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Between Kwanzaa and Jediism.
Contemporary constructions of religious identity and imagined communities

By looking at the forms which modern religious identity is taking today, it is not easy to point out its simple shape. In many cases both religious systems and identity locate their doctrinal basis within the pop-cultural sphere or cultural areas which are far removed from the patterns associated usually with religiosity. More and more often sources of religiosity are being perceived by people as the basis of their own (individual and group) identity in relation to phenomena, being a product of the melting of various religious contents together and used for constructing the category of religiosity around socio-cultural phenomena previously not associated with religion. I would like to dedicate this article to this very issue, which seems today to gain very much attention. Doctrinal constructivism, as it may otherwise be termed, is visible in many new religious phenomena, especially those which win supporters in the western world. New religious movements are being built often within particular discourses and cultural contexts which are a consequence of globalization processes, but which also function as an ideological platform for political postulates (like emancipation rights for various minority groups for example). On the other hand, new religious movements create a specific superstructure for the pop-cultural and media phenomena, like film narratives. Both dimensions of this new religiosity are, however, grounded in a specific system of values, in which the community aspects are being presented as the major issue. Despite the fact that aiming for a life in a group joined by the same religious identity isn't anything new, the constitutive feature of the new types of religiosity in this dimension is their relating to the community aspect in a reflexive manner and openly using socio-cultural symbolism to highlight the selected aspects of identity itself.

This phenomenon might be regarded as a specific consequence of modernism. By recalling a well known work of Anthony Giddens[1] it is worth contemplating if modernity,

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[1] A. Giddens, *Konsekwencje nowoczesności*, Kraków 2008.

understood as a kind of worldview system, is not implemented in contemporary religious narratives. The British sociologist claims that the clash with tradition is inscribed within the concept of modernity. Questioning the existing thought systems, including religions, does affect the search for alternative forms of self-realization. Rejecting stiff ideologies is therefore not just a form of contestation, but also an attempt to highlight our position in a constantly changing world. The dynamics of the processes of change do force us to adapt to existing conditions, but also stimulates our change in views and approaches. Modern religious worldviews are in this light a reflection of valid trends and the direction of contemporary culture. Contrary to a popular belief saying that globalization is changing modern societies into homogenous wholes oriented only towards the hedonistic consumption of goods and meanings, the cultural pattern dominating today is a heterogeneous construction as to the content it is based on. An evidence of this tendency might be the more and more popular idea of glocalization, which accepts the inevitable global character of social, cultural and economic ties in the modern world, and at the same time points out that the category of the local and the belonging to local communities is still very much alive and kicking. The eclectics of this form is being expressed also in the way people search today for new spirituality. The diverse array of churches and denominations might seem astonishing when we look closer at the doctrinal inspirations behind those movements. Starting from the widely understood New Age movement, through various groups gathering together UFO believers and ending with the movement of the fictional and cinematic religion of the Jedi Order – they all seem to share a common idea behind those exotic beliefs, i.e. striving for an expressing of a religious identity with the inclusion of the individual character of the religious experience.

A question therefore must be raised – if modern religious movements are oriented at the individual and private aspect of religiosity, why do people still create successful functioning religious institutions and churches? The answer might be related to the issue pointed out by many researchers as a specific understanding of the category of community, its being one of the ideological premises of the doctrinal systems of those movements. The community of believers is being understood often not just as a group of people, but also as an ideological community. It builds at the same time a community of thoughts and worldviews, which are shared but also cannot be expressed *explicite* by individual who are in fact outside the official churches. It is especially related to people who share a common type of ethics. The mechanism of inclusion is in this case a phenomenon hidden below the apparent surface of the exclusivism of belonging to such groups. Perceiving others as potential members of these communities does, however, require certain fundaments, which are frequently found in the doctrinal principles of those religious movements: an intensive proselytism, actions popularizing those movements in the media and the politics of "public relations" often accompany the existing denominations and those recently emerging. What is interesting such actions usually are not a generally formulated directive existing in the sphere of the worldview, but carefully thought out

marketing strategies, just like in the case of other modern organizations focused on attracting more supporters.

