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Role and Importance of Tradition in Contemporary Culture

Abstract: Western civilization faces a radical economic, political, moral and value crisis. The contemporary crisis is reflected in personal relationships, in relation to nature and to life in general. Contemporary culture is becoming “a culture of death”, in which manipulating with human lives is justified by freedom of scientific investigation (and desire for success and profit). Modern culture is characterized by despondency, lack of vision and absence of the sacred (holiness). The present article examines the contribution of religions and the role of tradition in solving today’s situation. Traditions provide value systems and standards of excellence, yet they frequently depend on culture and are often rather inconsistent with their original religious beliefs. I shall argue that tradition is not ossified and static, but a dynamic structure that must constantly be subjected to rational inquiry and critical evaluation. Present time is characterized by different traditions, which complete and enrich each other, but often also contradict each other. Great theological openness and willingness for dialogue among the holders of traditions are indispensable if all various traditions are to co-exist.

Key words: tradition, dialogue, values, contemporary culture, religion

Povzetek: **Vloga in pomen tradicije v sodobni kulturi**

Sodobni zahodni svet doživlja radikalno krizo na gospodarskem, političnem, moralnem in na vrednostnem področju. Kriza sodobnega časa se odlikava v medosebnih odnosih, v odnosu do narave in v odnosu do življenja nasploh. Sodobna kultura postaja kultura smrti, v kateri se manipuliranje s človeškimi življenji opravičuje s svobodo znanstvenega raziskovanja (in z željo po uspehu in dobičku). Sodobno kulturo zaznamujejo malodušje, pomanjkanje vizije in odsotnost občutka za sveto. V tej razpravi bomo skušali ugotoviti, kakšen je prispevek religij pri reševanju dane situacije, ali natančneje: kakšna je pri tem vloga tradicij. Tradicije so nosilke vrednostnih sistemov in standardov odličnosti, pogosto pa so odvisne od kulturnih razmer in nemalokrat nedosledne pri zvestobi svojim virom verovanja. V razpravi bom zagovarjala tezo, da tradicija ne sme biti pojmovana kot nekaj statičnega, okostenelega, temveč kot dinamična kompozicija, ki mora biti nenehno izpostavljena racionalnemu preiskovanju (rational inquiry) in kritičnemu vrednotenju. Sodobni čas je zaznamovan z različnimi tradicijami, ki se medsebojno dopolnjujejo in bogatijo, mnogokrat pa si

tudi nasprotujejo. Nujnost za soobstoj vseh različnih tradicij sta maksimalna teološka odprtost in pripravljenost na dialog med nosilci vsake tradicije.

Ključne besede: tradicija, dialog, vrednote, sodobna kultura, religija

1. Tradition and contemporary time

In the second decade of the third millennium, religions face a completely different world. Not only the Catholic Church but every other Church and religious community are entering a new era called by some a post-Christian era (Bigović 2009, 9) and by others a postmodern era or a culture of postmodernism. This process can be described as a shift between cultures which have not been fully settled on and have been left unclear in many aspects. Some criticize the postmodern era for lacking values, but the postmodern time has its values which are marked by feelings of comfort, excitement, content, self-actualization, and self-expression.

The individual was once determined by well-defined social frames with generally accepted rules and standards which defined the role and status of the individual offering him or her a sense of security. In the old and primary communities the individual was necessarily a part of society (Juhant 2009, 293); clan, polis, etc. It seems that today the postmodern individual has broken the chains of these bounds and is now facing a variety of choices and evaluations. Individualism is at first glance an undisputed achievement of the postmodern era as it gives the individual the chance to decide and choose freely while retaining all options for self-actualization. Focusing only on oneself and one's own personal interests, however, leads to isolation, alienation and passivism. The postmodern individual lives by and for him- or herself, has no relation to tradition, and is occupied only with him- or herself thus feeling lost and insecure.

He or she no longer feels part of a broader system which defines and offers him or her stability. The positive role of postmodernism expresses doubt over all previous narratives and ideologies. No ideology, philosophical or religious belief is dominant anymore. Postmodernism is also flawed in that it lacks concreteness, absoluteness and anything to offer stability and certainty.

The postmodern era is full of complex, unresolved and confusing issues. Pluralism, relativism and subjectivism all have a dramatic effect on the life of the individual, who is becoming a more insecure, decentralized and dependent subject. This produces a conflicted society, a society in which the sense of belonging to society and the sense for the common good are fading, which is becoming even more evident in the financial crisis at the beginning of the third millennium.

Another concept of the postmodern age closely linked to individualism is secularization – a decline in the significance of religion (Bigović 2009, 11). Putting aside the Muslim world, faith and religion play an important role in the individual's life; however, they have little or no significance for the wider community. The postmodern age is, nonetheless, not anti-religious but rather anti-ecclesiastical.

