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Religious studies in Poland. The present state of research and prospects¹

It is a matter of fact that religious studies in Poland is comprised of two essentials: the first one is the result of Polish research in the field of religion, which has been documented in literature on the subject by many experts in these issues, especially in the works of Prof. Henryk Hoffmann, who compiled a book on the history of religious studies in Poland from 1873 to 1939². However, the post-war history of religious studies in Poland, in spite of numerous fragmentary works on the topic, still waits for a credible, comprehensive study, in which it would be necessary to take into consideration the fact that due to the predominant position of the Catholic Church among other denominations, religious studies in Poland have always been enmeshed in diverse preferences of religious policy pursued to the year 1989. After the systemic change of 1989 took place, the factors that significantly determined the shape of research in the field of religious studies were not only the pontificate of Pope John Paul II and the concordat that Poland entered into with the Apostolic See, but also the political change that radically questioned the ideological assumptions of the socialist system and pursued the new religious policy, that is, the new formula for the coexistence of the state and the Church, with a preference for an assent to the “sacralisation” and “liturgisation” of public life in accordance with a completely erroneous assumption that religion purportedly legitimises the new social order today.

This article makes an attempt to indicate several issues related to the period after the systemic change took place, which had quite a radical influence on the form that religious studies have assumed in the recent two decades of building a democratic society, as well as on the manner in which it is now perceived by the younger generation.

¹ This text was presented at the plenary session of the Third International Religious Studies Congress that took place between 12 and 15 September 2011 at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

² See: H. Hoffmann, *Dzieje polskich badań religioznawczych 1873-1939*, Kraków 2004.

Before 1989, religious studies in Poland operated in the realm of two paradigms that used to be widely preferred at the time. The first one was related to the theory of secularisation, which was popular at the time and which opted for an inevitable and objective process of secularisation of the life of both the individual and the society in general. Therefore, religious studies were treated as an almost marginal phenomenon and as an element of subjective secularising influences, and thus as a factor that merely supported the objective processes of "widespread secularisation". Hence the programme of religious studies in Poland in the 1950s and 1960s included ideas related to the history of religion and the history of atheism. This historical interest in the genesis of religious phenomena at the time was dictated not so much by ideological determinants of research in the field of religious studies, which was somewhat of minor importance, but rather by the search for a curricular formula for religious studies in Poland and the actions aimed at creating it.

The second paradigm that determined the curricular actions of religious studies in Poland, especially after October 1956, was Marxism and its ideological assumptions, which could be noticed in the research then conducted in the field of religious studies. However, this trend has never dominated the circles involved in religious studies to such an extent so as to make them desist from undertaking research that would consistently confirm the original curricular intention of religious studies developed in Poland.

A significant role in shaping religious studies in Poland at the time was also played by the Polish Society for the Study of Religions, established in 1958, and by the scientific periodical on religious studies, entitled "Euhemer – Przegląd Religioznawczy". This periodical used to be, and still is, lay and secular in character, but simultaneously it presents an openness to various methodological trends, as well as to different world view orientations. The history of this periodical is in part the history of non-confessional religious studies in Poland, which were influenced by diverse fashions and trends, including ideological ones, throughout the over fifty years of its history. This periodical helped to develop an original model of religious studies in Poland, marked by the construction of its own theoretical and methodological foundations, consisting in such elements as a multifaceted and interdisciplinary, as well as historical and comparative, research of religion and religiosity, understood as phenomena of a social nature, which are culturally determined in the end. Authors who cooperated with the periodical consistently opted for researching religion as an integral element of culture, as well as for establishing religious studies as a self-contained empirical scientific discipline. The scope of dissertations and findings published in the periodical included all the sub-disciplines of religious studies.

Since 1992 onwards, the traditional programme formula of the periodical has been slightly changed, thus making it more open to the propositions put forward by confessional religious studies. For fifty-four years (to the year 2013) 250 volumes of this periodical have been published, reaching a total circulation of over four thousand publisher's sheets.

The Polish Society for the Study of Religions is merely one part of the realm of religious studies in Poland, which is also comprised of the following academic facilities at: the Jagiellonian University (the Institute of Religious Studies), the Adam Mickiewicz University (the Chair of the Study of Religion and Comparative Research), the University of Gdańsk (the Religious Studies Workshop), and the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (the Department of Religious Studies and Eastern Philosophy). All of these facilities, except for the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, conduct research on religious studies. Courses in religious studies are also conducted in the Theological Departments of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, as well as within the scope of the speciality of philosophy at the University of Wrocław and within the scope of cultural studies at the Bolesław Prus Warsaw College of Humanities. Moreover, the University of Warsaw has reopened its postgraduate course in religious studies. The Institute of Sociology at the University of Białystok includes the Religious Studies Department, and the Faculty of Law and Administration of the University of Warsaw includes the Department of Religion Law. All of the above undoubtedly attests that a change of climate has occurred in the academic circle, the members of which started to perceive religious studies as both a scientific discipline and an area of interest expressed by young people. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education has also made a gesture towards our circle by entering religious studies into the National Programme for the Development of Humanities. However, any possible research results of these changes made at the institutional level will require some time to become visible.

