

**“AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH...“,
OR IS THERE A SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN MORALITY?**

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Situace současného člověka v demokratické společnosti je obtížně slučitelná s autoritativně formulovanými nároky, jak ukázala krize kolem encykliky Humanae vitae (1968). Vzhledem k potřebě formulovat principy křesťanské výchovy v žité pluralitě je třeba se ptát po specifikách křesťanského étosu, případně křesťansky formulované etiky.

Klíčová slova: Teologická etika; morální teologie; proprium christianum; zjevení; specifika křesťanské etika; bible; Humanae vitae

Challenges after the Publication of Humanae vitae

The question of specifically Christian ethics has been asked urgently especially since the 1960s in connection with Church authority actions. Discussion was provoked namely by the publication of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae* (25 July 1968), in which the Roman pontiff endorsed the minority opinion of a large preparatory commission and explicitly denounced any intention of a married couple to separate carnal intercourse from its reproductive function. This brought a wave of discontent and even withdrawal from the Catholic Church, as conduct required by the encyclical was unacceptable for many Catholics.

This negative reaction could be interpreted as confirming the existence of specifically Christian (in this case Catholic) ethics, whose requirements, however, may be shrugged off and a morally successful life may be led without them – such a stand would counter the theologically valuable concept of the universal character of the Christian message. The rejected doctrine is considered incompatible with personal life and the autonomy an individual's life calls for. The problem here is not the moral good which the magisterial statement seeks to protect (i.e. the faithful wedlock of a man and a woman connected with the creation and protection of a new human life). The problem could be that the voice of the majority in the preparatory commission was not respected (the expectations of a contemporary western individual living in a democratic society used to plurality of opinion and autonomous choice cannot be disregarded, not even by the Church). Thus attention is drawn to the position of the Church authority in the ethics discourse. Or, to be more precise, doubts as to the extent to which moral requirements may be imposed on a person from the outside and from the position of authority without having to be presented in an understandable and comprehensible way, i.e., to what extent they must be substantiated by acceptable arguments. Finally we arrive at the difficulty of the first type of explanation: if the ethical argumentation in a particular issue is to be understandable, it must be rational. Rationality is the condition of communicability. And in rationality, together with ethical tradition, it is possible to find an element of universality reaching beyond the boundaries of religious appurtenance. Hence, to what extent can a thus imposed moral requirement be specifically religious or even denominational?

It seems that the question of the specifics of Christian morality is the fruit of the modern times characterized in Europe by increasing secularization and accompanying de-Christianization of thought. Ethics is expected to create common human space for a dialogue

about morally relevant issues, which cannot be conducted from religious standpoints only but which can neither disregard them.

Can support be found in the oldest Christian texts, when the Church represented a more or less tolerated minority within non-Christian societies? What attitude did its protagonists take towards non-Christian ethos?

Examples of Openness in Biblical Texts

Pauline corpus:

In his epistles, Paul deals with many areas of life (interpersonal relationships, relations to possessions, to the state and society, to sexuality...). His position is remarkably open; it even seems that, regarding content, he does not create any new ethic. Although according to Biblicists there is no evidence of direct Stoic influence on the Apostle to the Nations¹, Paul uses terms typical for contemporary popular Stoicism (*nature, conscience*), which can be explained by his origins in Hellenized Tarsus of Asia Minor. Paul does not find it necessary to react particularly to any of the contemporary streams of philosophy, which does not mean, however, that he would not have a critical approach towards “heterogeneous” notional content. His differentiated approach can be illustrated by the fact that Paul does not include in his ethical proclamations the target values of stoical ethics, such as *apatheia, ataraxia* or *eudaimonia*, but within the framework of the ideal of *agape*² he criticizes vices (*orgé, thymos*: anger) and includes desirable virtues (*praytés*: meekness, kindness; *makrothymia*: patience)³. At the same time he does not hesitate to change the polarity of values. For instance the virtue of modesty (*tapeinofrosyné*) was used in Greek non-Christian discourse in the negative meaning lowliness, humbleness (cf. *tapeinos*: lowly, humble). Paul sees it as a virtue (Eph 4, 1f; Rom 12, 16), perhaps following Matthew’s Christology (Mt 11, 29: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek (*prays*) and humble (*tapeinos*) of heart and you will find rest for yourselves.”), and certainly in connection with the Old Testament (cf. e.g. Prv 29, 23)⁴.

