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## THE THEOLOGY OF BORDER-LINE AND DIALOGUE OF HANS WALDENFELS

The fact of two terms: ‘border-line’ and ‘dialogue’ being used in the very topic of this work and the context of such formulation in the theological of Hans Waldenfels<sup>1</sup> is in itself a summary of a particular train of thought leading to the presentation of the peculiarity of Waldenfels’ fundamental theology reflection. A certain image used by Waldenfels to compare dealing in fundamental theology to the situation of a person standing on the doorstep of a house is a confirmation of that truth. “A person standing on the doorstep is at the same time outside and inside the house. He hears the arguments of those standing outside and of those inside. He wants to enter the house. On one hand he absorbs what people outside see and know – in terms of philosophy, history, social sciences – what they think about God, Jesus of Nazareth and the Church, but also about themselves, about the world and the society they live in. On the other hand a person on the doorstep has access to the knowledge coming from the inside, so he addresses his invitation to those outside and those inside”<sup>2</sup>.

According to Waldenfels the veracity of “revealed invitation” analyzed from the perspective of the relation with the contextual “outside” demands fundamental theology to consider two vital assumptions. The first one concerns the presentation of theology, of what is specifically Christian, of what Christianity **subsists in** – *proprium christianum*, in the non-theological environment. This thing is faith in one God, who Christianity claims to have revealed himself in a full and irreplaceable way in Jesus Christ.

The second assumption is linked with the relaying of that claim. Theology is communicative only as far as it is aware of its particular, historical context and its

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Waldenfels was born in 1931. Currently he is a retired professor of fundamental theology, the theology of non-Christian religions and of philosophy of religion at Bonn University. He is an author of multiple works inspired by conciliar ideas of dialogue and furthering the knowledge of non-Christian religions. It is worth mentioning that some of his books have been published in Polish translation. These are: *O Bogu, Jezusie Chrystusie i Kościele dzisiaj. Teologia fundamentalna w kontekście czasów obecnych*, Katowice 1993; *Fenomen chrześcijaństwa wśród religii świata*, Warszawa 1995; *Ukrzyżowany i religie świata*, Warszawa 1985; *Medytacje na wschodzie i zachodzie*, Warszawa 1984; *Religie odpowiedzią na pytanie o sens istnienia człowieka*, Warszawa 1986; *Odkrywać Boga dzisiaj*, Kraków 1997.

<sup>2</sup> H. Waldenfels, *O Bogu, Jezusie Chrystusie i Kościele dzisiaj. Teologia fundamentalna w kontekście czasów obecnych*, Katowice 1993, p. 83–84.

autonomy. Thus, as a basic discipline, aware of its historical nature, fundamental theology nowadays must be a fundamental theology in a context. In this sense, the contemporary context of theology poses itself as a background for today's talk about God, Jesus Christ and the Church<sup>3</sup>.

### **Mediative function of fundamental theology**

The realization of the aforementioned task requires taking into consideration certain important interdependence. Waldenfels, taking advantage of a game of words possible in German, proposes that this claim (*Anspruch*), proving the uniqueness of Christianity among world religions and the pretence to be the absolute religion resulting from it are faced nowadays with firm objection (*Widerspruch*) on the part of other subjects of the contemporary context of theology, namely: Christians of various denominations, representatives of modern atheism and agnosticism and adherents of new religions. Keeping in mind this basic assumption he stresses the importance of mediative function of fundamental theology in the apologetical dialogical perspective.

### **The apologetic function**

According to Waldenfels, the communicativeness of the Christian claim in the situation of objection justifies the necessity of considering the apologetic function of fundamental theology. It is based not only on the examination of the nature of the others' reaction to Christian appeal, but also on the presentation of theological grounds for the veracity of Christian appeal in a strictly defined context<sup>4</sup>. This is about a new way of perception of Christianity's veracity as a "dynamic veracity", characterized by lively response to historical- redemptive reality, in which Christian proclamation can be understood and accepted. This veracity is based on the foun-

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<sup>3</sup> Being true to this assumption is connected to realizing the proposition of the Second Vatican Council, according to which "The Church is obliged to read the signs of the times and explain them in the light of Gospel" (KDK 4). Practical fulfilment of this duty is best realised by growing of the Church into the abundance of cultural and religious forms which are not permeated as yet by the joy of the Gospel truth, just as Christ by his incarnation entered a particular religious and cultural environment (see DM 10). A measurable consequence of this inspiration, proving the theological sensitivity of the Church in relation to the context, is, doubtlessly, noticing of the idea of dialogue, which, as a way of coexistence, is not only the demand of current situation, but it also springs from the very spirit of Christianity.

