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**UNITY OF THE CHURCH VS. ETHICAL DIFFERENCES  
DIFFICULTIES ASSOCIATED WITH AND THE PROSPECTS  
FOR THE DOCUMENT  
*THE CHURCH: TOWARDS A COMMON VISION***

**1. Introduction**

Although the confessional division of Christianity was mainly due to dogmatic reasons, these issues seem less important when compared to the difficulties that have been caused by ethical differences. These differences are obviously rooted in fundamental theological disputes; nonetheless, they have occurred and they are becoming increasingly pronounced as a result of several concurrent factors. First, the fact that the Churches have been developing differently since this division took place is one cause of today's ethical differences. Since the Churches went their separate ways and were isolated from or even hostile towards other Christian denominations, many denominations have developed different ethical doctrines, and these differences are manifested both in the formulations they use and in the authoritative guidelines they draw up. While terminological differences are not irreconcilable as far as contemporary ecumenical dialogues are concerned, the differences in the guidelines that particular Churches provide to the faithful sometimes are a serious obstacle to reaching an ecumenical consensus. Secondly, the incompatibility between the ethical doctrines of particular Churches results from different theological assumptions, in particular, from different ways of understanding the role of church institutions as well as the importance and compulsoriness of the ethical guidelines they issue. It often turns out that, although the Churches were built on similar theological foundations, they apply these foundations in different ways as regards ethics just because the tasks of church institutions related to providing authoritative ethical guidelines and responding to the constantly emerging challenges to the Christian life are seen differently by the representatives of different denominational traditions. Thirdly, the Churches

develop geographically and culturally, and they also differ in this respect. As a result of intense missionary activity, some of the Churches are strengthening their presence in societies from outside the European cultural area while others carry out their mission mainly in countries that are “traditionally” Christian (and sometimes also “post-Christian” today). Still other Christian groups are formed and act while being completely detached from the European cultural context. As a result, apart from the differences in the way in which the Gospel is experienced and how ethical doctrine is based on the Gospel, which is characteristic of the European culture and mentality, some other, completely different problems arise and these are exacerbated by a different sensibility. This contributes to further fragmentation of Christian ethics, which currently varies not only between particular confessions but also in geographical, cultural as well as economic and political terms.

In such a situation the ecumenical movement, whose main aim is to achieve full, visible unity of Christians in the one Church, cannot push the ethical difficulties that are experienced by Christians to the margin because Christians would not only like to preach faith to the contemporary world, but also give a common witness of their faith with their lives, which are inspired by the Gospel. It is no wonder, then, that the latest document titled *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, which was created by the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order and which is devoted to ecclesiological questions, draws attention to this issue. In addition to presenting practical considerations that are related to the above-mentioned differences between Christian denominations, this document also has a theological foundation. The Commission reminds that, although Christians firmly assert that people are justified by grace through faith and not by works of the law (Rom 3:21-26, Gal 2:19-21), this view by no means decreases the necessity of expressing one’s faith through moral commitment in accordance with the Gospel<sup>1</sup>. This commitment is evidence of the genuineness of one’s faith.

The present article, which is an attempt at providing a commentary on the part of the Faith and Order text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*<sup>2</sup> that is devoted to ethical matters, first touches upon the issue of whether and to what extent ethical matters divide Christians. Then this article presents two solutions in response to the existing, and sometimes even deepening division between Christians with regard to ethical issues: common ethical discernment and common ethical discourse, with all their possibilities and limitations.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214, Geneva 2013, n. 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, nn. 61–63.

## 2. Do ethical issues divide Christians?

While the fact that there are differences between the Christian Churches regarding ethical doctrine and the resulting authoritative guidelines that are issued by church institutions is indisputable, it is – contrary to appearances – by no means clear whether and to what extent these differences divide Christians and make it impossible for them to achieve full and visible unity, which is the ecumenical movement's goal.

