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The evaluation of populist tendences
in the debate of the Christian Churches in Germany

Theological and moral perspective

Abstract

In the ecumenical dialogue of the Christian Churches (both Catholic and Evangelical), the issue of the development of populist tendencies is the subject of research, debate and joint statements by their most prominent representatives. This joint voice shows, on the one hand, the genesis and directions of the spread of populist ideas, pointing out all dangers for the development of civil society, and on the other hand, it highlights the weaknesses of the democratic system in the face of all abuses consisting in the concentration of capital and disturbing social justice, reducing the participation of citizens in decision-making processes and, in the case of the European Union, the development of federalist visions to the detriment of the community of homelands dominated by more developed economic and financial countries.

Keywords: populism, democratic order, ecumenical dialogue, axiology, morality.

Ocena tendencji populistycznych
w debacie Kościołów chrześcijańskich w Niemczech

Perspektywa teologicznomoralna

Abstrakt

W dialogu ekumenicznym Kościołów chrześcijańskich (katolickim i ewangelickim) kwestia rozwoju tendencji populistycznych jest przedmiotem badań, debat i wspólnych oświadczeń ich najważniejszych przedstawicieli. Ten wspólny głos pokazuje z jednej strony genezę i kierunki rozprzestrzeniania się idei populistycznych, wskazując na wszelkie niebezpieczeństwa dla rozwoju społeczeństwa obywatelskiego, z drugiej zaś strony uwydatnia słabości systemu demokratycznego wobec wszelkich nadużyć, polegających na koncentracji kapitału i zachwiania sprawiedliwości społecznej, pomniejszania partycypacji obywateli w procesach decyzyjnych oraz rozwijania, w przypadku Unii Europejskiej, wizji federalistycznych na niekorzyść wspólnoty ojczyzn z dominacją państw mocniej rozwiniętych ekonomicznie-finansowo.

Słowa kluczowe: populizm, ład demokratyczny, dialog ekumeniczny, aksjologia, moralność.

Public debate concerning populism is complicated as it is difficult to define it itself. It often happens that the allegation of populism is already inherently "populist" because it is based on demagogic arguments. Populism critics often use the projection mechanism to exaggerate the populist tendencies of their political competitors[1]. On the other hand, populist or extreme-populist tendencies are noticeable in many parts of the world, also in countries with centuries-old democratic traditions, because within the economic and financial order many social strata feel excluded from any real influence on politics and the system of power, and participation in real welfare is not based on the principle of social justice[2]. In the era of globalization and migration, as well as the noticeable division of the world into a rich and a poor part, and colonial-era implications that are embedded in postcolonial structures, people in many parts of the world, especially in rich countries, feel anxiety or even fear of being different, which may encourage populism and nationalism which have nothing to do with patriotism. This is accompanied by technocratic efforts involving power exercising instead of actual governing, handing over of power to commission entities both on a global and European scale, and not to political bodies with a proper election mandate[3]. The extraordinary situation with the wave of migrants, including refugees, affected Germany where Christian Churches, despite the decreasing number of believers who left the Church as a result of apostasy, play an opinion-forming role in the structure of German society in the context of intra-church and social debate. These Churches remain in permanent dialogue, seeking a common solution to current events, social and cultural tendencies and historical contexts. A very important joint text of Deutsche Bischofskonferenz (hereinafter referred to as DBK) and Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), published in 2019, is a document which, while assessing the democratic system in a comprehensive way, aims to strengthen social belief concerning its values which result from its proper perception and practical implementation[4]. Also, pastoral aids

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[1] Ralf Dahrendorf. 2019. *Acht Anmerkungen zum Populismus/Eight remarks on populism*. Potsdam-Babelsberg (et al): Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit, 6.

[2] Grzegorz Chojnacki. 2019. "Etyka cnót w polityce. Idea społeczeństwa sprawiedliwego w dialogu ekumenicznym Kościołów chrześcijańskich w Niemczech". Studia Oecumenica 19: 268–269.

