

SLOVAK LUTHERAN SOCIAL ETHICS, PAST AND PRESENT

by Vasil Gluchman

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Since 1989 Slovak Lutheran theology and ethics, including social ethics, have been attracting more and more attention, not only in Slovakia, but also abroad. Recent works dealing with this theme reflect this rising interest.¹ In his review of my book, Paul Brndjar makes several critical remarks that I would like to address here. On the one hand, I would like to explain the approach I took when writing my book. On the other hand, I would like to point out that after 1989 Slovak Lutheran ethics got its second wind. It does not merely confine itself to examining questions of the past, but also tries to offer all people (not just Lutherans or other Christians) answers to topical moral questions and problems that concern them now.

When writing my book *Slovak Lutheran Social Ethics*, I tried to present to the American reader the intellectual richness of the social ethics of Slovak Lutherans mainly of the twentieth century because this century (and especially its second part) is, from my perspective, the most interesting and also the most important. In my book I do not deal with Slovak Lutheran ethics of the nineteenth century, the only exception being two works by J. A. Fabry, published in 1898 and 1899, which are,

¹ Brndjar, P. "Vasil Gluchman: Slovak Lutheran Social Ethics (book review)", *Religion in Eastern Europe* 2004, 24(1), pp. 40-41; Forgacova, M. and Hinlicky, P. R. "Slovak Churches and Proselytism. Religious Pluralism and nationalism in the current history of Eastern Europe", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1999, 36(1-2), pp. 116-141; Hinlicky, P. R. "Slovak Lutheran Theology. Reflections on its Problems and Prospects", *Religion in Eastern Europe* 2003, 23(1), pp. 26-36.

however, put into the intellectual context of the early years of the 20th century since Fabry's works represent the beginnings of the Slovak Lutheran ethics of this century.²

In my opinion, the main value of my book lies in the fact that it examines the theoretical contribution of Slovak Lutheran philosophy and theology to the intellectual richness of the Slovak nation. I am a philosopher and an ethicist and that is why it is quite natural that I did not concentrate in my book on examining the theological problems discussed by Slovak Lutheran theologians. For the same reason, I also did not present detailed analyses of the political, ideological, cultural, social and economic aspects of the situation in twentieth century Slovakia. I mention these aspects in my work only to the extent necessary for explaining a given opinion. In the history of philosophical and ethical thinking, if we, for example, discuss Aristotle's or Kant's ethics, we do not analyse their opinions from the perspective of the complex political, economic, ideological, or social context of the era they lived in. Also, it is not necessary to compare their opinions with all of the then existing intellectual streams. In my book I concentrate exclusively on the ethical debates appearing in the intellectual milieu of Slovak Lutherans, because in Slovakia during the entire given period, there was an absence of any real philosophical and ethical debates that could be placed into a wider ecumenical context—not to speak of the lack of any discussions with non-religious, philosophical and ethical intellectual circles. Such discussions started to appear in greater number only in the 1990s.

As a philosopher who deals primarily with the history of ethical thinking in Slovakia, I mainly examined the intellectual wealth present in Slovak Lutheran ethics and its theoretical contribution to the history of philosophical and ethical thinking in Slovakia. I focused especially on the theoretical solving of the ethical and moral problems that appeared in Slovak Lutheran ethics in the twentieth century and which were reflected in this ethics. For this reason, I did not examine, in any specific way, the period of the Second World War, because only one significant work in Slovak Lutheran ethics appeared during that time, the work of Emil Boleslav Lukac, which I discussed in the context of the development of Slovak Lutheran social ethics in the

² Gluchman, V.: *Slovak Lutheran Social Ethics*. Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press 1997, pp. 43-44.
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first half of the twentieth century.³ Besides this work, the period of the Second World War did not produce any other significant theoretical contribution to the history of philosophical and ethical thinking in Slovakia.

The real development of Slovak Lutheran social ethics appears only after the Second World War (in 1946-1948), and, after a certain break, again in the later 1960s. However, Slovak Lutheran social ethics underwent the most significant development only in the 1980s. Therefore, I paid the greatest attention in my book to this period in the history of Slovak Lutheran social ethics. I really believe that in this period we can find its most important theoretical contribution to the history of ethical and philosophical thinking in Slovakia in the twentieth century. This is true despite the political and ideological situation that dominated Slovakia, and Czechoslovakia in the given period, but which at that time was already influenced by many positive changes resulting from the politics of perestroika. These positive changes allowed the more expressive voices of a group of mature Slovak Lutheran theologians dealing with the problems of social ethics to be heard, for example, K. Gabris, K. Nandrasky, D. Ondrejovic and I. Kiss. I. Kiss continues this up to the present day and in his works he concerns himself with currently topical moral and ethical problems.⁴ His work in the fields of ethics and especially theology has been praised also, for example, by Paul R. Hinlicky.⁵

Kiss's newest work *Jezisova kazen na vrchu v zivote krestana. Eticke problemy 5. kapitoly Evanjelia podla Matusa [Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Life of the Christian. Ethical Issues in the Fifth Chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew]* (2002) can be called a compendium of contemporary Lutheran Christian

³ Gluchman 1997, pp. 43-44, 46, 51, 62.

