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CATHOLICS AND GENDER THEORIES: UNDERSTANDING HUMAN SEXUALITY IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Abstract

The anthropological and ethical disputes in some conservative Catholic circles often refer to the problem of gender equality, particularly in the educational process. They lead to a confrontation between traditional communities, on the one hand, and on the other hand, open or liberal ones. In this context, the article aims to indicate (1) the anthropological and ethical foundations of the education based on the principle of gender equality, and (2) educational demands that result from it. Further, (3) these fundamentals will be scrutinised against Catholic anthropological and ethical criticism.

Keywords: Christian anthropology, gender theories, human dignity, human sexuality, Catholic educational ethics

KATOLICY I TEORIE GENDER. ROZUMIENIE LUDZKIEJ PŁCIOWOŚCI W PROCESIE WYCHOWAWCZYM

Abstrakt

Dyskusje antropologiczne i etyczne w pewnych konserwatywnych środowiskach katolickich często odnoszą się do problemu równości płciowej, zwłaszcza w procesie wychowawczym. Prowadzą one do konfrontacji pomiędzy wspólnotami tradycyjnymi i bardziej liberalnymi. W tym kontekście artykuł zmierza do wskazania (1) antropologicznych i etycznych podstaw wychowania opartego na zasadzie równości płciowej oraz (2) postulatów wychowawczych, które z nich wynikają. Następnie (3) te zasadnicze kwestie zostaną skonfrontowane z katolicką krytyką antropologiczną i etyczną.

Słowa kluczowe: antropologia chrześcijańska, teorie gender, godność ludzka, płciowość ludzka, katolicka etyka wychowawcza

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INTRODUCTION: GENDERED EDUCATION AND CATHOLICISM – AN ETHICAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL OR IDEOLOGICAL DISPUTE?

The presence of the gender issue in the language of philosophical, ethical and political disputes indicates that in a current public debate in many Western countries gender theories are not restricted to academic circles. These theories cannot be considered a purely theoretical interpretation of the rules governing social interactions but, as some already achieved results indicate, it aims to bring about social changes. It contains, therefore, elements of theoretical scientific analysis as well as political and ideological elements. Similar statements can be made with reference to Catholicism as well. A religious community is not only a group of people who share the same beliefs and perform similar rituals. An authentic religious community also aims to change the world, and social life in particular, in accordance with the doctrine it follows, and consequently, the ethics that results from it (Robbins 2014, 165). Obviously, gender theories (either as a branch of social studies or a way to interpret social life) and Catholicism (as a Christian denomination) operate on different cognitive levels. Although they cannot be considered comparable, one can notice an area for comparison and interaction as far as the transfer from their theoretical presuppositions into practical output is concerned. However, both gender theories and Catholicism are not only collections of ideas, be it social, philosophical or religious ones. They also make certain demands addressed to modern societies and in particular those institutions and people who are responsible for the process of social changes (Neuenfeldt 2015, 18-20).

The implications regarding raising children in both Catholicism and gender theories become conflicting areas. One of the consequences of anthropological presuppositions of gender theories is a very particular assessment of those institutions and environment which are responsible for children's education. As a result of the said presuppositions, the demands are directed to various educational institutions to implement changes in the educational process in order to eliminate all elements that could potentially lead to oppression, discrimination or exclusion of other people. Particular emphasis is put on these elements that impose on children strictly defined social roles, and the way of the realisation of their sexual identity, which have been repeated for generations. Catholicism, on the other hand, stemming from its doctrinal premises, with particular emphasis on anthropological assumptions and ethical guidelines, creates its own educational system. This system is based on a traditionally structured family and auxiliary institutions (such as the Church and the state). The goal of the said education is also defined in a different way (Vatican Council II 1965b).

2. ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

A comprehensive formulation of the essence of the educational process comprises the reflection on its context, educational institutions and the environment, on the one hand, as well as the reflection on its goals and methods that are supposed to enable achieving the said goals, on the other hand. If one wants to try to outline the main anthropological foundations of the gender theories of education, it is important to concentrate on the changes that have occurred in the context of modern realisation of the educational process including the educational environment and institutions.

