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Can we make references to Catholic social teaching (CST) when expanding scientific knowledge in accounting? Research problem statement

ABSTRACT

Research interests of the author focus, among others, on accounting and Catholic social teaching (CST). This paper is motivated by the wish to launch research into these areas by raising the question featuring in the title about the feasibility of interdisciplinary studies covering the above-mentioned fields of research, i.e., accounting and Catholic social teaching. The paper makes an attempt to answer the question, however, whether it needs to be stressed that it just delineates a context for a wider and in-depth discussion that can be continued. Looking at conclusions reached by the author we may agree that it is possible to make references to Catholic social teaching when expanding the body of research knowledge in accounting. The aforesaid can be substantiated by the following arguments. First, CST can be viewed not only as the Catholic Church's doctrine but also as a reflection of research activity. Second, today there is a number of research works that discuss interdisciplinary studies on CST and social sciences, including economics and law. Third, accounting is a social science but at the same time it is an applied science focused, among others, on seeking solutions that would assist humanity and, above all, economic entities in accomplishing goals and meeting requirements set forth for them, which the mankind delivers not just in the economic context but also in the context of the system of values approved and exercised by societies. Fourth, in the literature there are writings that touch upon accounting and its links with ethics, culture, and religion (e.g., studies on accounting and Islam). In view of the above, seeking solutions in accounting (e.g. in reporting) that

would meet requirements posed by CST is not in contradiction with to-date threads in research considerations and studies.

Keywords: accounting, accountancy, Catholic social teaching

JEL Classification Codes: A12, A13, M41, M490

Introduction

When expanding the body of scientific knowledge in the field of accounting can we use documents that belong to the body of Catholic social teaching (CST)? Opponents of the above suggested deployment of Catholic doctrines could argue that science should not be identified with religion. Along the same lines of thinking, religious writings should not be seen as part of the body of knowledge referred to as scientific knowledge which is acquired based on scientific methods rather than revealed in an act of revelation (typical of religion). However, according to the author of this submission, this stance is not correct. The paper is an expanded abstract of a discussion centred around the thesis stating that when conducting research studies in accounting, one can justifiably make references to Catholic social teaching. Wishing to highlight arguments put forward to substantiate the thesis, the author has divided the paper into three parts. The first one is a synthetic presentation of the idea of Catholic social teaching (CST), from which we can learn about the links between CST and social sciences, in particular economics. The second part reminds the subject and goals of accounting as science and, by making reference to them, gives arguments to prove the proposed thesis. The third part is a summary of considerations.

1. Catholic social teaching (CST) and its links with social sciences

Catholic social teaching (CST) can be understood in two ways. First, as the teaching of the Catholic Church addressed to the faithful; in this case, CST is a **doctrine** within the realm of broadly understood social relations. In one of the documents that belong to the body of CST, or more precisely in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, John Paul II stated that CST is “the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church’s tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; **its aim is thus to guide Christian behaviour**” [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, paragraph 72]. According to the United States

Conference of Catholic Bishops, CST interpreted in this way includes the following **seven broad blocks of themes** [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998]:

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person;
2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation;
3. Rights and Responsibilities;
4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable;
5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers;
6. Solidarity;
7. Care for God's Creation.

This rather broadly sketched framework of themes includes, among others, issues that relate to: the propagation of justice, ensuring jobs to the unemployed, promoting dignity and integral vocation of a human being, improved quality of the conditions of human existence, promoting solidarity, ensuring respect for fundamental human rights (especially the rights of children), eradication of hunger and poverty, elimination of illiteracy, guaranteeing healthcare for all, eradication of homelessness, showing the meaning and value of life, counteracting addiction and assistance in overcoming it, preventing loneliness and isolation in older people, elimination of discrimination, counteracting environmental damage, and bringing peace.

Viewed as a doctrine, CST is developed by Magisterium, the Teaching Authority of the Church. Magisterium consists of the Pope and bishops [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, paragraph 79]. It is worth highlighting that **CST takes account of scientific knowledge that helps in understanding reality, in which people live and the world around them.** Reflection on “complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order” requires not just “the light of faith and of the Church's tradition”, but also getting acquainted with this complex reality. Hence Catholic social teaching draws on the accomplishments achieved in other fields of science. “The Church's social doctrine avails itself of contributions from all branches of knowledge, whatever their source, and has an important interdisciplinary dimension. (...) Above all, the contribution of philosophy is essential. (...) In fact, philosophy is a suitable and indispensable instrument for arriving at a correct understanding of the basic concepts of the Church's social doctrine, concepts such as the person, society, freedom, conscience, ethics, law, justice, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, the State. (...) **A significant contribution to the Church's social doctrine comes also from human sciences and the social sciences. In view of that particular part of the truth that it may reveal, no branch of knowledge is excluded.** The Church recognizes and receives everything that contributes to the understanding of man in the ever broader, more fluid and more complex net work of his social relationships. She is aware of the fact that a profound understanding of man does not come from theology alone, without the contributions of many branches of knowledge to which theology itself refers” [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, paragraphs 76–78].

