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Teenage Exorcists. New dimensions of spirituality of American youth

The problem of dynamics of change taking place within the sphere of religiosity of youth groups constitutes a significant challenge for contemporary research in the field of religious studies. This remark equally concerns the methodology of research in this sphere, as well as the very object of scientific investigation, i.e. various forms of spirituality belonging to people who have found themselves at a stage of their lives in which their attitudes and personalities are being formed. The religiosity of groups of people during the period of adolescence is a reality marked by a considerable extent of fluidity of its structural framework, hybridity of the content it is composed of, and sometimes the contradictory and dialectic dimension of processes and sociocultural emanations being its immediate result as well. Therefore, the issue of how to research such a deeply complex topic is not a question about the nature of the object, but rather about the scientific knowledge that would be able to provide a type of description adequate for that object. Today this task is hindered for many reasons, including a complex of factors of cultural nature, which significantly influence many forms of religiosity, not only with regard to youth groups. With a considerable amount of certainty, we can agree with the ascertainment that contemporary culture has long since become the source of religious and para-religious experience for a significant number of inhabitants of our globe. Moreover, the awareness of the fact that religious content is embedded in culture is not a rare phenomenon among the participants in new religious movements, giving the latter a metanarrative voice in terms of the understanding of cultural references shown by the members of these movements, as well as in terms of intertwining them with religious practice and doctrinal theses. In such cases, the authorisation of culture, and more frequently pop culture as well, becomes an instrumentally used element that decides on the foundations of identity of young people, where religion and religiosity become increasingly important. It is not uncommon that these two seemingly contradictory orders become intertwined with each other, forming an amalgamate of articulation of

auto-identifications, both individual and collective. The dynamics of this phenomenon has grown stronger in recent years, especially in the context of the debate on the secularisation of Western societies at the time of utter domination of material and consumerist models. It provides a basis for a broader debate, which would indicate not so much a disappearance of religiosity as such, but rather a more radical transformation taking place in the sphere of form and particularist manifestations that religiosity assumes nowadays.

The relations that connect contemporary culture with the sphere of religion are expressed in a particularly interesting manner in the case of religiosity of young Americans. In this case, the transformation of models of religiosity mentioned above concerns diverse variants of American Protestantism in the first place, although it is certainly not limited to this denomination exclusively. Nonetheless, that which constitutes part of the Anglo-Saxon legacy for many Americans, is also connected with Protestantism in one of its many varieties. The Puritan roots of the American Evangelicalism become revealed in the process of socialisation of teenagers, especially those who descend from the white middle class. Religious elements, sometimes subtly intertwined with national mythology, historical narratives or models of socially acceptable conduct still remain a constituent of this process. Thus, in the American context, the transmission of religious models as such takes place in multiple dimensions, both through and owing to the reproduction of specific models of American culture, which religious content has been intertwined with in such a way that they somehow seem to be a natural part of the impedimenta of the *American Way of Life*.

Much as this process of socialisation is subject to critical deconstruction due to a number of social and political factors present in the USA today (to mention but the context of the legacy of counter-cultural movements or the debate surrounding the issue of teaching creationist theory as opposed to the theory of evolution), it still remains significant for Americans themselves in terms of its cultural embedding. However, American religiosity is marked by a high degree of diversification of the forms of cult in this respect, which in this case is identified by specialists in religious studies with the idea of folk religiosity, although in practical terms it is being implemented in a specifically American style. Seen from this perspective, folk religiosity in the USA is contained in a set of phenomena with a broad spectrum of religious practice – from the rituals of Pentecostals, consisting in ecstatic rapture, in which poisonous snakes play a significant role, to television preachers who call upon a turn towards Christ through transferring appropriately high sums of money to the preachers' bank accounts. Thus, American religiosity in the Protestant version gains a whole new appearance. It is the face of the new generation of American worshippers, who operate and rationalise religious content and leitmotifs of pop culture on equal terms; they combine everyday practice and traditional cult in order to create a homogeneous form of religious experience. Apart from that, they also form complex outlooks on life, in which religion constitutes an important axis of reception of reality and the ordering of the world that surrounds us. The combination of cultural order and religious order does not constitute any cognitive dissonance in the American

“folk” or “popular” religion. On the contrary, religion complements significant gaps of sociocultural structure, entering with intensified force into the areas from which culture withdraws, acknowledging its defeat.

