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Christianity in confrontation with individualism and crisis of Western culture: person, community, dialog, reflexivity, and relationship ethics

Abstract: Many events show that Western civilization is in a period of major crisis. Due to excessive individualism and subjectivism and a lack of common good, the dominant mode of thinking and acting are destructive nihilism and immanent narcissism. We believe that these two ways of thinking cannot deliver a solution to the social crisis. In this paper we summarise Sorokin's analysis of how historical society dealt with such a deep social crisis.

We provide some proposals for contemporary democratic communitarianism, in response to the excessive individualism and moral emptiness of contemporary society. Finally, we give some elements of a genuinely creative Christian response to the crisis: the importance of genuine dialogue, the importance of the principle of person and the process of personalisation, fraternity, reflection and discernment, relationship ethics, and of memory and wisdom.

Key words: socio-cultural crisis, individualism, Sorokin, person, reflexivity, communitarianism, societal changes

Povzetek: **Krščanstvo v soočenju z individualizmom in s krizo zahodne kulture: pomen osebe, skupnosti, pristnega dialoga, refleksivnosti in etike odnosov**

Mnoga dogajanja kažejo, da je zahodna civilizacija v obdobju velike krize. Zaradi pretiranega individualizma in subjektivizma ter pomanjkanja skupnega dobrega sta prevladujoči drži destruktivni nihilizem in imanentni narcisizem. Menimo, da ti drži ne omogočata izhoda iz takšnega stanja. V prispevku povzemamo Sorokinovo analizo, kako so se pretekle družbe srečevale s takimi globokimi družbenimi krizami. Predstavimo tudi nekatere predloge sodobnega demokratičnega komunitarizma, ki je odgovor na pretirani individualizem in na veliko moralno praznino sodobnega družbe. Nazadnje opišemo elemente pristno krščanskega ustvarjalnega odzivanja na krizo: pomen pristnega dialoga, osebe in procesa poosebljenja, bratstva, refleksivnosti in razločevanja, etike odnosa ter spomina in modrosti.

Ključne besede: družbeno-kulturna kriza, individualizem, Sorokin, oseba, refleksivnost, komunitarizem, družbene spremembe

Many events show that Western civilization is in a period of great transition. We are witnessing the end of the modern era in the form in which it has been known for centuries. In this paper we will look at some of the characteristics of the transitional period and show the potential contribution of Christianity to resolving this crisis period in European history.

The first part provides a brief analysis of the contemporary postmodern situation, different trends of postmodern society and some specifics of Western culture. In the second part, we identify some issues where there may be genuine dialogic encounters between the Christian faith and contemporary culture. In this context, special attention is paid to contemporary communitarianism. We are interested in what might result from a perspective that is based on elements like genuine dialogue, genuine person, community, fraternity, intermediary institutions, relationship ethics, and wisdom. It seems that these issues form an important part of changes which could transform society in the direction of a »culture of life« and a »new civilisation of love«.

1. The crisis of Western culture – are we facing a major transitional period?

Developments of Western civilisation in recent decades indicate more and more strongly that we are probably facing a deep social and cultural crisis. Among the various aspects often mentioned are the financial, economic, ecological and recently also more frequently, moral aspects of the crisis. We agree with these findings, but we believe that the crisis should be viewed in the context of broader social changes. It seems that the crisis extends into most areas of life.

Many indicators confirm that the findings of various mid-20th century – and indeed even earlier – authors concerning »the end of the modern era« were correct. For example Nikolai Berdyaev developed such reflections in philosophy, Pitirim Sorokin in sociology, Arnold Toynbee in history, Romano Guardini in theology[1]. Post-war techno-economic progress has indeed alleviated some of the external aspects of the crisis for several decades. But since no thorough recasting of the depths of the cultural substance (including the spiritual substance) of Western civilisation occurred at the same time, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Western culture is in crisis, which is further deepening. The very core of this crisis is the weak spiritual substance of contemporary Western civilisation.

We agree with Pitirim Sorokin and those other authors mentioned who speak of the fact that we are in a transitional period from the modern era to the so-called postmodern era. What the dominant cultural orientation of this period will be like, we do not yet know.