In his book *The Orthodox Church in 21st Century*, Radovan Bigović (1956–2012), the most prominent theologian of the Serbian Orthodox Church, argues that the importance of the role Christianity and Christian communities is diminishing. The Church no longer standardizes public and social life (Bigović 2009, 8) and engages too little in scientific discourse. Christians are now a minority and some even speak of the oncoming fall of Christianity in the West. The authority of the ministry had more or less gone through a transformation turning into the authority to rule others (9), what also turns people away from the Church. The Church has given into the temptation of greed and is consequently losing its reputation and social influence. On the other hand, Bigović points out there are still individuals and small communities that have been able to resist the negative temptations of the world and act as a response to the faulty politics of the Church – like a bright light on the horizon. With their way of living and their personal qualities they still reveal Christ to the world (9).

2. Religions at the crossroads between the postmodern and tradition

Today religions are at the crossroads of two different challenges: the culture of the postmodern and tradition. They both present a challenge and a temptation to religions, especially Christianity. Many traditionalists are past-oriented and live on their memories. They idealize everything past and portray it as good and positive and see the present, on the other hand, as something bad and negative. They reject everything new, even if it has been rationally considered and may bring about an improvement in present relations. That way of thinking presupposes order, social order, and an endless repetition of the same things (14).

Traditionalists in the rigid sense of the word glorify and praise things and life that have already ceased to exist. By contrast, the postmodern culture is always open to change and encourages novelties, but one cannot claim the postmodern has made a radical cut with the past or that it rejects the past. On the contrary, the postmodern culture accepts everything both past and present if it proves useful for the self-actualization of the individual. It also encourages the accommodation of past structures to the requirements of modern times. Everything that has become ossified and is no longer part of the living tissue must fall away so that everything alive and healthy can develop and flourish.

3. Role and importance of tradition

What is tradition and what is its importance today? Traditions are, above all, bearers of values and standards of excellence. The renowned moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, says about tradition:

»A living tradition ... is an historically extended, socially embodied argument,

and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute the tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life.« (MacIntyre 1985, 222).

Traditions are the repositories of the standards of rationality, which enable moral deliberation and action. In that sense, tradition is not conservative (MacIntyre does not use the term in a conservative sense). If a tradition is vital, it contains continuities of conflict (MacIntyre 1985, 222) and a mutual discussion on good, which is what gives it its special meaning and purpose. A vigorous and live tradition must include conflicts and resolve them. When no conflicts exist within a tradition and there is no dialogue, the tradition slowly becomes ossified and starts dying.

4. Tradition in crisis

Each tradition embodies a set of standards by which it evaluates the progress of its doctrines and concepts of good, and it also measures its failures and deviations from its previous achievements of inquiry (MacIntyre 2001, 167). If it fails to do this, if it becomes engulfed in destructive conflicts and repetitive structures, the tradition reaches a point of epistemological crisis. A solution to this situation demands the development of new concepts and the framing of new theoretical structures. The framework is defined by three requirements:

- First, it must systematically solve the previously intractable problems.
- Second, it must also provide an explanation of what it was that rendered the tradition sterile.
- Third, the first two tasks must be carried out in a way which exhibits continuity of the new conceptual and theoretical structures with the defining beliefs of the preceding tradition.

Ensuring a clear assessment of these conceptual and theoretical structures is not simple. No tradition is immune to crisis. A crisis occurs when rational solutions are evaluated; traditions grow brittle and can decay, disintegrate and disappear as a result of the crisis. Many traditions disappear because they fail to realize that occurring crises are an approximation for a reevaluation of previous achievements, and an opportunity for a reconstruction of ossified structures and inefficient rules. Such solutions may result in an interruption of the existing traditional syntheses. Healthy and vigorous traditions must be capable of revealing rational priorities thus overcoming the crisis. Supporters of solutions must adhere to the standards of the tradition while staying devoted to truth-seeking. It is no easy task (Mulhall and Swift 1996, 92).

To find an appropriate solution to a tradition in crisis, several perspectives must be taken into consideration: One must not only consider current standards, de-

votion to truth-seeking, and thorough rational deliberation (a critical evaluation of previous achievements), but one must also critically evaluate the moment in which the tradition exists. When resolving crises in traditions it is crucial that the person resolving problems is a person of authority. This person is virtuous and acts virtuously; the actions performed are done in the light of the good, and from the perspective of *sub specie aeternitatis*.

One must acknowledge that a crisis alone is not a bad thing for it is a healthy and vital part of every process thus even enabling it. Traditions, according to MacIntyre, cannot be static. Rather they are dynamic structures, which through time change and progress – some disintegrate, others evolve and survive or reappear as a solution to new circumstances.