Insofar as the concept of folk religiosity in the European context, particularly with reference to European Catholicism, is well known, the case of America is specific in this view. Speaking of American folk religiosity, we are forced not only to take into account the distinct specific character of culture, but also to indicate changes taking place within culture at a global level. This assumption is all the more significant because many forms of American new religiosity are often imported onto the European soil and gain broader groups of followers on the Old Continent. The original form of religious experience, which is hidden under the concept of “folk” religiosity in the United States, usually touches the problem of local rooting of many denominations, e.g. in the region of the Appalachian Mountains, where huge diversification of local churches, communities and congregations results equally from their spatial isolation and deep connection with the sense of internal community and social familiarity of their members, and thus a distrust towards people from the outside or the infidels. Redefining the concept of folk religiosity is of no lesser importance.

The classic study of this phenomenon by Louis Schneider and Sanford Dornbush, entitled *Popular Religion: Inspirational Books in America*, is based on an assumption that the folk version of religion is functional by its very nature and serves pragmatic objectives in everyday life, i.e. mundane problems that ordinary people are confronted in their lives¹. The result of the proximity of sacrum and the profane social practice is the formation of a strong sense of attachment, which the relations offered by institutional religion, let alone deliberations of theological nature, do not provide. The sense of intimacy and familiarity that accompanies folk religiosity translates into organisational coherence of many religious groups pursuing various forms of religiosity in the United States. Members of these groups sometimes form the sense mentioned above through emphasising the intensity of religious experience, which in American conditions often becomes expressed through the doctrine of aesthetic shock for the uninitiated, the exclusivity of membership in religious movements, etc. In the conditions of domination of the model of pop culture, it becomes increasingly difficult to meet the latter. This phenomenon has been noticed by many new religious movements, as well as by people who perceive refreshed religiosity as a threat to tradition and doctrines of denominations of a considerably longer history.

Some authors consider the idea of folk religiosity in terms of an opposition and peculiar degeneration of institutional religion, as is the case with Louis Mendonaldo, who perceives the former as a disfiguration of true religion, which takes place through emotional engagement outlined above or intuitive understanding of specific religious content. He is accompanied by Jean Seguy and Wade Clark Roof, who also shed some light on relations that connect the folk and the official version of religion in a similar

¹ See: L. Schneider, S. Dornbush, *Popular Religion: Inspirational Books in America*, Chicago 1958.

manner². It is no different in the case of William McKinney, who refers to this problem, indicating in his research a trend that is distinct in today's United States, namely to change the religiosity present there, which manifests itself in the loss of trust in the existing Christian institutions with a simultaneous increase in the interest in peripheral religions. On the other hand, however, it does not mean that the majority of researchers of the subject reject folk religiosity as a phenomenon which is insignificant for the general shape of a given cult or belief. These perspectives transfer this type of religiosity into the private sphere or delineate on its basis the outline of the process of privatisation of the religious sphere as such. Thomas Luckmann or Ernst Henau, among others, follow this path. Nonetheless, in the case of folk (popular) religiosity currently realising itself in the United States in various areas of life of the American society, it is not difficult to notice that religion remains the key element of identity of subsequent generations of Americans, despite sudden changes taking place in the field of American culture as such. This phenomenon goes beyond the sphere of privacy and intimacy, mainly due to the area in which not only American religiosity, but also many other spheres of life located outside the public sphere function with growing boldness. What I mean by that is the new media. At present, the field of the media does not exclude the popular dimension of religion and sometimes it is even to the contrary. It lends religiosity a character close to the remaining spheres, i.e. non-religious content being promoted in cyberspace or television and subjects it to the influence of economic rationality of the market. For Americans themselves, the acceptance of the presence of religion in the American media is a certain determinant of national identity, being connected e.g. with the symbolic sphere in the form of colours on the American flag or patriotic attitudes associated with the formula *God Save America* uttered many times by subsequent presidents.