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[1] N. Berdyaev, *Novoe srednevekov'e: Razmyšlenie o sud'be Rossii i Evropy* (1924); P. A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937–1941 (4 volumes); resume in 1957); A. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (1936–1954; 1961 (12 volumes); R. Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit: Ein Versuch zur Orientierung* (1950).

According to Gallagher (2003) there are three main directions of contemporary culture. One answer is destructive and nihilistic, denying the possibility of the existence of truth and common values. The second response is to emphasise immanence, in a culture of isolation, narcissism and self-realization. Both directions are characterised by passivity, apathy, temporality and fluidity. But there is also a third way, a constructive critique of modernity. This is characterised by the recognition of weakness and feelings, humble seeking, healing of old wounds and by creativity in finding new solutions. According to Griffin (1988, 10) so-called destructive post-modernism should actually be considered to be ultra-modernism – the continuation of the destructive tendency of the modern era.

The three trends of postmodernity were shown also by several other authors. Three seminal attitudes are fundamentalistic, relativistic and dialogical (Bahovec 2005).

We believe that Pitirim Sorokin made one of the most powerful insights into the core problems of the current period of Western civilisation. From his analysis of the socio-cultural dynamics of two thousand five hundred years of Western civilisation, Sorokin (1957) concludes that we are in a major transition. In the future the highest reality, the deepest foundation, the fundamental orientations of western society will be essentially different from those of the modern era.

1) Throughout history there have been periods, in which one of three types of consistent integrated supra-cultures dominated: *ideational*, *sensate*, and *idealistic*. As regards the *sensate* culture, the ultimate reality is this-worldly reality available to our senses – examples: late Hellenism, modern era. In the case of the *ideational*, the ultimate reality is supra-sensate, supra-rational, transcendental, symbolic, divine - examples: Homeric Greece, Middle Ages. In an *idealistic* period *human reason* (*ratio*) somehow consistently connects (integrates) both realities – two examples: the classical period of ancient Greece, the High Middle Ages. In some periods none of these three coherent forms of culture predominates, but we observe either mixed types of two of the above-mentioned cultures or of different non-consistent forms of culture. It is particularly important to note that an integrated culture includes consistency of internal and external expression, since pseudo terms and expressions are also known, for example in the pseudo-ideational type, which is such only according to its external expression and not according to the internal one. It is ideational only in form and not in the inner substance and/or ways of its realisation.

It should be emphasised that in Sorokin's analysis, no society has had only a single type of (supra)culture – there have always been other types of culture present, even if only in very small proportions. However, when a particular type of culture has experienced a serious crisis, then major changes have been born of another type of culture, a culture with a different foundation and orientation. »*By virtue of the principle of immanent change, each of the three integrated forms, or phases, of Ideational, Idealistic and Sensate suprasystems cannot help changing; rising, growing, existing full-blooded for some time, and then declining.*« (Sorokin 1957, 676)

2) Our time has many similarities with late Hellenism when there was a fundamental change in the Roman Empire. The western part of the Empire underwent a catastrophic change, while the eastern part, after the transitional period of turbulence, changed the central core of its culture (or cultural substance). Instead of the dominating form of the sensate supra-culture of late Hellenism, there emerged the ideational supra-culture of Byzantium. In the West, the culture of the Middle Ages, which is also ideational, slowly began to develop. Both cultures were creative responses to the crisis of sensate culture.

It is important to mention that the exceptional creativity of the Byzantine civilisation facilitated the apostolic work of the brother saints Cyril and Methodius, who responded to the invitation and brought Christianity to some of the Slavic regions of central Europe while respecting their language and culture. This interaction, between Christianity and the culture of the (old) Slavic nations, is an example of one of the most successful inculturation, genuine dialogic encounters between religion and culture. The fruits (in both faith and culture) are evident in many Orthodox countries, from Macedonia and Bulgaria to Russia and Belarus. But unfortunately it did not survive in Slavic Central Europe, where the church and political leaders effectively banished their followers.

