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When the sacred and the profane meet. Religion and culture in the modern world

Religion versus culture. Culture versus religion

Religion changes the world. Regardless of the way we look at it or which of its factions we consider, its potential for change cannot be doubted. It results both from the convictions of the believers (in every religion there is a set of rules to be obeyed, which means that the spiritual sphere extends into other fields of social activity) and from the way in which people with other preferences (followers of other religions, agnostics or atheists) react to them. Values and moral stances promoted by each religion are constantly being confronted with other systems functioning in the given society. “Religion is the fundamental source of personal values. At the same time, religious values are influenced by the social context and, to some extent, evolve together with it. Therefore, religion can be considered in some ways to be a starting point: an individual values the criteria, conditions and objects which his religious education has taught him to value”¹.

Of course, the influence of religion on the modern world differs from the one existing in antiquity or at the birth of Christianity and Islam. However, when analyzing the functioning of religious systems in societies, one must remember that religion has always shaped culture and its role is thus fundamental. Christianity cannot be disregarded, because it has shaped the culture of Europe and, by extension, the identity of modern Europeans. Hence the debate on whether references to this denomination should appear in the preamble to the drafted European Union Constitution. As a person brought up in European culture, I will therefore make references in this paper mainly to Christianity. However, in recent years Europe has

¹ J. Milton Yinger, *Religia, kultura i społeczeństwo*, in: *Socjologia religii. Antologia tekstów*, selected and ed. by W. Piwowarski, NOMOS, Kraków 2012, pp. 342-343.

undergone considerable transformation. The notion of multiculturalism, spreading chiefly in Western Europe, refers also to the peaceful coexistence of many religions. Inevitably, the arrival in the past few months of hundreds of thousands of foreigners, called refugees by some and immigrants by others, raises the question whether it is in fact possible for them to live peacefully alongside the Europeans and participate in creating rules of society. What is certain is that they originate from a different culture and bring with them a religion which so far has not been predominant in Europe. What will be the impact of changes which are likely to happen in these circumstances on the functioning of European societies? After all, the European countries with Muslim minorities have already faced problems resulting from the attempts of these minorities to make Islamic law (sharia) equally binding as the law of the given state, to have ritual slaughter recognized (introduction of halal food), and even to make teaching Arabic in schools compulsory. It is not important how strongly these movements are represented; what matters is that they are deeply rooted in religion, they aim to introduce specific changes to the social life, and their voice is getting louder. References to Islam in this paper are therefore unavoidable.

The clash of different religious systems results in at least some of them radicalizing. Today it is impossible to avoid this issue when writing about religion and its relation to culture. A good example of how religion can arouse intense feelings among very varied groups of people is the wave of protests ignited in Poland by the project of abortion law prepared by the non-profit organisation *Ordo Iuris* Institute. Just like in the case of the above-described expectations of Muslims, this attempt to make termination of pregnancy illegal demonstrated how a system of values can be discordant with the law. At the same time, we must remember that freedom of religion is one of the fundamental human rights.

I would also like to touch upon another interesting aspect of the functioning of religion in the modern world. Due to the changes which took place in Europe after 1989, it became necessary to redefine various social problems and the ways to solve them. One of the important issues at the time of the political transformation, in Poland as well, was the role of social policy. Its development was substantially impacted by the Catholic Church and the values which it propagates, as M. Książopolski notes in his paper *Polityka społeczna w różnych krajach i modele polityki społecznej* (*Social policy in different countries and models of social policy*). This is another proof that even in the face of growing secularization in some countries religion can be used to effectively introduce values fundamental to its followers into the life of whole societies².

Considering the relationship between religion and culture, it is necessary to attempt a definition of the latter. Piotr Sztompka points to the many facets of this term:

² Cf. M. Książopolski, *Polityka społeczna w różnych krajach i modele polityki społecznej*, http://www.academia.edu/9931940/M._Ksi%C4%99%C5%BCopolski_Polityka_spo%C5%82eczna_w_r%C3%B3%C5%BCnych_krajach_i_modele_polityki_spo%C5%82ecznej.