If this full, visible unity is understood in terms of uniformity, i.e. also as encompassing an absolute doctrinal identity between the Churches, then ethical differences constitute an obstacle to this unity. However, uniformity – as far as doctrinal formulations as well as the area of worship and spiritual life are concerned – is not at all necessary for achieving genuine unity, as evidenced not only by the church unions, but also by the diversity of great denominational traditions (of the Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, or Anglican Church, with its characteristic concept of *comprehensiveness*). Moreover, it seems that the conditions in which Christians live and profess their faith today are conducive to certain pluralism, which also affects Christian ethics. Researchers have noticed that a growing ethical particularisation is typical of societies in which the prerogatives of particular groups (i.e. social, religious, moral and gender groups) as well as their right to create their own ethical principles and to autonomously follow these principles is increasingly strongly emphasised<sup>3</sup>. The coexistence of discrepant or even mutually exclusive ethical norms in highly developed societies is not surprising today. The traditions that used to bind specific groups of people together into a society that cherished similar values and adhered to similar principles are being destroyed, especially in the Western world, which results in the multiplicity of criteria for distinguishing between good and evil and the multitude of possible lifestyles and social roles that are available to a contemporary human being<sup>4</sup>.

This is also the context in which contemporary Christians live; except for certain closed, fundamentalist groups, they develop multiple social and cultural relationships which are not restricted to their religious community only. According to the document issued by the Commission on Faith and Order, a diversity of views, which encompasses ethical pluralism, is characteristic of today's world. This is not only due to the richness of cultures, with every culture having its own methods of ethical discernment, but also due to dramatic changes, social as well as scientif-

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<sup>3</sup> Z. BAUMAN, *Etyka ponowoczesna*, Warszawa 2012, 69.

<sup>4</sup> M. ТОМКА, *The Fragmentation of Experience in the Modern World*, ConcGB 3 (1997), 5–6, 8–9.

ic and technological ones, that are taking place nowadays<sup>5</sup>. These changes require that the Churches constantly reflect on the traditional, Christian ethical guidelines and develop solutions which were not known in the Christian ethical tradition (this mostly refers to new ethical problems that are associated with the consequences of the scientific and technological progress, especially in the area of medicine or genetics). Although reflection on the validity of the traditional teachings (and the possible necessity of updating these teachings) as well as on new problems is based on the unchanging foundations of Christian ethics and anthropology which are rooted in the biblical message, this reflection also leads to the development and further diversification of modern ethical doctrine.

This development, however, does not have to be a manifestation of the fact that particular confessional groups are inevitably growing apart. On the contrary, it can be noticed that cooperation between Christians, who will rise above divisions, is possible and desirable in many areas. Moreover, it is also possible that Christians will cooperate with followers of other religions and all people of goodwill, especially in the fight for justice, peace or the preservation of Creation<sup>6</sup>. However, the fact that this is possible does not eliminate the problem of the importance of the existing diversity, which is manifested in confessional, ethical particularism. To what extent is uniformity needed and to what extent can such multiplicity and diversity be accepted so that these do not contravene the desired unity?<sup>7</sup> Various solutions to this question have been proposed. There are Christians for whom ethical differences are a reflection of the inner richness of Christianity as well as a consequence of the contextualisation of the Christian mission which, in order to retain its credibility, cannot be exempt from the requirements of a specific historical, cultural or social context. For others, however, the existing differences really perpetuate or even deepen the division of Christianity<sup>8</sup>. Some researchers state that ethical differences reflect deep disagreement between groups which base their ethical doctrine on the concept of natural law and those which give absolute primacy to God's will in this regard and believe that the Church's task is to constantly discern this will and which at the same time appreciate every Christian's individual freedom<sup>9</sup>. When ethical differences are blamed for creating and perpetuating divisions in Christianity, any attempts at developing "liberal" Christian ethics, which seeks dialogue with the modern world and which critically looks at particular ethical traditions and allows the possibility of revising certain specific ethical solutions, are also condemned.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, n. 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, n. 62.

<sup>7</sup> D. CLOUTIER, *Catholic Moral Theology: Piecing together a Discipline in Pieces*, „Modern Theology” 29 (2013) 3, 382–383.

<sup>8</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, n. 63.

<sup>9</sup> R. GILL, *Faith and Truth in Public Ethics*, „Theology” 117 (2014) 5, 336.

Conservatism, which sometimes only takes a verbal form and is isolated from the changing context of Christians' lives, is sometimes equated with faithfulness to the Gospel, whereas dialogue or attempts at reforms are perceived as a betrayal of the Gospel<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, it seems that reflection on the meaning and extent of possible ethical differences is necessary if ecumenical dialogue is to progress.