Precisely in the semantic frame of the novelty of life, into which the Apostle embeds his moral requirements, is where the proprium Paulinum rests⁵, according to Biblicists. Paul understands the kingdom of God mainly in its Christological dimension: the fact of Christian life is described as *being in Christ* (Gal 5, 6), conversion as “putting on the new self” while the old, not yet Christian self must die (Eph 4, 22–24). This image is the basis for Paul’s theology of baptism as death and resurrection together with Christ (Rom 6). Conversion and the ensuing “Christian” way of life is expressed through a change in conduct (e.g. refraining from lying, theft...). Pauline ethics is marked by strong Christological orientation and in this view a believer’s life has a strong Christophanical character.

An important element in the Apostle’s argumentation is that God’s action precedes human action. Moral conduct is not a condition for God’s love; on the contrary, it is its consequence, thus being responsorial in character. This standpoint is reflected in the structure of many of

¹ BONHOEFFER, CF. A.: *Epiktet und das Neue Testament*. Gießen 1911; POHLENZ, M.: *Paulus und die Stoa*. In: *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 42 (1949), 69–104; MARSHALL, L. H.: *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics*. London 1956, p. 234; SCHELKE, K. H.: *Theologie des Neuen Testaments III – Ethos*. Düsseldorf 1970, 211f.

² Cf. Col 3,5–9,12–14; Eph 5,5–9.

³ *Makrothymia* is not included in the Stoics’ vocabulary, although the virtue of persistence is highly valued among them. Cf. *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*. R. Brockhaus Verlag, s. I., 1993, p. 462.

⁴ Cf. *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*. R. Brockhaus Verlag, s. I., 1993, p. 176ff.

⁵ Cf. PREISKER, H.: *Das Ethos des Urchristentums*. Gütersloh 1949, p. 247.

Paul’s letters⁶: the first chapters are dogmatic and Paul often gives mystagogic instruction to their addressees in them (so-called Pauline indicative) and only then encourages them to live lives worthy of their calling in parenthesis (so-called Pauline imperative). The basis of Pauline morality is not an external norm nor a systematically conceived anthropology, but a personal experience of God’s love.⁷ A Christian is provided orientation through his love of Christ (1 Cor 16, 22) and guidance by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5, 16f); these, however, do not exclude adopted non-Christian ethical concepts.

Jesus’ ethics

We have seen that for Paul’s ethical message the reference point is his theological interpretation of the person of Jesus Christ. The question remains in what sense it is possible to designate the ethics of the Nazarene Master as new. After World War I a storm was caused by Gerhard Kittel, who studied late Jewish and early Christian teachings and arrived at the conclusion that the moral principles preached by Jesus could be found with the surrounding nations as well.⁸

The texts of the Gospels make it obvious that Jesus himself trusted sane human reason.⁹ Jesus’ teaching through examples and parables is rooted in his conviction that a man can be able to find firm moral principles on the basis of his own experience. “When you see a cloud rising in the west you say immediately that it is going to rain – and so it does; and when you notice that the wind is blowing from the south you say that it is going to be hot – and so it is. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Lk 12, 54ff).¹⁰