CST provides guidelines for action (inspirations), principles and evaluation schemes for individual solutions. Yet, it does not mean that the Catholic Church strives to adopt strictly

defined detailed solutions that would deprive humans of the freedom to create the reality in which they live. CST respects the autonomy of lay matters. It is a manifestation of wise reflection on the evaluation of reality which directs human actions towards the common good. Its goal is not to enslave, quite the opposite, it aims at bringing individuals and communities closer to full freedom and prevents from losing this freedom by falling into further internal and external forms of enslavement.

The major sources of CST include encyclicals devoted to social teaching [Strzeszewski, 1994, p. 163]. *Rerum novarum* by Pope Leo XIII issued on 15 May 1891 was the first social encyclical. It addressed the condition of the working classes. Many other social encyclicals have been issued since then, such as, e.g., *Laborem exercens* by Pope John Paul II, often discussed in the subject-matter literature. It is the fruit of in-depth reflection on human work, in particular on what it means to individuals, families and societies, as well as on threats to the correct order connected with this aspect of human activity, conflict between labour and capital, rights of the working people and the spirituality of work.

Approached as above, CST is viewed as a doctrine. However, the term ‘Catholic social teaching’ can also be interpreted differently. **In this second case, although it still covers the same field, CST is viewed as research activity focused on Catholic social teaching.** CST is also the subject of studies and scientific considerations, yet, remarkably, similarly to the doctrine, the subject covers not only ethics and theology but the entirety of social sciences [Strzeszewski, 1994, p. 157]. These relations between CST interpreted as a manifestation of scientific activity and social sciences can be observed at different levels. In Poland we can find them in scientific writings which consider CST and economics, in particular social economics [e.g., Dołęgowski, 2015; Chomątowska, 2013; Klimczak, 2012; Zadroga, 2009] or CST and law [Reda-Ciszewska, Włodarczyk, 2014], as well as conferences organised at academic centres, e.g., the international scientific conference *Chrześcijaństwo a ekonomia* (Christianity and Economics) held in 2015 and organised by, among others, the Polish Economic Society [Polskie Towarzystwo Ekonomiczne (PTE)] and the Cracow University of Economics [Pollok, 2015]. They can also be identified in publications originating from other countries when reviewing scientific literature databases. For example, when searching in the JSTOR database, for keywords such as ‘economy’ and ‘Catholic social teaching’ the engine provides full-text results for over 42K writings [accessed: 30.06.2019].

2. Potential links between accounting and Catholic social teaching

The question of the essence of accounting viewed as a science has been taken up in Poland since at least the 1950s. Recently, a wide discussion has developed amongst Polish scientists triggering numerous publications devoted to the science of accounting and a joint stance of Polish academics on the issue of the essence of accounting science. From the document we can

learn, inter alia, that accounting understood as scientific activity focuses on “already applied and potential ways of reflecting economic events and processes that actually or potentially take place in economic entities, their **economic consequences, as well as relationships developed in the course of such representation**” [Karmańska, 2016, p. XII]. On the other hand, the goal of accounting as a scientific discipline is to “carry out scientific studies that lead to the formulation, validation, and evaluation of theories which help in learning and understanding the essence, structure, and the role of the practice of accounting not only from technical and procedural points of view but also at organisational, social, and political levels and **design new theoretical solutions (positive and normative) that can be applied in practice**” [Karmańska, 2016, p. XII].

Such a framework delineated for the subject and the goal of accounting as science embrace, among others, learning about the practice of accounting and describing its practices, as well as revealing to what extent this practice is determined by broadly understood culture from which it stems (including Christian culture) and proposing new solutions to be applied in practice. The question is whether, in the process of learning and describing the practice of accounting, as well as when proposing new solutions, we can make references to CST interpreted as a doctrine or as scientific activity. The author of this publication believes that we can and provides the following justification for his positive answer.

First, accounting is an applied science. The goal of applied sciences is to generate knowledge that would be useful, that helps in selecting adequate measures to successfully accomplish set goals and predict outcomes of adopted plans, knowledge that triggers effective action [Ajdukiewicz, 2006, pp. 314–316]. In the case of accounting, seeking knowledge that would be economically useful means, as can be judged from the above-quoted description of the subject and goal of accounting, looking for and proposing new solutions to be applied in practice that is ultimately shaped by people.