The structures involved in religious studies mentioned above do not compensate for the Theological Departments that were created at the universities after 1989.

The facilities mentioned above conduct their own research and publish their findings in academic periodicals or in sister publishing houses, such as *Nomos* or *Humaniora*.

It is not an easy task to make an attempt at evaluating the present state of research in the field of religious studies after 1989, for it involves the evaluation of about 5,000 thematic publications within this scope (disregarding the content of periodicals). To analyse such a high number of works would require appointing a team of specialists in the 23 sub-disciplines of religious studies as listed in the Polish Thematic Classification published by the State Committee for Scientific Research. However, this classification does not include the philosophy of religion and sociology of religion. Instead, the following fields of study have been included in the realm of religious studies: theology, dogmatics, biblics, and apologetics, as well as other areas of theology and religious literature. This obviously requires being set in order as quickly as possible.

After entering the keywords "religion", "religions" and "religiosity", the incomplete Catalogue of the National Library of Poland (not all sections have already been electronically catalogued) outputs almost 5,000 records. After deducting weekly magazines, diocesan and parochial bulletins (approx. 240 titles), colouring books, religion textbooks and the handbooks for Roman Catholics, one is left with about 4,550 books, out of which 1,647

items are confessional publications (related to Roman Catholicism and other denominations, including Catholic universities and theological departments), which constitute 36% of the total number of publications, whereas the remaining 64% are books published by secular publishing houses. If one limited these publications to general religious studies exclusively, we would have 154 items (mostly encyclopaedias and dictionaries), out of which 53 books (34%) were published by confessional publishing houses and the remaining 66% – by secular publishing houses.

Different data can be obtained if we use the publication issued by the Department of Publishing House Statistics of the National Library of Poland: *Ruch wydawniczy w liczbach LV:2009*. Lists contained in this publication show that 12,600 titles related to religion, religious studies and theology were published between 1991 and 2009³.

This multitude of thematic publications issued in the period in question gives about 540 publications on religious studies and theology a year, thus revealing the immense intellectual potential of the Polish circles related to religious studies, calling for a credible analysis and evaluation. An entity able to rise to this challenge would be the Committee for the Sciences of Religious Studies, I suppose, and it is the circles related to religious studies that should come out with the proposition for establishing such an institution.

Prospects

The transformations that have taken place in Poland after 1989, as well as world-wide, and still continue to do so at present, provoke the circles related to religious studies into many theoretical reinterpretations that take both contemporary reality and research challenges into consideration. This is because new research prospects appear to us which marginalise local particularism in favour of a preference for a global universalism that urges us to take into consideration and not belittle the sociocultural transformations taking place today, especially in the sphere of the Euro-Atlantic civilisation. The main problem here involves new cultural codes and new narratives, ritual behaviour different from the hitherto present ones, the new structuring of meanings, and new language games that construct a new rationality right before our eyes. As a result of these trends, the boundary between the rational and the irrational starts to blur, for irrationality becomes rational and gains new validity.

The contemporary pursuit of success, power, prestige, consumption, and fun has pushed the world of values, truth and the category of ratio aside into a sphere of almost no significance. Preference is now gained for some new models of postmodern culture, which by assumption were intended to be rational, i.e. referring to science and new technologies. Instead, they become increasingly explicit in their irrationality, for human-kind and its inspirations and needs do not count – what counts is only profit and the

³ See: *Ruch wydawniczy w liczbach LV:2009*, Warszawa 2011, p. 87-88.

instinctive satisfaction of stimulated and projected needs. In his work entitled *The Meanings of Social Life*, Jeffrey Alexander states that “individuals can exercise scientifically rational orientations”, but their actions are not fully rational, for “their personality remains nested within deeply irrational systems of psychological defence and cultural systems of an enduringly primordial kind”⁴. Postmodernity was supposed to be a carrier of “secular transcendence”⁵ based on rationality, but instead it became a jungle of emotions stimulated by irrationality. The processes indicated here are not indifferent to the manner in which one perceives and analyses the phenomena that accompany religion and religiosity in the contemporary world, for they are overlapped by the iconic character of the message, which appears as a new and somewhat innovative form of symbolic communication. This iconic character refers to experience instead of to the content. It means understanding through sensation and contact, i.e. through the senses instead of through the mind. The iconic idea in this message becomes a thing, i.e. we think that it becomes a thing, gathers social meaning and becomes a new archetype. A thing shaped in this manner becomes a “social object” due to the fact of being “embedded in a certain narrative” which makes a coloured fabric a flag, clothing a uniform and wood a cross⁶. The sphere of the *sacrum* is full of “social objects” of this type. Contemporary religious studies must not belittle this manner of interpreting both the traditional and new phenomena related to religion and religiosity.