“Diversity, outer heterogeneity between different communities and uniformity, inner homogeneity which standardizes thoughts and actions within every community—these are two assertions united in the term culture. Clyde Kluckhohn, an American social anthropologist, compiled in a separate volume more than two hundred definitions of culture. His own definition described culture as a historically derived system of models of living, which tends to be shared by all members of a group”³. This supports my statement that religions have shaped cultures, since the “model of living” mentioned by Kluckhohn is necessarily related to values of which religion is the bearer. As J. Milton Yinger rightly notes, “in the cultural perspective, religion forms part of a system of commands and prohibitions that govern human interactions in all societies. It provides basic definitions of the meaning of last things and interpretation of experience”⁴. Religion shaped social stratification; it sanctioned the position of rulers by acknowledging their divine origins. It also brought forth lawmaking. For Milton, however, religion does not shape culture but is a part of it: “In numerous cases religion in its cultural aspect can be considered to be an integral part of culture as a whole. Religion is a product of the same forces which have created the comprehensive model of culture; it interacts with other elements of this model and evolves with them, though not without tensions and differences”⁵. Religion has also brought forth art. After all, epic poems *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* tell stories about Hindu deities, while gods are also the subject of Greek mythology, drama, songs and even sculpture. In Europe, painting, sculpture and architecture were actually created by Christianity because religious art had to appear in order for the secular one to fully develop, and theatre was reinvented thanks to the Passion and Nativity plays. Similar processes took place in other parts of the world. The reciprocal penetration of these two spheres and their mutual influence was and still remains unavoidable. It is therefore hard to disagree with Terry Eagleton’s statement that culture “had always been the most plausible candidate to inherit the sceptre of religion, (...) because it involves foundational values, transcendent truths, authoritative traditions, ritual practices, sensuous symbolism, spiritual inwardness, moral growth, corporate identity and a social mission. Religion is both vision and institution, felt experience and universal project, and culture at its most self-assured sought to lay claim to all these features”⁶. As societies develop, the concept of replacing religion with culture, the very possibility of such a substitution, grows in importance.

First indications of such a change appeared together with the Reformation, when culture, and literature especially, developed thanks to the Holy Bible being translated into national languages. The Enlightenment introduced the concept of

³ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2012, p. 291.

⁴ J. Milton Yinger, *Religia, kultura i społeczeństwo*, in: ed. cit., p. 341.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ T. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2014, p. 120.

a rational mind which is free from religious beliefs and superstitions. Also during that time an idea emerged that progress would ensure the proper development of the world. The French and Industrial revolutions not only transformed political systems but also changed the way in which religion was perceived. Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition* that earlier, there existed two spheres of social life: secular, which stemmed from the ancient concept of privacy, and religious, which corresponded to the public realm. Thus, the Catholic Church offered people a kind of citizenship. When a new social contract was formulated, however, culture took the lead, and religion gradually withdrew into the domestic area of life. A very intriguing question has been posed by the aforementioned Terry Eagleton, whether culture “could also rival the churches in bridging the gap between the values of a minority and the life of the common people that some Enlightenment scholars, Idealist sages and Romantic artists had found so disquieting. Could culture in the sense of minority values be linked with culture as a whole way of life? The Church had sealed the rift between them in its own fashion, enfolding clergy and laity in a single institution; and though the simple faithful may not be exactly on all fours with cardinals and theologians, this matters less than the faith they share. Within this social order, hierarchy and communality are fully compatible. A Swabian peasant will not grasp the doctrine of Original Sin in quite the same manner as a Tübingen theologian, but there are affinities between the two forms of understanding”⁷. Attempts to establish a dominant culture which would replace religion and create a set of values for the whole community can be found in the writings of utopian socialists. Karl Marx’s famous statement that religion is “the opium for the masses” and the development of socialist movements have consolidated the separation of church and state.

