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Christian Social Ethics in France

Zusammenfassung

Die Verfasstheit christlicher Ethik in Frankreich ist eng mit dem dortigen Verständnis von Säkularisierung und der Idee der Nation als abstrakte Gemeinschaft von Individuen verbunden. Aber besonders in Bezug auf die unterstützende Rolle von Religion und spirituellen Ressourcen für den sozialen und ökologischen Wandel deuten sich Veränderungen in verschiedenen Debatten sowohl in der katholischen Kirche als auch gesamtgesellschaftlich an.

Auch wenn die Zahl der bekennenden Christen auf 38% innerhalb der Bevölkerung gesunken ist, spielt die christliche Soziallehre weiterhin eine wichtige Rolle, weil das soziale Engagement der Kirche ein fächerübergreifendes Nachdenken und gemeinsames Handeln fördert. Einige Themen polarisieren hierbei jedoch und offenbaren zwei verschiedene theologische Perspektiven. Eine politisch rechte identitätsorientierte Perspektive „von-oben“, die sich etwa gegen die gleichgeschlechtliche Ehe ausspricht und eine links-politische Perspektive „von-unten“, welche sich z. B. dem Kampf gegen globalen Kapitalismus verschrieben hat.

Abstract

The place of Christian social ethics in France is tied to the French conception of secularism, which conceives of the nation as an abstraction of particulars. However, prospects for change are apparent in several debates, both in the Catholic Church and in society, notably regarding the role of religion and spiritual resources in order to support societal transformation and ecological transition. Even though the number of people claiming to be Christian has decreased to 38% of the population, Christian social ethics continues to play a vital role through the Church's social movements, fostering interdisciplinary reflection and collective action. Some topics still tend to polarize and reveal two different theological perspectives, one 'from above' and identity-oriented such as the opposition to gay marriage on the right; and one 'from below', such as the fight against global capitalism on the left.

The place of Christian social ethics in France is tied to the French conception of secularism and the evolution of societal debates regarding ethical question in France: on the one hand, with the exception of Alsace and Lorraine¹, Christian social ethics is not taught in state universities,

1 Alsace and Lorraine are still subject to the concordat of 1801 between Napoleon Bonaparte and Pius VII, which was abrogated in 1905, when these two regions were under German rule. The University of Strasbourg includes a faculty of Catholic theology and a faculty of Protestant theology, and the University of

but only in Catholic universities, often as part of a theological curriculum and sometimes as part of a social science curriculum; on the other hand, ethics is not taught as a self-standing discipline in institutions of higher learning and remains either confined to philosophy, or appears in more technical – and relatively specialized – curricula (engineering, natural sciences and medical studies) that include topics in applied ethics. In addition, university professors in philosophy inherit the hard French conception of secularism, which conceives of the nation as an abstraction of particulars and engenders suspicion of religiosity, which generates self-censorship on the part of Christian teachers regarding their denominational affiliation. To give two recent examples, a nun was recruited as a lecturer in philosophy at a public university without being able to mention her congregation, and a philosophy professor shared his frustration that he had never been able to discuss subjects related to his convictions of faith, among colleagues, and at the level of the university authorities of the State, for fear, he said, of being penalized in his academic career.²

1 Secularism and Christian Social Ethics in France: New Developments

However, prospects for the transformation of this situation appear in several debates, both in the Church and in society at large. These debates have been intensifying after the recent attacks against Jews (in Toulouse in 2013, then in Paris in January 2015) and Christians (murder of Father Hamel in July 2016), and against the symbols and values of a liberal society (on the premises of *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, in the *Bataclan* concert hall in November 2015, in Nice in July 2016) by radicalized people

Lorraine in Metz has a department of theology (part of its unit of formation and research in human sciences and arts), with a choice between two courses: Catholic theology and religious pedagogy. These are the only French public universities where theology is taught. They participate in the education of priests and pastors and of lay clergy (catechists and teachers of religion in primary and secondary education) and award state degrees in theology, which exist nowhere else in France. They are, however, training and research units in their own right (for further information see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concordat_in_Alsace-Moselle, accessed October 5, 2016 [Wikipedia n. d. a]).

