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Report on the thesis by Jakub Štofaniák “Between Cross and Hammer. The Reception of Social Thought in the Catholic Church During the First Half of the 20th Century”

This excellent thesis represents a major contribution to the currently vivid debate among historians about the relationship between modernization and secularization.

Main-stream historiography on 19th and 20th century European history has long suggested that the rise of industrial societies was inevitably, and irreversibly, associated with secularization – that, ever since the 18th century, religion was, as Wolfgang Reinhard has put it in the 1990s, gradually “running out” of society. More recent research – and, not least, current political experiences – have challenged such assumptions. Some historians would now claim that, in Europe, the 19th century in particular was a period of “re-confessionalisation” (Olaf Blaschke), and that religion represented, and continued to represent throughout the 20th century, a most relevant marker of identification, and thus a decisive factor for the creation of political, social, and cultural adherences.

Is this, however, also true for those spheres of political and social action that were at the core of the transformation processes towards modernity in the 19th and 20th centuries: the industrial world, the emergence of the so-called ‘social question’, and the sphere of labor conflict and trade-unions? This is the question that Jakub Štofaniák addresses in his comparative study of the reception of Catholic social thought and of the practices of Catholic commitment to the labor movements in Czechoslovakia and Belgium in the Interwar period. There are, of course, pioneering studies in this field too – like E. P. Thompson’s book on “The making of the English Working Class” or Dirk H. Müller’s study of Catholic labor organizations in the Weimar Republic. But Stofanik is first to inquire into how Catholic social thought and

the practices of Social Catholicism were intertwined in East Central Europe, and to discuss the issue in a comparative, East-West perspective.

As a background for his empirical study, the author provides a thorough reconstruction of the roots of Social Catholicism as an ecclesiastical paradigm and as a movement in the second half of the 19th century. We learn how Catholics throughout Europe, lay actors and theologians, discovered, since the 1850s, the world of industrial labor as a critical field of ecclesiastical action, and how the modern 'social question' eventually became incorporated into the churches official teaching since pope Leo's XIII. Encyclical Rerum Novarum of 1891. Clearly, the most important process of reorientation behind this was the transition from a 'paternalistic' approach to the social question (based on the traditional concept of charity) towards a new understanding of the matter that accounted not only for the 'systemic' relevance of the social question in industrializing societies but also for the agency of the people in question, the workers. This was also the context in which the overall position of the Catholic church in view of the upcoming 'great debates' of the 20th century took shape: The church took a critical stance in view of both liberal capitalism (as a fundamentally inhumane system) and the secular labor movement (mainly in its Marxist variant). Social Catholicism was to open a 'third way' that promised to reconcile Christian ethics with the economic challenges of the time, and to find modes of social and political negotiation more appropriate than party politics or trade union action. Such concepts of a 'third way' remained however, as the author points out, highly ambiguous and, in particular, extremely vague in view of what kind of social and political action in defense of the (human) rights of the workers was to be suggested. In that sense, the dilemmas that Catholic social action was to face throughout the first half of the 20th century seemed to be built into Social Catholicism from the start.

In its empirical chapters, the study focusses, in the first place, on the discourses of Social Catholicism in the late Habsburg Empire and, subsequently, in Czechoslovakia. It considers all possible levels of debate and communication: the stance of the ecclesiastical hierarchies, the teaching in ecclesiastical institutions, discussions within the clergy, academic debates, Catholic party politics, and it makes for that purpose ample use of all kinds of published sources – the protagonists' programmatic statements, pastoral letters, the press (national and local, professional and popular). What we learn from that analysis is, very generally speaking, that under the common roof of Social Catholicism different groups of actors

propagated rather diverging, and partially contradictory, projects of a Catholic renewal of society.

In the Czechoslovak case, the debate turns out to have been heavily dominated by the high clergy and the bishops who ultimately tended to be rather reluctant to fully endorse the teaching of Social Catholicism in its 'pure' form; for them the aim of consolidation 'national' Catholicism within the existing political and social framework seemed to be higher on the agenda than the implementation of a new, more 'just' social order. Moreover, Catholic party politics appear to have largely instrumentalized the language of Social Catholicism primarily for the purpose of criticizing their political opponents, rather than to pursue a concise agenda of social reform. And not least: While young priest, the most active supporters of Social Catholic thought, expressed much enthusiasm for the new ideas while attending universities and preparatory seminars, they often had to compromise with rather different expectations when confronted with the realities of service in their parishes.