What we usually consider Jesus’ typical ethical message is the requirement to love one’s enemy and the positive formulation of the so-called Golden Rule. However, a closer look is not without interest for our inquiry. The requirement of love for one’s enemies can be found both in the biblical (cf. Ex 23, 4; Prv 25, 21f) and non-biblical late-Jewish¹¹ traditions, and also in the writings of Stoics.¹² Jesus’ specific can be seen in theologizing this command – love for one’s neighbor is linked with love for the personal God, it is its expression (Mt 25, 31–46). With this Jesus breaks through the world-immanent ethical message of Stoicism while strengthening the universal dimension of this requirement: it is applied to all people. Although this idea was not alien to Old-Testament, especially post-exile, Judaism, in Jesus’ teaching this aspect gains key importance. Moreover, Jesus gives the requirement of love special prominence among other moral claims: “The principle ‘who does not fulfill one of the 613 commands, does not fulfill the whole Torah’ does not hold any more; now it is ‘who does not fulfill one of many God’s

⁶ Epistles to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians.

⁷ “Would Paul write in the same way even today, in the time of often only ‘sociological Christianity?’” asks the Pontifical Biblical Commission in the document *Bibbia e morale*, art. 55, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20080511_bibbia-e-morale_it.html (9-12-2009).

⁸ Cf. KITTEL, G.: *Die Probleme des palästinensischen Spätjudentums und das Urchristentum*. In: *Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament*, 3, vol. 1, Stuttgart 1926, p. 396f; SCOTT, E. F.: *The Ethical Teaching of Jesus*. New York 1957, p. 13.

⁹ The certainty that God will take care of man may be drawn from looking at creation in which God takes care even of grass which will soon be thrown into the oven (Mt 6, 30). It is equally understandable that a man will lift a sheep fallen into a pit even on the Sabbath (Mt 12, 11n).

¹⁰ Cf. also Mk 7, 21–23; Lk 10, 7; Mt 20, 13 etc.

¹¹ Cf. Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: Testament of Issachar V, 2; VII,6 and Testament of Dan V, 3. In: **Robert Henry Charles**: *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, with introduction, notes, and indices*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1908.

commands in the principal attitude of love for God and one's neighbor, does not fulfill the whole law."¹³

Likewise the principle of returning good for evil is expressed in the Jewish deuterocanonical story of Achikar (6th century B.C.),¹⁴ as well as in the Babylonian story of Xisuthra in Assurbanipal's library (ca 650 B.C.).¹⁵ It can also be found in Tao Te Ching by the Chinese wise man Lao-tzu.¹⁶ We could state that as to content this moral requirement does not bring anything new. The specific of Jesus' message stands out well in the context of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus formulates the requirement of love for enemies within the so-called Antitheses in his Sermon on the Mount. First, he mentions the notorious Old-Testament text, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,'" to then add his commentary, "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you," with a justification in a radically theological framework, "that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust... So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."¹⁷ The attitude of love for enemies in Jesus' interpretation reflects God's love for all creation. His wording is equivalent to those which can be found in the wisdom of other cultures; however, he weaves it into the entire theological framework of God's inconspicuous love.

Neither the positive formulation of the so-called Golden Rule, "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets," (Mt 7, 12) is specific to Jesus, though not infrequently claimed so.¹⁸ It can be encountered in the non-Christian context in works by Aristaeus, Isocrates, and Seneca, or in the Indian national epos Mahabharata.¹⁹

These examples show that Jesus does not build a special ethic in the sense of new 'revealed' moral norms or requirements. His contribution to the broad (all-mankind) ethical discussion is to be seen in the context of the main aim of his earthly mission, namely the renewal of communion with God.²⁰ We may find it inspiring that this aim of fulfilling the promises of the Old Testament need not necessarily contradict originally non-Jewish and non-biblical moral requirements. Jesus obviously joins the ethical discourse of mankind; he does not reject the wisdom of his predecessors or contemporaries. On the contrary, he appreciates it and offers an even broader scope of reasons to prove its authenticity.

¹² Cf. Philo of Alexandria, *De specialibus legibus* 2, 6, 63. Cf. also STAUFFER, E.: *Die Botschaft Jesu damals und heute*. Bern 1959, p. 165.