1.1. Social Context of Education

The process of education has a social dimension with all its positive and negative consequences. Education always means socialisation, but it also aims to adjust every individual that is being educated to the framework established by the society (Apple 2013, 151-165; Pollard et al. 1991, 293-294). The context of education enables men and women to enter a complicated network of social interactions, gives them social acceptance and the right to participate in the life of society. However, it inevitably shapes an individual according to social expectations that include prevalent patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. The result of this process is the ability of both men and women to function in society. The question remains whether they can maintain their autonomy while being subject to the strong outside influence (Straus 1991, 370-371). In a society where the traditional structure of interpersonal relations is strong and unquestioned, the issue about the destructive or perhaps restrictive aspect of the educational processes does not exist. The crisis of society as a sustainable community of values and the source of conduct and beliefs results in a greater importance attributed to an individual. Consequently, it seems impossible to avoid the problem of 'distorting' men and women, who are subject to the said education by adjusting their performance to the entire set of currently socially acceptable norms (Loots and Walker 2015).

The crisis of modern societies, in particular, the Western ones, leads to loosening social ties and challenging the normative and ethical role of society as well as its structures and institutions. Consequently, a major change in attitude towards the predominant patterns of behaviour is observed within the community of young people who are under a variety of educational influences. It refers to traditional determinants of adulthood, that is, the ability to function independently in a society and shape one's own life. A particularly important change seems to be the change of understanding one's fulfilment. It does not necessarily include the adoption of a traditional social role assigned to men and women according to their gender, ethnic and social background, individual physical features or family traditions (Bass 2015, 363-366; Coakley 2009, 58). In the anthropological dimension, these changes, which appreciate self-defining of men and women, and

relativize imposed models of life realisation seem to express the promotion of human dignity. They also seem to express the value of every man and woman as an individual and unique person, who cannot be viewed only as a piece of a social machine.

1.2. Transformation of the Family as an Educational Environment

The family remains an important educational environment, which is also the case in the Western socio-cultural context. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the changes it goes through, which are sometimes described as the erosion of traditional family patterns and consequently, of the educational and socialising role the family plays (Robertson-Elliot 1996, 102-103). In the anthropological dimension, not only does the very pattern of the family as an educational environment change, but also the attitude towards the family resulting in weakening its role in the process of education is being revised.

The concept of the family, particularly in modern Western societies, is evolving. It does not necessarily mean the rejection of traditional understanding of an educational role of the family (Rahilly 2015, 340-341; Robertson-Elliot 1996, 34-35). The semantic scope of the concept of the family indicates that the idea of a traditional family based on a stable and exclusive marriage, being a relationship of a man and a woman in which children are born and raised, has been widened. This traditional view of the family has not disappeared completely and is continued by the more conservative and religious communities. At the same time, new family patterns emerge; for example, those in which the importance of marriage (whether it is a religious union or a civil one), stability and exclusiveness in a relationship (open or free relationships, 'patchwork families') are being relativised. New models of relationships are being accepted, and the importance of an offspring for building a family is being redefined (Bernstein 2015, 322-326; Natalier and Hewitt 2014, 906). Not only do these changes mean the reformulation of the very idea of the family, they also redefine relations among the people within the family itself (e.g. regarding the relationship parents–children), and this directly influences the educational importance of the family (Robertson-Elliot 1996, 35; Rehel 2014, 126-128). Appreciation of subjectivity of children implies the reflection on the authority that parents hold as well as positive and negative implications of their educational influence on children.

These phenomena are accompanied by the transformation of the attitude towards the family life and in particular, the educational role the family plays. The crisis of the family as a social institution along with the above-mentioned extension of the concept of the family has also questioned its authority as far as education is concerned (Noller and Callan 2016, 1-25). Contrary to the traditional, often highly patriarchal, model, the family–due to a variety of its forms–is not an implicit point of reference as far as ethical values, religious norms and patterns of behaviour are concerned (Pinquart and Silbereisen 2004). This contestation expresses the

opposition to the educational and socialising role of the family, which is viewed as trying to impose certain expected social roles on men and women who begin their independent life, and which does not take into consideration their need for self-identification and self-expression. This phenomenon raises an anthropological question as to the nature of the family. The question arises whether the family is only one of the external social structures shaping the generations of men and women, or perhaps it is a necessary environment for the socialising process and most of all for the children's personal growth.