Bearers of a tradition are certainly capable of distinguishing between individual developmental stages of a tradition if they can successfully resolve internal conflicts and tensions within a tradition, therefore reforming and continuing it. They can separate what is good and what is bad in a tradition. In this manner, tradition has a built-in mechanism that enables it to eliminate flaws. To radically evaluate tradition cannot be wrong and may result in a more successful tradition. Tradition is a dynamic process which includes progress and assimilation.

Often in solving a crisis in a tradition the reflection principle is applied – a looking back on the history of the tradition or a return to the roots. Reflection may include parts of the existing crisis and methods to resolve it. Acting under the hypothesis that the method of understanding the development of a tradition is key to successfully resolving problems, one can presuppose that this is the best solution for the existing crisis.

5. Coexistence of different traditions: dialogue between traditions

In a certain time and place several traditions exist where some traditions may dominate over others. Different traditions often come into conflict. MacIntyre suggests applying the positive aspects of the conflict of two traditions, ours and a rival tradition. Adherent of the first tradition must defer to the fact that the rival tradition may be better at solving the existing problems he cannot see or cannot solve because the adherent of the rival tradition solves problems from another perspective.

Adherents of both traditions can make a comparison between the two traditions and form a judgement about the rational advantage of either. For traditions to reconcile and positively interact, a few requirements must be met:

1. First, the existence of the rival tradition must be acknowledged.
2. Second, the continuous interaction of adherents of both traditions must be ensured.

3. Third, an adequate degree of openness of adherents of both traditions to accept each other's differences must be ensured.

Adherents of the first tradition must be able to identify the rival within the second tradition who offers a different and a valuable perspective on an existing problem in the tradition. Despite their conceptual incommensurability there must be, at least in some part, a shared view of the world between rival traditions – they must be partly compatible (MacIntyre 2001, 370–388). If they cannot meet this minimum requirement, engaging in dialogue will be impossible and there will be no mutual, beneficial effects of interaction between them.

In practice, some adherents or bearers of a tradition mentally enter the other tradition or its central belief system. This is some kind of mental assimilation in which the perspective or philosophy of the other tradition must be at least hypothetically accepted. Anyone capable of such assimilation and transition between two traditions can understand the conceptual choices (or even conceptual solutions) of the other tradition – which his or her tradition cannot provide. Through such acts of the imagination, adherents of a tradition may be able to conclude that difficulties which seem impossible to solve in their tradition can be understood and overcome in the rival tradition.

I think the process of confrontation with deficiencies of one's own tradition, and on the other hand understanding and acknowledging advantages and virtues of another (rival) tradition is fairly difficult and challenging, because the adherent or bearer of a tradition must first critically face his own deficiencies and the deficiencies of his tradition, since tradition can serve as a cover to conceal mistakes. The first step is to acknowledge one's mistakes and the second stage of that step is to acknowledge the deficiencies of the tradition. The second step, which is not any easier than the first or even more difficult, involves recognizing and acknowledging the virtues of the rival tradition. Coexisting traditions and dialogue between them are possible only through constant openness to each other and a rational inquiry of one's own foundations.

Whether a tradition is adequate depends on whether it can be passed on. Here, authority plays a key role. In his book *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* MacIntyre points out two requirements where authority is vital for the tradition to function: The teacher (authority) and the student must establish trust and the student must accept the teacher's authority; the second is rational authority, in which the teacher must be capable of passing his knowledge on to the student and help the student develop and one day become the teacher himself and above all a critical thinker (MacIntyre 1990, 61–62).

6. Conclusion

Traditions are bearers of value systems and standards of excellence. They deliver and advance the good and they are often culture-dependent. Traditions

are not static or ossified, but dynamic structures which are constantly subjected to rational inquiry and critical evaluation. Modern time is characterized by different traditions which not only complete and enrich each other, but they also contradict each other. Theological openness and willingness for dialogue among bearers of each tradition are key to coexistence of all traditions.

Throughout history traditions decay, change, and some even disappear. What sustains traditions and strengthens them? What weakens and destroys them? What keeps them alive? MacIntyre gives a clear answer: the exercise or the lack of exercise of the relevant virtues (MacIntyre 1985, 223). Virtues or excellences not only sustain the form of an individual's life in which that individual seeks out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but they also sustain those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context (223–225). Lack of the relevant virtues, such as justice, truthfulness and courage, corrupts traditions. To avoid this, an adequate sense of the tradition to which one belongs to is required.

Contemporary culture which is predominated by individualism does not leave plenty of room for tradition as the latter hinders the individual's self-actualization. All of us inherit a certain tradition and we deliver it to future generations. The history of each of our own lives is embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions (222). Only a tradition (an individual or a nation) which is capable of fully understanding, recognizing and critically evaluating its origins and is willing to constructively engage in a dialogue with other traditions, can survive.

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