

Does the Evangelical understanding of the concept of property serve sustainable development?

Czy ewangelickie rozumienie pojęcia własności służy zrównoważonemu rozwojowi?

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Abstract

Protestant Reformation brought about some revolutionary changes in the ways that God and human role in the world were perceived. Martin Luther, known as the *Father of the Reformation*, adhered to the principle *sola scriptura* – *only Scripture*, and hence based all his teachings on the Word of God. The understanding of ownership proposed by him was also a faithful reflection of biblical teaching. According to Luther, the true meaning of ownership was servanthood – God bestowed goods to man in order for him to share his possessions with others. The Reformer did not perceive property as a value on its own. Rather, a man's attitude to property reflected his attitude towards his neighbour and the creation as a whole. People should not forget that all their possessions have merely been temporarily entrusted to them by God.

This Biblical principle has been elaborated on by evangelical theologians. Modern reflection emphasizes that the idea of ownership is not confined to material goods, but encompasses various elements of the surrounding world. Consequently, care for the creation and natural environment should be viewed as Christian responsibility. Man was created in God's image and likeness, and is known to be the crown of creation. Evangelical theologians point out that Christians should be particularly sensitive to issues of environmental protection and preserving this world for future generations. Responsibility for the surrounding world should not be a burdensome duty. It ought to be an expression of love for God and one's neighbour, a proof of deeper understanding of the meaning of Christianity. All in all, it is the fullest realization of the idea of sustainable development.

Key words: ownership, Christian responsibility, Reformation, sustainable development

Streszczenie

Reformacja spowodowała przełomowe zmiany w sposobie myślenia o Bogu i roli człowieka w świecie. Marcin Luter, nazywany dziś *ojcem reformacji* w myśl zasady *sola scriptura* – *tylko Pismo* całą swoją naukę opierał na Bożym słowie. Również proponowane przez niego rozumienie pojęcia własności było wiernym odbiciem nauk zawartych w Biblii. Własność, według Lutra, ma charakter służebny – człowiek zostaje obdarowany przez Boga po to, by móc dzielić się z innymi. Reformator nie postrzegał własności jako dobra samego w sobie. Własność była elementem, do którego stosunek określa nasze podejście do bliźniego i całego dzieła stworzenia. Człowiek nie powinien zapominać, że wszelkie dobra są mu jedynie przez Boga powierzone.

Ta biblijna myśl została rozwinięta przez współczesnych teologów ewangelickich. W aktualnych rozważaniach podkreśla się, że pojęcie własności dotyczy nie tylko dóbr materialnych, ale wielu elementów otaczającego nas świata. Troska o stworzenie i środowisko naturalne winna więc być przejawem chrześcijańskiej odpowiedzialności. Człowiek został stworzony na obraz i podobieństwo Boże. Jest ukoronowaniem dzieła stworzenia. Teologowie ewangelicy zwracają uwagę, że chrześcijanie powinni być szczególnie wrażliwi na ochronę środowiska, a co za tym idzie na zachowanie świata dla przyszłych pokoleń. Odpowiedzialność człowieka za otaczający go świat, nie może być jedynie uciążliwym obowiązkiem. Powinna być przejawem miłości do Boga i bliźnich oraz

znakiem zrozumienia naszego chrześcijaństwa. Jest bowiem najpełniejszą realizacją idei zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: własność, chrześcijańska odpowiedzialność, reformacja, rozwój zrównoważony

Introduction

Over centuries, Christianity adopted different approaches to the issue of ownership, or property. The Church of the Middle Ages aimed at turning people's attention away from worldly matters (Szarek, 2004). The most heated medieval disputes focused mainly on the question of peripheral, and at the same time central place of man among other beings (Bochenek, 2010). It was not until The Reformation that a significant change of attitude towards the issue of ownership took place. Analysing the situation in Europe at the end of Middle Ages, it seems that Martin Luther, or the *Father of the Reformation*, must have been driven by outer circumstances. Church reform had already been the subject of debate for several centuries (Uglorz, 1995). Reformation today it is defined as *a religious-social movement which led to significant changes in the doctrine and structure of the Church* (PWN, 1996). Assuming that a religious doctrine encompasses a theory of God – theology, a theory of the universe – cosmology, and a theory of man – religious anthropology, it seems evident that the Reformation brought about some critical changes in the way of thinking. It influenced both the way people thought about God, and about human role in the world. The latter pertains also to man's attitude to property, including his attitude to the whole creation and the natural environment.