1.3. The State and School in the Educational Process

In the classical approach to education, one should take into account the institution of a family alongside the role of state structures, among which the school is of particular importance. In this case, the school should necessarily be connected to the state, regardless of the form of organisation and ownership structure of a particular school, because the curriculum is dependent on the state educational policy. The schools of a particular character (religious or community schools) implement certain educational patterns aiming to provide their students with acceptable values. Despite that fact, they have to face manuals, reading lists or the very curriculum, which are either imposed or merely accepted by the educational authority, containing important information that shape students' conduct, support certain patterns of behaviour and present accepted social roles. Therefore, even in the case of public schools, which possess their own educational programme, the role of the state remains predominant. Political and philosophical issues are significant in the assessment of the educational influence of state institutions (Lewis 2006, 428-429; Moore 2003, 130-135). The curriculum often strengthens those patterns of behaviour that are desired by the government. It does that by promoting the stereotypical gender roles or by ignoring those ways of self-realisation of men and women, and their social and individual functioning that are not prevalent in a particular society (Blumberg and O'Leary 2007). In this context, many authors remind that education is not gender-neutral (Hamilton 2014; Natalier and Hewitt 2014; Rahilly 2015). At times, particularly in these aspects where the remnants of patriarchal attitude towards the division of social roles between men and women are noticeable, the versatile educational influence of the school intensifies existing inequalities. It is done by showing the students a priori what their role in a society should be. It also includes dividing given information or the way in which they are given, according to the criterion of biological sex. In such cases, the school becomes the element of social politics, which deepens injustice and destroys individualism, rather than providing the students with knowledge. Among other things, the curriculum might prepare the girls to be subservient and strengthen boys' belief that they should be independent and in want of power (Blumberg and O'Leary 2007; Moore 2003). A gender-related differentiation of education indicates to the students the only possible way of life and professional realisation.

On the other hand, by supervision of educational activities performed by all types of schools the state can play a positive role in eliminating stereotypes and enabling the students to grow personally. It is also able to fight against the displays of injustice present in all areas of social life. Undoubtedly, however, such position adopted by the state raises controversy as to how far state-run institutions should influence the educational process. Setting aside obvious issues regarding politics and opposing worldviews, the anthropological point of view requires raising the question of the primacy of a person over all kinds of social structures, including the state. The dignity of a person requires that such institutions as the school refrained from the destruction of individualism of students but rather supported them in their full personal and intellectual development.

2. EDUCATIONAL DEMANDS

The specific nature of research conducted in the gender framework lies not only in its theoretical but also practical and postulative character. As far as educational issues are concerned, the observations regarding the context of the educational process as well as its environment and responsible institutions lead to conclusions and demands addressed to people who are responsible for the state educational policy as well as other participants of socio-political discourse.

2.1. Education for Equality

One can say without exaggeration that widespread false beliefs and stereotypes regarding different social groups are one of the most damaging factors in the process of education. They also challenge the dignity of men and women by classifying and dividing them according to false and harmful criteria. Different social groups, and in particular ethnic and religious minorities, suffer from all kinds of stigmatisation and judgement based on prejudice. Nevertheless, one can observe that as far as the educational influence is concerned, the gender-based stereotypes play a significant role in limiting the opportunities for men and women (Douchy-Oudot 2012, 46-47). It is generally maintained that these stereotypes affect women more than men, but it is possible to show that they also limit men. Stereotypes passed in the process of education carry a versatile content load. Some of them refer to work self-realisation assigning men and women separate educational paths, which are theoretically on par with their nature conditioned by their biological sex. Other prejudices are connected with social roles, with particular emphasis put on the possibility of performing responsible tasks or occupying key positions in political and social structures (Bass 2015, 375-380; Moore 2003, 43-46).

