

## Contemporary Liberal Catholicism in the USA

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In the beginning, I would like to quote an email which I got from Paul Lakeland, one of the Catholic liberal theologian in the USA from Fairfield University, whom I've asked to give me a short description of what it means for him to be a liberal theologian:

“A liberal theologian is one who, as steeped in the tradition and with as much reverence for it as more traditional or conservative theologians, sees his/her work as always in dialogue with the secular world rather than confrontational. In Vatican II terms, ressourcement is always at the service of aggiornamento. Of course, in times like the present when the American episcopate is quite

reactionary in many respects, liberals become seen as adversaries. But liberals and conservatives love the church equally. What makes the difference for liberals is that their agenda is drawn from that Vatican II whose influence is currently being undermined by those who are less liberal. The liberal list of causes would therefore be something like: church as people of God, episcopal collegiality, synodal government, the importance of leadership roles for the laity, the transformation of patterns of ministry, openness to other religious traditions, openness to the world"<sup>1</sup>.

I started with this concise definition because I found in it all the complex field of relationship between Catholicism and the modern world which was in the center of the attention of the Vatican II.

### 1. A few introductory remarks concerning the title

#### a) What does it mean liberal?

The definition by Judith Shklar is what I have in mind when I say Liberal:

„Liberalism Has only one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom. Every adult should be able to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult"<sup>2</sup>.

Shklar is right when she enumerate Catholicism among the obstacles to realize the ideal of liberalism in modern world:

„It is difficult to find a vast flow of liberal ideology in the midst of the Catholic authoritarianism, romantic corporatist nostalgia, nationalism, racism, proslavery, social Darwinism, imperialism, militarism, fascism, and most types of socialism which dominated the battle of political ideas in the last century"<sup>3</sup>.

But American liberal Catholics try to show that the opposite is true, that they overcome catholic authoritarianism. And I think that they are doing this successfully. We can find many reasons for the particular situation of the Catholic Church in the USA, but two are, it seems to me decisive.

<sup>1</sup> Personal email, Nov. 18, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> J. Shklar, *The Liberalism of Fear*, [in:] N.L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Cambridge 1996, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

### b) Catholic Universities and Vatican II

The first is the Catholic High Education in the USA and the second is II Vatican Council. Both are closely related, or even one can say that catholic universities in the USA go further with the ideas of II Vatican Council. The two most important declarations of this event were produced by American theologian: *De libertate religiosa* (On religious freedom) by the Jesuit John Courtney Murray and *Nostra aetate* (Our age) by, although it may sound surprising, the American Rabbi born in Warsaw Abraham J. Heschel. Without these two documents the development of Catholic theology in the last fifty years in the USA would have been simply impossible, and this theology can be considered as a kind of commentary to these documents. Or more precisely, both documents became a departure point of dialogue with modernity. According to John O'Malley Vatican II was first of all "a language-event"<sup>4</sup>. For the first time Catholic theology spoke in a positive way about other religions, and on the capacity of human being to take responsibility of its religious choices. The new language in theology was a sign of a new attitude toward the possibility of formulating religious conviction in words. I think that we can say that the Catholic Church changed the paradigm of its view of other religions - it moved from religious exclusivism towards inclusivism or even pluralism<sup>5</sup>.

This shift of paradigm in the Catholic theology was fully adopted by Catholic Universities in the USA, although not with difficulties. These institutions preserved a great autonomy which could be today observed in the case of Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson from Fordham University. The great advantage that Catholic universities have in the USA is that virtually all of them have boards of trustees (the legal owners) who are for the most part lay persons, and in most cases no bishops sit on those boards or have any direct say in how they operate, etc. The principle of "academic freedom" is so sacrosanct in the USA that presidents of universities can always plead they cannot muzzle the faculty without incurring expensive law suits, which they would probably lose. Bishops have not been able to enforce the mandatum that the Vatican says teachers of theology should have. So the US Catholic academic establishment can, at least to the present, go its merry way. Bishops and the Vatican can of course discipline clergy, but not lay people. There is no way that Fordham would even think of expelling Johnson, no matter what the bishops say because she has

<sup>4</sup> J. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge 2008, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue*, New York 2001.

tenure, a legally binding contract that can be broken by the university only on the grounds of gross neglect of standard duties or grave and public moral lapse. However, some years ago, in 1986, it was different, when the catholic moral theologian Charles Curran was removed from the faculty of Catholic University of America as a dissident against the Catholic church's moral teaching.

