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TO GO TO THE PERIPHERIES!
LOOKING FOR THE CONTRIBUTION
OF THE NON-WESTERN CULTURAL PATTERNS
TO THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Abstract. The now-western cultural patterns play more and more important role in the social commitment of the World Council of Churches. This is certainly a sign of the growing impact of Christians from the non-European and non-Western countries. The cultural patterns they promote, appears to be unfamiliar to the European Christians. They might be also sometimes controversial as they are used due to various political reasons. Yet, the race to the bottom of the Western civilization, which seems to be more and more fast, urges to search new anthropological and theological images and categories. The article highlights the two particularly important concepts of *Sumak Kawsay* and *Ubuntu* which might be used by the ecumenical movement when facing various challenges of the postmodern world.

Key words: World Council of Churches, ecumenism, *Sumak Kawsay*, *Ubuntu*, postmodernism.

The speech pope Francis gave to Cardinals in the lead-up to Conclave contains an imperative call to Christians: “Evangelizing pre-supposes a desire in the Church to come out of herself. The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery.”¹ Christianity was born in the geographical and social peripheries and has never left them behind. Yet, the paradoxal mystery of God’s paths has been

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¹ <http://www.news.va/en/news/bergoglios-intervention-a-diagnosis-of-the-problem> [05.02.2014].

often revealed in the derisive reversal of human categories and human perception. Bethlehem (“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel”—Mt 2,6), cross (“but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”—1 Cor 1,23), sinners (“For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”—Mt 9,13): The content of Bible confirms many times that the main acts of salvation has been made on the political, social and normative margins of the then world; thus—on the peripheries.

When reading sociologically the call of pope one may refer it to the two perspectives. Both references are connected to the sociological concepts of the division between centre and peripheries. The first one is related to the perception of society where peripheries are concentrated around the centre formed by social elites and the elite groups mould the culture of their society. The second one could be derived from the so-called theory of dependency, of which main examples have been provided by the sociological concepts from the Latin America. According to them, the planet is divided into the two sectors: centres constituted by the rich post-industrial and often post-colonial countries and the poor peripheries which are economical dependent.²

There has been a prevalence of the binary thinking in the history of human grasping of reality, even though more and more criticized in the post-modern tradition of deconstruction. According to this critique, “binary thinking almost always builds in dominance or privilege—sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly.”³ Yet, dichotomous perception of the world appears to be one of the easiest ways to order the facts and meanings. Pope’s call to go to the peripheries may be read out as a part of this perception. There is but an important distinction with regard to the words of Francis: unlike the relation of dominance and dependence, the call to go to the peripheries of the Church is declared to be the task as well as the chance for Christians. The peripheries are equally Christian as centre is; there is not and must not be any theological distinction between the continents or countries, social groups and local patterns of culture. Yet, it is impossible to juxtapose theology and pure sociological and geographical factors in order to appraise one’s Christianity.

² Piotr Sztompka, *Socjologia zmian społecznych* (Kraków: Znak, 2010), 82.

³ Peter Elbow, “The Uses of Binary Thinking,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 13 (1993), 1: 51.

To go to the peripheries may therefore be grasped as a command to explore social and geographical margins of the Church in order to include them to the encompassing-all movement of Christianity. Yet, it might be worthwhile to highlight another one aspects of this call of which main content is of cultural character.