The just education, which takes into account gender diversity of men and women while being aware that it does not exhaust their full richness and potential, has to be therefore the education concentrated on the equality of opportunities in terms of both chances of professional realisation and ability to participate in socio-political life.

2.2. Education to Freedom of Expression and Self-Creation

The traditional model of social life provided men and women with clearly designed ways of self-realisation. They were connected with accepting a particular job providing income and starting a family based on a sustainable marriage of a man and a woman, who would pass this model of lifestyle onto the next generations (Moore 2003, 103-104). This educational model created repeatability of possible social roles and the ways of self-realisation of an individual. It gave men and women a sense of security based on their awareness of being a part of a long line of generations repeating this lifestyle. The security was also based on choosing those forms of self-realisation that were repeatedly tested, be it with respect either to a chosen profession or marriage and family life. While not questioning the value of such a model of development of men and women, and their transition in the educational and socialisation process from dependence to independence by any means, it should be taken into account that the stability of the social structure and consequently a sense of security of individuals take precedence in such a model over the right of every man and woman to independent creation of their lives. The richness of humanity of men and women can be limited to one sanctified model of education only at the cost of destroying that which defines the individuality and uniqueness of every human being.

The education should nowadays support the freedom of expression and self-creation. It does not necessarily mean the rejection of all traditional educational models, which used to prepare the children to lead a certain lifestyle. It does mean, however, that alongside traditional models there will also be space for other models, even if they were to be realised by minorities in society. The variety of ways of self-expression of men and women in the educational process can assist those who enter their adulthood to define themselves.

2.3. Education for Conscious and Free Participation in Social Life

Although a person is a social being, ontologically an individual comes before a community. For this reason, the purpose of the educational process, which also has a socialising character, is not adjusting men and women to the norms prevailing in a certain society by destroying their individuality and imposing external patterns of behaviour, but their education for conscious and free participation in social life.

The crucial condition is the removal of all forms of inequality and discrimination in the educational process. Their presence, even if hidden in a seemingly insignificant educational content (Blumberg and O'Leary 2007), contributes to raising next generations of men and women who copy instilled patterns of behaviour. These patterns, also unconsciously, reinforce numerous displays of injustice and oppression. Recognition of equal personal dignity of men and women demands the acknowledgement of their equal right to participate in public life and the freedom to define their place in society.

3. CATHOLIC CRITICISM

The Catholic Church seems to be very critical of some political aspects of gender theories which are referred to as an 'ideology.' This criticism can be found in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Pope Francis writes that 'an ideology of gender' 'denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time' (Pope Francis 2016, 56).

However, this papal statement does not necessarily mean that Christianity, or at least Catholicism, tends to reject social observations made from the point of view of gender research, and consequently its educational demands. In contrast to the diverse, and often controversial, ideological applications of gender theories, truthful consideration on the anthropological aspects of the gender-based analysis of education (which cannot be considered an 'ideology') indicates that we can find significant overlapping points, if not agreement as such (Allan 2015, 15-17; Barton 1996, 457-458; Parsons 1996, 463-464). It is possible to indicate three problematic areas in which one could see the above-mentioned overlapping points as well as lasting and currently inextricable differences.

3.1. The Primacy of the Family as an Educational Environment

From a Catholic anthropological perspective, the biggest problem is the description of the role of the family presented by gender researchers (e.g. Barnett and Hyde 2001; Goldberg 2013, 86-87; Hill Collins 1998, 62-64). Frequent demands to relativise the significance of the family as an educational environment and the increasingly explicit phenomenon of redefining the family meet with objection from the conservative Catholic circles.

A family is a unit of particular importance to religious groups. Religion sanctifies the family, provides it with the moral order, in which the members of a family are socialised. At the same time, the family is the most basic environment for religious practice and transmission of religious traditions. Therefore, changes in one of these realities imply changes in the other (Airhart and Lamberts Bendroth 1996, 3-7; Barton 1996, 451).

