



Exclusive humanism as a challenge for moral-ethical upbringing

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The main scientific aim of article is an attempt to reconstruct the concept of contemporary Western culture, created by Canadian contemporary philosopher of religion and politics, Charles Taylor, which is the exclusive humanism.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The main research problem takes the form of a question about the conditions of the possibility of moral-ethical upbringing in the reality of exclusive humanism. The methodology is based on hermeneutic reconstruction, emphasizing two categories – understanding and sense.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: At the beginning, the authors present the definition of exclusive humanism, as an outlook on life, typical of the Western European culture, deprived of transcendental horizon. Then they discuss the most important features of exclusive humanism, such as an affirmation of the value of human being and subjectivization of faith (and related with it – secularization or religious pluralism) and consider, what is the importance of these processes for the young person development. Then the authors describe such features of exclusive humanism, as orientation on earthly life and minimizing suffering, noting that this outlook on life cannot provide the answers for the most difficult existential questions. The authors also highlight the bright sides of exclusive humanism, such as observed global solidarity and general willingness to help people in need. Finally, the authors draw attention to the paradox of exclusive humanism.

RESEARCH RESULTS: As a result of the analysis, the authors come to the conclusion that the exclusive humanism is an important challenge for moral-ethical upbringing. The main threats for the educational process in the exclusive humanism conditions, are the difficulties of transmitting non-material values, especially – the moral ones. Although the object of its apotheosis (human flourishing, fullness of life, self-realization) may be considered as valuable, it may paradoxically – by

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freeing from transcendental framework – limit human development, by withholding from him the opportunity to achieve full self-realization.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: In the conclusion, the authors notes, that Charles Taylor, although a Catholic himself, when proposes a humanism open to the transcendence, he does not necessarily mean theistic perspective. Taylor’s form of humanism is compatible with a belief in God, but does not necessitate it. It necessitates an attitude of openness and willingness to leave a space for the possibility of God and a sense to life beyond the mundane.

→ **KEY WORDS – EXCLUSIVE HUMANISM, SECULARIZATION, ETHICS, MORALITY, UPBRINGING**

Preliminary remarks

This article is an attempt to present the issues of exclusive humanism as the conceptualization of contemporary culture, which is developed by contemporary Canadian philosopher of politics and religion, Charles Taylor. This perspective, although seen in philosophical literature, is not widely known on pedagogical grounds. Hence, the aim of this article is to show the pedagogical implications of this concept, particularly – its importance to the modern process of moral-ethical upbringing. After Charles Taylor we assert that, in fact, we live today in the reality of exclusive humanism and so we make an attempt to show how this, characteristic for the Western culture, worldview can affect the process of upbringing and its subjects (children, parents, educators). We will present the opportunities and threats connected with this secular humanism, which is a big challenge especially for those, who still want to follow transcendental values in the process of upbringing.

Exclusive humanism as a conceptualization of contemporary culture

The concept of “exclusive humanism” appeared in literature for the first time most probably due to the French Jesuit, Cardinal Henri de Lubac, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, who in his famous work, *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism* (1944), wrote: “Exclusive humanism is inhuman humanism” (de Lubac, 1944, p. 12). Still, it is commonly thought that Charles Taylor is the author of the term “exclusive humanism.” Taylor, by analyzing the relations between religion and