Postmodern issues with religion

The Second World War brought about further changes. Images of debased people who were quite often treated as objects seemed to foreshadow the end of religion. After all, what God could have allowed such a tragedy to happen? Such sentiments were present in the social discourse conducted in post-war Europe, especially behind the Iron Curtain. In the countries where socialist political systems had developed, religion was called “a superstition” or “an anachronism”. Homo Sovieticus got his paradise on earth. Religion was pushed out of schools and public life, and in some cases even outlawed (in 1967, Enver Hoxha declared Albania to be the world’s first atheist state). Western Europe also managed without religion. The introduction of capitalism and the development of neoliberal ideas resulted in religious zeal being replaced by consumerism. In France, which was Catholic up to this point, the number of the

⁷ Ibid.

faithful began to decline. Churches started closing in other countries as well, often converting into hotels, libraries or pubs. One's faith became his or her private matter. In consequence, asking someone about their denomination is often considered in European culture to be a violation of their privacy.

But does all this mean that culture has really replaced religion? Has religion come to an end? Franz X. Kaufmann writes in *Religion and modernity* that "if by religion we mean **historical** religion, so-called universal religions (Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam) in particular, then of course it is not true. If by religion we mean the need for reason, unity, identity, we can presume that nowadays it plays a bigger role than in the earlier periods. If by religion we mean common beliefs which are universally shared—in other words, a symbolization of such unity which allows people to easily determine the meaning and aim of their life—then religion is in a state of significant decline"⁸. In Europe, everyday life seems to support this statement. The universality of beliefs and hence the authority of religious institutions ("power over souls") are slowly disappearing; even in "Catholic" Poland there are more and more people who support the separation of church and state, hold so-called secular values and emphasize the rights of the minorities. Noemi Modnicka notes that "changes in religiousness are now more often described as a transition from the society of fate to the society of choice. The term »church of choice« is becoming more popular, as opposed to the »church of the people«"⁹. It is a feature of the postmodern world in which every individual was granted the right to self-determination and was made responsible for himself, his choices and his resulting place in social hierarchy. "In modern socio-cultural circumstances, religiousness is not passed on and protected by authoritative institutions, from family to institutionalized Churches, which aim to preserve forever one model of religiosity. The socio-cultural pluralism and structural individualism »force« the individual to make choices also in the religious sphere of his life—and in so doing, create his own religiousness. Among various »meanings of life«, symbols and rituals available on the new market the Church is just one of many groups seeking followers (religious pluralism). In today's circumstances, we are tempted to look back to the times when Churches held a monopoly on religious matters and occupied an influential position in individual communities and the society as a whole, and liberated people from the tension and danger of life through religious rituals"¹⁰. Identifying with a religious system means belonging to a community, which is one of the basic human needs. The loosening of social ties and the rise of

⁸ F.X. Kaufmann, *Religia i nowoczesność*, in: *Socjologia religii. Antologia tekstów*, selected and ed. by W. Piwowarski, ed. cit., p. 433.

⁹ N. Modnicka, »Kościół wyboru« – wybór miejsca w świecie, in: *Religia i kultura w globalizującym się świecie*, ed. by M. Kempny and G. Woroniecka, Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, Kraków 1999, p. 123.

¹⁰ J. Mariański, *Religia i Kościół między tradycją i ponowoczesnością. Studium socjologiczne*, Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, Kraków 1997, p. 55.

individualism have undoubtedly contributed to a feeling of loneliness which makes people seek new forms of communal life.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, "one has to pay for the privilege of being part of a community; and as long as this community exists only in our dreams we do not consider this price too high or even think about it at all. When the time comes to pay, the currency is freedom under various names: »autonomy«, »the right to self-determination«, »the right to be oneself«. No matter which way of life you choose, you gain something but always lose something else. The lack of community indicates lack of security; entering a community foretells an impending loss of freedom. Security and freedom are two equally precious and desired values which can be more or less balanced but are almost impossible to be wholly and smoothly reconciled. At least, no unflinching solution has been found yet. Unfortunately, the formula for the »real-life communities« renders the contradiction between security and freedom even more vivid, troublesome and harder to resolve"¹¹. This opinion resonates especially strongly when juxtaposed with the fact that these communal forms of life are sometimes sought in religious movements, some of which are becoming more and more radical. The need to belong, to have an identity or, as Franz X. Kaufmann put it, a meaning in one's life obscures the extremist message and the actions it demands, which only strengthens the fundamentalisms around us.