Reflexivity of actions has been replaced with a cool costs and risk calculation. The rationalization of the code of conduct of the movement's management and its regular members seems to be a constant tendency of many new religious formations. This results from the condition of the contemporary world, in which rationalization and the mechanical aspect of agency is an inalienable part of the human experience. According to Daniel Bell, it is to the same extent the effect of a change in the awareness of the Western societies as valid cosmologies[2]. The postindustrial world order demands to work out such strategies which assure individuals and institutions not just endurance, but also profit and the possibility of its consumption. Excellent examples in this case might be the Church of Scientology or the Amway organization. Special interest, however, might be deserved by those movements which propose to their followers much more than purely material wealth in the earthly life or its more spiritual equivalent in life after death. I mean here religious organizations relating to a specific cultural identity, which apparently has nothing in common with religiosity.

The construction of religious identity is in this case a product of a multidimensional process of self-identification within bigger socio-cultural entities. Members of these movements do identify with a certain position in their structure. It is significant that every time we recall such an entity it is being undermined as an expression of a specific order that is only an ideological myth, absolutely non-valid for the contemporary globalized reality. Using such terms as nation or nation state is considered as false from the methodological standpoint, because of the fact that the concept of nation is long passé. Furthermore, binding together the category of national community and religiosity demonstrates, according to such authors like Ernest Gellner, a disturbing close relation to religious fundamentalism.

Gellner's views in the question of the transitions of modern forms of religiosity have to be taken in the context of his standpoint on the changes in modern reality. Gellner, widely known as one of the most sworn critics of treating the idea of postmodernism as a given objectivity, comprehends the direction of changes in modern religiosity in relation to transformations in Western rationality. In his opinion, the process of shaping fundamentalist approaches in many societies is a consequence of translating economic rationality into the language of religion. Radical religious attitudes do go hand in hand with political extremism, which in the Western world frequently uses a language similar to that used in religious discourses. However, in the view of the British scholar, fundamentalism does not reveal itself only in those spheres of our lives which are subjected to the influence of religion. Gellner introduces the term "rational fundamentalism" to describe ideological attitudes (and also research attitudes), which he himself isn't a stranger to[3]. He admits that

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[2] D. Bell, *Kulturowe sprzeczności kapitalizmu*, Warszawa 1998, p. 184.
[3] E. Gellner, *Postmodernizm, rozum i religia*, Warszawa 1997, p. 105.

"the relation between ideology and political order did undergo many historical phases. First in the pre-axis era religion through dance reflected social order: it was a choreography of social relations, it underlined and sanctioned it"[4]. This interdependence of both levels ended, however, with the beginning of modernity, but the scope of reason and economic rationality did not push this significant relation out of the human area of agency. What did change, was the emergence of new Enlightenment frames of worldviews. The overlap of these two orders of thinking contributed to a cognitive dissonance. Today, religious fundamentalism occurs everywhere where people cannot define themselves when facing the changing reality. By grasping the vanishing axioms, they radicalize their views and actions, hoping that at least their position in the world of social unrest will remain intact.

In a similar manner this problem is being tackled by another researcher of the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism, Bassam Tibi. This German scholar, just like Gellner, has the point of view that today's fundamentalisms are closely related to the world of politics and the economy. Despite the apparent distance of the fundamentalist language from the purely material issues, both worlds are similar, because "fundamenalists do not praise the love of God, but strive to take power"[5]. It is characteristic that the popularity of various fundamentalisms grows along with the fragmentarization and stratification of everyday life. This specific world "disorder" causes conflicts, driven among others by fundamentalisms. The confrontation does occur frequently in the most extreme points, and therefore the polarization of views matches Huntington's model of the "clash of civilizations". The idea of a community is one of many which could serve as a point of reference for the feeling of ontological security. The contemporary use of the term is, however, carrying the burden of radicalism. So, if we speak of fundemantalism on the religious level, so in the case of community we may speak of nationalism.

We know that these ideologies do not have to exclude each other, and even may construct together a coherent worldview system. As an example here may serve the phenomenon of the frankly said marginal, but without any shadow of a doubt the most colorful, variants of nazi ideology known as nazi esotericism, or nazi occultism. The advocates of these occult options constructed their worldview on the basis of a mythologized history of the German nation, simultaneously creating a system of a quasi religious affirmation of German history. There was a concept of a community present – even more, it was put in the first place. However, it is not this from today's perspective peculiar marriage that seems to be important, but the mechanism of its construction. German nationalism, both in its classical form, as well as the form visible in the nazi ideology, reflected a vision of community which has its roots in the German romantic philosophy of the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Along with its rising popularity we could observe the beginning of the consolidation of the German state. Both processes: the birth of national consciousness and the formulation of the thesis that a unified German

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[4] Ibidem, p. 116.