¹³ NEUHÄUSLER, E.: *Anspruch und Antwort Gottes. Zur Lehre von den Weisungen innerhalb des synoptischen Jesusverkündigung*. Paderborn 1967, p. 117.

¹⁴ NIEHR, H.: *Die Weisheit des Achikar und der Musar Lammebin im Vergleich*. In: HEMPEL, C. – LANGE, A. – LICHTENBERGER, H.: *The Wisdom Texts from Qumran and the Development of Sapiential Thought*. Leuven 2002, p. 174.

¹⁵ STAUFFER, E.: *Botschaft Jesu damals und heute*. Bern 1959, p. 55–60.

¹⁶ Chapter 49: "The sage has no invariable mind of his own; he makes the mind of the people his mind. To those who are good (to me), I am good; and to those who are not good (to me), I am also good; – and thus (all) get to be good." Legge, James, *The Texts of Taoism*, 2 Vols, The Sacred Books of the East Vols. 39 & 40, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1891; reissued New York: Dover, 1962.

¹⁷ Mt 5, 43–48.

¹⁸ Last even in the Czech translation of the so-called Jerusalem Bible: *Jeruzalémská bible*, Praha 2009, in note c on p. 1713.

¹⁹ KITTEL, G.: *Die Probleme der palästinensischen Spätjudentums und das Urchristentum*, op. cit. p. 109, note 4.

²⁰ Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *Bibbia e morale* formulates the main aims of Jesus' engagement according to the Synoptics as follows, "The forgiveness of sins or reconciliation with God, then God's knowledge and communion with God" (art. 44; http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20080511_bibbia-e-morale_it.html, 9-12-2009).

From the theological point of view, the Incarnation of the Son of God is the climax of hermeneutics in the sense of theological evaluation of the person of Jesus, which the Church will soon grasp as “one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation.”²¹ Likewise, we can imagine these two natures joined into a harmonious entirety of one person in the domain of ethics. Both natures co-exist, neither of them disturbing or disabling the full presence of the other. From the Christian point of view, the Christmas event is the hermeneutics of God himself, his pronouncement, communication, self-explanation, self-devotion. And also seeking, trying to find an expression in the reality of human life.

Inspired by Transcendental Theology

Augustine addresses God in his Confessions as “more inward to me than the most inward part of me.”²² “To think God” is then possible to grasp as an extreme capability of the competence of human spirit, which a thinking subject realizes in the so-called transcendental experience (Karl Rahner) and which in the relation of man towards empirical (categorical) experience plays the role of a hermeneutical key. And through this very key, to a believer the world is apprehensible (thinkable) and thus anthropologically and ethically relevant.²³ ‘God’s thought’ found its historical realization in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In his awareness of the Father as well as his awareness of himself it became a reality capable of being experienced and communicated. Hence Jesus Christ’s self-awareness is a permanent reference point of theological-ethical reflection as well as of reflected Christian experience. The figure of Jesus of Nazareth is God’s revelation, the word that God spoke in these last days²⁴ without granting full knowledge to man or claiming respect for himself, “the Eternal enters time, the Whole lies hidden in the part.”²⁵

If we expected God’s revelation to remove suffering from the controversially experienced earthly reality and to disclose the truth as a once and for all valid content, the event of God’s Incarnation could easily become an outrage to us, as it became for many of Jesus’ contemporaries. In the Christological meaning the symbolic Gospel scenes which correct the image of the Messiah incarnate are particularly eloquent. For in their view Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a colt is the entry of the awaited king (Zec 9, 9), the washing of the disciples’ feet during the Last Supper is an expression of God’s presence at the feast of God’s kingdom. Equally eloquent is Jesus’ sentence before the Sanhedrin and his death under the inscription titling him the King of the Jews. Contrary to that, Jesus’ way of not avoiding suffering is presented as meaningful; the makeshift character of every human act stands out in the proximity of his ‘meaningless’ death on the cross, the image of a happy life bound to success is then placed among a new, although supremely human context.