<sup>4</sup> In Waldenfels understanding apologetics does not have to accuse. Not every objection is made out of ill will. Very often objection appears as a result of one's confidence in rightness and truthfulness of their judgement, or it springs from lack of understanding of the alien. Therefore, apologetics should not rely primarily on the means of polemics – accusation and indicating guilt, but it should rather strive for the atmosphere of understanding and in this way try to convince about the credibility of Christian faith. See H. Waldenfels, *O Bogu...*, p. 71.

dation of God's evident intervention in the history of mankind and viewed from the perspective of the economy of salvation and the history of redemption.

Waldenfels, keeping this claim in his mind, points to the feature characteristic for Christian theology which is its definite Christocentric- redemptive orientation. This means that the theology itself, out of its very nature, displays a particular, basic trait, deprived of which it loses the right to existence<sup>5</sup>. The matter concerns the process of God's revealing Himself and grace, the process, which is entirely universal and reaches its particularly material breakthrough in history focusing on Christ. It is He who determines the specific character of Christianity and the absolute character of its claim. The content of the claim, concerning Christ's unique work of salvation means that "every salvation which is achieved in a different manner, is explained at least by the hidden effectiveness of Christ's cross. Therefore, whenever anyone reaches salvation, it is obtained by the power of Christ's cross"<sup>6</sup>.

Because of this fact Waldenfels introduces an original concept of Christology "from the outside"<sup>7</sup>. It refers to the issue of the interpretation and embracing of Christ's salvific work outside the Church, outside theology, among non-Christians<sup>8</sup>. In his opinion, only the knowledge of what we receive Christologically "from the outside" allows for the permanent discovery by theology of certain common grounds, concerning the aspects of Christ's identity which particularly influence the course of dialogue<sup>9</sup>. Is this discernment enough, however? Waldenfels answers that practical verification of the realization of the stipulation of coexistence in dialogue makes it necessary to consider two main premises. Firstly, nowadays credible Christianity must take form of inclusive religion, asking ceaselessly about the role and meaning of Christian appeal to the world. The nature of this process is a permanent dialogue between the revealed Word of God and a particular culture or religion. Its main purpose is a profound and pervasive permeation of the deepest foundations of people's lives, their way of thinking and feeling, with Gospel and Christian faith born from it, so that Christian appeal gained was given its particular shape in a given culture. At the same time the religion or culture should be-

<sup>5</sup> In this context, a statement by Karl Barth seems interesting. He claims that not only theology, but also a real attempt at reconciliation is only possible from the point of Christocentric perspective. See K. B a r t h, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Bd. IV, p. 1858.

<sup>6</sup> See H. W a l d e n f e l s, *Ukrzyżowany i religie świata*, Warszawa 1985, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> See by the same author, *O Bogu...*, p. 194–198.

<sup>8</sup> See by the same author, *O Bogu...*; see *Fenomen chrześcijaństwa wśród religii świata*, Warszawa 1995, p. 48–93; see *Hinduismus, Buddhismus, Islam*, Münster 1969; see *Begegnung der Religionen. Theologische Versuche I*, Bonn 1990; see More on Jesus in Koran and Muslim tradition: see H. Z i m o Ń, E. S a k o w i c z, *Jezus w islamie*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, t. 7, Lublin, 1997, p. 397; see M. R u s e c k i, *Jezus Chrystus (pozachrześcijańskie źródła poznania historyczności)*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, t. 7, Lublin, 1997, 1306–1308; P. S t a w i Ń s k i, *Jezus w Koranie i tradycji muzułmańskiej*, [in:] *Między Wschodem a Zachodem*, pod. red. P. Stawińskiego, Częstochowa 1995, p. 77–91.