2 Personal communication, 2016.

claiming to act in the name of the Islamic State. They concern in particular the conditions of secularism favoring the integration of all believers in the secular nation, the means of mobilizing Christian resources to foster political projects relating to ecological transition and social cohesion in a pluralistic society: French society is faced with immediate challenges of enormous inequalities and increased marginalization of part of the population (primarily of foreign origin) who is being excluded from the benefits of globalization, as well as with the more remote challenges – related to climate change – of switching to sustainable living standards. These social and ecological issues question our ability to be more supportive towards the most vulnerable populations today and tomorrow, in our country and at a global level.

Faced with challenges of life and death for a part of humanity and the need to transform our cultures and write new collective narratives, Christian social ethics is recognized by a growing number of actors as playing a role that might have been underestimated in a period of secularization and technicist optimism.

It is primarily social ethics in general that is consulted in a new way by generations in search of meaning. It is worth repeating the definition given by Roger Mehl, professor at the Protestant theology faculty of Strasbourg: “Social ethics is about critical reflection on existing social structures and collective action in order to achieve the reform of these structures or the establishment of new structures, knowing that this reflection and action is dominated by a fundamental ethical question, the one which Gaston Berger said was the question posed by any prospective thinking: What kind of human being do we want to form?” (Mehl 1967, 14). The influence of Marxism and socialism on social ethics was noteworthy as an attempt to transcend individual ethics. This influence, which seemed to be in tension with a Christian – and liberal – perspective, centered on the message addressed to each individual person, and with the situation of secularized societies where the Church is being relegated to the private sphere. The risk was then – on the liberal side – to promote either a pietistic attitude, opposed to the call to live the life of the Spirit in this world, or a fundamentalist legalism with regard to the Scriptures.

Let me now turn to the development since the 1970s: at the end of the period of prosperity during the boom decades after the Second World War, succeeded by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the illusion of an end of history marked by the triumph of liberalism and the ideal

of a globalized economy and then, symbolized by September 11, 2001, the return to awareness of the importance of borders and cultural and political identities. In this world, where religious powers return in force, Mehl's analysis is still relevant. He aims to formulate a dynamic and creative social ethics, "the utopia of a responsible society, in which the other is the source of responsibility and the opportunity for service" (Mehl 1967, 74), and which calls for the creation of institutions to serve one's brothers effectively. According to Mehl, Christian social ethics is inseparable from a testament to the Kingdom of Christ, action in view of this coming Kingdom, and an association of "a recapitulated and reconciled unity and a singular personality" (*ibid.*, 41). This perspective echoes the image of the polyhedron proposed by Pope Francis as a symbol of globalization – as opposed to the sphere:

"Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seeks to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone." (EG 236)

This perspective articulates global structural challenges and the particular way in which individuals and groups, embodying different traditions and representations of good life, take on these challenges in a way that includes the most vulnerable.

Christian Social Ethics provides a theoretical framework in terms of spiritual life and discernment, practical resources, and symbolic resources. In France, the mobilization around ecology reveals different ways of using these resources and different debates between different theological and political sensibilities – which go beyond ecology and which we will specify later. Even though the number of people claiming to be Christians has decreased to 38 % of the French population (of the 36 % who claim to be Catholic and 9 % are regular practitioners, cf. European Social Survey, 2014), more and more individuals and groups emphasize the importance of religion to question our way of life with hope. The number of people registering for retreats in spiritual centers

or on the Internet ('Notre Dame du web' or 'Retraite dans la ville')³ on subjects relating to justice, ecology and solidarity, illustrates this spiritual turn. We should also note the development of movements that seek to promote a secular spirituality and reconciliation between believers and people in spiritual search, marking a renewed interest in the contributions of Christianity. Regarding both spiritual and practical orientation, texts such as the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* by Pope Francis have an impact that goes well beyond the borders of the Catholic Church. The experiences shared by Christians, academics or interested laypersons at conferences on the encyclical letter since June 2015 across France indicate that it is positively received in some non-denominational circles, which are already in search of other ways of life and eager to embrace a spiritual dimension. Finally, the imagination conveyed by religious traditions can contribute to the arts (notably cinematographic, as evidenced by the success of the film "Men and Gods", about the martyr monks of Tibhirine: 3.2 million tickets sold in 2010)⁴ and local initiatives, which may have an impact on broader behavior. Let us also recall how, in secular France, the figures of the struggle for justice and charity, like Abbé Pierre⁵ or Sister Emmanuelle⁶, were among the favorite national characters for a long time. With a proper understanding of the conditions in French society, these contributions of the Christian tradition can enrich the theoretical debates on the ends and the means of real and positive transformations of our societies.