[5] B. Tibi, *Fundamentalizm religijny*, Warszawa 1997, p. 146.

spirituality exists, tackled identity issues. The view shared by many Germans at the beginning of the 19th century that the national community has its roots beyond the empirically graspable reality was at the same time an expression of faith in the notion that it is being bound by deeper relations than simple belonging. National identity became at that time a religious and magic identity expressed best in the theses of ariosophy or nazi occultism.

The translation of the supernatural order into the language of politics is happening at an ideological level. That's why we may say that the type of community we speak about is rather an "imagined community" than based on solid premises. We owe the notion of such an imagined community, gaining much popularity these days, to Benedict Anderson. His own concept of imagined community, which one may find in his book from 1983, is related fore mostly to the rule of social constructivism, clearly seen in many national discourses. As an imagined community Anderson describes the product of certain ideological processes, which takes shape as a specific group consciousness. It is based on the conviction that the community created by the group may have not clearly drawn borders (though it may be open to potential new members), but very clear drawn criteria of belonging. This model is related to those types of national consciousness which are specific for groups emerging from other national or ethnic entities, striving to stress their sovereignty, giving the mark of authenticity to their political postulates and strengthening the framework of a group identity. To the set of factors shaping an imagined community we may count in: shared cultural roots, political goals, time perception and religion. The last factor is one of two, beside the dynastic monarchy, cultural systems shaping the foundations of these imagined communities.

The religious fundaments of imagined communities may be determined on the basis of their linguistic manifestations. This also counts in the process of a specific sacralization of language. Despite the fact that the traditional model of community also did use a sacred language, in this case we see a clear difference. As Anderson states: "this kind of classic communities bound together by scared languages did differ from imagined communities, i.e. modern nations. One of significant differences was the conviction of these old communities that the only sacred language is their own, that is also their concepts of belonging to a community"[6]. Anderson adds, however, that such a narrative featuring of the concept of a community has certain limitations. Language is independent/dependent on??? the change of the character of the sign itself which becomes the object of ideological agency. For an imagined community to exist through submerging it in cultural symbols, it is necessary to give the signs a non arbitrary character. This thought is supposed to be unfamiliar to the nature of Western culture, where the flexibility of symbol use and its semantic connotations is relatively big. Such problems the communities outside the Western world do not have, for they treat language (for example Chinese ideograms)

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[6] B. Anderson, *Wspólnoty wyobrażone. Rozważania o źródłach i rozprzestrzenianiu się nacjonalizmu*, Kraków 1997, p. 27.

as a reflection of reality and not its freely fabricated representation. This causes that in the linguistic sphere imagined communities strive to give the signs of authenticity to phenomena from a symbolic space.

Anderson's concept finds application in those religious movements which function within the frames of particular discourses of modernity. If we assume after David Howarth that a discourse is being made by a set of objects and actions having an attached meaning and being a product of historically conditioned systems of rules, then the cultural narratives created by those movements operate with signs related to certain steady points in the "flickered"/framed??? reality (or just try to make such an impression). This might be made by such spheres as sexual identity, race or the media. In the case of the media sphere, the basis for constructing identity is taking for example cinematographic fiction as reality. The common denominator of the organizations mentioned here is, however, the striving to "close ranks" through the stressing of their community character. The often expressed aversion towards treating them as formal religious institutions or churches goes hand in hand with the publicly stressed defining of them as "social movements" or "subcultures". Both terms may be treated as two poles of the same idea of community, and the mechanism of self-identification of their members as two ingredients of a vision of community typical for modernity.

An example of a social phenomena recalling a common religious identity and describing itself as a community of people of the same descent, understood as a part of a common cultural heritage, is a group of emancipatory movements of Afro-Americans in the United States. These movements present a quite colorful mix of the world's great religions (Islam and Christianity) as well genuine constructions of nativistic religious identities, appealing to an alleged common root of all black Americans. These movements, like the Nation of Islam, use the category of community in the meaning described above. Its basis is being made by an objectified concept of race, treated as a potential ingredient of identity. Not without reason within such movements people speak of the need to "wake up" an Afro-American spirituality or the need to stir up in this part of American society a feeling of pride of its own cultural and racial heritage.