[3] More about governance methods in a globalized world cf. Wawrzyniec Rudolf. 2010. "Koncepcja governance i jej zastosowanie – od instytucji międzynarodowych do niższych szczebli władzy". Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Oeconomica 245: 73–82.

[4] Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland. 2019. *Vertrauen in die Demokratie stärken* (Gemeinsame Texte 26). Bonn – Hannover (hereinafter referred to as: VDS and page number)

prepared by DBK, evaluating extreme right-wing populist tendences and indicating pragmatic solution opposing to waves of extreme beliefs should be also mentioned in the context of the said joint document[5]. Wojciech Roszkowski notes that since 2004 in Germany the public attraction was won by "the extreme post-communist left which can be as aggressive as the extreme nationalist right"[6]. Therefore, each voice of Christian Church representatives referring to current social situation seems to be something understandable and necessary. This paper aims to present the reception of a mental state of German society by Christian communities' representatives, aetiology of any types of populist behaviour and ways of activating civil society as part of awakening axiological and moral awareness that will follow the ideas of a democratic state, and not extreme ideologies.

1. Explication of the origin and nature of populist tendences

While taking into account that populist tendences develop in Germany in a sinusoid way, both hierarchs of German Christian Churches aim to approach this phenomenon in a reliable way in their search for its aetiology. For its condemnation or showing that the solutions proposed by populism supporters are simply unwise and do not eliminate the problem[7]. While developing this idea, it should be emphasized that the belief adopted by the politicians that their political decisions are inherently right and supporting it by the feeling that they implement the will of the nation, their voters or society requires more detail, because referring to the sovereign's will does not mean uncritically accepting any detailed solutions. Therefore, vigilance of intellectual elites, moral authorities and a feeling of common sense in all citizens are required. It is certainly counterproductive to express a grudge or regret towards voters who favour populist parties. It is rather necessary that all responsible social forces, including the Christian Churches, have answered the question of whether they have done their best to understand the needs of a changing society, while taking into account all social groups[8].

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[5] Deutsche Bischofskonferenz. 2019. *Dem Populismus widerstehen. Arbeitshilfe zum kirchlichen Umgang mit rechtspopulistischen Tendenzen* (Arbeitshilfen Nr. 305). Bonn (hereinafter referred to as: PW and page number).

[6] Wojciech Roszkowski. 2019. *Roztrzaskane lustro. Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej*. Kraków: Biały Kruk, 548.

[7] VDS, 6: "So sehr diese Vorgehensweise mit ihren einfachen Lösungen zu problematisieren ist, so sehr muss sie auch als ein Anzeichen gesehen werden, unsere demokratische Ordnung angesichts der gegenwärtigen Herausforderungen weiterzuentwickeln".

[8] VDS, 14: "Obwohl ein einheitlicher Volkswille eine gefährliche Fiktion ist und der Populismus auf keines der Probleme unserer Zeit eine tragfähige Antwort hat, verfangen seine Parolen dennoch bei vielen Menschen und finden bei demokratischen Wahlen Zustimmung. Wer die Demokratie ernst nimmt, kann darauf nicht bloß mit Empörung oder gar Wählerbeschimpfung reagieren,

When we consider the term "populus", it primarily means "people, nation" and has positive connotations. Therefore, the word "populism" may seem a positive expression at first glance. However, the danger we face is that the notion of "nation" is not understood by populists in a complementary manner. A nation is neither ethnically monolithic nor people that stand in opposition to any groups or institutions. A nation understood in this way may lead to the development of leftist populism, which emphasizes antagonistic processes, institutions and groups in relation to the people (nation). Globalization, Americanization, capitalists, international corporations and unions, groups of rich countries stand in opposition to the left-winged people. On the other hand, right-wing populist groups are marked with the determination of national identity (both cultural and ethnic) in relation to other nations, immigrants or national minorities[9].