3 For further information see <http://www.ndweb.org/>, accessed September 4, 2017 and <http://www.retraitedanslaville.org/>, accessed September 4, 2017.

4 For further information see https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Des_hommes_et_des_dieux, accessed, September 4, 2017 (Cf. Wikipedia n d. b).

5 Abbé Pierre OFM Cap (born Henri Marie Joseph Grouès [1912–2007]) was a French Catholic priest, member of the Resistance during World War II, and deputy of the Popular Republican Movement (MRP). In 1949, he founded the Emmaus movement, with the goal of helping poor and homeless people and refugees.

6 Sister Emmanuelle (1908–2008) was a French nun, whose work in the slums of Egypt was often compared to Mother Theresa's.

2 Theology from below

One aspect of this understanding is linked to the connection between Christian social ethics and theology: two positions coexist. One of them is to recognize that the Christian human and spiritual experience of meeting the other, fragile and vulnerable, the recipient of love, are privileged sources for theological reflection. This perspective, inspired by Rahnerism, carried today by theologians such as Christoph Theobald (2006), Etienne Grieu (2009), Alain Thomasset (2015), or Catherine Fino (2017) may be in tension with a “vertical” conception of theology which starts from the top of the Church hierarchy and the attempt to define the Christian mystery, and its consequences in the life of the faithful. Each of the two perspectives has critics: the first because it risks diluting the Christian identity, the second because it could insist on magisterial discourse without taking into account particular contexts. Recent developments tend to show the importance of relying on a perspective based on the word of the poor, on an anthropology of giving, on the aim of the common good and the commons, for fundamental moral theology and even for Trinitarian theology and Christology in France (Fino 2017). The “Common Good” Chair of the Catholic Institute of Paris, inaugurated in November 2016, brings together, in its scientific council, moral theologians, exegetes, ecclesiologists, philosophers and economists from different institutions and with different political leanings, and constitutes a part of the process that began with the creation of a Research Unit “Religion, Culture, Society” (EA 7403) as recognized by the French State.

These two positions correspond, in fact, to two different emphases in thinking about the social thought of the Church: on the one hand, as a research in dialogue with the social sciences and, on the other hand, in reference to principles that define the implementation of a core doctrine. The encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* expresses the tension between these perspectives well:

“As a result, this doctrine, beginning with the outstanding contribution of Leo XIII and enriched by the successive contributions of the Magisterium, has now become an updated ‘doctrinal corpus’. It builds up gradually, as the Church, in the fullness of the Word revealed by Christ Jesus and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 14:16, 26; 16:13–15), reads events as they unfold in the course of history. The Church leads people to respond, with the support of rational

reflection and the human sciences, to their vocation as responsible builders of earthly society.” (SRS 1)

It is therefore both inspired by the Word of God and a “doctrinal corpus” forged by “rational reflection and the support of the human sciences”.

Although the social encyclicals invite us to consider the two movements together, it is necessary to recognize the different ideological leanings that exist. Social ethics can divide people and communities, and both believers and non-believers (for example with regard to homosexuality, economic growth and the regulation of finance). The debates about the “marriage for all” that legalized marriage between persons of the same sex in 2013, forged a broad movement of opposition from Catholics. Polling on these Catholics shows that a large majority of believers vote the right or even to the extreme right⁷ and do not recognize themselves in the libertarian positions easily invoked by some representatives of the parties of the left. However, initiatives also emerged which tried to overcome fixed dogmatic positions and to include the reflections of the Catholic Church, for example on homosexuality, in an anthropological framework enriched by the contributions of different social sciences (Association Un en Christ 2016).

In the context of a crisis of social ties and the disintegration of social cohesion, a major challenge for Christian social ethics in France is the reaction of inclusive pastoral care, based on a theology of gradual changes.⁸ It is also about strengthening the understanding of the situations experienced by many people today, and working on behalf of the vulnerable and against structural evils.

3 The Integrating Role of Christian Movements

Church actors play an important role in various national and international movements of solidarity and advocacy. However, there remains a gap between the knowledge of the social thought of the Church, which is

7 In 2014, 43% of Catholics expressed feeling close to right-wing parties and 19% to the National Front. During the 2015 regional elections, 33% of Catholics voted National Front in the first round (Cf. ESS survey 2014 and Cévipof / Ipsos / Le Monde survey, January 2016).