1. CHRISTIANITY IN FACE OF CHALLENGES OF THE SECULAR WORLD

A collapse of the institutional religiosity in the Western countries appears dramatically enormous even though one considers this process as a concurrence of many social, cultural and geographical factors of different intensity.⁴ An apparent twilight of the traditional churches is immersed in the secularization connected closely with the gradual process Max Weber called disenchantment of the world (*Entzäuberung der Welt*). Theological side of Weber's claims has presented Dietrich Bonhoeffer when insisting that church and Christianity must be preaching for the world which has moved out from its adolescence and reached an adult age (*der mündig gewordene Welt*).⁵ This which is described as the secularization has accurately been summed up by Ernest Gellner when he wrote: "Sociologists have long entertained, and frequently endorsed, the theory of secularization. It runs as follows: the scientific-industrial society, religious faith and observance decline. One can give intellectualist reason for this: the doctrine of religion are in conflict with those of science, which in turn are endowed with enormous prestige, and which constitute the basis of modern technology, and thereby also of modern economy. Therefore, religious faith declines. Its prestige goes down as the prestige of its rival rises."⁶

The process of secularization is usually referred to Christianity. There are many causes of this concurrence of which the most important seem to be the following ones: Firstly, since the Enlightenment Christianity set a religious background of the "planned secularization", whether political or cultural.

⁴ Janusz Mariański, *Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym. Studium socjologiczne* (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010), 10.

⁵ Gerhard Ludwig Müller, *Für andere da. Christus-Kirche-Gott in Bonhoeffers Sicht der mündig gewordene Welt* (Konfessionskundliche und kontroverstheologische Studien, 44) (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1981), 29

⁶ Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.

Furthermore, as Ernest Gellner highlighted, Christian theology has shifted on from the fundamental thinking of an undoubted faith into something flexible and liquid, what was contradicted to the faith itself.⁷ An example of Islam which is said to be resistant to secularism, provided us with extremely different experiences concerning the clashes of religion and contemporary world.

There are various attitudes of Christians towards the Western secularism. Christianity adopted partly a theological conviction expressed by many contemporary theologians that secularism is a natural process to be recognized and confirmed by the church in order to be more efficient. But another part of Christians rejects this belief when claiming that Christianity and contemporary Western culture clash with one another. This ambiguity of attitudes might be expressed in the terms of fundamentalism and modernism.⁸

According to many Christians, a specific case is provided by Europe. “No Religion please, We Are European”; this title of one of the Internet blogs might be an accurate summary of the state of religion in the European countries. Europe is becoming less and less religious which is also connected to the growing hostility to religion in the institution of the European Union. This belief is often intertwined with the conviction that the European societies are immersing in the anthropological and cultural crisis. “Has God left Europe for good”; “has God not moved his vineyard to another place (Mk 12,1)?”—ask many journalists and theologians. A number of such sentences bear witness to disappointment and a feeling of alienation which is experienced by many Christians in Europe.

Theologians and church leaders try to find a solution of how to face the challenge of secularism. The belief of “moving the vineyard to another place” appears sometimes as a specific feeling of *Schadenfreude* expressed by many Christians. Yet one must ask if the churches may resign from their European duties? Or maybe should not be the less and less religious countries in Europe recognize as the starting point of the process which will be encompassing entire planet? And, on the other hand, is the theological euro centrism we may still observe in the Catholic Church really accurate? Are not both the technological revolution and globalization affecting Christianity in the way they are affecting another social institutions?

There is a paradoxal tension within the questions highlighted above. Our societies as well as Christian churches are standing before many ambiguities:

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

the local and the global, the secular and the religious, the individual and the communal. The most important task for theology and for Christianity is to find the ways between these ambiguities in order to develop the culture of justice, peace, love and faith. The going to peripheries might be declared to be one of that ways. Yet, Christian churches must ask themselves whether is it still possible to build their identity on the cultural patterns provided mainly by the Western culture, and further, whether the cultural framework of the Greek, Jews and Latin categories are not too narrow for the new globalized world of quick and liquid relations?

2. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE NON-WESTERN CULTURAL PATTERNS IN THE CONCEPTS OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

An answer on these questions has been searched to the certain extent by the ecumenical movement, particularly by the World Council of Churches. Yet, ecumenism seems to be an ideal tool to create a new framework for Christianity as it embraces entire world (*oikumene*) and uses the dialogue as its main method. Furthermore, ecumenism is also a key task clearly enrooted in the Jesus Christ's call "That they may be one." Both, the ecumenical tool as well as the ecumenical key task create together an enormous chance to the divided, though globalized world.