The notion of ownership in the Bible

In the *Old Testament*, the issue of ownership is mentioned mostly in context of legal regulations for the Israelites. But is it that the *Old Testament* has nothing to say on how a contemporary man, not necessarily a Christian, should perceive property, and consequently, how he should relate to the surrounding world? Actually, there are many relevant passages that theologians would be ready to point out. I would like to bring up just two of them. The first fragment is from the *Book of Genesis*, which speaks of creation of the world and man (Gen 1:1-31). Udo and Pawłowski (2010) quoted it as probably the earliest and the most important passage, and also an interpretation of global social equilibrium attained by the means of populating the Earth. I agree with this statement. However, I would like to especially emphasize the words referring to the Earth: (...) *and subdue it*. Is it not a clear suggestion that we are owners (co-owners) of the world? The world has been given to us so that we can manage it. We are to use its resources, but in a rational way. Although we are the crown of creation, we are also

its part. Being a part of creation, we have the responsibility to care for it. The proponents of sustainable development also tend to take expressions like *use in a way not to use up* or *live and let live* as their central axiological premise (Kuzior 2006).

In the *Book of Deuteronomy* (Deut 8:17-18), in turn, there is a passage concerning the Promised Land which says: *You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me"*, and in the following verse: *But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today*. The fragment warns clearly against pride because of one's possessions. For all that we have has been given to us by God.

Interesting reflections on Biblical ecology can be found in Uglorz's (2010) *Ekologiczne wątki w biblijnej historii zbawienia [Ecological Themes in the Biblical History of Salvation]*. The book presents, among others, two ecological metaphors of man: man as an administrator, and man as a host. The former is most fully illustrated in the *Book of Psalms* (Ps 24:1; Ps 50:10; Ps 89:12). As the author indicates, the metaphor stands there for the idea of care and a sense of responsibility for a received gift. Administering the Earth on God's behalf should be characterized by care and responsibility. The metaphor of a host, taking care of a common house for all living things created by God (Isa 45:18), is the epitome of the basic idea of ecology. Ecology, in the words of Uglorz, is a word (teaching) about a house. A host takes care of the house, i.e. the environment God created for man to live in. Good condition of the house is reflected by proper relations between the household members, and between them and other creatures inhabiting the house.

The *New Testament* speaks even more pointedly of the attitude towards possessions that a man should take. The *Gospel of Luke* (Lk 12:13-21) openly warns against greed and teaches that wealth should not be accumulated for its own sake. Another passage from this Gospel explains how wealth ought to be used (Lk 16:9-13). The concept is then illustrated even more clearly in the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30). Man is only a steward of property belonging to the Lord. Property that we are to respect, manage and multiply. In his teaching, Jesus did not condemn wealth on its own; neither did he condemn the idea of growing rich. But he very strongly warned against getting enslaved by wealth. One should also agree with the observation made by Rev. Bołoz, that the Bible presents animals and plants as worthy of praise and of caring for their good (Smóderok, 2010). Care for the surrounding

world means care for a common property. It is also a measure of our responsibility towards ourselves and towards the following generations.