8 In line with the Pope Francis exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL, 2016).

shared by a minority of people, and the active involvement of Christians in various organizations in virtue of their convictions and experience. But it is interesting to note that the theoretical debates (between a top-down approach, with a more explicit reference to the Christian faith, and a bottom-up one) also correspond to the different approaches and strategies of social ecclesial movements during the last 70 years.

For instance, the Secours Catholique (Caritas France), created in 1946 by Jean Rodhain, who worked as a chaplain in prison camps during the war, is devoted to the provision of emergency aid and to international charity through channels favored by the ecclesial institutions, respecting the local ecclesial approaches of these different countries. In contrast, the CCFD (Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement), created in 1966 to respond to a call for hunger aid in the world – after an alarming report by FAO – is a movement that from its inception focused on the structural causes of injustice and is open to partnerships with non-denominational movements.

Both of them work to defend the most vulnerable in our societies and to work with them for structural transformation. These movements act at the heart of society by providing not only practical skills, but also expertise on collective action and advocacy. The CCFD Terre Solidaire is a very active member of the network ‘Citizen Forum for Corporate Social Responsibility’ which takes advocacy for corporate social responsibility and the fight against tax evasion. It has close links with non-governmental and non-denominational organizations such as Amnesty International, Sherpa or the Nicolas Hulot Foundation both within the framework of citizen mobilization and within the framework of government institutions. An example of the latter is the CSR Platform⁹, set up by Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in 2013, which brings together representatives of the economic sphere, civil society, the academic sphere and the government and parliament to advance common positions on business regulation and social and environmental standards to meet current challenges. Secours Catholique was co-initiator of the “publish what you pay” initiative in order to put pressure on companies and the states that host extractive industries with a view to fighting tax evasion.

9 For further information see <http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/plateforme-rse>, accessed September 4, 2017.

The two movements represent two slightly different sensibilities – the Catholic identity of the Secours is certainly more explicit than that of the CCFD-Terre Solidaire, and the Secours has historically advocated a political neutrality that is less pronounced in the CCFD. Jean Rodhain’s formula, “today’s charity is the justice of tomorrow”, which was adopted by Véronique Fayet, the current president of the Secours Catholique, expresses a strategy based on micro-actions in the field, combined with consultations and close relations with public authorities in order to change the regulations (cf. Mabile 2016). The CCFD adopts a more prophetic posture, at a distance from public institutions, to move more immediately towards a fight against structural injustices and proposals for the evolution of regulations, not only nationally but internationally.

It is noteworthy that the two movements are united in their work with and against public authorities and companies, reinvigorating a sense of politics as a search for a sustainable and practical utopia. A serious challenge in French society is the dialogue between separated worlds – to use the categories of geographer Christophe Guilluy (2016), who highlights the growing distance between “metropolitan France” and “peripheral France” –, based on a better knowledge of social facts, a discernment in view of a collective interpretation, and joint action. From this point of view, the question is how to mobilize a Christian approach in this discernment – the envisioned means sometimes explicitly refer to the framework used by Catholic Action Movements, “to see, judge and act”, which were very much alive in France for several decades.

In this regard, the development of centers of social action such as the CERAS (Center for Research and Social Action, founded by the Jesuits in 1903) is an interesting initiative to promote awareness among members of Catholic organizations, and other NGOs and unions. They draw from Christian sources and aim to enact Catholic social teaching. This center is engaged with the magazine *Projet*¹⁰, published in partnership with Secours Catholique, CCFD-Terre Solidaire and the Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation. It forms an interface between different fields of intellectual and practical engagement, and provides a forum for exchange between different Christian movements (Scouts and Guides of France, Christian Movement of the Executives (MCC), CCFD-Terre

10 For further information see <http://www.revue-projet.com>, accessed September 4, 2017.

Solidaire, Secours Catholique, Semaines Sociales de France, etc.) and a platform for denominational and non-denominational political, economic and academic actors. The CERAS staff conducts an annual session for students in philosophy and theology at the Centre Sèvres; joint research seminars (between professionals and academics) take place on issues relating to social justice (for example, on the issue of income inequality or the links between social justice and ecological justice.)