There is a special place within the ecumenical movement which is occupied by The World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC has an exceptionally-important position on the map of Christianity. It is the largest institution which unites non-Catholic Christian Churches. It defines itself as "a global community of Churches whose mutual relationships and common actions are the sign of common faith in Jesus Christ." It was established in 1948 as a combination of two organisations that pioneered the ecumenical movement - the Faith and Order Commission and the Life and Work Group. Currently, it includes 349 member Churches from 140 countries. As a result, it has over 550 million Christian members. Therefore, judging by the size, it is arguably the most representative institution which presents non-Catholic Christianity and represents various religious traditions.

The global reach of the WCC, following the principles of dialogue and cooperation, striving to solve fundamental problems which plague the contemporary world, make the WCC an area in which experience, ideas and

concepts which refer to the world's problems are widely shared, and also a place where they are gathered, interpreted, conceptualised and presented to the world. As a consequence, the WCC is a unique source of ideas coming from all over the world and gathered in one place. In this way the keystone which is a set of basic elements of the Christian doctrine must maintain the set of categories, notions and patterns coming from even totally-different cultural systems. With this keystone in place, these systems do not confront each other. Rather, they strive for a self-interpretation in the perspective of a theological community. Thus, cultural diversity must be viewed as a tool which enriches the content of the activity, not as a factor causing conflicts.

As a result, the WCC mediates in the transfer of cultural elements, with the transfer being bilateral, since this basis is the core of the content of Christianity as defined by the WCC. Individual WCC units often make use of the categories that are characteristic of the particular cultural system by applying them to their interpretations of a given social and economic phenomenon.

Consequently, the social commitment of the WCC may be declared to be a conspicuous example of how non-Western cultural patterns could be included in the ecumenical, thus Christian discourse. Even though some of them are becoming theologically controversial issues, ecumenical theology and ecumenical movement must still get out apart from the known-itself categories in order to find new images and notions better expressing the diversity of the contemporary world.

An important statement from São Paulo, released by the WCC in cooperation with other ecumenical organizations as a fruit of the meeting, displays the examples of such images. The participants of the conference, which has been convened to discuss the "New Financial and Economic Architecture," claimed that they "reject the economic abstraction of *Homo Oeconomicus*, which constructs the human person as being essentially insatiable and selfish, and affirm that the Christian perception of the human person is embedded in community relationships of *Ubuntu*, *Sansaeng*, *Sumak Kawsay*, conviviality and mutuality. Contrary to the logic of neoliberals, as believers we are called to think not only of our own interests but also of the interests of others."⁹ The notions mentioned above has been suggested even more strikingly when authors of the WCC document "Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call to Action" stressed that they "affirm the "good life" (*Sumak Kawsay* in the *Kichua* language and the concept of *Waniambi a Tobati Engros* from West

⁹ http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/files/sao_paulo_statement.pdf [01.02.2014].

Papua) modelled by the communion of the Trinity in mutuality, shared partnership, reciprocity, justice and loving-kindness”¹⁰ and they “must embody a “transformative spirituality” (Commission on World Mission and Evangelism) that re-connects us to others (*Ubuntu and Sansaeng*), motivates us to serve the common good, emboldens us to stand against all forms of marginalization, seeks the redemption of the whole Earth, resists life-destroying values and inspires us to discover innovative alternatives.”¹¹

Various postmodern concepts recognize and confirm a lack of solid categories in the contemporary reality. Furthermore, economy is concentrated around the neoliberal dogma of the free-market philosophy. The economic Dominant Interpretive Discourse, using the expression coined by Alain Touraine,¹² rests on the apparently overwhelming combination of individualism, economic success and the anthropology of *Homo Oeconomicus*. One may ask if the concepts of *Ubuntu*, *Sumak Kawsay*, *Sansaeng* and *Waniambi a Tobati Engros* brought in to the contemporary *Agora* of ideas could help to face a deep anthropological crisis of the present Western culture and to strengthen ecumenical striving for reconciliation, though they sometimes are used due to political reason. This question is referred mainly to the two first concepts as they are introducing in many political, social and cultural projects of various orientations.