### 3. Common ethical discernment

Given the existing ethical differences, which are even further exacerbated by the above-mentioned disagreement about their significance to the Christian pursuit of unity, the Christian Churches are currently using two strategies as part of the ecumenical movement and while carrying out activities together. These are alternative strategies, but they are also complementary to a certain extent, especially because they have the same objective: to give clear Christian witness in today's world.

The first strategy involves common ethical discernment. It is mostly about establishing which ethical guidelines and the resulting conduct of Christians can be regarded as the faithful implementation of Jesus's teachings. Such discernment results in developing common ethical guidelines that are aimed at the good of humankind and at changing the world so that it is more human and at the same time more consistent with God's will<sup>11</sup>. The document created by the Commission on Faith and Order reminds that Christian ethics has its source in God<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the fundamental issue of the extent to which particular Christian ethical guidelines are consistent with God's will should be placed before the social, political or economic significance of these guidelines. However, this does not mean that Christian ethics is shaped in isolation from the world. Nonetheless, the question about the faithfulness of ethical doctrine to the Gospel touches the very authenticity of Christianity, for which the key issue is whether it really preaches the Gospel to the world and a lifestyle that results from the message of the Gospel as well as values, attitudes and patterns of conduct that are based on the Gospel.

Common ethical discernment which the Churches participating in the ecumenical movement engage in is a difficult task. The difficulty arises from the context of Christians' lives that are affected by the lack of generally applicable and recognised norms and values in many societies<sup>13</sup>, which is accompanied by

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<sup>10</sup> CH.C. BRITAIN, *On the Demonisation and Fetishisation of Choice in Christian Sexual Ethics*, „Studies in Christian Ethics” 27 (2014) 2, 145.

<sup>11</sup> R. SCHWAGER, *Religion as the Foundation of an Ethic of Overcoming Violence*, ConcGB 4 (1997), 125–126.

<sup>12</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, n. 62.

<sup>13</sup> Z. BAUMAN, *Etyka ponowoczesna*, 69–70.

the rejection of the traditional behaviour patterns<sup>14</sup>. This situation also affects the Churches, which are experiencing changes in their relations with the world and in the understanding of their role in the world. Sometimes these changes are manifested in the crises that particular Christian groups go through, in protests against the officially accepted doctrine as well as fundamentalist and progressive grassroots movements which want to make changes within a given denomination<sup>15</sup>. Another difficulty with common discernment is that the Church structures that are responsible for official teachings are heterogeneous<sup>16</sup> (which has been determined by the differences in the development of particular denominational traditions), and therefore also particular guidelines that are issued by church institutions within the Churches differ in importance.

However, since the ethical difficulties that today's Christians are faced with are becoming more severe, common discernment seems to be an important task that the ecumenical movement must fulfil. Perhaps this would be a motivation for establishing a specialised group whose aim would be to engage in Christian ethical reflection?

#### 4. Common ethical discourse

It must be stated that common discernment leading to the development of identical ethical guidelines is not possible everywhere, at least at the present stage of ecumenical dialogue. This is because Christian ethics is rooted in dogmatic fundamentals, in particular in Christology, anthropology, and ecclesiology. Since there are still differences related to these matters, they must translate into ethical differences. This does not mean, however, that Christians, who are aware of what elements make the ethical teachings of particular Churches different, should remain silent on the subject. Even though Christianity is divided, it still must perform certain serious tasks in today's world. These tasks are related to the numerous phenomena of denying and relativising human dignity as well as the destructive activity of political and economic institutions and structures<sup>17</sup>. The greatest tragedies of contemporary humankind, i.e. poverty, injustice, war, crimes against humanity, different forms of persecution of and discrimination against specific social groups, or the tragedy of people suffering from HIV/AIDS or other

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<sup>14</sup> M. TOMKA, *Individualism. A Change in Values. The Experience Society: Converging Trends in Sociology*, ConcGB 4 (1999), 26–27, 31–32.

<sup>15</sup> J.H. PROVOST, *Prospects for a More 'Democratized' Church*, ConcGB 5 (1995), 132, 135.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 140.

<sup>17</sup> N. METTE, *Decline or Transformation of Solidarity?*, ConcGB 4 (1999), 88–89; J. SOBRINO, *Humanizing a Sick Civilization*, ConcGB 1 (2009), 62–65.

diseases and infirmities that exclude them from social life demand a Christian response<sup>18</sup>. Various manifestations of evil in the world pose a challenge to the Churches and represent a test of the authenticity of their witness<sup>19</sup>. In this context Jon Sobrino points to the necessity of “humanizing a sick civilization”<sup>20</sup>, which is a special Christian duty.

