

INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRACY IN THE PRE-WAR ERA?

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■ THE PRE-WAR ERA?

“The post-war era is gone. We are living in new times: in a pre-war era. This is why NATO and solidarity between Europe and America are more important than ever before”¹ – wrote the Prime Minister of the Polish government, Donald Tusk, on Platform X at the beginning of March 2024. This assessment circulated through all major media in Poland, on the one hand, summing up the stage of the discussion on whether the world, is in danger of a conventional war and, on the other, opening up a debate, in which the most important military commanders

¹ „Europe’s post-war era of ‚blissful calm’ is over: Polish PM”, PolskieRadio.pl, access date: 24.03.2024; „The post-war era has passed. We are living in new times: the pre-war era. That is why NATO and solidarity between Europe and America are more important than ever” (translated by P.Z.), <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/artykul/3346310,europe-s-postwar-era-of-blissful-calm-is-over-polish-pm>.

speak directly about the need to increase armaments and strengthen the defence capabilities of European countries.² The latter also requires, as previously stated by General Carsten Breuer, Inspector General of the Bundeswehr, a change in public thinking on security and war preparedness. According to the German general, it is primarily about deterrence and being able to defend oneself, which will cause the adversary to refrain from attacking.

One can cite many similar statements made in recent months, starting with Russia's attack on Ukraine. Relations between China and Taiwan,³ as well as Israel's war against Hamas, which began with the attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and was marked by a boiling dispute over the tragedy of the genocide allegedly committed by the Israelis against the Palestinians, have also encouraged the continuation of the tone of statements emphasising the danger of an escalation of the war.⁴

The international and geopolitical situation indicates that not only has the noble German demand "Nie wieder Krieg in Europa!"⁵ has fallen irretrievably, but the world order established at the peace conferences after the Second World War is crumbling before our eyes. This is indeed an epoch-making change. A imbalance in public discourse accompanies it, the scale of which is best illustrated by the extremely populist slogan uttered by Donald Trump during the US election campaign when – in response to the question whether the US would still defend a country attacked by Russia if that country failed to meet its NATO membership fee (set at 2% of GDP) – Trump declared: "No, I would not protect you. (...) In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You got to pay. You got to pay your bills."⁶ This trite reference to citizens' payment

² Bundeswehr-Generalinspekteur Breuer: „«In fünf Jahren müssen wir kriegstüchtig sein»“, Der Spiegel | Online-Nachrichten, access date: 10.02.2024, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/carsten-breuer-general-inspekteur-der-bundeswehr-in-fuenf-jahren-muessen-wir-kriegstuechtig-sein-a-be252f67-1039-43c7-bd92-518e1be958d2>.

³ On the current state of tension along the China-Taiwan line, see regularly updated report: 'Institute for the Study of War', Institute for the Study of War, access date 24.03.2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/project/china-project>.

⁴ See, for example, Mohammed Nijim, "Genocide in Palestine: Gaza as a case study," *International Journal of Human Rights*, access date: 21.04.2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2065261>.

⁵ C f. Heinz Oskar Vetter, „Ansprache auf dem Antikriegstag 1979.“ In: library.fes.de, access, date: 24.03.2024, <http://library.fes.de/gmh/main/pdf-files/gmh/1979/1979-09-Dokumentation.pdf>.

⁶ See Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough | CNN Politics", CNN, access date:

obligations, calculated to applaud people who are rightly accustomed to paying their obligations in an economically liberal American society, violates all the proportions implied by the question Trump was asked. Similar statements are unprecedented in the history of Western civilisation after the Second World War.⁷ And Trump's subsequent words, in response to the international outcry that the statement 'do whatever the hell they want' is a certain form of negotiation, indicate that the boundaries Trump is crossing in his statements are comparable only to those already crossed by Putin.

■ HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED?

