

## CHRISTIAN STANDARDS IN THE PROVERB TRADITION IN SLOVAKIA

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The proverb tradition as a cultural phenomenon functions on various levels. It appears in the so-called official, institutional culture of the well-educated classes, and equally in the so-called culture of the everyday life of a people, where it arose naturally. This current is represented by cultural values of a spontaneous, collective character bound to tradition, from which the so-called official culture often received and acquired cultural values. Christian ideals positively impressed on the proverbial tradition in Slovakia. They form an important part which is reflected in the content and structure of the function of proverbs.

The acceptance of Christianity brought a powerful impulse to split spiritual culture into official and folk, but also, at the same time, an enriching penetration of both with the proverb tradition. The ascension of Christianity represents for the history of Slovak culture the arrival of the Thessalonian brothers, Constantine and Methodius in Great Moravia in the year 863. After his arrival, Constantine translated the Four Gospels, Psalter and breviary and, together with Methodius, the Mass of the Western Rite. Methodius translated the entire Old Testament, except for the Books of the Maccabee, which were not considered canonical, an interpretation of virtually the entire Bible which became the first translation into a living European language since translation of Wulfilus into Gothic in the fourth century.

The moral standards of Christianity grew from the Ten Commandments, the prestige of which is increased by the faith that they were given to Moses by God himself on Mt. Sinai. Their significance was supported by both religious and secular powers, by which the origin of secular laws was added to God's. God's law has its advantages over laws created by humans. It's ethical and legal standard is united and consecrated by a supernatural authority, it accounts for the entire Christian world, and has its own natural and supernatural system of rewards and punishments throughout life and after death.

The biblical Ten Commandments, and Old and New Testaments express moral principles, maxims and values. Their common goal gives their standard-setting

character an internal conviction and authorization. It is not just a contained "whole" or collection of situational commands and prohibitions, but rather bound by a system of moral values and norms. For many centuries in various social orders, it served as a model and motive for moral behaviour. Christian standards, a code of norms, were, and are up to the present day, in the centre of realizing moral values, whereby moral good is regarded as the greatest value.

The ideas of Christian morals, "sentences, gnomes, biblical quotations, commandments, lessons and warnings got into the folk context especially by the means of divine service, where they functioned as social regulators in literal form, or were adapted and reformulated in conversation to folk tastes.

A further context in which it was possible to acquire a message on normatives was school. We have handwritten and published documents, textbooks and memoirs where we discover that proverbs functioned as an important, didactic device in education, including the teaching of language, rhetoric and stylistics.

An independent and extensive chapter in the history of the proverb tradition in Slovakia is literature. The proverb message of Christianity is found primarily in literature of a religious character, but also in fiction, popular literature, in grammar books and independent collections of proverbs.

Knowing, deciphering and confronting the tradition is significant not only as proof of the historic odyssey of mankind, but also as a conscious upbringing of an individual towards a selection and acquisition of traditions, including those dating back the farthest, according to firm criteria. The highest, evaluative supernorm of all traditions is Herder's formulated tradition of "spiritual knowledge," that is, humanity. It gives sense to passed-down values from the perspective that they contributed to the development of a multi-sided, humane person. J.G. Herder includes among the traditions of humanity those which participated in the cultivation of the moral, spiritual strengths of man. These are also the ethnocultural traditions, among which belong the proverb tradition. We understand tradition as a qualitative category of cultural values concentrated in the collective consciousness of people, which we take from previous generations. At the same time we see the developing and creative essence of the proverb tradition in its value-oriented and development-regulating principles. The value base of the proverb tradition is decisive in its standard-setting mission.

J. Kramárik asserts that what we call culture is not carried on or passed down at the lowest levels of development of human society. That which is carried on is a particular selection of phenomena which are formed in the course of time by values, even by the norm of human deeds and dealings. Thus, tradition is a determined, conscious process, the task of which is not to ensure only the existence of society, but also its order and organization. In our concrete consideration of the proverb tradition, we feel and understand its essence only when we consider it a means, a continuous principle of passing down values and an adequate system of norms.