T. Eagleton states that "Fundamentalism has its source in anxiety rather than hatred. It is the pathological mindset of those who feel washed up by a brave new late-modern world, some of whom conclude that that they can draw attention to their undervalued existence only by exploding a bomb in a supermarket. This is not, needless to say, a distinction between West and East. Fundamentalism is a global creed. Its adherents are to be found in the hills of Montana as well as in the souks of Damascus. The world is accordingly divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little. While some lack all conviction, others are full of passionate intensity. There are those who are loyal to little beyond power and profit, and there are others who, outraged by some of the consequences of this moral vacuity, tout doctrines that can blow off the heads of small children"¹².

Steve Bruce notes that fundamentalism appears when tradition is under threat. The existing stance is not only strengthened but also transformed in response to the menaces of the present: "Fundamentalisms arise in traditional cultures, but they are not traditional in any simple sense. Enough of the old religion needs to have been preserved to provide the inspiration and the symbolism for those who wish to reassert its domination. But fundamentalisms are not merely survivals, the past continued. They are radical revisions of the past provoked by changes that threaten the continuity of the tradition. In that sense, fundamentalisms are reactive. Their

¹¹ Z. Bauman, *Wspólnota*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2008, p. 10.

¹² T. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, ed. cit., pp. 197-198.

conservatism is not conservation but a creative reworking of the past for present purposes"¹³.

So what happened to the values considered by modern culture to be inalienable rights? After all, the radicalism, often called religious terrorism, which is becoming more and more common, negates freedom, equality and even the most fundamental right—the right to live. How can values which have evolved with the development of civilization and culture be reconciled with values imposed by religious systems?

On values

Freedom is a fundamental value for the Europeans since the French Revolution. "In European thought, freedom has a rich socio-political meaning, naturally encompassing the concepts of equality, justice and solidarity. It is not just a lack of bonds and restrictions but more importantly an autonomy which allows unconstrained activity. A man is free when he is able to effectively satisfy his needs, which are not limited to just the material ones. Psychological circumstances are equally important: a free man is certain that his life is not in danger and that nothing is hindering him from achieving his life goals. For this reason, he must be allowed to self-improve and develop the potential necessary to fulfil his aspirations"¹⁴. Freedom is glorified both by culture and religion. The famous painting by Delacroix *Liberty Leading the People*, monuments commemorating war heroes, poems and movies showing how freedom is regained by individuals (Andy Dufresne, sentenced for a crime he did not commit, who escapes from prison in an adaptation of Stephen King's story *The Shawshank Redemption*) and whole nations (for instance, during the Second World War) are just a few examples that prove this topic is present and significant in art. Freedom is also valued by religion, at least in the case of Christianity which has had the largest influence on Europe. It is present, for example, in the concept of *free will* given to people by God. The Catholic Church has also supported on numerous occasions the attempts to maintain or regain freedom. During the Second World War (and other conflicts as well) priests often gave their blessing to people going into combat and consecrated tanks and other types of arms. It should be also remembered that in Poland, the patriotic song "Boże, coś Polskę" ("God Save Poland") is still being sung in churches, although the line "Return our Homeland to us, Lord!" has been changed to "Protect our Homeland, Lord!".

¹³ S. Bruce, *Fundamentalism*, 2nd ed., Polity Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 13.

¹⁴ W. Hanasz, *Wolny świat: odmienne kultury, odmienne wolności*, in: *Religia, kultura i edukacja w świetle zagrożeń współczesnego świata*, ed. by H. Czakowska, Rev. M. Kuciński, Wydawnictwo Kujawsko-Pomorskiej Szkoły Wyższej w Bydgoszczy, Bydgoszcz 2014, p. 66.