The rivalry between the two paradigms present in the sphere of social life, namely, the economic (market) paradigm and the political paradigm, also impinges on the contemporary phenomena and processes that determine postmodern religiosity. Both of these paradigms strive to achieve the status of hegemonic interpretations that predominate over the description and explanation of social processes. Permanent rivalry in this respect determines the scale of the rationality or irrationality of social conduct, including the one related to the world view.

Among multifarious research challenges that appear before religious studies in Poland, apart from the ones indicated above, it is worth paying attention to some of them, especially encouraging younger academics to consider them and possibly take them into consideration in their research plans.

Hitherto conducted sociological research has decidedly preferred surveys and questionnaires, which allow one to diagnose the state of Polish religiosity mainly based on self-declaration. However, the increasingly widespread research related to the **measurement** of religiosity presents us with different results from the ones obtained based on self-declaration. In view of this research, Polish religiosity and the interest expressed in religion appears to us as an extraordinarily superficial and illusory if not quite marginal issue, and our Catholicism and institutional structures of the Church appear as if they

⁴ J. C. Alexander, *Znaczenia społeczne*, Kraków 2010, p. 122.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

⁶ See: R. Harré, *Material Objects in Social Worlds*, “Theory, Culture & Society”, 2002, no. 19, p. 23-33, as cited in: J. C. Alexander, *Znaczenia społeczne*, op. cit., p. 450.

were in hibernation. This is also where the challenge for the Polish sociologists of religion originates from. Is it not true that the time has come to express interest in research based on the measurement of religiousness instead of leaving this realm exclusively to the interpretations and analyses conducted by computer scientists, mathematicians and marketers? After all, we are aware that neither the hitherto existing tools and research techniques, nor the traditional sociological categories diagnose religiosity in a postmodern society aptly enough.

The category of pluralism in today's world deserves to be paid particular attention in the research related to religious studies, for the panorama and conditions for the coexistence of monotheistic religions become radicalised. Not only has this pluralism led to the emergence of new forms of confrontation in terms of the world view and religion, but it has also led to the situation in which Christianity most likely has irretrievably lost its status as the only true religion in the 21st century. After all, claims of this type are being laid by almost all religions, including the new religious movements. Therefore, in the near future Christianity will have to accede unconditionally to being reduced to the status of a historical religion, as well as to the consent that it is merely one of many institutions present on the religious market, proposing an offer of salvation that is no different in any special way from other offers of this type. There are many more consequences of pluralism in the sphere of religion, and they involve both the category and practice of tolerance in terms of religion and the world view. The dictates of Christian axiology can no longer be maintained in the civil society.

We still lack an interdisciplinary and simultaneously multi-contextual definition of religion, God (Absolute) and the universal concept of various versions of salvation. Is it possible that these issues do not gain recognition or do not deserve to be substantiated in the 21st century? Do questions about the existence of God make sense today? Do we have any uses for the concepts of God today? Does the phenomenon of "non-religiosity" (secularity) deserve becoming the subject of study in the realm of religious studies? Here are some questions that mark out our research prospect.

The dispute between evolutionism and creationism, or, to put it more broadly using different categories, between ontology and ontotheology, seems momentous in its consequences that involve the world view. Unfortunately, these issues are rendered completely marginal in the periodicals and magazines related to religious studies, although they deserve a special research programme.

It is worth thinking seriously about the problem of the model of the presence of the Church in the social life in Poland, which is being made real at the moment, for it does not find any rational justification. The social status of religion is subject to far-reaching changes, regardless of the fact that politicians fail to perceive the scale of this phenomenon and evaluate it improperly, and obstinately affirm an altogether archaic assumption that religion and its institutional structures legitimise social law and order. As a result, they consent to the "sacralisation" and "liturgisation" of social life, which implies activation of the so-called aggressive secularism. In view of this situation, we

should look for an answer to the following question: What role in fact do the systems of “great transcendence” play today in society, in Poland, as well as in particular other countries and within social, ethnic and national groups? What are the predictions concerning religiosity and what factors determine it? Is the process of the social deconstruction of religion a universal process? Is there any rational substantiation for the prospect of a “global religious society”? Perhaps one should think over the reasonableness of statements concerning the “global non-religious society” and start conducting quite serious research on the “new spirituality” as the synonym for new religiosity – this is a view that has been persistently promoted by Prof. J. Mariański.

The paradigm of the rational choice of the form of market theory, as proposed by R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge, in spite of criticism expressed by many sceptics, who do not accept its assumptions and suggest that the sphere of the sacrum be analysed from the angle of the laws of economy, reveals new research areas to us, where the shape of religion and the religiosity of particular societies will be decided by the market, the activity of religious institutions and eventually, which is also possible, by GDP. Poland becomes a particular exemplification that confirms the legitimacy of this paradigm and deserves credible research in this respect. This is because young people increasingly see the Church as an enterprise that offers specific spiritual goods, which are perceived in terms of commodity, and the clergymen are seen as managers and marketers of this enterprise.

The proposed research suggestions provoke one to take up an attempt at adopting a non-standard view on the world of religion and religiosity, which calls – as it seems – for a new prospect and a more sensible formula that would interpret the global vision of the contemporary world.