**c) American Catholicism is more American than Catholic**

I agree with Harold Bloom who stated in his *The American Religion* where he wrote:

"I argue in this book that the American Religion, which is so prevalent among us, masks itself as Protestant Christianity yet has ceased to be Christian. It has kept the figure of Jesus, a very solitary and personal American Jesus, who is also the resurrected Jesus rather than the crucified Jesus or the Jesus who ascended again to the Father. I do not think that the Christian God has been retained by us, though he is invoked endlessly by our leaders, and by our flag-waving President in particular, with especial fervor in the context of war. But this invoked force appears to be the American destiny, the God of our national faith"<sup>6</sup>.

I don't agree with this statement. Particularly, in the case of theologians deeply involved in dialogue with modern culture. They try to show how different faith is from political using and abusing religion.

Most of his attention he dedicated to Mormons and South Baptists but at the end of the book he observed:

"Since I am persuaded that much of what this book described can be found also in Americanized Catholicism and Judaism, as well as in most mainline Protestantism, much of American religiosity clearly lacks spiritual content"<sup>7</sup>.

I see in this comment rather as a paradox than as a statement, rather a provocation than real description of deep theological debate. And as such, Bloom's book is an invitation to discussion on the condition of American society.

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<sup>6</sup> H. Bloom, *The American Religion with the New Afterword by the Author*, New York 2006, p. 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 285.

#### d) Religion as a Cultural System

In understanding of religion I follow the definition formulated by Clifford Greetz<sup>8</sup> in his essay "Religion as a Cultural System", because it explains the relative success of Liberal Catholicism in the American cultural contest. According Greetz religion is:

"(1) system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality, that (5) the moods and motivations seems uniquely realistic"<sup>9</sup>.

For liberal Catholics their religion fits perfectly in the American democracy and they develop their ideas mainly in five areas, which I will discuss and it will be the main part of my talk. I will conclude my presentation with an interesting remark by John L. Allen, Jr. made by him in the book *The Future Church* which I consider a good introduction to the Catholicism in 21<sup>st</sup> century

### 2. In what spheres American liberal Catholicism is visible?

#### a) Sexuality

The problem of human sexuality was one of the most discussed in Catholic theology in the post II Vatican period, and particularly, when the pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, a document dedicated to this topic. The main theologian who criticized the Vatican doctrine was Charles Curran, at that time a professor at Catholic University of America. A dramatic description of his struggle with Church hierarchy could be found in his personal accounts about his experience with the Roman Catholic Church, *Loyal Dissent: Memoirs of a Catholic Theologian*<sup>10</sup>. In the author's words:

"This book try to explain how the church and moral theology have changed in the past fifty years and how I matured from an uncritical, dutiful, pre-Vatican II Catholic into a loyal dissenter who remains a committed Catholic"<sup>11</sup>.

Of course he was not alone, and in 1968 a group of 600 theologians, authored a critical response to *Humanae Vitae*. He said that one

<sup>8</sup> C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, p. 87-125.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> Ch. Curran, *Loyal Dissent: Memoirs of a Catholic Theologian*, Washington 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. XI.

could disagree in theory and practice with the Pope, which condemned artificial contraception, and still be a loyal Roman Catholic. Curran continued to teach and write about Church's teaching in various moral issues, including premarital sex, masturbation, contraception, abortion, homosexuality, divorce, euthanasia, and in vitro fertilization throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Finally in 1986, the Vatican declared that although a tenured professor, Curran could no longer teach theology at Catholic University of America schools, because

"[...] clashes with church authorities finally culminated in a decision by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, headed by then-Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, that Curran was neither suitable nor eligible to be a professor of Catholic theology". (Curran)