contemporary Western culture, and observing progressive process of secularization, characterized the contemporary times as an age of exclusive humanism. In 2007 he published a monumental work *A Secular Age*, in which he was searching for the answer to the question, whether we live today in a secular age, that is, in the age of exclusive humanism (Taylor, 2007a).¹ This purely secular humanism is based on two categories: human flourishing and enhanced life, as the main goals of human existence, and accepting no final goals (transcendent) beyond those two. Today's "secular age," as Taylor calls it, rejects the belief, that human life has a sense beyond itself. Therefore the present life and self-realization of an individual are becoming the most important issues. Closed for all theistic perspectives, this worldview is characterized by "the affirmation of ordinary life" (started in the sixteenth century) and the ethics of authenticity (rooted in romantic expressivist individualism), which guides individuals (Taylor, 2012, chapter 13; Nowak, 2008). Based on conviction that the greatest value has life itself, the human efforts are oriented to preserve it, to care for the sensual happiness and for an individual fulfillment, and also avoiding suffering and fighting against death (Taylor called this attitude "a secular religion of life"). We are now in a situation without precedent – the state that we experience in the age of exclusive humanism was unknown to our ancestors, because the religion suggested that there are higher goals than life itself. Therefore the absolutization of life itself was the result of attempts to overcome (such) religion (Nowak, 2008). Taylor does not call exclusive humanism a "doctrine," but – noting the commonness of exclusive humanism – speaks more of a certain "intellectual climate," which characterizes the Western culture. It is the context in which all people live, regardless of their confessional orientation, or lack thereof. More and more people can imagine an existence based on the belief that human well-being is the highest goal. Young people are growing up today in reality which leads them to think, that transcendence is not possible at all.

Affirmation of the value of human being

One of the most characteristic features of exclusive humanism is the affirmation of the value of human being. Stressing the importance of such

¹ Distant sources of exclusive humanism can be found in the ancient Epicureanism and Lucretianism, and in the 18th-century Enlightenment secularism (Nowak, 2008). Although Charles Taylor is considered as the author of the term "exclusive humanism," the first thinker who used this expression – in the 1940s – was most probably Cardinal Henri de Lubac (de Lubac, 2004).

categories as human flourishing, fullness of life or self-actualization, the analyzed belief seems to favor the process of young people's growth and forming their identity. The popularity of these values in the modern world can be justified i.a. by the strong orientation of contemporaries on individualism. Community values (and the community itself) seem to lose its importance. It is no accident that we speak also about the culture of egotism and narcissism. It is therefore worth giving some thought to how these individualistic categories, promoted by exclusive humanism, could be used in the service to the individual and the community, and therefore make them valuable (or at least not harmful) proposal for an educational process. The notions of human flourishing, fullness of life and self-realization seem to correspond well with the educational objectives. It is important to raise awareness among children and young people of their inner potential and to support the discovery and development of their talents. Humanism affirming the value of human individuality also draws the attention of educators, especially parents, to the fact that children are not their property. A child is an autonomous subject, and he/she does not exist to fulfill his/her parents dreams and plans. It happens quite often, especially when the child is about to choose his/her career path. Human well-being and the fullness of life can also be the categories of great positive significance in the process of self-education, mobilizing an individual to realize his/her potentiality.

There are many currents of thought, which – just as exclusive humanism – affirm human being and can therefore be a valuable source of inspiration in the educational process. The anthropocentric exclusive humanism, rejecting all transcendence, focuses solely on the earthly life of the individual, and does not seek the sources of human value anywhere beyond itself (e.g. does not see it in God, as the Christian personalism already present on the pedagogical grounds). This does not necessarily mean, however, that this worldview closes an individual to the needs of others and directs toward the egoistic self-fulfillment. We can see a valuable ethical potential in the exclusive humanism. The conviction that the human being is the most important does not have to be associated with selfishness, but can encourage individuals to perceive this good also in other people, and to protect it. Moreover, if we connect this humanistic fruit of modern individualism with Taylor's ethics of authenticity, the culture of exclusive humanism may appear to be unthreatening to the process of upbringing, especially when parents and educators will focus on the actions, thanks to which this individualism will lead an authentic human person not to take an attitude of axionormative relativism, but to form moral autonomy and responsibility for his/her own choices and actions (but also for other people), and thus will result in Taylor's responsabilization.

This direction of identity development, however, is a postulate extremely difficult to realize, especially if we are aware of the socialization displacement, observed for a long time in the Western culture, characterized by the loss of influence of the traditional agendas, such as family, school or Church to the media (as cited in Wajsprych, 2010).