God’s Incarnation is kenotic, it bears the form of self-emptying.²⁶ However, God’s self-emptying is unthinkable as an objective reality beside other realities. It is rather contained in the

²¹ Canon of the Council of Chalcedon of 22-X-451. In: DENZINGER, H. – HÜNERMANN, P.: *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*. Freiburg i. Br. 2001, k. 302; translation according to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Chalcedon.

²² Augustinus Aurelius: *Confessions*, III, 6, 11.

²³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 14 a. 1.

²⁴ Cf. The Letter to the Hebrews 1,1.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* 12.

²⁶ Cf. the Christological hymn in the Letter to the Philippians, “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself (Gr. *ekenósen*), taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2, 6ff).

structures of thought themselves. And in this inwardness every reality is begun, including the reality of man. A man does not gain his self-conception only by harmonically joining the given reality of the world of phenomena external to him, but also by posing himself into the world intellectually, 'in-comprehending' himself into it. The point where this happens is the individual reality of a man in communication with others.

Precisely this kenotic aspect of God's self-pronunciation in Jesus makes it possible to explain the openness of early Christian authors towards stimuli from the surrounding non-Christian world without having to sacrifice their own identity. The kenotic character of revelation makes it impossible to pose positive moral requirements as a closed normative system valid once and for all. It warns against the temptation to present generalized ethical judgments and to pretend harmony in a reality often experienced as contradictory and leading to dilemmas. Every moral judgment and human conduct is considered to be only provisional. In this way, theological ethics is pre-destined for dialogue, in which "the theological" can play an important maieutic role. The transcendently philosophical standpoint in accordance with the biblical discourse generates respect for other people: indeed, the place where man and God directly meet is the human heart itself. However, from the outside it can be neither grasped nor judged.

This is where the limitations of the content of normative ethics stem from. In this sense, specifically Christian ethics can be considered bravely open. It is an ethics which relates to its own centre of gravity, which is God revealed in Jesus Christ. An ethics of a man's response to God's invitation into a relationship. However, it must be based on personal experience of God's love and not only on membership in a church or religious education. In my opinion, it is the focus on authentic Christian spirituality and pastoral practice, which poses an important challenge to contemporary ethics discussion, which must not be overlooked.

Shrnutí

"A slovo se stalo tělem", aneb existuje specificky křesťanská morálka?

Na příkladu pavlovských textů je možné si uvědomit otevřenost raně křesťanského myšlení ne-křesťanským hodnotovým systémům. Pavel usiloval o jejich koherenci s křesťanským gravitačním polem. Jeho etické hlásání chtělo být srozumitelné pro okolí (hodnoty např. stoické etiky – *praytés, makrothymia...*), nepostrádalo však nové prvky (zapojení do rámce ideálu *agapé*, hodnotové přeznačení *tapeinofrosyné...*). Vzátažným bodem takto kladené morálky není pro Pavla vnější mravní norma, nýbrž osobní zkušenost přijetí člověka Bohem.

Ani tzv. ježíšovská etika nás nepřesvědčuje, že by Ježíš přinášel obsahově zcela nové mravní požadavky. Evangelní texty svědčí o jeho otevřenosti obecné lidské zkušenosti (např. Lk 12, 54nn). I často uváděný požadavek lásky k nepřátelům nalezneme v mimobiblické tradici. Jeho hlavní přínos do etických tradic je v jejich zapojení do kontextu trvalého společenství v Bohem, a to v horizontu ukřižování.

Uvedené biblické příklady nacházejí oporu v charakteru Božího zjevení, soustředěné v historické osobě Ježíše Krista. Kenotická povaha jeho pozemské životní cesty (Fp 2, 6nn) musí být trvalým paradigmatem křesťanského etického mluvení, které nepřináší nové vnější nároky, nevytváří primárně ucelený systém ani neodstraňuje zakoušené rozpory. Teologická etika je předurčena k dialogu, ve kterém hraje, to teologické maieutickou úlohu.