### b) Feminism

One of the first theologian who included a feminist perspective in her theological reflection was Mary Daly, in her book published for the first time in 1968 *The Church and the Second Sex*. She agreed with those who, being engaged in the struggle for the equality of the sexes, have often seen the Catholic Church as an enemy. Because according to Daly "Catholic teaching has prolonged a traditional view of women which at the same time idealizes and humiliates her"<sup>12</sup>. Daly was teaching from 1967 to 1999 in Boston College. After 1968 she became more radical and not only left the church but also declared to be non-Christian. Less radical are mentioned above Rosemary Radford Ruether<sup>13</sup>, and Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza particularly known for her biblical hermeneutic with feminist perspective<sup>14</sup>. Both wrote many books on theological implication of feminism for Catholic theology. I mentioned already Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson from Fordham University who belongs to the mainstream of theological reflection. She proposed a concrete solution for patriarchal concept of God in her book *She who is*.

<sup>12</sup> M. Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex with the Feminist Postchristian Introduction and New Archaic Afterwords by the Author*, Boston 2002, p. 53. Cf. also M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father. Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston 1973.

<sup>13</sup> R. Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston 1993.

<sup>14</sup> E. Schuessler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston 1985; *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York 1998.

*The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discours*. For example, using more inclusive theological language for God (he/she), and for prayer, instead of naming God as the father, perceiving Her also as God the mother, and so on. This book brought her great recognition in Catholic circles<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, lately she was criticized by American bishops for her last book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. It is hard to find any reason for this<sup>16</sup>. There is no sense in the critic, because the book collected, only, ideas already presented in the theological debate for years, but the bishops became more and more conservative, and even generally accepted concept are for them "revolutionary". What is interesting and characteristic for American liberal Catholicism is a long response of Sister Johnson, in which she defends her theology as Catholic and faithful to the tradition.

### c) Jewish-Christian relations

The first book written in the USA by a Catholic theologian concerning the relations between Jews and Christian was *Catechetics and Prejudice. How Catholic Teaching materials View Jews, Protestants and Racial Minorities* written by John Pawlikowski<sup>17</sup> in 1973. One year later Rosemary Ruether published an important book, *Faith and Fratricide. The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* focused on Christian responsibility for anti-Semitism<sup>18</sup>. A mature theological reflection on mutual relation between these two religion could be find in Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* published in 2000<sup>19</sup>. Also Mary Boys edited an very important volume of Catholic theologians dedicated to the new theological approach towards Judaism, which was an answer to the document published in 2000 by Jewish intellectuals *Dabru Emet* on the new attitude towards the

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<sup>15</sup> E.A. Johnson, *She Who Is. The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, New York 1992, 2002<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> E.A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, New York 2007, and her response to the bishops critic could be find in: <http://cnsblog.wordpress.com/2011/10/28/response-from-sister-elizabeth-johnson-to-us-bishops-committee-on-doctrines-latest-statement/> [accessed: 14.12.2011].

<sup>17</sup> J. Pawlikowski, *Catechetics and Prejudice. How Catholic Teaching Materials View Jews, Protestants and Racial Minorities*, New York 1973.

<sup>18</sup> R. Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide. The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, New York 1974.

<sup>19</sup> M.C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding*, New York 2000.

Christian world<sup>20</sup>. In few words we can say, that in these publications we find deeply rooted conviction that both religions have theological right to exist, and that both are expression of a divine will. From the Catholic side we encounter also a honest recognition of the Christian responsibility for the Shoah. From the Jewish side, expressed in *Dabru Emet*, we see the acceptance of this new situation as a good departure point for mutual respect and dialogue.

#### d) Interreligious dialogue

One can learn a great deal from those Christians theologians who went to Asia and returned transformed by their exposure to Asian religions.<sup>21</sup> Asia, mainly, is the place, where Catholic theologians elaborate new Christological approaches. For example, Jacques Dupuis, a Belgian Jesuit, who worked many years in India, invented there the concept of "pluralistic inclusivism".<sup>22</sup> In others words, theologians who accept 'pluralistic inclusivism' are able to see in other religions a right path to God, with equal dignity as the Christian way. Another example, from the new generation, is Peter Phan, an American theologian from Georgetown University. He writes in a similar spirit when he speaks about "being religious interreligiously"<sup>23</sup> or about multiply religious belonging. According to him:

"There is a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and other religions. Not only are the non-Christian religions complemented by Christianity, but also Christianity is complemented by other religions. In other words, the process of complementation, enrichment and even correction is two-way or reciprocal"<sup>24</sup>.