However, the current state of the world is not the result of a sudden effect. It is possible to trace the processes that have led to tensions (China–Taiwan) and the outbreak of wars (Russia–Ukraine, Israel–Hamas) that continue to threaten Western societies. This threat is all the more significant, the more the socio-political attention of the West is focused, of necessity, on the conflicts already taking place, as this increases the risk of superficial description of the phenomena and social dynamics of the West itself. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine was triggered by processes of the same type (not to say the same) as those making themselves known, coming to the fore in authoritarian discourses increasingly represented in the West. Russian imperialism can be understood as an extreme variant of nationalism. This, increasingly present in Western countries, is gaining public sympathy in a wave of populism. Politicians using populist ploys, interested only in their own self-interest and disregarding the long-term consequences, or failing to understand the complexities of the modern world, reinforce extreme, up to and including extremist, attitudes in society.

But can such processes – the rise of nationalism, populist and extremist tendencies – be explained by events along the China–Taiwan line or Israel–Hamas?

11.02.2024, "No, I wouldn't protect. (...) In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever they want. You have to pay. You have to pay your bills." (translated by P.Z.), <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

⁷ Le Monde with AFP, „Trump explains recent NATO threats as a ‚form of negotiation“”, Le Monde.fr, access date: 20.03.2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/united-states/article/2024/03/20/trump-describes-recent-nato-threats-as-a-form-of-negotiation_6636346_133.html.

In the first case, Chinese imperialism comes to the fore, but given that country's political regime, can we speak of a nationalist foundation to Chinese imperialism? In the case of the Israel– Hamas war, extremism plays an unquestionable role. But are these phenomena exclusive? Can the list of causes of complex socio-political phenomena escalating to the outbreak of war be exhausted in a three-element set? Awareness of such questions is not enough to provide a correct answer. It is enough, however, to indicate in which aspect and from which perspective the phenomena under consideration are approached in the multi-author study proposed here.

■ PERSPECTIVE AND ASPECT: NATIONALISM, POPULISM AND EXTREMISM VS RELIGION

In the mosaic of distinguishable phenomena that define the current state of the world, this publication pays attention to three tendencies: populism, nationalism and extremism, among others, due to their rise in the West for at least a decade.⁸ While posing a multidimensional and multifaceted threat to democracy, these tendencies are highly reductionist. This is evident when one considers, for example, how religion is incorporated into populist, nationalist and extremist discourses and practices. It is, therefore, religion that is the focus of the book.

Religion – with its potential to transmit strong individual and collective emotions – is being reduced by populism, nationalism and extremism to the role of an ideology supporting a nation-state, a minority cultural community (e.g. Islam) or the current election campaign. This is exemplified by the increasingly frequent demands for a return to a Christian Europe – in the face of secularisation and the increasing number of Islamists in Europe. Behind these slogans are the political aspirations of populists who do not care about the future of Christianity and its development but rather about idolising their people, thus creating a dangerous form of idolatry. Populists and nationalists seek to attract representatives of the Church just to become more socially credible, promising privileges in return for their support. In this way, populism and nationalism destroy a healthy democracy, also with the help of religion.

⁸ See e.g. “Der Aufstieg des Rechtspopulismus in Europa und den Vereinigten Staaten Eine vergleichende Perspektive,” Bibliothek der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, access date: 24.03.2024, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/12892>.

These initial observations led to numerous questions – almost every author asked their own – and problems that could be outlined but not resolved. Most generally, the issues considered were whether religion, especially Christianity (mainly Catholic Christianity and the Catholic Church), can respond to threats involving religions in a spiral of phenomena that contradict them. Can religions only react, or are they capable of making a positive contribution to counteracting the discussed threats to democracy? If so, in what way? Such and similar questions analysed the threats to contemporary democracy, especially in Europe, expressed in populist and nationalist tendencies and emerging extremist attitudes. Against this background – with the prevailing assumption that religion is not doomed to merely reacting to the processes of which it is a part – the authors attempted to seek positive solutions to the emerging tensions, focusing attention on the role of Christianity (mainly the Catholic Church) in this respect.