Of course, due to the advance of globalisation and the development of technology which both enables the rapid transmission of messages and facilitates travel, we now live in a cross-cultural world. "In the world of many cultures and societies which were founded on very different values and living conditions, it is impossible to have one definition of freedom, equality, justice and good life. The meaning of these concepts varies across cultures. According to contemporary political philosophy, the discrepancies are so huge that an unanimous consent as to the meaning of justice or worthy life cannot be expected. Even those concepts which appear to be more definite, like inequality, discrimination, violence, poverty, honour and so on, are understood differently. What is considered to be a natural and proper encouragement of appropriate behaviour in one culture can be deemed an unacceptable violence or humiliation in another, while the object of pride in one culture can be seen as worthless or even ridiculous in another"¹⁵.

This discrepancy is a product of secular culture, but it was also impacted by differing religious systems. Freedom seen from the Christian perspective does not resemble freedom as understood by Islam, as can be clearly seen when comparing the position of women in both these religions. Christians do not deny women the right to self-determination, while Muslims believe that they should be subjected to men. In European societies, the equal legal status of men and women is now indisputable, whereas in the Islamic law, a testimony of one man carries the same weight as testimonies of two women. The western influence in the Arab countries is often seen as a source of depravity and moral decay and thus regarded as a threat. An incident described by Mona Eltahawy in her book *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* in the context of an attempt to ban bikinis in Kuwait provides an excellent example:

"The *Gulf News* reported that just days before the »bikini ban« proposal, a Kuwaiti woman lost a custody battle with her ex-husband after his lawyer showed the court a picture of her wearing a bikini in the company of another man while abroad.

»The mother cannot be trusted to raise the children properly and the picture as an example indicates a lack of modesty and a deficiency in her morals that erode trust in her and result in public disdain as society assesses her actions morally or religiously«, the lawyer said"¹⁶.

Another event described in this book shows that both religious and cultural norms do not matter when there is social acceptance for something:

"At the first anniversary of the Mohamed Mahmoud clashes – with Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood as president-women protesters reported that they were grouped by their male counterparts as they tried to escape the security forces'

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 70–71.

¹⁶ M. Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2015, p. 15.

tear gas and pellets. What goes through the mind of a protester who is dodging security forces, tear gas, and blows but nonetheless pauses to grope the body of a fellow protester? Morsi remained silent as organized gangs raped and sexually assaulted women at protests with impunity. On the second anniversary of January 25, at least nineteen women were sexually assaulted, including one who was raped with a knife. All this aimed to punish women for activism and to push them out of the public space. And it would not have happened unless there were societal acceptance of such assaults; it would not have happened if women did not face various kinds of sexual violence on a daily basis. It would not have happened if hatred of women had not, for so long, been allowed to breathe and stretch and run so freely in our societies¹⁷.

The fact that traditional subordination of women could have played a part in this occurrence (the taboo was broken by men who were in position of power) does not make it less drastic.

Nowadays, Islam seems to be constantly challenging values and norms of the secular world. Nicholas Mirzoeff tells the story of an Egyptian artist who took part in the protests in Cairo, just like Mona Eltahawy: "In October 2012, Ganzeer organized an exhibition entitled »The Virus is Spreading« at the Safarkhan Gallery in Cairo. The works displayed there raised the issues of freedom, sexual identity, censorship and Islam. One of them was a shocking image of a blindfolded man who was sewing his mouth up. And the picture of a hurt and tormented cat with only one eye became a symbol of the current situation in Egypt. ... Other graffiti artists also contributed to the exhibition, Sad Panda among them. They were immediately accused of heresy by the Islamists. In response, Ganzeer published the following letter:

Do you know any group of liberals that has prevented the construction of a mosque? Has a liberal person ever criticized an art exhibition on the grounds that it was Islamic – or sought punishment for its participants?

The letter pointed out that no liberal Egyptian has attempted to prevent Islamic groups from living according to their beliefs. Unfortunately, this is not reciprocated¹⁸.