3) During transitional periods, the law of polarisation and limited creativity of each culture is intensified. In every culture system the higher creative abilities are then stunted - when this has occurred, then negative aspects of this kind of culture take over. Sorokin has shown that many transitional phases in the past lasted at least 150 years and it is not to be expected that it would be otherwise today.

4) According to Sorokin the most important, essential part of all cultures concerns social relationships. Sorokin distinguishes three types of social relations that are internally consistent, coherent and integrated: *contractual*, *familistic* (genuine *Gemeinschaft*-like), and *compulsory* types of social relationships. There are also mixed types of social relationships - but these are either internally inconsistent or are fragmented, fluid, changeable - and pseudo forms where the internal and external aspects are not consistent. Sorokin's analysis showed that in the last centuries a mixture of contractual and compulsory relationships dominated, and the proportion of genuine *Gemeinschaft*-like relations strongly decreased.

Interestingly, the division into three types of social relationships can be found reflected also in other, very different, authors. Here are some: Spektorski (1932) discusses the three types of government in ancient Greece (tyranny, usurpation; democracy, agreement; an organic, spiritual authority), Arendt (1993 [1961]) distinguishes three types of authority (coercion and leadership; rational discussion, obedience and persuasion), Berger (1997) three types of mediation (imperative type; pragmatic type (agreement between the interests); dialogical type of mediation). Comparison of typologies of different authors (for different aspects of social life) shows that there are many similarities among the three types and that Sorokin's is most elaborated.

In recent centuries either compulsory (for example, in politics absolutism, dic-

tatorships and totalitarian regime in the planning economy) or contractual type of social relationships (democracy, market economy) predominated in Europe. Typical understanding of the relationship between human beings tended towards either individualism or collectivism (class, racial, national), or a combination of both (consumer society, mass popular culture).

Therefore, we think that the answer to the next stage of civilisation considerably depends on what will be the response to contemporary individualism.

2.   Individualism and subjective culture

Individualism is not a new phenomenon; it has been described already by classical sociologists such as Emil Durkheim and Pitirim Sorokin (1957) as a phenomenon of atomistic individualism. Individualism is actually an older concept and is one of the important aspects of the Enlightenment understanding of Man. Even Hobbes' theory of the social contract arises from individualistic assumptions (Archer 2011, 121; Rožič 2013, 29–30). However, as Bellah et al. (1985) showed for the United States, it is important to distinguish between two expressions of individualism. In the classical form of individualism in the USA (both biblical and republican individualism) the tendencies of individual and community (religious or national) were balanced.

In the modern form of individualism this is no longer the case: utilitarian individualism in the public sphere and expressive individualism in the private sphere rank an individual's autonomy over that of the community. The culture of individualism in Western society has been strengthened and has reached a level which leads some authors to characterise contemporary society as a society of individuals (Norbert Elias) or individualised society (Bauman 2001). According to Beck »individualisation is becoming *the social structure of second modern society itself*« (in Archer 2011, 124).

The culture of individualism is reflected in the characteristic of the dominant trends of contemporary Western society such as consumerism, popular culture: mass society goes hand in hand with individualism.

Sociological analyses of values (such as the European Values Study and the World Value Survey) indicate that in Western civilisation, particularly in Europe, compared to other parts of the world, values associated with individualism, pluralism and secularisation are those more emphasised. There is a strong emphasis on individualisation and subjectivisation in various areas of life, and tolerance is seen as a superior response to the contemporary pluralism (Luckmann 1991; 1999).

The prevalence of individualism in Western societies is also evident from Hofstede's studies.[2] Western countries differ from all other civilisations in the indica-

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2   According to Hofstede's study in the 1980s, values that distinguish countries from each other can be statistically grouped into four clusters. They show different ways in which societies deal with differences between genders (masculinity versus femininity), power inequality (power distance), uncertainty (uncertainty avoidance), the relationship between individuals and (primary) groups (individualism versus

tors of individualism and power distance (Table 1). With other indicators the differences are not so unambiguous.