<sup>9</sup> In Waldenfels opinion one of such common grounds seems to be Buddhists' great interests in kenotic Christology. See H. W a l d e n f e l s, *Faszination des Buddhismus*, Mainz 1982; see by the same author, *Buddyzm i chrześcijaństwo w dialogu*, „Communio” 1988, 4, p. 54–64.

come, thanks to the contact with the Gospel, awakened and open to new, hitherto unknown possibilities.

On the other hand, credible Christianity must be missionary, which means, above all, that it should inquire of others about the meaning of Gospel appeal for their culture. Thus, Christian appeal has a chance to be enriched through its expression in the language and symbol of a given culture or religion, allowing it to become a new quality within the culture, retaining at the same time absolute distinctness.

### **Dialogical function**

The fulfilment of the aforementioned undertaking, in fundamental theology thus applied, involves the necessity of combining the apologetic tendency and the dialogical one. According to Waldenfels, the element that determines the necessity is allowing for the threefold structure of every communication, dialogue. It consists in the fact that “the one who says the dialogue, not only has the other within his range of sight, but also engages himself, in the end seeing the matter that concerns both of them, rather than himself and the other”<sup>10</sup>.

Transferring this scheme to the platform of encounter between one and the other creates the need to accept three crucial assumptions. The first of them concerns the matter of respect for the subjectivity of the other. According to Waldenfels, the practical realization of this criterion is the ability to embrace the other in his dissimilarity. In connection with this fact, he points to the role and the importance of fundamental theology, which does not convey non subjective subject matter, but each time it is based on practice and experience. The nature of this experience is the permanent striving of theology to learn about the current life situation of the other person, to participate more fully in the communication of the appeal in different thought, and language structures and to take care that the person listening to the appeal has something to say themselves. Personal relationship understood in this way, free from the temptation to inscribe the other person into one’s own spiritual perspective, allows fundamental theology to rise above the tendency to treat the other person as an object, for the sake of this person, but also because of the subject of the dialogue, which is the Mystery, shared, even if understood differently.

Another premise requires considering one’s own subjectivity. In Waldenfels’ optics the realization of the task makes fundamental theology constantly deepen and develop the awareness of Christian identity. The key element of the process is the culture of memory, which constitutes Christianity itself, it being in its nature the religion of memory of God and man. The culture of memory, according to Waldenfels, leads to the assimilation of spiritual values of one’s own religious tradition, allowing a man to discover the truth that this tradition is not an accidental collection of memories, but an organic synthesis of human characters

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<sup>10</sup> H. Waldenfels, *O Bogu...*, p. 75.

and behaviours based on faith in Jesus and in his Church. Certain crucial features of these behaviours, which have their point of concurrence in implementing the same values, such as the need of conversion, the testimony of faith and staunchness to promise, are revealed by the analysis of the life of saints. The discovery of this truth seems to be a specific call to seek the traces of revelation in each human "now." It is in the present, as Waldenfels claims, that "we are still under the banner of the promise given us at the beginning, and then under the banner of the blessing, which remains effective, and of the burden consisting of human stories with their bright and dark sides"<sup>11</sup>.

The third premise, which is decisive if the proper communication is to take place, is the attitude to the subject of the dialogue. In theological-contextual study, it means putting the claim of considering subjectivity in the context of the universal promise of salvation contained in Christian appeal (1 Tm 2.4). According to Waldenfels, Christianity can be persuasive only when it succeeds in gaining the interest of the potential listeners of the appeal, so that they can freely accept its content. Theology, keeping that in mind, must, apart from studying assumptions drawn from God's revelation, learn about the ephemeral reality of this world, of which the man, in his particular existential situation, is a part. As it turns out, Church subjects are not only the subjects of the Church, but also the children of their times, affected by their environment, attitudes, expectations and hopes, fears and queries<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, the key element allowing for conveying the message about the promise of salvation, given to humanity by Christ, is the biographical element.