■ OUTLINE OF PUBLICATION STRUCTURE

The variety of questions addressed and analyses determined the book's structure. It has been divided into four parts. We start with two texts framing the discussion: a polyphony and a mosaic of perspectives. The first is an interview with Prof. Tomáš Halík, which seeks to approach and develop the idea of 'an afternoon of Christianity' in such a way as to take into account the conditions leading to fundamental questions about democracy and its future. The second text, by Prof. Maria Widl from Erfurt, sketches a broad social perspective that enables democratic principia to be rethought from a theological perspective.

The subsequent parts of the book are organised around dominant issues. The assumption was made that the detailed sciences should provide a starting point, allowing a closer look at individual phenomena without sketching a broad cognitive horizon. Philosophy and theology, following the classical model, speak last, *ex universa*. However, the whole arrangement is a postmodern variation of the classical pattern rather than a representation of it. The book's second part most extensively discusses issues collectively described as socio-political, including topics specific to sociology, psychology, and political science.

The third part, consisting of only four texts, considers the diverse viewpoints in evaluating the guiding question in the typical normative aspect of philosophy.

Thus, we find analyses from social and political philosophy, ethical philosophy, and the neuroscience viewpoint in the philosophical part.

The fourth part – drawing on the achievements of both the specific sciences and philosophy, but within the scope set by the aims and method of theology – proposes a broadly sketched normative horizon. The reader can follow different theological paths – more classical, inspired by philosophy, and more contemporary, carefully considering sociological and political data – towards the goal they ultimately sets himself. After all, theological texts work very well as a pretext for seeking one’s unifying worldview, which considers the transcendent perspective in the broadest sense. This perspective, in turn, can prove inspiring for both the classically religious and believing and those who do not share faith or religious convictions.

■ ORIGINS OF THE PUBLICATION

The publication presented here is based on an international, interdisciplinary, and interreligious scientific project entitled “Threats to Democracy – Nationalism, Populism, Extremism – and Christianity’s Response to Them.” Initially, the entire project was intended to be completed between 2020 and 2021, and even at that stage, unusual challenges began to emerge. However, this became impossible due to the global coronavirus pandemic, which began at the end of 2019 and escalated in the spring of the following year. The seminars were originally planned to take place in Krakow (Poland), Tbilisi (Georgia), St. Petersburg (Russia), and Herdorf near Frankfurt am Main (Germany). However, the pandemic made travel impossible, forcing a reorganization of the project.

Just when everything seemed on track, Vladimir Putin struck Ukraine militarily (on the morning of 24 February 2022), and Russian troops almost immediately began committing tragic war crimes on its territory.⁹ This caused a profound shift of the geopolitical perspective. As a result, Russia could not participate in the project.

Despite the constraints of history and unpredictable circumstances, the project on democracy – unexpectedly growing in stature – came to fruition between 2022 and 2023. It involved students and doctoral students from the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, the University of Silesia in Katowice,

⁹ See: „Human rights in Ukraine,” Amnesty International, access date: 24.03.2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/ukraine/report-ukraine>.

the John Paul Catholic University of Lublin in Lublin (Poland), Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University in Tbilisi (Georgia), the Universities of Erfurt, Karlsruhe, Bremen, Landau (Germany), the University of Szeged (Hungary), the Polish Catholic Mission in Germany, the University of Vienna (Austria), Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic), Keele University (UK).

The project's work was conducted using the seminar method. First, the students and young researchers, under the guidance of their professors, held seminars at their research centres and prepared their papers. Each had to choose the most exciting issue in the outlined area. The professors edited extensive papers to provide a basis for the participants' work. In the next phase, three international sessions were held: in Krakow (Poland) from 29 November to 3 December 2022, in Herdorf (Germany) from 30 April to 4 May 2023, in La Ferté-sous-Jouarre and Paris (France) from 25 to 29 June 2023, and a concluding session of professors in Hannover (Germany) from 24 to 26 January 2024.

These assemblies featured a programme consisting of two parts: scientific and cultural. Participants presented their thoughts through papers or other contributions in the scientific part. There were discussions in smaller thematic groups and plenary discussions. In the artistic part, participants were introduced to the history and culture of the local area where the subsequent sessions were held, taking the opportunity to get to know each other and to make scientific contacts and friendships.