However, the coexistence of American religious and non-religious discourses realises itself in a specific sociocultural sphere, considerably conditioning the former. This is also why religion is subject to the same factors of transgression as other areas of American culture. The influence of the media marks its existence in this case not only by the shape that this religious discourse assumes, i.e. becoming a media discourse as a form of a message, but through this it gains a global overtone and becomes an element of global culture. A glaring example of this type of globalisation of American religiosity is the case of Reverend Bob Larson and his three loyal sister disciples: Brynne Larson (his daughter) and Savannah and Tess Sherkenbeck. The case of Pastor Larson has become notorious in the United States in recent years through television reports showing him and his charges as an unprecedented as yet, as well as intriguing example of a new form of American religiosity that gains global publicity at a blistering pace. Larson, a self-styled preacher, would-be musician and television showman from Nebraska, began his career in the media in 1980s with the programme entitled *Talk-Back*, where he mainly focused on the realisation

² Ch. H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States*, Westport 1994, p. 4.

of evangelisation efforts towards American teenagers, considering them to be infiltrated by the content and ideas that are distant from the truly American spirituality, i.e. intensely experienced Christianity. The ideas mentioned before, which supposedly had a bad influence on the young generation, included rock music, oriental religions that used to be in fashion since 1960s and leftist political ideas on equal terms. In the same period, he also began to subject the viewers of his programme to the rituals of exorcism, including transmissions done through the telephone link. Until 1990s, he was strongly engaged in the fight with more or less imaginary manifestations of the influence of Satanism, which inscribed itself in the forms of Christian proselytic activity known as *Satanic Panic*, which were quite popular at that time. During a face-to-face confrontation in the studio, Larson himself made an attempt to convert Nikolas Schreck and Zeena Lavey, well-known figures of the Church of Satan in the USA and then of the Temple of Seth as well, but to no effect.

Larson's activity has gained new momentum several years ago, when exorcist rituals he conducted began to be published in television news and reports. Larson's popularity increased even more since he engaged his daughter and her two friends known as "Teenage Exorcists" to help him. The activity they conduct is based on the popularisation of a vision of Christianity enforced by Larson, where it is understood as a stabilising factor for the vibrating contemporary world, which in his belief has been devoid of spiritual substance due to the popularisation of materialistic attitudes among the youth, both in America and worldwide, as well as false religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism, or false idols of pop culture in the form of media celebrities. Seen from this perspective, the turn towards true faith and deep spiritual experience is intended to lead to liberation from the fetters of the satanic plan personified by liberal American politicians or rock music. Evil is also claimed to lurk in the form of a number of demons that permeate human psyche, which quite often has been disturbed by earlier traumatic experience or involvement into the temptations of contemporary consumerist culture. The aim of exorcisms conducted by Larson and Teenage Exorcists is to exorcise these temptations from the bodies and souls of possessed individuals, offering them the possibility of reunion with God, quite often verbalised through references to the tradition of the Old Testament. It is shown in one of the so-called testimonies, published on Larson's official website: "A demon of Death violently manifested, claiming he went back 50 generations »to the time of Napoleon«. The evil spirit gave his name in Hebrew, claiming that he came from an area in northern Africa where people consider themselves descendants of King Solomon and claim their Jewish faith as Sephardic Jews. After an intense struggle, the curse was broken and Brandon was freed, rejoicing in this »chance« encounter with the real exorcist"³.

There are numerous other testimonies of this kind, as well as recordings of rituals conducted in the public. However, they are quite loosely embedded in the Christian tradition and they are also subject to continual re-interpretations due to the context in

³ See www.boblarson.org [access: 1 XI 2013].