Interpersonal relationships, relationships within society, human activities can be viewed at diverse levels: economic, legal, political or religious. Undoubtedly, all of these levels concern one and the same: a human being and his/her activities. These levels are not autonomous; one cannot deal with politics totally disregarding economics, law, social relations or the system of values. Neither can we claim that one can focus on law in complete isolation from economics, politics or the system of values; nor can we conclude that the religious dimension is disconnected from other dimensions (levels) of human activity. Man as a person and a religious creature is one and indivisible. Thus, we cannot expect him or her to be guided by one system of values at work, another at home and a third one in public life. Otherwise (i.e. if the aforesaid were expected), we would deny man the right to choose his/her system of values, the freedom of religion and, by the same token, the right to self-determination. If we interpret religion as a system of beliefs and values and the freedom of religion as not a mere right to engage in religious practices but as the right to have a particular system of values, we cannot deprive those who deal with the accounting science of the right to seek solutions that

would contribute to the building of a society that functions in accordance with CST and, at the same time, respects the freedom of people of other religious beliefs.

Second, researchers are extremely lucky to have plenty of leeway in the selection of matters to be examined within the framework of scientific considerations. This substantial freedom is restricted only by subjectively defined area of research studies appropriate to a given field of science. In economic sciences, accounting included, there are many writings whose subjects suggest that their authors have been looking for answers to questions about good and bad models of conduct or ethical norms. Obviously, for the purpose of this paper, we have in mind publications on ethics, also the ethics in accounting. On top of that, there are other publications which discuss systems of accounting that fit the principles of a given religion or culture shaped by this religion. As examples, we can list Polish writings that discuss Islamic accounting [Adamek, 2009; Adamek, 2012; Adamek, 2013; Czerny, 2016; Jaworska, 2011]. The above-mentioned publications (those on ethics, as well as on Islamic accounting) have been written by scientists and published in scientific journals or monographs. Thus, we may conclude that in the light of the so far adopted practices, aspects of ethics and Islamic accounting remain within the subject of the accounting science subjectively acknowledged by scientists. Following from that, we can further conclude that taking inspiration for research from encyclicals and other documents that make the body of Catholic social teaching, as well as using moral principles to assess the proposed solutions, does not remain in contradiction with considerations available in the modern subject-matter literature and generally approved practices.

Third, being an applied science, accounting serves people, including, perhaps first and foremost, people working in accounting and those related with the field. Can we, thus, ignore the system of values that they recognise and/or follow? The answer to the question seems obvious: we cannot. And these very people expressed their interest in values propagated by the Catholic Church at the meeting with the Holy Father Francis in November 2014 during the World Congress of Accountants in Rome.

Consequently, one can make references to CST in his/her research work. CST may become the source of inspiration to those who want to contribute to finding solutions in accounting that would provide real answers to problems and challenges highlighted by CST. For instance, these could be solutions in reporting that would genuinely contribute to the eradication of poverty, unjust distribution of goods or help in protecting the environment. In addition, CST can be used as a criterion to assess moral value of the proposed solutions. At the same time, we need to take account of the entire vision of the teaching. CST makes a coherent block. Discussing economics, including putting forward solutions to issues in accounting and assessing these solutions separately from other aspects, such as human person and his/her rights or environmental protection, might lead to false conclusions. In this context, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* seems particularly useful as it “offers a complete overview of the fundamental framework of the doctrinal corpus of Catholic social teaching. This overview allows us to address appropriately the social issues of our day, which must be considered

as a whole, since they are characterized by ever greater interconnectedness, influencing one another mutually and becoming increasingly a matter of concern for the entire human family” [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, paragraph 9].

Summary

This paper has been written only and exclusively in an attempt to herald the research problem consisting in expanding the body of scientific knowledge in the field of accounting, while simultaneously making references to Catholic social teaching. Based on the above brief discussion, we may formulate the following conclusions. First, CST can be interpreted as the Catholic Church’s doctrine but also as a reflection of research effort. In both cases, CST is referred to by making references to the revealed truth, as well as to the achievements of social sciences. Second, nowadays there are many research analyses that discuss and describe interdisciplinary studies on CST and social sciences, including economics and law. Thus, CST has been continuously present in what we interpret as scientific knowledge. Third, accounting is a social science but at the same time it is an applied science. The science of accounting focuses, among others, on seeking solutions that would assist humanity, mainly economic entities, in accomplishing goals and meeting requirements set forth for them. Humanity accomplishes these goals and requirements not just within the economic context but also within the framework of the system of values approved and followed by societies. That is why it seems justified to make references to what societies believe is right and good when looking for the solutions. The Catholic Church community views CST as a set of guidelines on what is right and just. Fourth, amongst writings on accounting there are publications considering its links with ethics, culture, and religion (e.g., studies on accounting and Islam). Thus, seeking solutions in accounting (e.g., in reporting) that would meet requirements posed by CST is not in contradiction with to date threads in research considerations and studies.

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