In the framework of human activity, material and ideal objects gain their own specific position, and with that also a specific meaning, that they have only for man.

Everything which turns to man, and everything to which man turns through his own practical activity, everything that has a place in his life has also a human value, a respective value for man. A value is not a solitary thing with its own characteristics, but its meaning for man, which belongs to it objectively in human practice.

The proverb tradition alone is also a high, positive value for man – as a manifestation of the social memory of mankind. The proverb repertoire, which mirrors, names and formulates social reality, the life of a human. At the same time it influences the formulation and hierarchization of values, as well as the preservation and securing of moral norms, by naming them and in communication actively and in an imperative manner demanding that people stand by them.

The proverb tradition is long-term, progressive and socially creative. Its goal is the stabilization of interpersonal contacts, and the attainment and assurance of good and moral order in society. The stated goal is the highest value, the peak of the value system, which has to ensure the preservation of norms. A norm is a prescription that has to be fulfilled in order to achieve the goal which has been acknowledged as suitable or correct by an authority determined by the norms. Norms are met and fulfilled either from an internal conviction, or by force from an outside power. The unavoidable assumptions of normative relationships include the goal or value which has to be achieved by the preservation of norms.

With this aim the achievement of moral good was, in Christian lands, directed primarily by divine law, but, secondarily, also by secular regulations (law, Church, ceremonial, communal sanctions, etc.). The system of rules (norms, regulations), the fulfilment of which depended on the achievement of the goal, served towards its realization. The fulfilment and continuation of norms was ensured by the authority which defined them with coercive measures and sanctions, which combated disloyalty to norms, and also by a system of rewards directed towards their preservation and stimulation.

Before the arrival of Christianity, the axioms of the proverb tradition were expressed by a so-called natural law. With the arrival of the Christian religion the proverb tradition was enriched in statements with a normative character declaring principles. A coexistence of the elements of a religious system and a system of morality occurs here, and the proverb repertoire with its mirroring ability reflects not only the so-called official, prescribed, regulated, moral imperatives, but also morality in its real life realization and fulfilment.

While religion defines sin, folk morality evaluates an action according to whether it is good or bad, regardless of religion. An action can be either good or bad according to which values the system of morality includes. Religion judges the same actions differently than does morality. The moral conscience differs according to the confirmed statement "What is allowed a king, is not allowed a peasant." This also indicates that many behavioural norms are historically changeable and socially differentiated.

Moral norms are derived from a moral goal and are systematic measures towards reaching it. Values are often a concretization of the moral goal, whereby a

norm is an imperative expression of a particular value – a system of regulations and measures of how to realize values. If the value is love, the norm says: “Love your neighbour!” If the value is “goodness” the norm says: “He who throws rocks at you, you throw bread at him.”

The high ontological status of the proverb tradition manifests itself in the reflection of commands, in the attempt to attain and fulfil the norm – piety and faith being the highest value – (“He who doesn’t abandon God, God doesn’t abandon him,” “No faith disparage, but keep your own!”), but also in the breaking and ignoring of the ideal: “Faith never saved anybody;” and “Pray or don’t pray, from an empty bowl you don’t find food!”

Because of this we know norms a) which are acknowledged and last; b) which are acknowledged but are overstepped; and c) which fall apart.

For example, the Christian “Thou shalt not steal!” and the socialist “Who doesn’t steal, robs his family;” the Christian “Thou shalt not commit adultery!” and the folk “Wedding under the willow tree.”

By the investigation of the linguistic form of normative and evaluating statements, we discover the following signs. Valued acts and manifestations are expressed for the most part in the declarative mood, norms in the imperative mood. Final clauses are, in essence, also normative. Values of objects are usually indicated in the attributive form, norms in the substantive form. Values which are expressed in proverbs we can characterize as a) metaphysical, b) endowing with knowledge, c) moral, d) vital, e) sensual, f) aesthetic, and these can of course be both positive and negative.