In Europe, right-wing populism can also be characterized by Euroscepticism, which has a cultural aetiology (e.g. the EU is treated as a threat to language, values), political genesis (e.g. the state should be autonomous and sovereign) or economic reasons (e.g. the EU is considered to be a threat of the use of national economies). Also, it should also be emphasized that all populist groups and parties, both right- and left-wing, use democratic mechanisms to be represented within the legislative forum. And although populism in its essence is anti-parliamentary, it is a parliamentary election that is used to participate in power. The diagnosis of many political scientists shows that the victories of populist parties and associations in elections often indicate the weakness of the previous parliament and the lack of representativeness of all social strata[10]. At the same time, as emphasized by the German hierarchs of both Churches, democracy nevertheless provides the best grounds and conditions to face all the challenges of today, but democracy must owe its credibility to credible politicians[11].

Perhaps the most important threat to democracy by populism is the introduction of an element of anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism. As noted by M. Marczewska-Rytko, populists want, in the name of noble principles of brotherhood and social solidarity, to lead to the creation of an ex-, not inclusive, community, headed by people who will awaken the "dormant" forces of the people. This peculiar idealization of the people leads to its antagonistic understanding in comparison to the elites, which are perceived as "alienated" from real social

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sondern muss sich selbstkritisch die Frage stellen, ob die etablierten politischen und gesellschaftlichen Kräfte – auch wir Kirchen – vielleicht zu wenig getan haben, um die mit den verschiedenen Herausforderungen verbundenen Fragen und Interessen der Menschen aufzugreifen und mit ihnen über Lösungsmöglichkeiten ins Gespräch zu kommen".

   [9] Cf. Jan Pakulski. 2016. "Ruchy populistyczne i degeneracja elit przywódczych – analiza weberowska". Zoon politikon 7: 59.

   [10] Dahrendorf. 2019. *Acht Anmerkungen zum Populismus/Eight remarks on populism*, 9.

   [11] Cf. VDS, 16.

problems. Thus, they have nothing to do with the people's values. Proponents of populist tendencies in society often promote their conflict in the context of values, setting themselves as a model for their implementation, while the elites, in their opinion, follow values that do not meet the basic needs of the people. This anti-elitism is very often related to anti-intellectualism, which consists in questioning the value of theoretical and practical reason as an instance that develops ideas and provides practical solutions for their implementation. The natural search for knowledge, for which reason is responsible, wants to exchange forces such as feelings, belonging to the volitional order in man. Reason allows a person to make specific decisions under the influence of willpower, which takes into account the person's entire system of emotions and feelings. However, it cannot be replaced by feelings[12].

Apart from anti-elitist and anti-intellectual tendencies, populism supporters adhere to very interesting economic views that may arouse great popularity among part of the society. Populists point to the possibility of building an economic order on the so-called "Third Way", which means an intermediate solution between the capitalist and communist systems for them. In the name of economic syncretism, they can combine the best solutions offered by socialism supporters with capitalist ideas. Among these syncretic solutions, the need to maintain a protective role of the state towards state-owned enterprises is primarily recognized. This role may be multidimensional, including state subsidies that may distort the free market and the principle of competition. Often, in populism, fighting against world's globalist tendencies, the state is required to assume a role of the society defender against domestic and international monopolies, which may act unfavourably or even take advantage of the people. M. Marczewska-Rytko emphasizes, like many economists, that populism prefers to favour inflation policy. This means a tendency to increase the budget deficit, put more money into circulation claiming that this will be a kind of remedy for economic problems. All in all, it may be concluded that from the economic point of view, populism tries to balance between stagnation and development attempts[13]. A very interesting aspect of assessing populist tendencies is their understanding of the relationship between an individual and social groups which are subject to multiplication, transformation or collapse. Supporters of populism see a huge potential in their ideas, which aim to help an individual, and thus a whole society, come out of the state of axiological emptiness and anomie, to rebuild individual's moral features and make legal order objective but also interiorized by man. Undoubtedly, in the

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[12] Cf. Maria Marczewska-Rytko. 2000. Populizm. In *Encyklopedia politologii*. Vol. 4. Ed. Maria Marczewska-Rytko, Edward Olszewski, 290. Zakamycze: Kantor Wydawniczy Zakamycze.