In Waldenfels' perspective, the awareness of that fact provokes Christian theology to consider certain preferential options. The first of them is openness towards others in their distinctness. This allows Christianity to reach an understanding with other subjects. If by dialogue we understand a meeting of people with different religious orientations and views of world, the only basis for it may be the things they have in common. Such situation is about the dialogue of life, about "the meeting of human creatures of whom each embarks on the task burdened with his or her human situation"<sup>13</sup>. In this context, meeting at the depth of humanity may comprise not only the starting point for its fuller definition, but also a place for common exploration of the sense of one's existence<sup>14</sup>.

The other option is the one for the benefit of the poor. The realization of it allows Christianity to participate in the creation of world community and to present to this community its own understanding of solidarity, free from hatred and

<sup>11</sup> By the same author, *Fenomen chrześcijaństwa...*, p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> Practical implementation of such undertaking requires a complex exchange of self and hetero interpretation, combining looking from one's own point of view, looking from the point of view of the other, accepting being estimated from the other's point of view, looking at oneself and the historical context of the meeting. See by the same author *O Bogu...*, p. 397.

<sup>13</sup> *Chrześcijaństwo i religie*. A dokument by International Theology Committee, "Kurier Synodalny" 1997, 5, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> See J. R a t z i n g e r, *La mission d'après les autres textes conciliaires*, [in:] Vatican II, *L'activité missionnaire de L'Église*, Paris 1967, p. 139.

violence. Love of the enemies and rejection of violence and hate do not exempt Christianity from fighting for everybody's subjectivity. Otherwise, it would lose its cause of being the fatherland of hope. Thus directed strivings of fundamental theology allow it to stand on guard of the orthodoxy of Christian religion and the orthopraxis connected with this religion. The realization of this goal is significant for everyday life of Christian congregation in times of closer contacts with others. A Christian must be ready both to undertake cooperation and express their objection in difficult situations endangering their faith<sup>15</sup>.

### Realms of dialogical coexistence

In apologetical-dialogical perspective, we can talk about various dimensions of dialogical coexistence. One of them is the evangelical mission of the Church, particularly in reference to the fundamental rule of evangelization, which is inculturation. According to Waldenfels, proper reception of the problem of dialogue in the process of the inculturation of the Gospel is connected with the necessity of considering certain interdependence, according to which: every dialogue between religions is always an intercultural dialogue and as such it enhances the efforts to inculturate and familiarize the Church in other cultures and nations<sup>16</sup>. In the process of dialogue between the Gospel and a culture modern theology has a special role to play. It consists in constant discovery of new planes suitable for formulation of faith. That is, for presenting the appeal and the values of Gospel in such a way that faith and Christian life can penetrate profoundly and from within a given cultural context.

Another dimension of dialogic coexistence is connected with the problems of religious-social encounters. In Waldenfels' opinion one of the crucial issues among the problems is working for world peace. This engagement can not be attributed to Judeo-Christian thought. It has to be acknowledged that these notions are rooted also in nations outside Europe, especially Asian ones<sup>17</sup>. In reference to this fact, he points to the necessity to create a certain space of freedom protected tightly by Christianity and other religions, a space of which everybody could take advantage. Credibility of the religions acting in defense of this space of freedom requires a peaceful stance within. Its unambiguous realization would be peace between religions.

Another important issue is the topic of theological reflection on human suffering. The analysis of this phenomenon shows explicitly that what allows for cross-

<sup>15</sup> See H. Waldenfels, *Religie odpowiedzi na pytanie o sens istnienia człowieka*, Warszawa 1986, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> By the same autor, *Das Christentum und die Kulturen. Die aktuellen europäischen Christentümer*, „Stimmen der Zeit“. Monatsschrift für das Geistesleben der Gegenwart, 209 (1991), p. 301.

<sup>17</sup> By the same autor, *Źródła duchowości współczesnych społeczeństw*, [in:] K. Wąs, *Rozeznać zamysł Boga*, Kraków 1997, p. 30.

ing any divisions and differences between people is the “language” of suffering. It is thoroughly ecumenical, because in this “speech” of suffering every man can find a part of themselves. This fact is particularly significant for Christian theology, which, while concentrating its attention on Christ who reveals his power of Redeemer through embracing and endowing with meaning the human experience of suffering, must at the same time ask the question about the contemporary meaning of this great Christian truth.