4 New Projects, New Alliances

The activity of different centers also illustrates the current restructuring of social ethics through interdisciplinary linkages. In what follows, I will name a few examples of this trend:

- *Integral ecology, new economic models – including a reflection on digital economy – and new ways of life.* An important nexus exists in Lyon, around a network of Christian economists (GRACE: Group of research on Christian anthropology and business) and at the Catholic University, a Chair “Jean Bastaire: For a Christian Vision of Integral Ecology: Theology, Ethics and Spirituality”. In Paris, besides the “Common Good” Chair of the ICP already mentioned, there is a research department “Economy and Society” of the Bernardins College (theological faculty and cultural center of diocese Paris), co-directed by Baudoin Roger (priest of the diocese of Paris) and Olivier Favereau (economist at Paris X – Nanterre University). It brings together theologians, economists, political scientists, lawyers and management professors from various public and private institutions, and its work on companies (e. g. on property, on multinationals and constitutionalization of the world) enjoys good academic recognition (cf. Favereau/Roger 2015). In Toulouse a research center on the anthropology of giving, which works at the crossroads of philosophy, moral theology and management, was created around Tanguy-Marie Pouliquen. The “CODEV – Enterprises and Development” program I run at ESSEC Business School (Paris) also brings together researchers from different disciplines, including the Jesuit Gaël Giraud, currently Chief Economist of the French Development Agency (cf. Giraud/Renouard 2012); it is focused on the ethical and political responsibilities of multinational corporations, and on the assessment of the contribution of private business to development, in a perspective inspired by the

- social thought of the Catholic Church and explicitly linked to the Capability Approach. Some research at CODEV is carried out in close connection with the Centre Sèvres.
- *Bioethics and health, and issues related to artificial intelligence as well as 'enhancement' of human beings, sexual ethics, the couple and the family.* The Institut Catholique de Paris has developed an interdisciplinary reflection on vulnerability. Various theologians work on the ethical issues of health, such as Marie-Jo Thiel in Strasbourg, Dominique Foyer in Lille, Jean-Marie Gueulette in Lyon or Brice de Malherbe at the faculty Notre Dame (Bernardins). The department of biomedical ethics of the Centre Sèvres, headed by Bruno Saintôt and following the work of Patrick Verspieren, has close ties with caregivers and institutions such as the Centre Jeanne Garnier (palliative care).
 - *Citizenship and the role of religious sources,* in order to support reflection and practice, creating a place for cultural diversity and the reception of migrants in our country, while preserving social cohesion and patriotism in a flourishing political community. At the Centre Sèvres, this approach is pursued by political philosophers (Véronique Albanel) and theologians (Alain Thomasset) in collaboration with CERAS and the Jesuit Refugee Network (JRS France – Welcome).

These themes are also addressed transversally by the service “Family and Society” of the Conference of Bishops of France as evidenced by the publication of two books on the Common Good (Conférence des évêques de France 2014 and 2016) for parishes and church organizations, dealing with the themes international solidarity, interreligious dialogue, ecology, violence (T1) and non-violence, politics, labor, property, lifestyles, secularity, company (T2).

Ultimately, Christian social ethics continues to be vibrant in the Church movements that embody it and promote an innovative blend of direct action and long-term advocacy, supported by academic research, both in the social sciences and in theology. The difficulty for the theoretical deepening of social ethics in connection with theology is twofold: on the one hand, it is linked to the aging of clergy and religious life and to the small number of priests and scholars who hold a doctorate in moral theology or applied social ethics. One example of this is the unclear future of the only French-language journal of moral theology and Christian ethics, the RETM (Journal of Ethics and Moral Theology, founded by the Dominicans, and taken over in 2016 by ATEM, Association of

Theologians for the Study of Ethics). On the other hand, some topics continue to be the subject of debates and confrontations between theological and spiritual ideologies: for example the human ecology highlighted by Benedict XVI is mobilized by certain Catholics – notably in the movement of the “watchmen” (“*les Veilleurs*”)¹¹ (Bès et al. 2014) – to carry out a double critique of economic liberalism and cultural liberalism (marriage for all), which together could feed a closed national identity; this perspective is also in tension with Pope Francis’ conception of ecology as the concern for the common home, and with the priority given to the quest for transcultural solidarity and social justice in fragmented, plural and unequal societies that foster exclusion. On the more specific themes of climate change and migration, it is to be hoped that there will be closer collaboration between churches at European level in order to emphasize the importance in each state of taking more seriously the social and ecological stakes in our future.

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11 For further information see [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Veilleurs_\(mouvement\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Veilleurs_(mouvement)), accessed September 4, 2017.

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