Similar tendency could be observed in the theology of Paul F. Knitter who claims in his last book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, that Buddhist experience deepened his Christianity<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> M.C. Boys (ed.), *Seeing Judaism Anew. Christianity's Sacred Obligation*, Lanham 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Like: Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Enomiya Lassalle, Heinrich Dumoulin, William Johnston, Anthony de Mello, Raimundo Panikkar.

<sup>22</sup> J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue*, New-York 2001, p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> P.C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously. Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, New York 2004.

<sup>24</sup> P.C. Phan, *Multiply Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church*, "Theological Studies", vol. 64, 2003, p. 502.

<sup>25</sup> P.F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, Oxford 2009.



### e) Anthropology – dialogue with postmodernism

One of the most important Catholic thinkers who articulated a new Christian anthropology (independently of the Vatican II) was the American Jesuit Walter Ong<sup>26</sup>. As far as I can see, he was the first Catholic theologian in the XX century who was looking for inspiration outside of Christian theology and took seriously the possibility that religious conviction might change as an outcome of a dialogue with other cultures and religions: “The dialogic approach means you don’t know where you are coming out. You stand to be modified by the other man; he stands to be modified by you”<sup>27</sup>. According to Ong, the center of the Christian message should be the human being as such, an individual person, and not the Holy Scripture, or dogmatic formulations:

“The [...] person of every human being, for believers and non believers, lies in a way beyond statement. The ‘I’ that any one of us speaks lies beyond statement in the sense that although every statement originates, ultimately, from an ‘I’, no mere statement can ever make clear what constitutes this ‘I’ as against any other ‘I’ spoken by any other human being”<sup>28</sup>.

The theological consequences of this way of thinking are enormous. Namely, it means that not doctrinal formulations are at the center of theological reflection, but rather human beings. In other words, before we can start a dialogue between religions, we have to realize that we meet as human beings. How far this new approach will lead us, it is impossible to say. It seems that this kind of dialogue is the only way to avoid the dangerous aspects of any fundamentalism, because we don’t have any more an absolute truth for which we have to die for or to kill for. Ong speaks about American culture, but his observation is also appropriate for the European context. Ong says that each and every text should not be treated as a final truth that cannot be interpreted further. This conviction also applies to the Church’s doctrinal formulations. In Ong’s thinking we can find a basis, and a support, for a fundamental skepticism toward an uncritical acceptance of written tradition, including Christian tradition. In other words, what is needed

<sup>26</sup> Th.J. Farrell, *Walter Ong’s Contributions to Cultural Studies. The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication*, New Jersey 2000.

<sup>27</sup> *An Interview with Walter J. Ong Conducted by George Riemer (1971)*, [in:] Th.J. Farrell, P.A. Soukup (eds.), *An Ong Reader. Challenges for Further Inquiry*, New Jersey 2002, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> W. Ong, *Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and “I”*, “Oral Tradition”, vol. 10, 1995, p. 20.

is a new form of interreligious dialogue in which not the texts, but the people involved, will play the most important role.

A good illustration of these possibilities is the book by Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, in which the author presents the consequences for Christology which enters in dialogue with postmodern context.<sup>29</sup> Again the result is that it is impossible to have the only one and absolute Savior for all, as traditional Catholic theology claimed. The reaction of Vatican to this proposal was to forbid Haight to teach this subject to the students of theology.