From Christian dogmatics many statements expressing transcendental, metaphysical values in the conceptions of good and bad, sin, conscience, etc. settled into the proverbial tradition. Naturally, all grew out from the highest value of God, which is at the same time the measure of all behaviour and happenings, the measure of the human ideal, as well as all human qualities.

“Where there is faith in God, there is the gift of wisdom.” “Without God, you can do nothing of good.” “What doesn’t come from God, has not worth.” “He who is unfaithful to God, is also unfaithful to man.”

These statements can be considered canonical. The statement “Faith saves no one;” or “Pray to God and swim to the shore!” express the ontology of elemental materialism and atheism.

Religion such as that, creates a relationship between a man and his society, and to himself alone, the basic feature of which is that it calls on and refers to the supernatural interference of transcendental strength. In religion, the concept of sin is of the greatest importance, because he who commits a sin violates a law which comes from the highest power. In Christianity he is sinful who opposes God, who oversteps God’s Commandments and who does not behave in a manner of universal, human good. – “Sin, the devil’s laughter.” “One sin begets another.” – In religion, the conceptions and norms of good and bad are always directed higher, to a sure concept of a supernatural character. Morality, particularly folk morality, is more tol-

erant, although they have some norms in common. "Thou shalt not kill!" "Thou shalt not steal!" "A house divided cannot stand." Etc.

After sin, there legitimately follows punishment. Punishment can be executed by the highest power during life, with death, or after death. The most just and fitting punishment for sin is the eternal fire of hell, from which a person cannot escape. "Sin does not escape punishment." "In the way one sins, so is one punished." "The soul would like to go to heaven, but the sin is heavy." "How he acted, so he felt, the devil he served, the devil him took." "Mischief burns in hell."

In this biblical principle of retribution folk proverbs are canonical. "How one lives is how one dies." "Who sows the wind, reaps a storm." "He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword."

The common characteristic of religion and morality is conscience. The violation of norms, sin, brings not just a divine punishment and condemnation, but also a sanctioning of one self by mediation with one's conscience. Conscience – as something transcendental and at the same time immanent for a person – as a dialogue "I and my ego" has a learning, individual and socially creative function. The conscience is a regulative and, at the same time, a normative of human behaviour, as in the statement: "A conscience is prosecutor, judge and executor in one person."

"He who walks with a clear conscience, not even thunder can harm." "A guilty conscience bites the most." "A clear conscience is a soft cushion." "He who hears his conscience, thinks that every one is talking about him."

Because the subject of evaluation is not just a human alone, his personal characteristics, but the significance he gives to these characteristics, and in what way they are important for him. Because of this, conscience creates in the defence of self-respect, a preservation of dignity, one of the basic, human needs, which M. Ossowska presents in her systematization of moral norms.

The concepts of honour, good name and respect, and on the contrary, disgrace, insult, shame and humiliation waver around normative significance expressed by phrases such as: "Don't judge, lest you be judged yourself!" or "Judge, but don't condemn!" "You can't buy anything at the market on honour and a good name." "He who doesn't respect himself, will not respect others." "Disgrace is worse than flood." "What you can't praise, don't insult." ("If you can't find something nice to say, don't say anything at all!")

From the other norms which M. Ossowska presents, there are norms in defence of our biological life – "Thou shalt not kill!" – norms in defence of independence, privacy, justice and norms serving the saturation of the need for trust, for example: "Don't lie!" "Keep your word!" "Thou shalt not steal!" "Don't deceive!" "Don't denounce!" Etc.

None of these phrases contains either fact or fiction, but simply a command that something ought to happen or not. They are normative.