The Catholic Church acknowledges the existence of different family models, but it regards the traditional family model based on the matrimony of a man and a woman open for giving rise to and bringing the offspring up as the only valid model (*Catechism* 2010, 1638-1654). From this perspective, the Catholic Church supports the teaching regarding the key role the family plays in the process of education (*Catechism* 2010, 2207, 2221; Pope Francis 2013, 43). It can also be

noted that the Catholic Church struggles with acknowledging the fact that, at least in some socio-cultural contexts, the family based on religious marriage between a man and a woman is no longer the only or even the predominant model. Therefore, Catholic reflection on education should also include other patterns of family life, which – although they are not and need not be accepted by the Church – indeed exist and are becoming increasingly popular, and therefore play an increasingly important role as an educational environment.

It must be said that the Catholic Church, which favours the traditional model of a family and gives it the primacy to raise children, does not absolutize the family. Any educational acts are to serve the well-being and development of individual gifts of the children and allow them to choose their path of life freely and maturely. The family, from a Catholic point of view, is not a place of educational oppression, but the ‘school of deeper humanity’ (Vatican Council II 1965a, 52).

3.2. Auxiliary Character of Other Institutions

The Catholic Church emphasises the auxiliary character of other institutions and communities to the family as the primary place of education. It applies to both the Church itself, as well as public institutions, including schools (Vatican Council II 1965b, 3). It is not the responsibility of educational institutions to impose solutions consistent with the ideological option of those who are in power. Without a doubt, this trend would also comprise the Catholic rejection of such educational policies which in the name of certain social interests impose the only possible role in a society on men and women, and strengthen or expand existing injustice.

While stressing the primacy of the family in the field of education, the Catholic Church reluctantly addresses any ideologically motivated efforts, which would interfere with a set of standards and values given by parents to their children (Vatican Council II 1965b, 3, 6). The actions to change society, to eradicate stereotypes, to present non-standard models of family life encounter the resistance from the Church. This resistance does not seem adamant, however, if it is assumed that the stereotypes, injustice, manifestations of prejudice and oppression that exist in society are the expression of the pathology directed against an individual.

3.3. Education to the Completeness of Humanity

Undoubtedly, there are differences regarding the understanding of what is ‘natural’ for people and consequently the ability of self-realisation of a man and a woman as well as the scope of permissible self-creation, especially when it comes to gender roles. Despite that, from a Catholic point of view what deserves recognition is the demand for remodelling the educational process in such a way as to allow for the full implementation of all the potentialities of women and men. Firstly, it is necessary to reject anything that demeans the person (Jovic 2015, 35-36; Kurian 2012, 343-344; Vatican Council II 1965c, 5). Thus, it is necessary to oppose discrimination, injustice, and abuse – also in cases when it is gender-based (Hewitt 2012, 333-335;

Pirri-Simonian 2015, 95). Further, it is about shaping the complete human being and, therefore, about the development of their freedom, maturity, independence, and responsibility. Even if the scope of the responsibility and freedom remains disputable in the public debate, it is worth emphasising that from a Catholic point of view, a child, a young man or woman, who is subject to educational influences in the family or educational institutions, should be treated subjectively and personally. Although it cannot be denied that in the process of education the socialisation takes place, which enables men and women to function in society, this socialisation should not be linked to the negation of individual features, desires, needs, and plans.

CONCLUSION

Despite significant differences in anthropological background of gender theories and Catholic worldview, there are also substantial areas in which one could notice the similarity of goals. These common grounds can be seen especially in the struggle to remove oppression, inequalities or social injustice and to enable men and women, who enter adulthood, make their own autonomous decisions as far as determining their role in social structures and the way of experiencing and expressing their own identity are concerned. The existence of these common areas should motivate all parties engaged in the educational process to co-operate.

The existing differences are rooted in issues extending far beyond the theory of education. They reach the very anthropological foundations and the concept of a human being. Nonetheless, it does not mean that we should not try to overcome these differences or reconsider them. From a Catholic perspective, it is necessary to reflect on the conditions of educational processes in the post-Christian world, in which Christian life patterns and models of social structures have been questioned and marginalised. From the point of view of gender-oriented researchers, it would be useful to change the way the Church is perceived. The Church, despite its traditional standpoint on the education and social structure, is not an environment of oppression and discrimination but, according to its doctrine and its ethical implications, it strives to promote the dignity of every man and every woman.

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