	Individualism Index	Power Distance Index
Western Europe	67,1	39,8
USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand	85,0	34,3
South America	22,3	67,8
Sub-Saharan Africa	28,2	68,2
Islamic countries (North Africa and Near East)	38,3	74,9
Asia (without Near East)	26,0	72,8

Table 1: *Hofstede's indicators of individualism and power distance (average values of countries group, own analysis). Source: Samovar at al. 2007, 142–147.*

These trends are quite strongly reflected also in the changing of social religion. In respect to personal religiosity, it is clear that there has been a decline of church religiosity in the last half-century. However, there is also a search for spirituality – both inside and outside Christianity (Platovnjak 2013). Contrary to the secularisation thesis, »›spirituality‹ has become a surprisingly central word in today's culture« (Gallagher 2003 [1997], 149). We are witnessing a true boom of alternative spiritual search, revival of the esoteric, the occult and openness to various aspects of Asian spiritual practices (Campbell 2007). A special place is given to New Age spirituality in a broader sense (Bahovec 2009). It is interesting that one of the leading researchers of the New Age (Sutcliffe 2003) showed that »*seekership*« represents the main form of spiritual path in New Age. Spiritual seeking does not mean the same as in Christianity, where a seeker is looking to meet Christ /God and stay with him. In New Age seekers are »invited« (also supported by spiritual leaders) to move between different spiritual paths in the network of (alternative) spiritual offers and practices, without making lasting commitments.

This may also be confirmed with the words of a person I met discussing New Age in one small Christian group. He had searched for a long time in groups of New Age spirituality, and then found Christianity. He said that in searching in different New Age groups he never found peace – there was always achievability, he had to go elsewhere, forward. But when he met Christianity he no longer had the need to go elsewhere because he recognised that he had found his home, a place where he is »at home«, to which he can always return.

All this shows that a new social form of religion has been established, which Thomas Luckmann (1991) a few decades ago termed »subjective religiousness«.

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collectivism). Later on, the fifth dimension of national culture was added: short-term versus long-term orientation (Samovar at al., 2007, 140-151).

3. Christianity and dialogical answer to the signs of the times

How should Christianity respond to the challenges of contemporary times, including those presented above? What should be the Christian response to the crisis of western civilisation? We believe that the appropriate answer connects several aspects.

According to our reflection the most important aspect is the promotion of genuine reflection and action which together strengthen and expand the relationship of genuine community. This is an acceptance of the fact that the human being is fundamentally relational and develops the culture of neighbourliness and brotherhood, which is so frequently emphasised by Pope Francis. According to sociologist Margaret Archer (2011, 136): »The opposite of individualism is not collectivism but fraternity«. In other words: »How we may envisage getting from the micro-level of friendship to the macro-level of societal fraternity, […] is the most important question to answer in order to transcend the crisis that is Modernity.« (137)

3.1 The shift is already underway

First, Christianity in the different Churches is already responding to the changes described.[3] According to our evaluation, the 2nd Vatican Council should be understood as a typical »postmodern« event. Council movements – including most of its decisions - cannot be placed in the framework of the modern era. There are also other »postmodern« elements in contemporary Christianity, including decisions in favour of new evangelization, inculturation and genuine dialogue in relation to other religions, cultures, unbelievers. These, of course, are the creative characteristics of a new culture, which does not necessarily mean, however, that this culture has already become the prevailing general culture - not even within Christianity. The most we can say is that this is the sign of a different culture in a transitional period which is still ongoing.

However, we believe that some expressions of new cultures have already been developed in society, not only in the Church. Although they do not yet constitute the mainstream of Western culture they are already an integral part of it. For example: in the last period, a strong emphasis has been placed on the dialogue between cultures and civilisations. As regards genuine dialogue, Peter Berger (1997) – a prominent Western sociologist – notes that there was no systematic knowledge about dialogue in the social sciences with the exception of inter-religious dialogue. Later, there was more emphasis on dialogue, as shown by the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue and World Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

This suggests a special opportunity for meeting between the Church and the world. Knowledge of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue can help to develop knowledge about dialogue between cultures and in other areas of life. However,

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[3] This is also supported by some ecumenical movements, the emergence of new ecclesiastical lay communities and movements, by »multi« religious prayer meetings (Assisi) etc.

it must also be remembered that the transfer of knowledge into another area requires taking into account the diversity of issues – and that is why cooperation of experts and practitioners in both the areas concerned are necessary - they need to listen to each other in a creative examination of the differences under consideration.