The notion of ownership in the views of Martin Luther

Conforming to the Reformation rule *sola Scriptura* – *only Scripture*, Martin Luther based all of his teachings on the Word of God. He believed that the *Bible* should be the only source of faith and Christian life. Concerning the question of property, the Wittenberg theologian laid special emphasis on the Biblical passage, which states that: *the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil* (I Tm 6:9-10). One of the mottos of the Reformation ethics was that faith was made effective through love (Hintz, 2009). Therefore, the Reformation model of a Christian was that of a socially active person, readily participating in the matters of this world. Luther's ethics, including his views on property, is an integral part of his theology. His understanding of the concept of ownership is presented in the *Catechism*. Explaining the seventh commandment (*thou shalt not steal*), the theologian wrote: *it is herewith forbidden, in the first place, to do our neighbour any injury or harm (in whatever manner supposable, by curtailing, forestalling, and withholding his possessions and property), or even to consent or allow such a thing, but to interpose and prevent it*. Luther indicated clearly that other people's property was to be respected. Our attitude towards our neighbour's property defines our attitude towards our neighbour himself. By respecting other person's property, we respect that person as a human being. In the following passage Luther writes: *and, on the other hand, it is commanded that we advance and improve his possessions, and in case he suffers, we must help, communicate, and lend both to friends and foes*. It is evident, then, that Luther saw property as a means of obeying the commandment of love. This is further confirmed by Luther's explanation of the ninth and the tenth commandments (*thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is his*). The Reformer writes that: *it is commanded, first, that we do not desire our neighbour's damage, nor even assist, nor give occasion for it, but gladly wish and leave him what he has, and, besides, advance and preserve for him what may be for his profit and service, as we should wish to be treated*. As can be seen, these commandments are directed against greed. Greed is a desire to possess some goods, regardless of the consequences the fulfilment of that desire might lead to. It basically comes down to *here and now*. In many fields of human activity, striving to maximize profits is tainted with greed. Yet what can be observed from the analysis of a branch of economy such as agriculture, is that

increase in production disturbed the ecological balance and caused a lot of damage in the form of environment pollution, water and air contamination (Pawłowski, Pawłowski, 2008). In other words, the acceleration of development resulted in the loss of equilibrium between man and nature (Tuziak, 2010). Of course, it can be proven that the world population explosion necessitated an increase in food production. But on the other hand, one should not overlook the phenomenon of overproduction. The maximisation of production did not alleviate the problem of food availability in the poorest countries. Is it not, then, that the real, though perfectly disguised, reason for the intensification observed not only in agriculture, is greed, or the desire to possess? Luther treated the existence of ownership, that is the stewardship of possessions, as an inevitable state of affairs. According to the theologian, the true meaning of ownership was servanthood – God bestowed goods to man in order for him to share his possessions with others. As far as economy is concerned, Luther was a child of his time, and so he was oblivious to the rules of modern economy, governed by the law of supply and demand, and driven by the desire for profit. He believed that the traditional economy of goods ensured welfare for a large number of people, while the money economy lead to excessive wealth of a small group of citizens, at the expense of the poor majority (Hintz, 2007). Although today the latter model prevailed, it is hard not to notice that in the long run, it might turn out to be fatal. The devastation of natural environment is caused by the current global economic system. Modern industrial society has already seriously upset the balance of the whole organism of the Earth (Naumowicz, 2009). Actually, a kind of paradox can be observed. The chase after personal gain and increasing personal assets has lead to a decrease in the assets of humanity as a whole. Due to wasteful exploitation of the environment, the natural resources are dwindling at an appalling rate. If humanity does not come to its senses, there will be not much left for the generations to come. For some losses, such as the extinction of numerous species of plants and animals, are irreversible.

Ownership as seen by contemporary evangelical theologians

Nowadays, the concept of ownership as entrusted property should be universally recognized (Benedyktowicz, 1993). The idea of trust makes us treat our own possessions as common property. In Anglo-Saxon countries there is an expression *Christian stewardship*, understood as Christian trust. Benedyktowicz (1993) writes that being aware of the fact that what we have has been entrusted to us to manage, requires treating property in a sensible, responsible and socially useful way. If we believe

property to be an entrusted gift, we cannot use it improperly.