The lack of full unity does not relieve the Churches of the duty to actively participate in a public debate<sup>21</sup>. Their living and audible voice is important for the stability of the identity of Christians who live and profess their faith in a socio-political context which is sometimes against Christianity as well as for their credibility as witnesses and preachers of the Gospel and a lifestyle that is consistent with the message of the Gospel<sup>22</sup>. Although Christian ethics, which is an essential part of such a lifestyle, clashes with behaviour patterns and systems of values that are contrary to this ethics in secularised societies, the Churches – while being aware of the lack of full unity between them – should promote Christian ethics in public life together. Even if they experience rejection and opposition, this does not justify withdrawal from world-view and ethical discussions, which are a part of the Christian mission in the world<sup>23</sup>.

It can be argued that, despite the lack of full unity related to ethical solutions, it is better that the Churches take a stance on important social matters than that they remain silent while waiting for a consensus among Christians. Without diminishing the value of theological dialogue which leads to agreement on specific ethical matters, one should note that – as far as the Churches’ mission is concerned – it is important that the Churches be aware that Christians can offer a contemporary human being a lifestyle and conduct which is rooted in the Gospel, rejects everything that denies human dignity and which makes genuine personal growth possible for men and women from every social and cultural background, in anticipation of ultimate, eschatological fulfilment.

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<sup>18</sup> A. FRITZSON, „*The Church*” and the Church. *Fragile Gifts*, „The Ecumenical Review” 65 (2013) 3, 350–351; R. GILL, *Faith and Truth in Public Ethics*, 335.

<sup>19</sup> A. KARAMAGA, *Hope and Dignity for Africa. Ecumenical Theological Challenges*, „The Ecumenical Review” 66 (2014) 1, 94–95; E. BORGMAN, *The Struggle against Evil and Dehumanization in Europe, or How to Deal with the Other*, ConcGB 1 (2009), 24.

<sup>20</sup> J. SOBRINO, *Humanizing a Sick Civilization*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> R. SCHWAGER, *Religion as the Foundation of an Ethic of Overcoming Violence*, 126.

<sup>22</sup> L. SOWLE CAHILL, *Christian Theology and Ethics*, ConcGB 1 (2009), 78.

<sup>23</sup> J. MONTGOMERY, *Public Ethics and Faith*, „Theology” 117 (2014) 5, 343–345.

## 5. Conclusion

The Commission on Faith and Order's latest document, which is devoted to ecclesiological matters, also deals with ethical issues, thus making it clear that one cannot disregard these issues when truly pursuing unity between Christians. In this comprehensive ecumenical text little space is devoted to ethical issues. This is certainly not because they are of little significance. One can suspect that the differences regarding ethical issues, which still exist and which are sometimes even becoming increasingly pronounced, made it impossible to present these issues in more detail in a text which is reconciliatory in character.

The fact that ethical issues are touched upon in the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* indicates that it is necessary to deepen ecumenical, ethical reflection when it comes to interdenominational ethical discernment and when it is urgent that the Christian Churches participate in a public debate on ethical issues together. Perhaps the time has come to establish, within different specialised ecumenical groups and institutions, a body that would be specifically dedicated to providing an ethical Christian response to contemporary challenges facing not only the Churches but also all humankind?

### **Jedność Kościoła wobec różnic etycznych.**

#### **Trudności i perspektywy dokumentu *Ku wspólnej wizji Kościoła***

##### Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi próbę komentarza do części dokumentu *Ku wspólnej wizji Kościoła* poświęconej zagadnieniom etycznym. Tekst dotyczy tego, czy i do jakiego stopnia problematyka etyczna dzieli chrześcijan. Następnie przedstawia dwie propozycje rozwiązań w odpowiedzi na istniejący, a niekiedy wręcz pogłębiający się podział wśród chrześcijan, jeśli chodzi o zagadnienia etyczne: wspólne rozeznawanie etyczne oraz wspólny dyskurs etyczny, wraz z ich możliwościami i ograniczeniami.

**Słowa kluczowe:** jedność chrześcijan; eklezjologia ekumeniczna; różnice etyczne; etyka ekumeniczna.

**Keywords:** Christian unity; ecumenical ecclesiology; ethical differences; ecumenical ethics.