3.2 Communitarian answer to contemporary individualism

We already mentioned that many sociologists characterise modern society as a society of individuals. According to Archer (2011, 126) »pervasive individualism without-dignity« should be seen as the main form of contemporary individualism. However, although we may agree to some extent with such denotation, we claim that it is not really a complete reflection of modern times.[4] There are also theoretical conceptions and practices with a non-individualistic conception of man, searching for deeper cultural substance and moral solidarity. Among these we should particularly mention contemporary communitarianism (communitarianism is not to be confused with collectivism) and the perspective of intermediary institutions.

One of the central ideas of new communitarian thinking is that contemporary excessive individualism does not provide the optimal response to the demands of life in society. In a good society, there is a balance between individual and common good, between rights and responsibilities. The approaches of welfare state politics and a free market do not cover social needs; both civil society organisations and different forms of communities are needed for genuine personal and social life. An important role is given to active citizenship – but not, however, to individuals acting alone but in conjunction with civil society and community.

In this regard an important, even irreplaceable, source of social renewal is connected with revival of genuine intermediary institutions. These are institutions which act as intermediaries between individuals and social macro institutions (the state, free market etc.). Their important role is to mediate between individuals and macro-institutions, and this in both directions (Berger and Luckmann 1995; Luckmann 1998). If they do not do this, they will remain a private enclave of life or they will be the »extended hand« of macro-institutions (state, political parties, big business...). Also small groups within the church - parishes, (lay) ecclesiastical movements - are potentially authentic intermediaries. Whether or not they play this role in practice is an open question and must be examined for each case individually.

According to communitarianist authors three central aspects are:

1) The basic task of society is promotion of the individual both as a person and as an active community member. We become who we are through our relation-

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4 It is true that prominent individualism is actually a characteristic of the dominant current of contemporary Western society, both in the forms of mass culture (i.e. consumerism, popular culture) and in central institutions of modern society (both the free market and the welfare state are in the current form highly individualistic).

ships. To develop his/her potential as a person each human being needs community, needs to be integrated in relationships with others. Participation takes place at different levels of society. In particular, it is important to be active participants in both »small life-world« and in broader civil society associations and movements.

2) *A good society is able to distinguish between core values and other values.* Complex western societies need to find a means to accept contemporary pluralism while at the same time contributing to social cohesion. *Core values are essential elements of the balance between pluralism and achievement of the necessary unity in diversity.* First, a society must not put forward the values of just one existing group (community) but must simultaneously work on two aspects which together allow for the preservation of liberty, active participation and other values of a genuine democracy. On the one hand, it must recognise and enforce the necessary common core values without which it is impossible to achieve sufficient cohesion and integration while, on the other, it must preserve diversity to give room for other values (Etzioni 1995).

3) The communitarian view recognises a community as genuine where the values of piety and civility do not exclude but complement each other (Selznick 1992, 387). The norms of piety are personal and passionate, the norms of civility are rational. Important forms of filial piety are love, obligations of family life, patriotism, friendship, vocational pride etc. Civility builds frameworks within which people can cooperate despite their divergent views and interests. Communitarianism values belonging to »complementary« associations, including the family, local community, cultural, ethnic and religious groups / institutions, economic organisations, trade unions and professional associations, the national state.

4. Conclusions: reflexivity and discernment, process of personalisation and fraternity, dialogue and relationship ethics, memory and wisdom society

It cannot be expected that many solutions to contemporary questions will be found without a common search and cooperation between Christianity and people of good will. Indeed, Christians, Jews, agnostics and atheists developed contemporary communitarianism jointly. Communitarianism also has a lot in common with the social teaching of the Catholic Church, such as the importance of the person, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity.