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF SUMAK KAWSAY

There is an inundation of expressions of what actually the *Sumak Kawsay* means. The term of *Sumak Kawsay* is derived from the *Quechua* language and may be identified with another expressions enrooted in the indigenous traditions of the Andean region: the *Suma qamaña* (*Aymara* from Bolivia), the *Ñande reko* (*Guarani* in Paraguay), furthermore, the representatives of the Coordinación Andina de Organización Indígenas (CAOI) indicates also to the concepts of *Mapuche* (Argentina and Chile) and *Kolla* (Argentina).¹³

¹⁰ “Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A call to Action,” *The Ecumenical Review* [WCC] 64 (2012), 4: 590-597.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 595.

¹² Alain Touraine, *Thinking Differently* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 13.

¹³ David Cortez, Heike Wagner, *Zur Genealogie des indigenen “guten Lebens” (“sumak kawsay”) in Ecuador; in Lateinamerikas Demokratien im Umbruch*, ed. Leo Gabriel and Herbert Berger (Mandelbaum Verlag, 2010), 175.

Sumak Kawsay may be translated as a principle of living well (Spanish: *buen vivir*), the concept is sometimes expressed also by the phrase “living well but not better.” The larger part of the content of this principle has been encompassed in this distinction. A turning point of the popularity of the *Sumak Kawsay* was when it has been included into Bolivian constitution as its main concept and paradigm.¹⁴

Rene Ramirez describes *Sumak Kawsay* as the “complex concept, non-linear, historically developed and constantly under revision, which identifies as goals the satisfaction of needs, the achievement of a dignified quality of life and death, to love and be loved, the healthy flourishing of all in peace and harmony with nature, the indefinite prolongation of cultures, free time for contemplation and emancipation, and the expansion and flourishing of liberties, opportunities, capacities and potentials.”¹⁵ Mark Becker adds that it is “a new way of thinking about human relations that was not based on exploitation. Social movements should regain control over state structures to use them for the common good rather than for the profits of elites.”¹⁶

Consequently, *Sumak Kawsay* may be grasped quite differently from the Western anthropological principles which are well exhibited by the three assumptions: Firstly, it assumes an interrelationship between every human life and nature; the sense of every existence must be referred to nature, or rather to the cosmos. Secondly, this reference limits the reach of the Western anthropocentrism, and furthermore, *Sumak Kawsay* is of deep political importance as it is used to break up the neo-colonial system of dependency in the present world.¹⁷

In his some empathetic and picturesque descriptions of what *Sumak Kawsay* is, Fernando Huanacuni, one of the most prominent lobbyist of the concepts argues that “Living well is to live in harmony with the life cycles and with the multiverse, and in balance with all forms of existence. Living well means to live in harmony and equilibrium, in harmony with Mother Earth’s cycles, with cosmic cycles, with history’s cycles, with all life’s cycles, and in complementary balance with all forms of existence. Within this

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁵ <http://climateandcapitalism.com/2010/10/06/pachakuti-indigenous-perspectives-degrowth-and-ecosocialism/> [01.02.2014].

¹⁶ Marc Becker, *Pachakutik: Indigenous Movements and Electoral Politics in Ecuador* (Critical Currents in Latin American Perspective Series) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 27.

¹⁷ Cortez, Wagner, *Zur Genealogie des indigenen “guten Lebens,”* 170.