[13] Cf. Marczewska-Rytko. 2000. Populizm, 291.

times of the cultural disintegration, the emergence of subcultural groups, the development of nationalist or anti-globalist sentiments as well as a sense of a widespread chaos, populist tendencies find easy ground for growth[14]. In this context, questions arise about the condition of modern democracy in individual countries where legal systems are based on it. In a situation of strengthening nationalist-populist tendencies, democracy seems to be failing, although its ideas should, on the whole, foster the development of national values, as noted by M. Kuniński. Democracy, as a rule, respects and promotes the principle of freedom of speech. It also observes the rights of national and ethnic minorities, ensuring an integral development of all individuals belonging to a given state community and the opportunity to associate in order to be represented in all political and decision-making bodies. However, the question of the balance between understanding the nation in the political and cultural sense remains open. Undoubtedly, the cultural respect for the rights of individual national and ethnic entities fosters harmonious development of the social order, however, it must be combined with political forms ensuring political integrity and building a civil society on the bonds of real participation in public life. Without these appropriate forms, populism may arise, taking the form of national separatism[15].

While contemplating the background of the multidimensional nature of populist tendencies, it is interesting to describe the attitude of the hierarchs of both Christian churches in Germany and their diagnoses concerning the global context, especially in the context of the actual and real life problems experienced by individual German citizens, but also fuelling irrational fears[16].

2. Socio-political and cultural tendencies in German society in axiological and moral assessment

In view of the intensification of dissatisfaction, disorientation and fuelling populist tendencies in the German society, the Catholic and Evangelical churches see the need to strengthen the values of democracy and its perception among the citizens, especially their faithful. A united voice, expressed in the form of a docu-

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[14] Cf. Marczewska-Rytko. 2000. Populizm, 291–292.

[15] Cf. Miłowit Kuniński. 2004. Demokracja. In *Słownik społeczny*. Ed. Bogdan Szlachta, 127. Kraków: WAM.

[16] Cf. an accurate analysis of the causes of irrational thinking of individuals in a given society: Sabina Olszyk. 2007. "*Vox populi vox Dei*. Teoria populizmu politycznego". Annales Academiae Paedagogicae Cracoviensis 46: 238. "Zasadniczym elementem retoryki populistycznej jest negacja, czyli opozycyjność wobec istniejącego stanu rzeczy, mobilizowanie uboższych warstw społecznych przeciw instytucjom państwa. Ruchy populistyczne podsycając mniej lub bardziej irracjonalne lęki, stają się gwarancją bezpiecznego przejścia przez momenty kryzysowe i lansują się jako jedyny skuteczny sposób na zaspokojenie potrzeb mas".

ment, confirms that the Christian Churches want to play their meta-political role towards the society and the German state, and treat their subsidiary function as a service to the truth and purification of human conscience, thus safeguarding the democratic and legal order based on universal values, negatively evaluating all extreme ways of thinking and attitudes. This democratic order is possible only if the rule of law foundations comprise freedom and equality. As emphasized by the Churches' representatives, there is no single model of a democratic system, therefore, a democratic constitutional state, a democratic state of law, a liberal or constitutional democracy is being discussed here, however, it is hard to imagine a lack of reflexive relation between freedom and law in democracy. The nation, as a sovereign and collective subject of freedom, never stands above the law, but rules itself within the framework of the law it has established. When dignity and each individual's rights resulting from dignity are constitutively enshrined in the law established by man, then the idea of free and equal people is accomplished, which is extremely important for all democratic processes as it provides them with a proper framework[17]. According to A. Sylwestrzak, the rule of law should be based "on a socially approved organizational structure, on the one hand, and on clearly exposed catalogue of axiological values on the other, where democratic principles of electoral law, the separation of power, respect for human rights as well as guarantee of independence of courts and public control underline the legal system"[18]. Apart from a close relationship between freedom and law, which must never be destroyed, the hierarchs provide that "democratic morality" is of great importance from an ethical point of view, which they define not as a vision of a good life combined with individual development, but as the implementation of good manners in democracy that will have an impact on the quality of politics. Among many good manners, they emphasized the attitude of "fairness" in all activities aimed at better political ratings, showing respect to other political competitors, the ability to conduct polemics and political discourse, which should have specific practical implications, instead of acting a political "theatre". In addition, democratic morality must take into account the sense for community and striving for the common good. These activities can contribute to a better political culture that has a great influence on the behaviour and relationships between members of a given community[19].