Naturally, the proverbial repertoire contains many phrases of a definitive character, from an expressive, evaluating standpoint. It is not our job to judge whether a

notion or a value – and with their rational and emotional syndromes – is superior. That is a question of philosophy. However, superior to both is the concept of a norm which is created from a specific goal that has a value for us. In our case it is the goal that a society based on humane principles will function successfully. Because of these, all norms, as far as they are correct, are values; however, not all norms are values. The highest goal is to attain an ideal, or at least an attempt to draw closer to it. Because of this, we understand ideals as the relatively highest norms and the goals of our attempts, to which other norms are inferior and which give meaning to these other, inferior ones.

Such a heterogeneous norm is, for example, divine law. This norm is ideal, only when we freely and independently agree with it. In general we freely create an ideal with our emotion, will and sense. An ideal is an ideal for people particularly because it is idealized, that is to say that it is practically unreachable, absolutely unfulfillable. It is stimulating, binding and directed towards a practical attempt, effort and feeling that norms must be fulfilled.

For example, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, chap. 5, ver. 44 and 48, Christ says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "Be perfect, therefore, as our heavenly Father is perfect."

Naturally, with such a departure from human sense, an identification and similarization with God we do not find often in practice, but we realize very intensively a particularly emotional bond with this norm.

Thus, ideals and norms are our own tendency, an expression of our endeavours. In this sense, they are reflected in the proverb repertoire, as we have indicated above. Statements trying to maintain moral norms and preserve values have an imperative character in their proverbs. For example:

"Keep your promises!"

"Keep your word!"

"Don't raise your nose higher than your head!" Taken from the Gospel of St. Luke 14,11 "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

There are also the so-called rules of precautions. For example:

"Bridle your tongue and your anger!"

"Don't pour oil on the fire!"

"Trust, but scrutinize!"

"Don't put out what's not burning you!" ("If it ain't broke, don't fix it.")

"Don't poke your nose into someone else's pot."

Although we know that our norms come from real life, it's requirements and needs, we can never relate a norm with law. We cannot exchange "what is" for "what should be."

We understand the proverb repertoire generally as a pluralistic phenomenon, which in itself includes elements of philosophical comprehension as well as of concrete experiences, social system, ideology, morality, law, medicine, meteorology, etc. It pre-

sents in its manner a "picture of the world" which we understand as a reproduction of ideas and present knowledge – which represents its cognitive side, and also what the world means for man, that is, how man evaluates the world with his evaluating system. That is, a multitude of criteria, norms, commands, prohibitions and suggestions. Loosely said, the proverbial repertoire represents a folk, world view in a unique way. Proverbs reflect moral views and norms, and they do it on the level of their ideal and violation in practical life. They express 1) the relationship between man and God (which represents the moral ideal), 2) the relationship between man and another man, family and society, and 3) the relationship between man and nature.

The first relationship, portrayed in both Slovak and other nations' proverbial statements, is theocentric, and always forms the first chapter of a proverbial collection; two others are explicitly considered on the anthropocentric level. Christian moral knowledge is a common-historical reflection of practical behaviour, as well as of desired forms, commands and norms, as in an individual manner the proverbial tradition mirrors it.

Proverbial statements reflecting Christian norms work simultaneously in written texts as well as in personal, eye to eye communication, in a few of the following forms:

- a) as literal quotations from the Bible;
- b) as a formal variation of statements preserving the original meaning, for example: "A wolf in sheep's clothing," Matthew, 7,15; "He saved others, but he can't save himself," Matthew 27,42;
- c) as paraphrases from the Bible: "Love your fellow man;" "Man is not just alive because of science;"
- d) many are in the stage of falling apart, in the form of word pairs or phraseology, and are at this point symbolic: "To bear one's own cross (burden)," "Judas's kiss," "Job's tidings."

The moral message of Christianity forms a basic proverbial repertoire by naming

- a) a moral requirement, or
- b) a moral value.

We regard the seal, which Christian ideals impressed on the proverb tradition in Slovakia, as a positive and important part which is reflected in the content and structure of the function of proverbs. The proverb tradition, as a unique socially artistic code with the ability of generation and modelling of reality, functions continually and selectively in union with present-day socio-cultural needs.

#### REFERENCES

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