which they are presented. Larson and his charges strive to adapt to the changing situation, including adaptation in the sense of a different cultural context. It is explicitly shown in the materials concerning exorcist sessions conducted by Larson in Ukraine in 2012: not only in the ones published on his official website, but also (or even more) in the ones contained in documentaries on the phenomenon of Teenage Exorcists⁴. We perceive them as an image of Larson's proselytic activity outside the USA, which he has been vitally interested in throughout recent years. A significant feature of these documentaries is the emotional charge typical of Larson himself with regard to both people who do not share his convictions and people who are objects of his exorcisms. In the case of his visit in Ukraine, Larson visited primarily the poor, eastern part of the country, marked by a considerable rate of unemployment, social pathologies and a large number of people in need for psychological support. It was this group that the meetings with Larson were intended for and during the majority of which the attendance was considerable. In the case of persons who did not give in to Larson's suggestion after all, he showed hostility strongly marked with religious rhetoric. This approach was all the more visible because those situations have been documented by a camera crew present at the venue. The American pastor expressed smooth adaptation to a sudden failure in terms of a demon which is exceptionally hard to eradicate and who should be given considerably higher exorcist effort than it was thought at the beginning. However, the course of exorcist sessions conducted by Larson always has some more or less dramatic dimension, which sometimes transforms into ecstatic religious rapture, reminiscent of situations typical of American communities of Pentecostalists or Anabaptists. Nonetheless, the success of Larson's activities outside the United States is debatable. The participants in the meetings in Ukraine in 2012 themselves spoke quite cautiously about both the figure of the American evangelist and his charges and the course and sense of the ceremony they conducted. Moreover, it was not uncommon to hear some critical remarks with regard to a religious show of this kind, the importance of which was far from the religious experience and tradition of eastern Ukraine.

Apart from that, Larson's activity also has an institutional and educational dimension. The *International School of Exorcism*, which he established, is one of its examples. It is a web-based school, the graduation from which would allow us to have a certificate signed by Larson, constituting an attestation of our professional skills in exorcising demons. The educational offer of this facility contains comprehensive preparation in the field of exorcisms, comprised of three levels of teaching: apprentice level, warrior level and exorcist level. We can find the following subjects in the curriculum offered by the school. At the apprentice level these are: Introduction to Exorcism, New Testament Exorcism, Biblical Exorcisms, or Christian & Pre-Christian Exorcism; at the warrior level we can find such subjects as Catholic Approach to Exorcism, Introduction to Spiritual Warfare, Satan & the Origin of Evil, Hierarchy of Evil, Curse Breaking, and Legal Rights & Strongholds; at the

⁴ What I mean by that are the documentaries made by the BBC and the VICE magazine.

final level, i.e. exorcist level, the course is surmounted with such subjects as Inner Healing Basics, Healing the Fragmented Soul, Weapons of Warfare (with demons – *J. D.*), Performing the Exorcism, Procedures for Dealing with Demons, or Aftercare & Restoration. The educational offer presented above concurs with the mission of the school. This is because Larson believes that the demand for exorcisms nowadays is higher than ever⁵. It is so because of the character of contemporary reality, in which the spiritual element clearly disappears and evil spirits are thought to creep in the void created in this way. Thus, the answer, as is the case of the Catholic Church or the Anglican Church, where it is advisable to assign one exorcist to each parish or diocese, is that it is required that people trained to fight off evil and able to effectively oppose it should mark their presence considerably stronger. The mission of the school is to teach those who are called to “fulfil Christ’s command to heal people with broken hearts and liberate the enslaved”⁶. The specially developed curriculum, constituting a peculiar answer to the demand of the “market”, is to serve that purpose.

It should be added that other organisational and project initiatives are an equally important part of the activity conducted by both Larson and his Teenage Exorcists. These initiatives include groups of spiritual support called *Do What Jesus Did* (DWJD) and the CSI project (*Christian Spiritual Investigators*)⁷. The aim of the latter is to provide an answer to questions that rankle the youth, such as: Does God exist? Does Satan exist? Are demons and angels real? Does true love exist? The conviction of young entrants to the art of exorcism is that questions of this kind are apparently supposed to be the essence of spiritual dilemmas of the young generation that seeks the meaning of reality which is simultaneously embedded in a world full of both consumerist values and eroding religious traditions and iconographic references to them.

The economic analogy used with regard to Larson’s group is not completely groundless. The exorcist activity of the preacher and his helpers is also a business plan that has been well thought out. This is because we can not only buy books written by Larson and DVDs with recorded sessions on his official website, but we can also purchase a crucifix which is the basic tool of trade of a contemporary exorcist. In this case, marketing activities are closely related to the activities in the field of popularisation of the version of Protestant spirituality promoted by Larson. Both spheres are oriented towards those target groups which in Larson’s opinion are most susceptible to the influence of evil spirits, demoralisation or disappearance of spiritual values, i.e. the American youth. By offering an attractive religious product, packed in the visual trimming and semantic references of pop culture, Larson artfully moves in the world that resides at the borderline between religion and business. Teenage Exorcists provide immeasurable help in this regard, constituting a significant background of the image of the whole undertaking.