The present volume contains the texts of the papers or abstracts of the presentations made by the participants in the scientific part of the project. Some of them are printed in two languages (English and the participants' national language). Photographs illustrate both the work of the sessions and selected events from the cultural programme accompanying the congresses.

■ THE “HERDORF METHOD”, OR TRYING TO PRACTICE CHRISTIANITY DEMOCRATICALLY

It is worth paying closer attention to the method of seminar work adopted during one of the stages in Herdorf, or rather, to the *cooperation* process between participants and professors practised there.¹⁰ It was crucial for the formation of

¹⁰ We owe the development of this working method, as well as the running of the seminar in Herdorf near Frankfurt, to Professor Maria Widl of the University of Erfurt.

the democratic habit. Its first element is the experience of each participant contributing to the audience of up to ten people (this is how participants are divided into seminar groups). It consists mainly of preparing the topic of one's contribution, in line with the central theme of the seminar – and making this contribution available well before the next meeting. Again, ensuring that the participants correctly identify this circumstance is essential. It is simple: democracy is about participation. Before anyone exercises the rights and goods available in a democratic seminar community, they are asked to consciously and actively contribute.

According to the accepted definition, democratic habitus is understood, among other things, as also habitual reliance on persuasion instead of force. To give this normative qualification a practical implementation, the seminar participants presented their topics in pairs, one after the other. At this stage of democratic habit formation, the most important thing is that the issues are juxtaposed as a matter of principle as contradictory, at least to some extent, or simply paradoxical. The aim is that the participants not only know but also experience a concrete relationship that difference – broadly defined, including differences of opinion on major and public issues, should not lead to hostility but should be an opportunity for conversation. The conversation does not necessarily lead to a change of mind or a victory in the discussion but to a better understanding of the difference and whether it is about being right.

After listening to both speakers, the interview is divided into two phases. The first is the question phase. All seminar participants can ask what is essential or unclear to them. No judgements or comments are made at this stage. The idea is to let ignorance resound and recognise that not knowing or not understanding enough is a normal state of affairs. There is no need to rush to find camouflage for this condition or adopt makeshift solutions. The value lies in withstanding the question. *Sit, maneat questio!* So, there are no immediate answers. The questions asked are written down on a large sheet of paper. And they wait their turn.

A crucial stage for building a democratic habit is the following conversation phase, called the “murmuring phase.” In this part, after two dissenting voices

The unanimous opinion of the participants indicates the considerable benefit derived from a seminar conducted using this method. The organisers would like to express their gratitude to Professor Widl for this initiative and for conducting the seminar using a „democratic method”, enabling everyone to participate creatively. At the same time, we would like to point out that the reconstruction and commentary on the method presented in this paragraph is by Patryk Zajac.

have been heard and questions have been asked and publicly written down – participants divide into groups of two or (at most) three. In these groups, they talk among themselves, taking up one of the written questions they can look at or all the questions as the talkers decide. This democratic habit-building step is intended to show that, in the face of existing questions, public speaking should not always be the behaviour of first choice. It is appropriate to consult one's own opinion in a somewhat narrower circle in front of people whose presence does not constitute a kind of social and accountability tribunal against which every word would be weighed. In this experience, it is a matter of seeing democracy as a matter of opinion, all the same, not any opinion, but one that can be consulted, modified, changed and perhaps even kept to oneself. Each of these decisions, on a matter of formed opinion, has a democratic meaning and sense and, above all, is based on the principle of freedom.