The question is whether property refers only to material goods. Certainly not. Christian responsibility should be also reflected in caring for the creation and natural environment. Man was created in God's image and likeness, and is considered to be the crown of creation. Nevertheless, although God gave him rule over other creatures, this rule is not that of a sovereign. The kings of Israel can serve as an example. Uglorz (2010) explains that royal rule in Israel was not sovereign. The rulers were obliged to obey the Law and walk in the ways of Jehovah. They were assessed and qualified according to their faithfulness to God.

After all, modern man is not that different from the first people. We still face the same problems and dilemmas. However, taking into account the fact that we have been exploiting the Earth for a very long time, we are worse off than our ancestors. We can no longer pretend not to notice the dangers that we have created and keep on creating. It seems that the idea of sustainable development, as opposed to consumerism, evolved out of a human twinge of conscience, in order to stop this destructive process. Piątek (2005) expressed a similar thought, saying that the concept of sustainable development is the first intentionally formulated attempt to avoid self-destruction in the history of the Earth. Also today, the idea of sustainable development is seen as an urgent demand for a change in the direction of human development (Gawor, 2010).

The importance of introducing this idea was confirmed by the manifold interpretations that the term *sustainable development* generated (Redclift, 2009; Wodzikowski, 2009; Pawłowski, 2009).

In a Christian society the idea of sustainability replacing, according to Sztumski (2008), uninhibited and ferocious development, should automatically find understanding and support. At least because of the values that we hold. Unfortunately, very often we do not see the relationship between loving and responsible attitude towards the creation commanded by God, and everyday life.

Still, in my opinion, this command is the fullest realization of the idea of sustainable development. The results of research conducted by Bołtromiuk (2010) indicate that only a small portion of the Polish society can correctly identify the meaning of the term. Nevertheless, in spite of lack of full understanding of the concept, over 70% of the respondents expressed support for the idea, which is encouraging. The vast majority also declared awareness of both the positive and negative influence that their attitude and behaviour have on the natural environment.

Maybe, then, it is not true that, as Sztumski (2008) said, sustainable development is an illusion, or *opium of the masses*, since it is based on illusionary and irrational premises, and unfounded faith.

Perhaps realizing the true meaning of Christianity will help us work on preserving this world for future generations.

This is a task for all Christians (and not only), however, it should especially concern the Protestants. One should not forget that Luther's teaching on the attitude of man towards God's creation is a direct interpretation of the Holy Scripture. And the Reformer fiercely condemned selfishness and desire for profit, which stand against God's teachings. Modern evangelical theologians also indicate, but more directly, that Christians should be particularly sensitive to the issues of environmental protection, and preserving the world for the generations to come. Benedyktowicz (1993) claims that appreciating the dignity of the world should come to us naturally, since it is the work of God the Creator. He also points out that in our times such respect ought to express itself in supporting environmental protection activities. Also Jagudzki (1975), who rejects the possibility of isolating oneself in a religious fortress, as a means of escaping the world, proposes an affirmation of the world, which should reflect a spirit of servanthood. Similar views are expressed by Uglorz (2010) in his reflection on the position of modern man in the world, when he writes: *God equipped man in gifts which will enable him to care for all the creation according to the will of God*, and then: *royal reign of man over creation is a service for its good, since man is connected with the creation and dependent upon it*. Finally, Hintz (2006) highlights the fact that both the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament* perceive human being as a psychosomatic whole. Especially the *Old Testament* emphasizes a close, almost intimate, relationship between God and nature, and in particular man, as being part of it.

Conclusions

In the light of the discourse presented above, it can be said that the evangelical understanding of ownership does serve sustainable development. Evangelical thought, being based, among others, on the principle *sola scriptura*, is a simple and clear interpretation of the *Bible*. Evangelical theologians, beginning with Luther, unanimously emphasized that man is to serve the surrounding world. The work of creation, of which according to God's will we are co-owners, is a possession entrusted to us. Responsibility of man for the world should not be a burden, but rather an expression of love towards God and our neighbour, as well as a sign of our Christian maturity. For it is the fullest realization of the idea of sustainable development.

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