⁵ See <http://internationalschoolofexorcism.org/mission-statement/> [access: 12 XI 2013].

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ In the case of the latter, the convergence of names with the popular television series is intentional.

However, the case of Teenage Exorcists and Bob Larson shows a broader problem related to the presence of religious and spiritual sphere today, especially in the context of American folk religion. In an obvious manner, it answers and inscribes itself into today's needs of many groups of people, the spiritual sphere of whom forms within a peculiar, culturally saturated social environment, in which institutional religiosity withdraws from the public sphere due to the expanding decline in the interest in this form of expressing relation to the field of transcendence. On the other hand, the interest in other forms of expressing spiritual needs, including those present in contemporary United States, has definitely profited by its growth trend for several dozen years. From the New Age revolution to the contemporary movements that offer answers to ultimate questions, or alternative ways of gaining peace of mind – the majority of them refers to putting true spirituality against the existing religious institutions or the largest religions of the world. The formula of American popular religion, examples of which are definitely Bob Larson and Teenage Exorcists, also enters into this area. The commercialisation of religious experience, including its extreme exemplification of the ritual of exorcism, constitutes in this regard the result of economic rationalisation of the activities of religious leaders, preachers, or charlatans of all sorts, who aspire to be authority figures in the field of new spirituality. On the one hand, the factors that shape this phenomenon are resultant outcomes of the processes of global cultural change. On the other hand, they result from the requirements of the present time, which are subject to strong economisation of all discourses, including the religious discourse. However, the clash of two seemingly contradictory orders – economy and religion – bears fruit in an interesting effect of emergence of new phenomena, in which this dichotomy does not constitute a dissonance at all. Sometimes it is precisely the fact of presenting the sphere of spirituality or religious symbolic representation in isolation from traditional meanings and rather as an attractive product develops a new quality, in terms of both the very phenomenon of new spirituality and new research areas emerging in this way.

Contemporary folk religiosity, no matter how we define it, is a phenomenon of this type. The context of American folk religiosity provides all the more of a number of examples in the kind of Teenage Exorcists in this regard. Such examples undermine the understanding of spirituality and religiosity from a perspective which identifies these problems in view of religion as an independent and closed field. The problem is, however, that religiosity and spirituality, like the whole culture, constitute dynamic reality that goes beyond theoretical models proposed by the researchers, for whom religious phenomena function outside of any non-religious context and thus are resistant to changes characteristic of late contemporaneity. Nonetheless, the interfusion of the spheres of economy and religion is a significant fact which can be clearly seen today. Noticing and accepting it as a basis for research on new spirituality results in the understanding of the phenomenon of change of both spirituality and religiosity as such and the ways in which they are perceived by the society gain new shape that is closer to reality. What is important here is a shift in debates on religious studies towards contemporary folk religiosity which

realises itself in the time of the new media, the omnipresence of models of pop culture and common fatigue with traditional religiosity. The youth in the United States, while embodying these phenomena to a large extent, often expresses the need for articulating the spiritual sphere in terms of the language of pop culture, i.e. within the framework of the discourse of contemporaneity. The fact that institutional religions are keeping pace with this trend is insufficient, although it cannot be stated that institutions such as the Catholic Church are not striving to keep up with the changes delineated above either⁸. In such cases, however, the trends related to modernisation do not have the same popularity and reach that spiritual and religious movements referring directly to the identities, aesthetics, standards of behaviour or the idea of calling the status quo into question have.

A confrontation of institutional religion and folk religion in America realises itself today to a large extent in the sphere of specifically American cultural, political, social and economic discourses. However, taking the observation of current processes of transgression inside the American society as a base, including the sphere of religiosity, we can ascertain that the American model currently experiences clear proliferation in the context of globalisation processes. What I mean is not only the presence of American culture on a global scale, but rather the popularisation of a certain set of attitudes and structures of predisposition with regard to the issues of transcendence. This is why the case of Bob Larson and Teenage Exorcists becomes inscribed in a certain broader problem. That problem is the deep change in the conceptualisation and articulation of spiritual needs of the young generation that lives and functions in a network of global interrelationships.

⁸ The current pontificate of Pope Francis might be an example of the attempts to contemporise the language of the Church.