From the beginning of the 1960s in the United States a process of the erosion of racial views and concepts had taken place, at least in the public discourse and the institutions of public life. Its culmination happened in 1968 when in the United States we could feel at that time the wind of revolutionary sentiments of counterculture, just like in the Old Continent. That year James Earl Ray had shot Martin Luther King, and black American athletes publicly expressed through a symbolic gesture their support for the Black Panthers organization during the Olympic games in Mexico. This decade of socio-cultural transgression had many dimensions, and one of the most important turned out to be the Afro-American movement. Its social influence was at that time slight, but two decades later it was supposed to be a beginning of a new social order – an order which clearly denied the existing relations between various social groups in the USA and pointed out the need for their radical redefinition.

At this time the actions of Afro-American organizations were intensified to work out a common level of identity. Afro-American political activists like Malcom X (born as Malcolm Little) had expressed more and more loudly the postulate of rejecting the existing ideological order, which was an expression of the oppressive domination of the "white man", and creating an ideologically attractive alternative for the self-identification of all those who were by this system humiliated and deprived of their basic civil rights. In the context of these years this was a very important postulate because of the fact that the issue of the legal status of black Americans became a basis for many emancipatory debates.

The roots of these debates lay upon the system of racial segregation legal in many states of USA. The process of the erosion of the legal barriers was possible due to the social activism of Afro-Americans, fighting for example for an equal access to education. One of the most fundamental decisions in this matter is related to the court case "Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education", which in 1954 had significantly moved the American society. It recognized the division of public schools due to racial differences of pupils as unconstitutional, and by doing so it had ended racial segregation in the American public life institutions, which had lasted since the end of 19th century and had its origins in the famous "Plessy vs. Fergusson" case[7]. By the court's decision a view had been rejected, that said that the continuation of the politics of racial segregation was justifiable in public schools, based on alleged natural (racial) differences between the Afro-American pupils and the white majority. This view was to a large extent reflective of the imagination of racial differences valid in the American society in that time and simultaneously it objectified it as a given reality.

The Nation of Islam and its activists like Wallace D. Fard Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan expressed quite radical views on the character of necessary changes in the American society. With time, the slogans of Islamic organizations uniting black Americans were more and more close to a new segregationism, especially when they included in its rhetoric anti-Semitic, antigovernment, and anti-system ideas. The rejection of existing institutions, legal order, and the worldview framework typical for the white majority created an ideological vacuum, which had to be filled as quickly as possible. The Sunni Islam shared by the members of the Nation of Islam sometimes took a shape far from the doctrines known from the Middle East. This organization, especially Farrakhan, had popularized for a long time its own version of cosmology, in which the Earth and the Moon and all the continents were once close to Asia.

Not all Afro-Americans were willing to accept such a radical change. However, most of them did agree that the hitherto worldview was a product of a long lasting process of rooting out their "African identity" and replacing it with the ideas of the whites. The indigenous dimension of these slogans had also included the issue of spirituality. Christianity, so ardently practiced in the south of USA by many Afro-Americans, turned out

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[7] Casus „Plessy vs. Fergusson" from 1896 did point out the supreme character of state law over the federal law and sanctioned the principle "separate but equal" in the public life in the USA.

to be just one more tool of domination. Christian institutional structures were insufficient to unite all Afro-Americans under the banners of the new liberation movement. One of the advocates of this view and a student of Malcolm X, was Maulana Karenga (born as Ronald McKinley Everett), the author of the idea of a new, purely Afro-American holiday named by him Kwanzaa.

Karenga's idea seemed to be brilliantly simple. In place of the old Christian holidays we have to bring to the fore their Afro-American counterparts. Kwanzaa was supposed to correspond to all the requirements of the new ideology of the revitalization of identities lost in the past. As the reference point, served the widely understood African culture. Therefore, Kwanzaa is a very syncretic religious holiday, based on content taken from many different African religions. The name of the holiday was taken from the Swahili language ("matunda ya kwanza" – the first fruit of the harvest), which functions in many parts of the African continent as a lingua franca. The universal character of the language was supposed to point out the unity of all black Americans, along the idea of a pan--Africanism. The holiday lasts for a week from the 26th of December to the 1st of January, and the first celebration of Kwanzaa took place in 1966.