Along with emphasizing the principles of democratic morality, it is difficult not to notice the importance and significance of social justice, which, when

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[17] Cf. VDS, 24; PW, 31.

[18] Andrzej Sylwestrzak. 2015. *Historia doktryn politycznych i prawnych*. Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer, 421.

[19] Cf. VDS, 26.

implemented in social life, is a guarantee of maintaining the social balance, so crucial in the intensification of populist tendencies. VDS warns that the experience of fallen democracies show that social balance and focus towards social justice seems to be essential in building a country's democratic stability. The weakness of democracy can be seen in the example of tax avoidance by new markets that seek the so-called tax havens and, while failing to comply with the rules of good cooperation and prosecution of financial crimes, they look for illicit privileges.

A very serious reason for the development of populist tendencies is the unprecedented gap between rich and poor people on a micro- and macro-world scale, which increases the sense of social injustice and affects community solidarity, especially when the rich relieve themselves of the obligation to support the common good, which is one from the more serious factors destabilizing the democratic system. Christian Churches representatives also emphasize the need to ensure access to basic goods such as education, health care and safety in an open and transparent manner for everyone and the need for sufficient funding, in the spirit of ensuring social justice. If access under the given conditions is not ensured, this raises the problem of excluding certain social groups not only in a social but also political sense, which is naturally a "fuel" for people spreading populist ideas. Therefore, it is not enough to promote liberal ideas or respect the rule of law to ensure a democratic order, but it is necessary to appreciate the social dimension of democracy as a normative goal, which is undoubtedly the main pillar of the political order built on freedom, law and democratic morality[20]. As noted by political scientists, it was Aristotle who distinguished between institutional and moral justice. When the legislator passes a law, it is based on a specific concept of morality. Therefore, the idea of Aristotle raises the fundamental question whether the legislator is able to achieve synergy between the concept of law and the moral convictions of the citizen. His advice is to seek legal solutions to minimize the discrepancies that had already been visible in his time, and which are still visible while assessing contemporary pluralist societies. "However, the emergence of clear and extremely opposite attitudes results in the deepening of the problem of the alienation of power derived from the philosophy of Feuerbach, Hegel or Marx […]"[21], which is a common problem for both "young" and "old" democracies. By commenting the issue of educational exclusion and inequality, M.V. Llosa emphasizes the problem of privilege and defines it as favouritism: "It is indeed in the world of education – school, vocational and university – that privilege is most unfair, whereby some young people are privileged

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[20] VDS, 26-27, cf. PW, 22.
[21] Sylwestrzak. 2015. *Historia doktryn politycznych i prawnych*, 421.

to receive high quality education while other ones are condemned with cursory and ineffective education leading to reduction of future opportunities, failure or existence limited to survival"[22]. Probably in the case of education, the Christian Churches in Germany still have resources that would allow more effective access to good forms of education.