The penultimate stage of participation in the democratic experience is the public presentation, by a representative of each of the discussing subgroups, of that opinion, or those opinions of the participants they have chosen to make public. Each such opinion is noted as a comment under the related question. In doing so, the participant's task is to conduct a public discussion in which holy indignation and defensive attitudes are avoided. Personal criticism is excluded; substantive criticism is always welcome from any participant. Moments of manipulation, if any, are also caught. On the other hand, participants must become aware of the importance of their arguments in action, i.e., in discussion. There is also an emphasis in some groups on the role of metaphor in the Davidson-Rorty sense.¹¹

In this view, metaphors do not have meanings but have a causal effect on the recipient, so they allow not so much to argue efficiently but to go beyond argumentation by “speaking differently”, i.e., using familiar words in a new way. Before the use of a new metaphorical expression becomes well known, it is ideally suited to fulfill an inspirational role – not only in the sense of creating a political utopia but also in the sense of people inventing new descriptions of themselves, in a mode of social negotiation of what we want and should become. This sometimes affects Newton's use of medieval *gravitas* or St. Paul's *metanoia*.

¹¹ For a more extensive discussion, see, for example, Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 114–118, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139173865> and Richard Rorty, “Unfamiliar Noises, Hesse and Davidson on metaphor”. In: „Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth.“ Vol. 1: Philosophical Papers, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 162–172.

Both argumentative skill and creativity in inventing metaphors are highly applicable in shaping free democratic discourse. Neither argument nor metaphor allows for definitive closure of any issue, and the appearance of such closure harmoniously leads to a discussion of whether we have just fallen into authoritarian violence at the level of discourse.

A specifically Christian experience can be identified in this context, recognising it as an experience of unity in diversity. This is because people representing societies of a well-established, long-established democratic tradition meet with people who emphasise human dignity above all in their statements. In their cultural context, they do not pursue the preservation of democracy in the face of the spectre of authoritarianism and the abuse of religion in politics, but try to justify that a person in a dramatic life situation can and should be helped at all. This is how the idea of dignity, taken for granted and even undermined in their society, is being revived before the eyes of young, enthusiastic democrats.

These similar situations and personal encounters during the seminar and in the cultural part make it possible to experience and understand how Christianity transcends the categories of unity and plurality, proposing the Trinitarian faith as a principle. At its core is the conviction that true unity does not annul diversity, while diversity is only realised with *ousia* being a dialogical and not a dialectical principle of unity. In this model, as adapted in a democratic society, difference becomes a place for the revelation and reception of the profound truth of the unity of reality and not an accusation of the struggle of opposites.

The Christian specificity of forming a democratic habit can be read even more profoundly if one pays attention to what precisely the otherness of Christianity as practised here consists of. First and foremost, it is expressed in the non-reduction of the Christian experience to religious worship, performed by priests. It is possible to give an original hermeneutic to this experience of a differently practised Christianity by taking a theological look at the final stage of seminary work, i.e., the phase of evaluating and interpreting the results obtained through listening, questioning, forming opinions, and expressing opinions. To show this originality, it is worth starting with the words of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church "Gaudium et spes", where the Church herself writes of the person: "The joy and hope, sorrow and trepidation of modern people, especially of the poor and of all those who suffer, are also the joy and hope, sorrow and trepidation of Christ's disciples; and there is nothing truly human that does not have resonance in their hearts

(CCD 1)”. Joy – green colour marker; hope – yellow colour marker; sadness – red colour; trepidation – purple colour. In the concluding phase of the seminar, after collecting all the sheets on which questions and opinions have been written, the results of the democratic discussion and exchange of perspectives – the participants are asked to place a marker (one of each colour) where they identify joy, hope, sadness, and trepidation. The final task addressed to all will be interpreting the resulting colour mosaic.

However, this very act of expressing one’s judgement in terms in which the Catholic Church has expressed its reference not only to the modern world but to what is “truly human” – is a step towards an ecumenically lived Christianity of tomorrow. It turns out that followers of Islam leaning towards atheism, Catholic traditionalists, and simply ordinary Christians – can see reality from a perspective that is not merely ecclesiastical but genuinely universal. This is how the Church realises that it transcends itself. And, without contradicting anyone’s position on their faith or disbelief, it turns out that for Muslims, atheists and Christians alike, Christianity lived differently becomes what it is: “a sacrament, as it were, that is, a sign and instrument of the intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 1).

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