Cosmo vision, all forms of existence are equal in status; all have complementary relationships, all are living, and all are important.”¹⁸

The concept of *Sumak Kawsay* may therefore be recognized as an asking about the human happiness. Yet, how to be happy appears as one of the fundamental questions of one's existence. According to the indigenous traditions, there is any possibility to reach the ideal of “living well” in the tradition of the West, where the principle of living well is defined within around individual and intellectual human nature. Unlike the western individualism, according to the *Sumak Kawsay*, happiness may be reached only when respecting the order of Nature and the order of community. Consequently, the good of individual is contained in the good of community and the good of Nature; they are deeply intertwined each other. This is why there is a distinction between the “living well” and the “living better” as the *Sumak Kawsay* rejects the prevailing development paradigm of the contemporary economy. Unlimited and self-justifying development is “the race to the bottom”, when destroying human relations and affirming economic growth as the main point of reference.

There are a number of projects of which the main content is oriented on the principle of the *Sumak Kawsay*. Yet on the other hand, it is criticized by many. Firstly, it is revealing its political instrumentalization, particularly by the Eco socialist movements. Furthermore, many sociologists indicate that the concept of living well is constructed rather than really enrooted in the indigenous thinking. One asks whether it has not over interpreted the ancient *Quechua* expression when including various patterns from other systems of culture and using it for political reason. And finally, according to many, the idea of *Sumak Kawsay* is somewhat naïve, without any view of economic and social dependencies. It is another one dangerous utopian vision constructed to found a new society.

4. THE UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY

The term of *Ubuntu* is well known to the people. But it is referred mainly to “the world's favourite free operating system, with more than 20 million people preferring it to commercial alternatives.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Mirna Cunningham, “Lama laka: Our Indigenous Path to Self-Determined Development,” in *Towards an Alternative Development Paradigm. Indigenous People's Self Determined Development* (Baguio City: Tebtebba Foundation, 2010), 92.

¹⁹ <http://www.ubuntu.com/?cp=close> [01.02.2014].

The project is based on the principles of open source development according to which users are encouraged to use free software, study how it works, improve upon it, and distribute it. The *Ubuntu* is then spread and developed through the selfless cooperation. This way of business is therefore acknowledged as a counter philosophy to that of Microsoft and other big companies which affect so-called New Economy.

The examples of *Ubuntu* as the operating system introduces well into the elucidations what the term of *Ubuntu* means. Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, outstanding social rights activist and one of the most important figures of African Christianity, said that “ One of the sayings in our country is *Ubuntu*—the essence of being human. *Ubuntu* speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality—*Ubuntu*—you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World.”²⁰

The shortest and best way to express this term in English is that *Ubuntu* means “I am because you are”. Every person may be a person only in relation to other. Individuals and communities are strictly intertwined and, unlike Western culture, there are other engines of human conduct than the individualism. Further, for Africans, to live alone appears as a terror, what was picturesque expressed by Ryszard Kapuściński in his book *The Shadow of the Sun*: “Alone on the earth! Hamed cries out, and there is a note of terror in his voice, for that is the one thing a Somali cannot imagine: finding himself alone in the world.”²¹

The anthropological concept according to which a person is a person through person is common to all African languages and cultures. Consequently, the concept of *Ubuntu* might be declared to be a label of the entire anthropology of the Sub-Saharan Africa. It contains a comprehensive catalogue of moral principles including dignity, solidarity, compassions, mutual concern, participation, legality. Mogobe Ramose claims that “African philosophy has long been established in and through *Ubuntu*. That here not only the Bantu speaking ethnic groups, who use the word *Ubuntu* or an equivalent

²⁰ http://globalministries.org/resources/special-days/gm-sunday/GMMissionStory_Ubuntu_rev.pdf [01.02.2014].

²¹ Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Shadow of the Sun* (New York: Random House, 2001), 301.

for it, are referred to, but the whole population of sub-Saharan Africa, is based on the argument that in this area ‘there is a “family atmosphere”, that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa.’²² Examples of the similar to *Ubuntu* concepts are provided by the Senegal conception of *Tenangai* which means a spirit of the mutual hospitality or the Zimbabwewan term of *Ubukhozi*.