Subjectivization of faith

Exclusive humanism is perceived by some as a growing in power alternative for traditional religion, so one may presume that that the main threat posed by the immanent humanism applies to the sphere of religion. This worldview, however, is a complex phenomenon – it is not quite about “fighting” against religion, but rather about overriding transcendence and affecting many other spheres of human existence. As previously mentioned, exclusive humanism is associated with observed in contemporary times progressive secularization, which – according to Taylor – occurs in three forms: 1) the separation of religion and state (which results in i.a. the privatization of religion), 2) the decline in belief and practice, 3) rapid pluralism in forms of life and worldviews, including religiousness (in other words – the change in the conditions of belief) (Taylor, 2007a).

However, both secularization and religious pluralism or – also characteristic of individualistic contemporary culture – subjectivization of faith, not necessarily constitute a threat to the religious education of children and young people, experiencing religion in the contemporary world. On the contrary, adverse external conditions for traditional religiousness and devotion can contribute to a more conscious involvement of religious people to the values and religious norms, and responsibility for these values in everyday life. Pluralism may be in fact a threat to religiousness not based on personal reflection and experience. It can be also an opportunity for personal devotion (also the one with the references to Church). In the climate of pluralism, when the religious involvement is no longer a matter of habit, routine or custom, there is a greater probability, that an individual will engage in religious life with personal and internal motives (Mariański, 2010). A certain benefit of the exclusive humanism is that in terms of exploration and profession of faith we went from premodern “direct obviousness” to postmodern “reflexivity.”

This reflexivity is not an universal attitude. Exclusive humanism reality, rejecting transcendence and locating religion (because of its universality) to the purely personal sphere of individuals, caused the appearance of a phenomenon called “privatization of religion.” It is related not only to

the postulated (and realized) in many countries separation of Church and state, but also to the way of experiencing religion by some people, who – although declare affiliation to the Church – adapt doctrine to their own needs and capabilities, and represent selective approach to the teachings of the Church (which can be also associated with a lack of knowledge in this area). Another dangerous phenomenon in the sphere of religion, associated with the expansion of exclusive humanism and, so characteristic for contemporary culture, individualism, is religious syncretism, which consists in combining elements of different religious traditions. We can also observe a consumerist approach to religion. Religion is treated today instrumentally by many people – it fulfills the ancillary role towards the individual, who does not exactly seek a closer relationship with God, but rather a personal fulfillment. Thus, it seems that in the conditions of exclusive humanism and in secularized world religion has only one *raison d'être* – it is useful only if it helps the individuals to function better in their earthly life. Those for whom religion is not a way of experiencing a personal relationship with the Lord, but some form of spending “free time,” giving “a deeper” meaning to his life, bringing an emotional support, or continuation of tradition, it can be very difficult to educate young people in faith they identify with. The effects of such inept religious education (which may be caused not only by the parents’ lack of religious knowledge, but also by providing wrong patterns) can be counterproductive, because observing parents, whose actions have no connection with declared beliefs, and whose values are not internalized, can discourage young people to develop a relationship with the Church. Taylor notes that the spiritual hunger is today still a common phenomenon, but it is very often fulfilled in a characteristic for the culture of exclusive humanism way – e.g. by getting involved in various types of “human potential” movement (we note that today many people are more interested in what their coach or motivational speaker says, than a representative of the Church hierarchy). Therefore the boundaries between immanence and transcendence are blurring nowadays. All of these changes in the role of religion in human life result in deepening young people’s confusion both in terms of spiritual values and the meaning of religious practices. Religious education is therefore a major challenge today – there are many teachers and enthusiasts, but few authentic witnesses.

Orientation on earthly life and minimizing suffering

One of the most characteristic features of the exclusive humanism is the orientation on temporality, which perfectly corresponds with the postulates

of modern hedonism and consumerism. They share the belief that one should “live life to the fullest,” because we do not have anything more. Approach like that is associated not only with the lack of interest in religion and God, but it also affects all other spheres of human life, and his relationships. Establishing a desire for personal well-being as an ultimate goal of human life is associated with attachment to such values as preservation of life, security, well-being, self-realization or minimizing suffering. Those goods affirm the value of human life in its temporal dimension, as happening “here and now.” Young people, observing the adult world and submitting to the media socialization training, learn that one should strive to have a comfortable life. From a pedagogical perspective, the harmful effectiveness of these influences can be seen in interests, which many of young people have today. We can note an unusual, unprecedented in scope and intensity, orientation on sensations and “collecting” experiences, but they mostly concern rather the sensual sphere, than a spiritual one. Therefore the main threats for the educational process are the difficulties of transmitting non-material values, especially – the moral ones.