Within the problems of religious-social dialogue, Waldenfels draws attention to the issue of Christianity competing with other offers of explaining the sense of existence, unconnected with religion. A measurable sign of this competition is the theological critique of ideological claims. The critique concerns above all the sense horizons offered by postmodernism, which are programmed and deduced from the present. All these offers are characterized by certain exclusion of novelty through persistent remaining within the realm of answers deduced from existing identities. The novelty of future requires different thinking – open, able to reject ideological pitfalls. This “new” thinking is Christian theology. It deals in new and ultimate realities and it remains forever a type of thought bearing the stamp of the Word as an event. It is an event of the revelation of a living God, communicating with man by means of promise and hope, not in any object of creation. This substantiation of hope creates a chance of man’s discovery of new, strong ethical motivations. In this way, a renewed appearance of a new horizon is connected with searching of the sense lost.

What is also important in the concern for dialogical coexistence is the striving to overcome the temptations of fundamentalism and religious syncretism. In Waldenfels’ opinion, both these contradictory standpoints are factors destabilizing the processes of interhuman communication. In the end, these standpoints lead to the constant increase in processes of alienation, through a tendency to retain one’s own, narrowly understood identity. Therefore, from the point of view of dialogue they are unacceptable.

## Summary

The recapitulation of the problem of dialogue in the theology of Hans Waldenfels leads to the following conclusion:

The aforementioned concept of dialogue displays significant features, typical of fundamentological reflection. This is confirmed by such elements as: its own fundament (Christian claim), considering, especially remarkable for interpretation, of the specific character of the context of this claim – (evident objection) and apologetic-dialogical perspective of the interpretation. Based on such reflection, Waldenfels directs his appeal not only to those, who belong to the community of the baptized, but also towards those outside Christianity. Therefore, his theology is the theology of mission; it constitutes a call for dialogue with others. Consequently, contex-



tual fundamental theology of H. Waldenfels may serve as practical assistance in proclaiming God, Jesus Christ and His Church to the world, remaining at the service of the people in search of salvation.

## HANSA WALDENFELSA TEOLOGIA POGRANICZA I DIALOGU

### Streszczenie

Powyższy artykuł to prezentacja refleksji fundamentalnoteologicznej Hansa Waldenfelsa, skoncentrowanej na problemie dialogu. Fundamentalną przesłankę tejże refleksji stanowi przekonanie o wyjątkowości chrześcijaństwa pośród różnych kultur i religii oraz wielorakich systemów i hierarchii wartości, współtworzących obecnie wraz z nim współczesny krajobraz pluralistycznie zorientowanych społeczeństw. Zgodnie z sugestią Waldenfelsa, owa wyjątkowość chrześcijaństwa, którą konstytuuje przekonanie o absolutnym charakterze własnego roszczenia, napotyka obecnie coraz większy sprzeciw ze strony innych podmiotów zarówno religijnych, jak i świeckich, które poprzez absolutyzację własnych roszczeń, próbują neutralizować zbawczą wartość chrześcijańskiego orędzia. Sytuacja ta prowokuje zatem pytanie o możliwość jej dialogowego rozwiązania.

Waldenfels, mając na uwadze tę zasadność, wskazuje na znaczenie mediacyjnej roli teologii fundamentalnej uprawianej w apologetyczno-dialogicznej perspektywie. W tym kontekście uzasadnia on niezbędność apologetyki, której zadaniem jest nie tylko badanie charakteru reakcji innych wobec chrześcijańskiego wezwania, lecz także prezentacja racji teologicznych na rzecz chrześcijańskiego orędzia oraz zabieganie o klimat zrozumienia, dzięki któremu to orędzie może być przyjęte. Osiągnięcie tego celu warunkuje konieczność spotkania tendencji apologetycznej z dialogiczną oraz potrzebę ich wzajemnego dopełnienia, dającą możliwość permanentnego poszerzania obszarów dialogicznego współistnienia.