In his letter, Ganzeer not only alluded to concepts created by Western culture (liberalism) but made a reference to the sphere of values. As can be seen in all of the above-mentioned cases, there is also the issue of culture being used as a tool both by religious fundamentalists and supporters of a secular state. Culture as a system of signs and symbols becomes a battlefield between the sacred and the profane.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 26–27.

¹⁸ N. Mirzoeff, *Jak zobaczyć świat*, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków-Warszawa 2016, pp. 274–275.

In the world of symbols

Religions have always used symbols to convey their truths. With the development of culture, these symbols gradually exceeded their original context and acquired universal meaning. In the case of medieval religious painting, for example, the audience understood the precise meaning of every colour that was used and every plant, bird or animal that was depicted. With time, however, these meanings changed. In ancient Greece, the colour blue was associated with Zeus—in Christian culture it became a symbol of Mary and the Immaculate Conception. In later times, the blood of aristocratic families was thought to be “blue”, and nowadays it suggests competence and coldness. Religious symbols adopted by other faiths suffered the same fate. For example, swastika, the Asian symbol of happiness, nowadays brings to mind only the Third Reich and the atrocities committed during the Second World War. Some symbols, however, are still associated with their original religious context: the cross, the menorah, the *shahada* and the crescent. At the same time, as K. Pankowska pointed out, „the religious symbol is exceptional, since it involves supernatural phenomena and meanings but at the same time is on par with all the other cultural symbols. By expressing the religious experience of an individual, it becomes a component of their identity. It also shapes the corporate identity of the believers”¹⁹. When identifying with a religious system, a person assimilates the symbols proper to it and develops an emotional relation to them. In the world of popular culture, which treats symbols and values as products and lifts limits and taboos, the overuse and transformation of religious symbols can evoke feelings of discomfort and danger, thus playing into the hands of religious extremists. Coming into contact with another culture or society can also feel incongruous. Since multiculturalism is currently one of the principal values of “civilised” societies, cultural conflicts are inevitable. “The existing symbolic universe is threatened by the emergence of different definitions of reality within it. This has usually two causes. The first one is the confrontation with another society with a completely different history and culture. The appearance of an alternative symbolic universe is a threat because it demonstrates that there exist other worldviews beside »our own« and it may not therefore be the right one. The second kind of threat is posed by the emergence of groups within the society which do not accept the universal norms and establish their own deviant version of reality. Current civilisational and cultural changes seem to present yet another kind of threat. Alternative reality is often created within one’s own culture which has become deformed by the wart of pop culture”²⁰. A couple of years ago, the clothing chain C&A introduced into the market bracelets with images of saints of the Catholic

¹⁹ K. Pankowska, *Tożsamość religijna w dobie kultury popularnej*, in: *Tożsamość religijna w nowoczesności*, ed. by L. Dyczewski, K. Jurek, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2015, p. 36.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 37.

Church, turning them thereby into “icons of pop culture”. The shape of the cross, usually stripped of its religious connotations, has also become popular, for example in earrings. T-shirts with Christ’s face on them are worn not only by Christians.

The use of religious symbols in mass culture is not always silently accepted or ignored. When Croatian theatre director Oliver Frljić presented his performance entitled *Our Violence and Your Violence* during this year’s Festival of New Dramaturgies in Bydgoszcz, it triggered a series of indignant reviews and petitions calling for the dismissal of the manager of the theatre which had organized the festival, not to mention a prosecutorial investigation. The director was accused of disrespecting both national (the Polish national flag) and religious symbols. Szymon Spichalski described the key controversial scene in his review for the theatre portal Teatr dla Was: “The scene in which Christ rapes a Muslim girl is supposed to be a direct attack on the Poles. It is presumably an illustration of the very refined metaphor that Poles are supposedly »screwing« the refugees. The funny thing is that the actor who played Jesus wore the white-and-red loincloth upside down; just a small inconsistency in costume but it could make one wonder what poor Indonesia has done to Frljić. Another clichéd rhetorical device was used against our countrymen to show that as Europeans we are responsible for the situation in the Middle East. The artists do not care that we have no colonial experience and that in the previous century we were treated by the Western powers as badly as Iraq and Syria are treated today. But why care about such small details? Yet the most absurd thing is to use Christian symbols at a time when Europe is becoming more and more secular”²¹.