In all, the messages communicated to the faithful obviously remained quite ambiguous, if not contradictory. This made it difficult for the Catholic actors 'in the field' to convince the workers of the authenticity of the church's social commitment - even if, among the clergy, the concept of Social Catholicism was indeed very much an authentic, in a way grass-root movement.

On a second level, the thesis inquires into Social Catholicism as a social practice – and this is where a systematical trans-national comparison between Belgium and Czechoslovakia comes in. Here, the study focusses on two aspects: the analysis of the organizational structures and the protagonists of Social Catholicism in both countries, and, in a second step, the reconstruction of Catholic involvement in three exemplary cases of social conflict (Krompachy 1922, Duchcov 1931, Borinage 1932).

The comparative analysis firstly reveals that in Czechoslovakia organized Social Catholicism never reached the same degree of organizational consolidation and of social acceptance as in Belgium. Belgian Catholic workers organizations (trade unions and youth organizations) were able to gain massive support and credibility by acting independently of political parties and of the Catholic church hierarchy. The Catholic actors in Czechoslovakia instead remained under significant external influence throughout – being under the pressure by the bishops or by Catholics parties, and having to cope with competing national agendas. In any case, the

Czechoslovakian protagonists of Social Catholicism always had to deal with competing agendas of other 'Catholic' actors, and never actually managed to establish a solid position within the social field in question.

The three presented case-studies confirm this assumption. While in Belgium the Catholic workers' organizations were indeed able to mobilize, and guide, their followers in situations of acute labor conflict, their Czechoslovak counterparts always remained in a somewhat defensive position. They reacted, rather than acted, in situations of labor conflict, and when they tried to retrospectively defend the claims of the defeated workers they did not find explicit support by the Catholic 'authorities'. The project of Social Catholicism thus was, in Czechoslovakia of the Interwar period, a lost case – although, in the period between 1944 and 1947, it potentially provided 'communicative bridges' again between traditional beliefs and a new order of social justice.

Ultimately, the study leads to the following thoroughly argued conclusions:

- Social Catholicism of the Interwar period represented much more than a merely 'defensive' strategy in reaction to both nationalism and lay Internationalist trade-unionism. By combining the concepts of social solidarity, Christian ethics and corporatism Social Catholicism indeed amounted to a genuine project of a 'third way' in the future development of industrialized societies.
- The fact that Czechoslovak Social Catholicism was however much less successful than the respective Belgian movement can be attributed to a number of factors: the primacy of national over social agendas, the deep entanglement of official church politics and that of Catholic parties with the Catholic social movement, thus the lack of political and institutional independence, and of social credibility, of Catholic social action in the field.
- One could therefore argue that, in this case, Social Catholicism failed to prove its validity as a genuine counter-project of modern society in spite of its intellectual and social potential.

This is a most valid result. It represents the maximum of what could be achieved in the framework of the study's methodological and empirical design, on the basis of the vast body of sources examined.

At the same time, these results provoke further questions in view of the study's starting point. The author most convincingly claims that religion had not 'run out' of society by the end of the 18th or the 19th centuries; apparently, religion continued to provide orientation

for large segments within the industrializing societies, and Christian churches reacted to that social demand – for which Social Catholicism in the Interwar period provides ample evidence. However, the explanations for the ultimate failure of the project of Social Catholicism as a political and social movement that the study offers mainly refer to ‘strategic’ aspects: the ambiguities in the public rhetoric of Social Catholicism; the dilemma of competing social and political agendas within the Catholic movement. But if religious belief and confessional loyalties were actually still relevant factors in early 20th century’s societies: How is that reflected in the thinking, and in the political and social options, of contemporary workers? What motifs decided about the individuals’ option between socialist trade-unionism, nationalist projects and Social Catholicism?

Obviously, these are questions that are in fact beyond the research agenda of the present study. Judged by the standards of a PhD thesis Jakub Štofanič’s study merits to be qualified as outstanding.

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