Among the key tasks in recovering from the contemporary crisis of our Western culture, according to our assessment, the following are particularly important:

1) To find a way out of individualism, more specifically out of the twins of individualism and collectivism. We believe this is the key step to moving towards developing processes of genuine *personalisation* (and not individualisation) and *fraternity*. The main precondition for this is to move from emphasising the individual to emphasising the person. The essence of the person is relationship, the

fullness of the person in a free and binding relationship with the other – this is love in the meanings of all three Greek words for love: *Eros*, *Philia* and *Agape*. Responsible freedom is an integral part of the principle of person and personalisation (Rupnik 1997).

Another important aspect of a person is the way he or she relates to culture, history, different communities, and social structure. Personal development is dependent on living memory and real traditions, which are open to new developments. From the meeting of old and new true creativity is born. Traditionalism is a diminishing of our inheritance (our tradition) for it maintains only its outer appearances and has no creative thrust.

2) The movement from the individual to the person is also related to a shift from society to *genuine community*. According to Sorokin, in a modern society the fundamental and predominant type of social relationship is either »social contract« (contractual relationships in democratic societies and capitalistic economies) or compulsory relationships (in absolutism, dictatorships, and totalitarian political regimes).

The contractual type of relationship also has limitations, since its central interest can be a barrier to really accepting and recognising another person. The other in this relationship remains a »stranger«. Therefore, it is not surprising that contemporary society puts a strong emphasis on tolerance of others (who are different). On the one hand, tolerance is necessary, but on the other hand, it is not sufficient. Tolerance alone does not provide comprehensive solutions to the requirements of cohabitation. An authentic contact requires true dialogue! The dialogue can occur when people recognise our interconnectivity (personal principle) and the merits of the cultural communities. So we can say that the quest for dialogue is at the same time a striving for a real personal principle and personalisation (not individualisation) and developing true mutual »*Gemeinschaft*-like« interpersonal relationships, not merely a contractual society, but a communal spirituality (Platovnjak 2012, 650) and a culture of fraternity.

According to Pope Francis (2015) fraternity is a necessary pillar of good society: »History has shown well enough, after all, that even freedom and equality, without brotherhood, can be full of individualism and conformism, and even personal interests. … Today more than ever it is necessary to place fraternity back at the centre of our technocratic and bureaucratic society: then even freedom and equality will find the correct balance.«

3) The third necessary shift is the transition from that kind of subjectivity, which is popular, arbitrary and does not include the reason, to *genuine reflexivity*. Subjectivity is necessary – every process of personalisation also includes a subjective aspect. Genuine personalisation includes the reason and intellect. However, it is not about *ratio* in the sense of modern rationality – it is about »postmodern« reason, which is not based on the modern separation of subject and object. Two important terms of such use of reason are: (a) reason as part of reflection and confrontation of subjective feelings with objective aspects of religion and knowl-

edge, and (b) reason as part of wisdom. Reason in this context plays a key role in reflection and discernment - without that, all subjectivity becomes irrational.

4) The listed shifts also include a shift in ethics, which might be called a shift from emphasising »normative morals« or rational ethics to »*relationship ethics*«. The essence and foundation of such ethics is genuine community relationships (including love) and not rational reason. We can also call it »*interpersonal ethics*« because the foundation of such ethics and morality is confidence and trust in other persons and in interpersonal relationships. The foundation of such ethics is not an individualistic understanding of human rights, but a relational understanding of human dignity.

All these and other elements, so we believe, support a fundamental shift in Western civilisation, a shift to integral realisation, to deepening of the spiritual substance of our culture, to the implementation of specific knowledge that has been neglected in the modern era: (genuine) wisdom. It is a shift towards a *wisdom society* (Blasi 2006). Wisdom is based on reflected experience, symbolic communication, and memory rooted in social community and cultural-historic identity (Spidlik and Rupnik 2010). This also implies a shift in the dominant type of social relations – the shift might be called a shift from interest, contractual relations to genuine *Gemeinschaft*-like relationships. It is not surprising that Sorokin stressed that the very core of transition is transition to a new type of social relationships.

These are the elements with which Christianity has transformed the late Hellenistic approach. Living memory and the inspiration of the first centuries of Christianity extend beyond the critical confrontation with contemporary culture: this allows a genuine dialogue and a courageous and creative encounter with modern culture.

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