This balanced opinion was lost amid the cries of outrage. Protests were organized in front of the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz and prayers were offered in the local Chapel of the Sisters of the Poor Clares to ask forgiveness for the “sins of the stage”. This incident shows that the unwarranted (in the opinion of the believers) use of religious symbols can evoke really intense feelings. Other faiths have also been subject in recent years to such insensitive use of their symbols, which in the most extreme case resulted in an attack on the editorial office of the magazine “Charlie Hebdo” in response to the publication of caricatures of the prophet Muhammad.

Religion is being represented by modern culture in various ways. According to Oriana Fallaci, we live in the civilisation of fear, which she associated with the competition between major religions and the consequent terrorism. Since other aspects of postmodernity include also the climate crisis, huge natural disasters and the lack of great authority figures, numerous references to the Apocalypse in art should not come as a surprise. Yet it would be worth asking, in the case of other religious symbols as well, whether popular culture gets its inspiration directly from biblical stories or from sources which it had already transformed. Bartosz Szurik

²¹ S. Spichalski, *Publiczność zwymyślana?*, <http://www.teatrdlawas.pl/artykuly/982-publicznosc-zwymyslana>.

poses such a question in his paper *Eschatologia chrześcijańska w popkulturze* (*Christian eschatology in popular culture*): "Is it true what Lem suggested in *Fantastyka i futurologia* [*Science Fiction and Futurology*] that in modern visions the apocalypse is caused by the people themselves and not by supernatural beings? Does popular culture mention biblical or mythical visions of the end of the world at all? Maybe they are present only as remote echoes, hidden in science-fiction where »messiahs« like Neo from the *Matrix* series or John Connor from the *Terminator* series try to save humankind from the »powers of darkness« (intelligent machines)?"²².

It may be that with such questions we leave the firm ground of facts, since the issue seems to depend on the chosen interpretation. Some people may consider "Matrix" to be deeply rooted in religious revelations, yet others may not see such an analogy. "The religious counterpoint to numerous secular or New Age apocalyptic visions present in popular culture is only natural. Unfortunately, due to the aesthetics and bluntness of pop culture, even the best-intentioned quasi-religious work can take on dangerously fanatical overtones, while its subject matter, lacking any depth, may lose its original meaning. It is disturbing when authors distort biblical science and theology while writing about wars which precede the Parousia; after all, it is easy to assume God-like competences when telling a story about His plan, and such religious perspective has never done history any good"²³.

Popular culture also takes a peculiar attitude towards death. On the one hand, death loses its metaphysical aspect, because our TVs and smart phones show it to us on a daily basis (if God Himself is dead, why dwell on the death of an individual?); on the other hand, it is sometimes celebrated in an especial way, which, among other things, emphasises the importance of mourning. Wearing black clothes or bands to show sadness after the death of someone close may not, however, be as common as it used to be. Nowadays, there are other ways to show bereavement, e.g. virtual cemeteries: "E-cemeteries are created to give Internet users the opportunity to remember the deceased. The opinions as to their point are varied. Some cannot believe that such things exist and that there are people willing to use them, while others consider them to be something quite natural. They are appreciated especially by young people who are unable to come from afar to visit the graves of their loved ones, and so create virtual tombstones adorned with virtual flowers and candles. Some virtual graveyards allow pictures of the deceased to be put up, as well as his biography, commemoration book and a forum. Administrators of e-cemeteries assure that virtual flowers are always fresh and candles burn for months. Although these necropoleis are safe from grave robbers, it is very common to find »burials« of people

²² B. Szurik, *Eschatologia chrześcijańska w popkulturze*, in: *Religijność w dobie popkultury*, ed. by T. Chachulski, J. Snopek, M. Ślusarska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego, Warszawa 2014, p. 118.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

who are still alive. Virtual tombstones of the Kaczyński brothers or Roman Giertych have appeared”²⁴.