In the center of the ideology behind this holiday lies "Nguza Saba", or "the seven principles of being black", that is "Umoja" (unity – the principle of family unity, local community, nation and race), "Kujichagulia" (self-determination – the principle of defining who we are, creation and self-expression), "Ujima" (collective work and responsibility – the principle of a collective solutions of problems by all members of the local community, mutual support and contribution to the community's existence), "Ujamaa" (collective economy – the principle of doing business together, from which profits are meant for the local community), "Nia" (goal – the principle of acting on the community's progress and bringing back to Afro-American culture its lost magnificence), "Kuumba" (creativity – the principle of acting with correspondence to create strength, acting the best we can and by doing so leaving future generations a better community) and "Imani" (faith – the principle of believing with our whole heart in family, other community members, teachers and leaders). To the ritual attributes of Kwanzaa belongs also a set of seven candles (each colour represents each principle of "Nguza Saba"), fruits and vegetables (a symbol of harvest and wealth), as well as characteristic clothing called "kente", stylized on traditional clothing from Central Africa.

In its ideological aspect Kwanzaa is, as Karenga states, an expression of a community spirit of the Afro-Americans and a specific "philosophy of community". Although the popularity of this holiday ended with the decrease in popularity of the Afro-American emancipation movements, today we may observe a phenomena of the inclusion of white Americans among the Kwanzaa followers. Even more, the holiday is celebrated in many public institutions in the USA, where Afro-Americans are a minority among the employees. The inclusion into the public life of the content brought by Kwanzaa and the movement gathered around Karenga is just a shadow of its past popularity, but it is worth mentioning that the American culture's mainstream is being joined today to marginal elements like

Kwanzaa. Despite a significant drop in interest in this holiday among Afro-Americans, this suggests that a particularization of religious experience may result from the search for new, alternative towards the dominant order cultural identities alternative towards the dominant order, based not on objectified determinants, but purely worldview issues.

If we speak of modern religious movements, meaning the straightforward example of this mechanism, it is worth to look at the other pole, that is, those movements whose members constitute communities beyond the traditional barriers and in contrast to local communities. A deterritorialization of the religious experience is being realized fully in the sphere of the new media. The global and, as it is defined, anti-authoritarian character of the Internet has caused a true explosion of religious movements, denominations and churches. The possibility of an unlimited expression of the need to define self-identification on the web generates new, sometimes peculiar, forms of religiosity. A perfect example of one apparently imagined world and purely constructivist doctrine is the identification of young people with religion based not in the real world, but in cinematographic fiction – the Jedi knights.

The movement of the followers of the Jedi knights religion has its roots in the movie saga by George Lucas's "Star Wars". The first signs of the new movement appeared in 2001, when the census in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom revealed a surprising number of over half a million people who, under "confession", filled in their religious denomination as "Jedi". The movement itself is very diverse when it comes to denominations contributing to its appearance, but all of them do present a convergence in relation to their doctrine. The Jedi religion, just like the cinematographic original, does draw its roots from the religions of the Far East (Buddhism, Shinto, Hindu), Christianity, as well some philosophical and religious traditions of the West (gnosis). Nevertheless, Jediism is a relatively new phenomenon, and has little social influence. This does not change the fact that it presents an important tendency in the matter of new forms of religiosity. Jediism is supposed to be, according to some fans of the Lucas saga, an answer to the contemporary materialism, the race for success, and a life constantly on the move. Becoming a Jedi knight requires a lot of patience. The members of real world Jedi orders are joined by the symbols created in the movie (on the other hand, it is known that Lucas was inspired by the Japanese samurai codex) and are sensitive to all references to the cinematographic source. Especially the content that refers to an undefined "force" does cause a great interest among the movie fans. They create a community, whose members are bound together by a conviction of uniqueness of their identity. The identity constructed by these people is simultaneously a reconstruction of an imagined world. Complex rituals, the order's hierarchy and a sophisticated visual aspect do increase the number of followers of this fast growing religious phenomena. The community of the Jedi knights makes, however, a group that is characterized by a self-identification which puts in the center of its system of ideas a vision of a global community of people for whom religion is a strategy of dealing with reality without any axioms. It is a product of western cultural processes, as well pop-

culture itself, which set the field for the identity building not just of the modern Jedi, but also many other religious formations.