In the era of globalization, German hierarchs see the need to build a Europe of solidarity and peace based on its historical heritage, in which three pillars are noted: ancient philosophy, Roman legislation and Judeo-Christian religious roots. To ensure a lasting peace in Europe, it is necessary to take into account the balance between what is universal and European and what is characteristic for each of the European nations. Going to cosmopolitan or purely national extremes, imposing majoritarian solutions disregarding the character and distinctiveness of a given country or remaining convinced of the rightness of one's own national legal and economic scheme are counter-effective actions, while searching for balance and compromise fosters the development of solidarity in Europe[23]. The German hierarchs warn against conducting a political and social discourse from a narrow German perspective and overly supporting national interests only (such as Nord Stream 2)[24]. On the other hand, when the progression of the political system in the EU shows an increase in legislative and executive powers at the central level, the powers of representative instances of individual states may be limited, which naturally leads to the development of populist tendencies in given national communities against the background of citizens' passivity and strengthening of bodies of representative offices in the EU that are not elected but appointed. The processes of strengthening of the oligarchic tendencies among the EU ruling institutions are also noticeable, as a result of the fact that the entire EU community is many times larger in number but also more divided in terms of political and economic interests. Therefore, finally there are situations in which, at the level of the civil society of a given Member State, there is a reduction in the political responsibility of the rulers and the reduction of citizens' control over the governing bodies[25]. Faced with such trends, it is necessary to emphasize the necessity of participation as a credible feature of a "good governance" doctrine, which can be an effective antidote to the previously demonstrated weaknesses of the common Europe: "The quality, relevance and effectiveness of EU policies depend on ensuring broad participation throughout the policy chain – from the first idea to the end result. Such par-

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[22] Mario Vargas Llosa. 2020. *Zew plemienia*. Transl. Marzena Chrobak. Kraków: Znak, 24.

[23] VDS, 31.

[24] VDS, 30.

[25] Cf. Kuniński. 2004. Demokracja, 126–127.

ticipation largely depends on national governments, which, after all, co-create
and then implement EU policies in their countries"[26]. A very pressing problem
of modern democracies in developed countries is the issue of digitization, which
is ambiguously perceived by the German Churches' representatives as an op-
portunity and a threat. Digitization should be treated as something positive, as
a tool for participation in the progress of civilization, the increase of the popu-
lation's wealth as well as the development of the common good. This is only
possible when all digital means and tools as well as both knowledge and ability
to use them are widely available. Naturally, participation in democratic system
is currently unthinkable without digital technologies. The state, according to the
hierarchs of the Churches, is primarily responsible for creating the conditions
and framework for the proper development of digital infrastructure that includes
the country's entire territory. It is necessary when private investors leave some
of the country's areas, especially rural ones, without proper digital infrastruc-
ture, due to some commercial reasons. This call is even more understandable
in the era of the coronavirus pandemic and the threatening state of lockdown.
The protection of data, both regarding individuals and all state structures seems
to be even greater challenge and a "sign of the times" in the era of such rapid
technological development. Each country's public authorities should treat such
protection as major political task influencing all structural and functional activi-
ties of all services on each levels of both the state and community. Apart from
well working protective systems, it is necessary to make aware each citizen and
implement the data protection within the available personal protective means
and individual vigilance aiming to increase protective standards against politi-
cal manipulation. The Christian Churches' representatives also emphasize the
need for joint political action on a global scale upon the emergence of larger and
larger digital giants covering more and more areas of the Earth, and their pos-
session of more and more data that can be used as a huge political and economic
power and illegal trade of IT resources[27].

While discussing digital processes, VDS highlights three ethical tasks for
the world of media, which has actually become the so-called "fourth" author-
ity in the era of digitization, responsible for the democratic order. Among all,
they are bound to act in a diligent way in the event of spreading and using
fake news to maintain the principle of the highest transparency of informa-
tion. Apart from this diligence, faced with attempts to exaggerate and evaluate
political facts that a crucial for democratic decisions it is necessary to maintain
critical reflection. In third place, special attention should be paid to the very

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[26] Rudolf. 2010. "Koncepcja governance i jej zastosowanie", 79.
[27] VDS, 40–41.

ambivalent potential of social media. These three tasks pose a great challenge to democratic morality, where media ethics is one of the milestones of building a just civil society[28].

Conclusion

"Unity in diversity" comprises both a goal and a process in ecumenical dialogue. While uttering a joint voice on the democratic order in their country, the representatives of both Christian Churches in Germany are striving to fulfil their metapolitical role in designing a civil society and setting high standards and good practices in politics. Only the combination of axiology and the political and legal system can ensure the growth of the common good, which translates into the socio-economic development of individual citizens and their involvement in building a civil society.

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[28] VDS, 41–42.

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