### 3. The Future Church

John L. Allen, a Catholic journalist and the author of the book *The Future Church. How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, summarizes the recent history of Catholicism in one sentence: "The recent part of Catholicism belonged to the liberals, its present belongs to the evangelists, and the future belongs to the Pentacostals"<sup>30</sup>. I found a strong confirmation of this statement in the book by Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, in which he describes the development of this new form of Christianity:

"Since there were only a handful of Pentecostals in 1900, and several hundred million today, is it not reasonable to identify this as perhaps the most successful social movement of the past century? According to current projections, the number of Pentecostal believers should surpass one billion before 2050"<sup>31</sup>.

This statistical and demographic fact has to make American Catholics, and not only catholic liberals, think, that the center of Christianity is moving into other direction – towards Asia and Africa. But the future of Catholicism is a new topic which we don't have time to deal with now.

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<sup>29</sup> R. Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, New York 1999.

<sup>30</sup> J.L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church. How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, New York 2009, p. 438.

<sup>31</sup> Ph. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford 2002, p. 8.



STANISŁAW OBIREK

### **Contemporary Liberal Catholicism in the USA**

#### **Abstract**

American liberal Catholics are able to show that they overcome the traditional catholic authoritarianism. We can find many reasons for the particular situation of the Catholic Church in the USA. One of them is the Catholic High Education in the USA and the second is II Vatican Council. Both are closely related, or even one can say that catholic universities in the USA go further with the ideas of II Vatican Council. The two most important declarations of this event were produced by American theologians: *Dignitatis humanae* and *Nostra aetate*. The problem of human sexuality was one of the most discussed in Catholic theology in the post II Vatican period, and particularly, when the pope Paul VI issued *Humanae vitae*, a document dedicated to this topic. The main theologian who criticized the Vatican doctrine was Charles Curran, at that time a professor at Catholic University of America. One of the first theologian who included a feminist perspective in her theological reflection was Mary Daly, after her and less radical are Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza particularly known for her biblical hermeneutic with feminist perspective, and Elizabeth A. Johnson who proposed an concrete solution for patriarchal concept of God. Very important is a contribution of American liberal Catholics in Jewish-Christian relations, interreligious dialogue, and even with postmodernism.

**Keywords:** Catholic University, interreligious dialogue, Liberal Catholicism, postmodernism, Vatican II.

STANISŁAW OBIREK

### **Współczesny katolicyzm liberalny w USA**

#### **Streszczenie**

Amerykańscy liberalni katolicy są w stanie pokazać, że pokonują tradycyjny katolicki autorytaryzm. Możemy odnaleźć wiele przyczyn, które legły u podstaw szczególnej sytuacji, w jakiej znalazł się Kościół katolicki w USA. Pierwszą z nich jest katolickie szkolnictwo wyższe w USA, kolejną stanowi Sobór Watykański II. Obie są ze sobą ściśle powiązane, a nawet można powiedzieć, że uniwersytety

katolickie w Stanach Zjednoczonych kontynuują idee Soboru Watykańskiego II. Jego dwie najważniejsze deklaracje: *Dignitatis humanae* i *Nostra aetate* zostały wykreowane (odpowiednio) przez amerykańskiego teologa oraz amerykańskiego rabinę. W okresie posoborowym jednym z najbardziej dyskutowanych problemów w teologii katolickiej była kwestia ludzkiej seksualności, szczególnie gdy papież Paweł VI wydał poświęconą temu zagadnieniu encyklikę *Humanae vitae*. Głównym teologiem, który krytykował nauczanie Watykanu, był Charles Curran, wówczas profesor na Katolickim Uniwersytecie Ameryki. Z kolei jedną z pierwszych teolożek, które w swojej refleksji teologicznej uwzględniły perspektywę feministyczną, była Mary Daly. Następnie warto wymienić (mniej radykalne) Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza (szczególnie znaną ze swej hermeneutyki biblijnej, uprawianej z perspektywy feministycznej) oraz Elizabeth A. Johnson, która zaproponowała specyficzne rozwiązanie patriarchalnej koncepcji Boga. Niezwykle istotny jest wkład amerykańskich liberalnych katolików w relacje żydowsko-chrześcijańskie, dialog międzyreligijny, a nawet w postmodernizm.

**Słowa kluczowe:** uniwersytet katolicki, dialog międzyreligijny, liberalny katolicyzm, postmodernizm, *Vaticanum II*.