Some of the authors stress that it would not be correct to reduce the concept of *Ubuntu* only to the ethical dimension. In fact, the concept refers the ground of human existence and its place within cosmos and spirituality. Ramose, when making a basic semantic scrutiny, shows how interrelation of individual and cosmos is constituted. He “discusses this concept also in a comprehensive ontological horizon. It defines how the being of an African is anchored in the universe. This is primarily expressed by the prefix *ubu-*, which contains the being as enfolded, while the stem *-ntu* means its unfolding by means of an ‘incessant continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes of being’. This process of unfolding includes the emergence of the speaking and knowing human being. As such it is called *Umuntu*, which is able ‘to conduct an inquiry into be-ing, experience, knowledge and truth’. Thus *-ntu* as ‘the process of continual unfoldment may be said to be the distinctly epistemological’ aspect of being.”²³

An intelligible description of what the *Ubuntu* means may sound as follows: “A human being is a human being through human beings or the being human of a human being is noticed through his or her being human through human beings ... The ontological figure of *Ubuntu* is commonly converted into an example and imperative for human conduct.”²⁴ Thus, according to the African philosophy, human nature reflects a cosmic order and expresses in human interrelations embedded in this order. Consequently, the civilization of the West with its free-market philosophy and the paradigm of the economic growth must be discerned as unhuman and destroying forces which corrupt social relations.

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²² Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), 208

²³ Heinz Kimmerle, “Mogobe B. Ramose: African Philosophy Through Ubuntu” (Review), *African Philosophy*, 13 (2000), 2: 189-197.

²⁴ Henk van den Heuvel, Mzamo P. Mangaliso, Lisa van de Bunt, *Prophecies and Protests: Ubuntu in Global Management* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2006), 71.

The concepts highlighted above play more and more important role in the social commitment of the World Council of Churches. This is certainly a sign of the growing impact of Christians from the non-European and non-Western countries. The cultural patterns they promote, appears to be unfamiliar to the European Christians. They might be also sometimes controversial as they are used due to various political reasons. Yet, the race to the bottom of the Western civilization, which seems to be more and more fast, urges to search new anthropological and theological images and categories. The world desperately needs a new order, encompassing the entire globalized planet. Christianity with its theology respecting the rights of every human being as well as of all creation appears as an only way to reach this order. The concepts of *Sumak Kawsay* or *Ubuntu*, provide Christianity with the instruments which may help to include peripheries into the global Christian system of culture as well as to enrich and strengthen this culture in order to be more efficient and more intelligible.

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IŚĆ NA PERYFERIE!

W POSZUKIWANIU WKŁADU NIEZACHODNICH WZORÓW KULTUROWYCH
DLA RUCHU EKUMENICZNEGO

Streszczenie

Wzory kulturowe wywodzące się spoza cywilizacji zachodniej odgrywają coraz większą rolę w społecznym zaangażowaniu Światowej Rady Kościołów. Jest to z pewnością znak wzrastającego wpływu chrześcijan z krajów pozaeuropejskich. Wzory kulturowe, które oni promują, wydają się chrześcijanom z Europy obce. Mogą również jawić się jako kontrowersyjne, ponieważ niekiedy są wykorzystywane z powodów politycznych. Jednakże równia pochyła cywilizacji zachodniej, zdająca się być coraz bardziej stroma, przynagła do poszukiwania nowych obrazów i kategorii antropologicznych. Artykuł naświetla dwie szczególnie istotne koncepcje: *Sumak Kawsay* i *Ubuntu* i stawia pytanie, na ile mogą być one wykorzystane przez ruch ekumeniczny w stawianiu czoła wyzwaniom ponowoczesnego świata.

Słowa kluczowe: Światowa Rada Kościołów, ekumenizm, *Sumak Kawsay*, *Ubuntu*, ponowoczesność.