If in the reality of exclusive humanism life itself (in its biological sense) is the highest value, all human efforts are oriented to preserve it. This is reflected in today’s world in the fight against suffering, evanescence and death. Contemporary man lives as if life would never end – he cares about beauty and body, negating somewhat the passage of time and not allowing himself to think about evanescence. He works more and more, but more and more working to satisfy growing consumer needs, and he collects things. By focusing so much on the material side of life, he does not give himself the chance to experience life consciously and reflectively. Many people seem to think that youth will last forever. They know, that the old age is not positively valued in contemporary world. Young people postpone major life decisions, such as marriage or conception, and some do not make them ever. “Here and now” is every day. More and more adults are passively observing those changes, they accept and justify the selfishness and immature choices of their own children and their peers. However, the responsibility for future generations and the fate of the world, or thinking about one’s own passing should be something natural and desirable for the reflective human person. If we are aware of the passage of time, we try to use it respectfully. The culture of exclusive humanism makes the educational process problematic. Young people, receiving messages from the media, their peers and many adults, who say, that self-realization and “enjoying the moment” are the most important things in life, have difficulty in understanding, why should they live differently. Non-material values are perceived today by many

young people as some abstract notions (as cited in Wajsprych, 2010; Mariański, 2006; Melosik, 2005).

The important problem of exclusive humanism is related to the fact, that although the object of its apotheosis may be considered as valuable (human flourishing, fullness of life, global solidarity), it may paradoxically – by freeing from transcendental framework – limit human development, by withholding from him the opportunity to achieve full self-realization. In relation to the elimination of the transcendental horizon from its area of interests, exclusive humanism is not able to provide a sufficiently strong justification for its postulates and values. A pedagogue should inquire about different sources of values, and every other reflective human being should do the same – ask about the basis of his action, trying to understand the motives. Exclusive humanism is not able to explain, why should we treat all people fairly, why should we limit our own interests for the sake of other people, including the poor and the weak. In the immanent humanism a man will not find the answer to the question, what is the point of doing good, when it might never be recognized or reciprocated. The individual will not learn why he/she should respect every human being, including the one that acts immorally. Conversations with young people allow to see that, in fact, the youth feels great difficulties in finding justification for their own moral acts. Young people tend towards the principle of justice, which from both ethical and pedagogical point of view is indeed correct, but it is not perfect. Meanwhile, in the process of upbringing, we should promote human development in all its fullness – strive not only to fulfill, but also to exceed oneself. Therefore, the order which would be good to establish as the principle of human behavior, should be not only the order of justice, but the order of love. In this perspective it is much easier to explain to young people that there are situations in life where you must give up your own flourish and subjectively understood well-being. Charles Taylor, who does not hide his religious beliefs, is convinced that “selfless love is impossible without a transcendent perspective. Nothing else can inspire to a level of altruism that would lead us to forego or renounce our personal well-being” (Olearnik, 2010, p. 112). A matter of the sources of values and their justification in the reality of exclusive humanism is therefore another important and difficult challenge for contemporary educators (parents and teachers).

Exclusive humanism and global solidarity

For all the criticism of the exclusive humanism, it has brought also positive changes on a large scale. This worldview is connected with the

