proof of it.

* * *

The ecumenists outlined the vision of the state, which was defined by its functions, and not by itself, which had to protect human dignity and human rights, social institutions with a special emphasis on family, and more vulnerable members of society. It was also the state that created the mechanisms against discrimination, which allowed its members to develop according to their abilities and skills, and acted to impose the frames of social responsibility on the market economy. It is also the vision of society in which people were endowed with the right to build their wellbeing. Actually, such a vision was expressed more than fifty years later by Amartya Sen when saying that people have a moral right to freedom "to achieve those things that are constitutive of one's wellbeing."²⁹

Furthermore, such a vision was at odds with the dominant political and social discourses at that time; it even was not evident in the first post-war decades. It was a prophetic thought, that preceded, due to its comprehensiveness, the "secular" political and social ideas and programmes. This prophetic dimension of the social teaching of Oxford is more striking when considering the historical

²⁹ Amartya Sen. 1992. *Inequality re-examined*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 57.

context of the atrocities, injustices, violations of human dignity and rights, tyrannies and national egoisms.

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