⁴ Kiss, I. "Die Besonderheiten in der Theologie von Comenius als Quelle seiner Bemühungen um die Allverbesserung", in: U. Nembach-H. Rusterholz-P.M. Zulehner (eds.): *Informationes Theologiae Europae*. Frankfurt-Berlin, Peter Lang 2001, pp. 241-250; Kiss, I. "Die theonome Autonomie in der Kultur und die Erziehung der Theologiestudenten", in: *Rostocker Forum Theologie*, Band I, Rostock 1997, pp. 37-39; Kiss, I. "Johann Amos Comenius' Vorstellungen über die Einheit Europas und der Welt", in: U. Nembach-H. Rusterholz-P.M. Zulehner (eds.) *Informationes Theologiae Europae*. Frankfurt-Berlin, Peter Lang 2003, pp. 281-288; Kiss, I. "Luther's Ethics Face to Face with the Social Challenges of Today", *Seminary Ridge Review* 1998, 1(1), pp. 18-25; Kiss, I. "Paradise as Paradigm", in P. Piivoinen and P. M. Bouman (eds.): *Europe in the Making*. Joensuu, University of Joensuu (Finland) 1995, pp. 46-55.

⁵ Hinlicky 2003, p. 26

ethics because it deals with and looks for answers to some moral questions concerning the everyday life of the Christian (and not only of the Christian). In the case of this book it is certainly justified to speak about Christian ethics and not merely about morality because Kiss bases his arguments on the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, which speaks about what the Christian should be and not what he is. Precisely this book brings Slovak Lutheran ethics into discussion with other philosophical, ethical and intellectual opinions in Slovakia, because Kiss's opinions transcend their religious and denominational framework and become interesting also for people outside the Lutheran (or other Christian) milieu.

I base my ideas about ethics and morality on an emphasis of the role and significance of the consequences of our behaviour and conduct for our morality and virtue (see chapter 1 in my book *Slovak Lutheran Social Ethics*, or my other work *Human Being and Morality in Ethics of Social Consequences*).⁶ That is why I was attracted by the starting point of Igor Kiss's discussion, according to which in ethics it is not right to fulfil any requirement dogmatically, without considering given circumstances. He claims that it is always necessary to take into consideration the possible consequences of certain conduct.⁷ I really believe that the ethics and morality of the Christian, or of any sensible person, cannot be based just on extreme positions, expressed as an either/or, which are supposedly valid always and everywhere, in any circumstances, regardless of the situation in which the person finds himself/herself in, and regardless of the possible consequences of decisions.

Kiss bases his reflections on the ethics of the contemporary Christian, as well as on the opinion of Martin Luther who 'believed that the Sermon on the Mount applies to every Christian only in his individual ethics, but not in social ethics (when he has to act as soldier, policeman, judge, economist, politician)'.⁸ Therefore, according to Luther, the Christian acting in accordance with the ethics of the Sermon

⁶ Gluchman V. *Human Being and Morality in Ethics of Social Consequences*. Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press 2003; Gluchman, V. *Slovak Lutheran Social Ethics*. Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press 1997.

⁷ Kiss, I. *Jezišova kazen na vrchu v zivote krestana. Eticke problemy 5. kapitoly Evanjelia podla Matusa* [Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Life of the Christian. Ethical Issues in the Fifth Chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew]. Liptovsky Mikulas, Tranoscius 2002., p. 5.

⁸ Kiss 2002, p. 20.

on the Mount must be humble in the face of God and before people; he must respect everybody and not feel superior; he must know how to endure suffering; he must be mild, tender, kind; should yearn for justice and support everything that is pure, good, just and fair; he should spread peace. However, as we will see later, Kiss, in presenting his argument, partially modifies this starting position based on Luther's opinion by not separating individual and social ethics so strictly.

According to Kiss, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is the ethics of love that needs to be spread into the world as a part of the world's humanization, which is already happening.⁹ This is a very interesting thesis that corresponds with my opinion that during its historical and moral development, humankind has achieved a certain moral progress, which can be expressed in Kiss's terminology as a certain humanization of humankind. But I am not completely sure if the claim that humankind has undergone the process of humanization is completely accurate, because human history shows many examples that contradict that belief. That is why it seems to be more appropriate to speak about a certain moral progress of humankind, while accepting the fact that new forms of moral evil still develop, and to say that progress (in Kiss's terminology 'humanization') is reflected in the fact that the good preserves, thanks to our effort, a certain primacy over evil; a primacy that perhaps increases, but only very, very slowly.