phenomenon which is unprecedented in human history – the universal feeling of sympathy and compassion, and sensitivity to human misery around the globe, and humanitarian aid operations. Therefore it could be said that it is, from a pedagogical perspective, a positive pattern of conduct. Furthermore, we can see that many young people willingly engage in volunteer work. We can admit, however, that sometimes the global kindness turns into “ritualized philanthropy.” There are many spectacular actions and campaigns supporting various charities, but many people engage in this work not because of the sincere desire to help the needy, but because the action became fashionable (this happens especially with the initiatives which are born and spread via the social networking websites). It happens that the participants of such events sometimes do not know what the help that the event promotes is all about. It should also be noted that this global support has a lineament typical for the exclusive humanism – it concerns life in its biological sense and is interim. Referring to the educational reality we should therefore draw attention to the fact that it is difficult to form the attitude of reflective compassionating or “imagination of mercy” in such case. Those actions may be treated by young people as just another event, experience, sensation (also the already mentioned voluntary activity can be motivated not by the desire to help those in need, but only by the desire to acquire the necessary skills and improve one’s own situation in the labor market). Meanwhile it is about a man who suffers, and so – from the pedagogical perspective – first and foremost it would be desirable to draw attention to the personal aspect of the experience of suffering and to sensitize young people to the problems and needs of individuals, who live in their immediate area. Today we note a worrying trend – along with the desire to engage in a big, publicized in the media, aid campaigns, there is a weakening of social sensitivity to suffering and injustice we encounter every day – on the street, in neighborhood environment, in the family.

The paradox of exclusive humanism

It is also worth drawing attention to the paradoxical nature of exclusive humanism. Preaching the affirmation of human flourishing, it presents itself as a totally anthropocentric worldview, while – ignoring the transcendent sensemaking structures – it may deprive an individual of the possibility of fulfilling this idea. Charles Taylor, as a critic of exclusive humanism, notes that neither life itself nor the humanistic “fullness of life” exhausts the sense of reality if we reduce these values only to existence

understood immanently. It is not enough to teach young people that they should reject egoism and that we should care not only about the fullness of our own lives (and those who are closest to us). What is needed is a complete change of orientation, because the fullness of life requires action for the good of humanity. In order to remind the contemporaries of transcendence, Taylor argues, that the recognition of transcendence means seeing the meaning beyond life itself. Exclusive humanists, proclaiming the apotheosis of human flourishing and making it the most important purpose of life, do not seem to allow for the possibility, that the highest form of human flourishing can incorporate our quest for something other than human flourishing. Taylor says here about the final goals. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the final goal is the love of God. Meanwhile, the exclusive humanism

closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond. More, as though it weren't an irrepressible need of the human heart to open that window, and first look, then go beyond. As though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous world-view, bad conditioning, or worse, some pathology (Taylor, 2007a, p. 638).

Preventing an individual from finding the meaning in the horizon beyond the earthly life, exclusive humanism is helpless against the most difficult human problems and experiences.

Conclusion

The essential question raised by Taylor in his monumental work, *A Secular Age* – whether we contemporarily live in a secular (postreligious) age, cannot be simply answered. A map of attitudes within our culture is very rich. It generally consists of two camps – belief and disbelief, which are themselves divided and enter into various alliances with one another. Contemporary times can be described as a secular age not so much because of the presence of exclusive humanism, but rather for reasons of – unprecedented – commonness of self-sufficient humanism. Although its premises were known in the previous eras (e.g. in the recurring Epicureanism), it has always been the worldview of a small minority within the elite. Only nowadays, in the reality of modern secularity, exclusive humanism became an option for the masses – universally available and generally acceptable (Nowak, 2008). The main difference between previous eras and the contemporary times is that the disappearance of all goals except for human well-being becomes imaginable for the broad

masses of people (Taylor, 2007b). Here a great number of people choose worldliness, deprived of any religious dimension (Nowak, 2008). Immanent concept of human fulfillment is thus becoming a humanistic alternative to faith.

It should however be emphasized that Charles Taylor, although a Catholic himself, when proposes a humanism open to the transcendence, he does not necessarily mean theistic perspective. Taylor's form of humanism is compatible with a belief in God, but does not necessitate it. It necessitates an attitude of openness and willingness to leave a space for the possibility of God and a sense to life beyond the mundane. What is needed, therefore, is to accept the fact, that man is by nature a being who has spiritual dimensions that induce him to search for meaning and truth. Preventative 'spiritual lobotomy,' which, in Taylor's opinion, characterizes contemporary culture, does not solve problems faced by the human person, aiming to attain a fullness of being, and thus does not favor moral-ethical development of an individual (Olearnik, 2010; Taylor, 2003).

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