In Kiss's view, the Christian should follow in his life the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, such as love, rightness, equality, mercy, peace, service, truth, and the preservation of life. Christian ethics, then, in his opinion, does not have only a transcendental and after-life dimension, but also an immanent and worldly dimension. He believes that already in this life we can partially experience our salvation by God if we live according to the ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰ It is acting according to these principles that contributes to the humanization of the world, regardless of whether the acts are performed by Christians or 'secular people'.

⁹ Kiss 2002, p. 25.

¹⁰ Kiss 2002, p. 26.

In his reflections on the ethical and moral message of the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, Igor Kiss pays great attention to the analysis of individual commandments that concern the ability to control anger and hatred, love of one's enemy, the problem of marital infidelity and divorce, the careless vow and vengeance. He rejects the possibility of taking justice into one's hands. His reactions to these questions reflect the belief that the Christian should primarily strive for love, peace and quietude, but this does not mean to be passive, or not to resist evil by violence, or to lapse into some form of quietism. Kiss bases his belief on the fact that 'in the realm of individual ethics the Christian should be a person of the Sermon on the Mount – mild, forgiving, kind, gentle. But if he faces things that are not acceptable in ecclesiastical or social life, he must know how to be strict, to stand on principle, and, if necessary, to fight vigorously against evil. These two ethics are not in mutual conflict since God also acts in this way: he is kind sometimes and strict at other times.'¹¹

I had some minor doubts about Kiss's opinions on the possibility of punishing evil, since he writes that it is the role of judicial authorities and police to punish an evil act, which makes the search for personal retribution unacceptable. God's anger at the wrongdoer can be expressed also through secular authorities. The punishing of the aggressor is not a part of individual ethics but of social ethics. It is the concern of the secular authorities to act against evil.¹² But later he states: 'At the moment when the Christian is attacked by someone, he has to defend himself. In that case the attacked one represents the non-present secular authority and resists evil on behalf of that authority'.¹³ I believe that this statement presents a very good solution, dispersing the doubts that I have formulated above. Kiss believes that, in principle, the punishment of evil is to be performed by secular authority and, as such, it belongs to the sphere of social ethics. However, when an individual is attacked, he has to fight back and act on behalf of the non-present secular authority. It seems to me that it is relatively often

¹¹ Kiss 2002, pp. 34-35.

¹² Kiss 2002, p. 36.

¹³ Kiss 2002, p. 36.

that an individual can, or must act on behalf of the non-present secular authority, and Kiss provides a moral justification for such acting.

Defence against evil is not at the centre of individual ethics, but if necessary, an individual can, or must take over the duties of secular authority and, through his action, handle the problems that belong to the sphere of social ethics. This conclusion is certainly not a result of a misconception in Kiss's argumentation, since human beings participate in both individual as well as social ethics. This is exactly the point in which Kiss modifies his opening thesis based on Luther's view. In this respect, we can also reflect on the question of when a person's action falls into the sphere of individual ethics and when it falls into the sphere of social ethics. I think that it is not possible to draw a clear line between the types of action that fall undoubtedly into the sphere of individual ethics, and the types of action that fall, equally undoubtedly, into the sphere of social ethics. Exactly for this reason I appreciate Kiss's modification of the original thesis.

In my book *Slovak Lutheran Ethics* I write that from the perspective of the ethics of social consequences, it is necessary to approach religion through its social-ethical dimension that reflects its ability to help believers to live a this-worldly life. I formulated my opinion on religion and the Church on the basis of how religion and the Church help people to live in the present day world, to find orientation in the complex problems of the present. I write there that from the perspective of the ethics of social consequences, I judge the social-ethical side of religion and the Church on the basis of the social consequences that the impact of religion and the Church brings to people and to society.¹⁴

Also on the basis of such a formulation of the criterion, it is possible to perceive Kiss's work as certainly valuable not only from the perspective of Slovak Lutheran Christian ethics (as it really helps the search for the solution of everyday moral problems face by Lutheran Christians), but also from a wider perspective, because it offers certain guidelines for all good-willed people, explaining how to humanize the world; how to achieve moral progress on the individual level as well as

¹⁴ Gluchman 1997, p. 30.

how to solve some moral problems on the social level. I believe that it is a compendium of Christian ethics that has something to say not only to Christians, but (since neither its content nor its impact can be reduced only to religion and believers) also to others because with its message aimed at the actualisation of universal moral values it concerns all people. That is why I believe this work to be a very positive theoretical (but not only theoretical) contribution of Slovak Lutheran ethics to the history of Slovak philosophy and ethics at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and also to the philosophical (ethical) discussion in Slovakia.