Another point where the secular and the religious meet is the area of language, and culture plays here a fundamental role as well, being a source of linguistic norms.

Creative power of the word

At the beginning there was the Word – the Word which has creative power. From this belief, present in many religions, stems also the fear of the word (including the true name of God) which is characteristic of Judaism and Islam.

Nowadays, in popular culture especially, the word becomes less powerful and loses its influence. Language is also subject to cultural changes. What we used to call the culture of language seems to be coming to an end, with the “language of the street” beginning to prevail. Less and less people pay attention to style, vocabulary and grammatical correctness. The daily language is not only becoming exceedingly vulgarized but also oversimplified, impoverished and often clichéd. At the same time, since there are no more taboos and we are encouraged to talk openly about all our experiences, matters of faith have also become a topic for discussion. The already-mentioned translation of the Holy Bible into national languages and, in more recent times, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have allowed people to experience faith in a more personal way and to share their religious feelings with others. As Wojciech Kudyba notes, “in our country, we are most certainly witnessing cultural changes which impact also the language we use to describe our religious experience. The new position of culture means a new position of the religious language, since it is never outside the cultural sphere. On the contrary, it is always immersed in it and receptive to its fluctuations and inclinations, because it owes its existence and communication qualities to this very culture”²⁵.

Mass culture not only influences the way laymen talk about religion but also seeps into the official language of the Church. Even though the hierarchs still use the high language of the past, simplified and colloquial language is not uncommon in daily sermons. Later on in his paper, Kudyba writes: “It is certainly true that sermons use informal language and that laymen, including rock stars, sometimes talk about their faith using colloquialism or even swearwords. The observation of current circumstances proves, however, that this vernacularisation has not affected the liturgical language, since colloquialisms do not appear in prayers or pastoral

²⁴ A. E. Kubiak, *Żałoba on-line. Cybernetyczne obcowanie*, in: *Religijność w dobie popkultury*, ed. cit., p. 128.

²⁵ Wojciech Kudyba, *Język religijny w kulturze masowej*, in: *Religijność w dobie popkultury*, ed. cit., p. 18.

letters. To say that high language is disappearing from churches, or is at best mixing with informal language, is to make an attractive hyperbole—but this assertion is very far from the truth”²⁶.

The way in which language is being used nowadays will force further changes in the area of religion as well. Although the hierarchy of the Church pays attention to the linguistic form and correctness of its message, the average person is unable to comprehend its meaning. The difference in the way the words are used creates misunderstandings.

A separate issue is the penetration of religious terminology into informal language and the gradual corruption of ideas. Kudyba writes: “Does this mean that the fear of the trivialisation of religious language is ungrounded? On the contrary, it seems entirely justified. But the point is that religious terms are being devoid of their deeper meaning in a different way than we expect; not when we talk about God in the informal language but when we talk about ordinary things in the religious one. I have in mind particularly some of the advertising slogans. When the sweet voice of Daniel Olbrychski tells us that koral ice-cream are so tempting he decided to commit a sin for the first time, does it not significantly change the way in which we perceive guilt? Does it not suggest that to sin is nothing more than to bravely break the ban which prevents us from enjoying higher pleasures? Does the theory of temptation shown in commercials have anything to do with the biblical meaning of this term? How should we explain to children that salvation has nothing to do with vizir washing powder and that happiness in heaven does not involve stuffing oneself with almette cream cheese?”²⁷.

The world of commercials is important for the present discussion because it uses words in a particular way. Catchphrases and slogans which reinforce the image in advertisements should be easy to remember and evoke direct associations with the given product or brand. “The persuasiveness of advertising directed at the »faithful« is based on the endorsement of traditional motifs, symbols or beliefs which seem to »lend« the ideals and values associated with religion to the object being advertised. Such references can be enigmatic and allusive (as in the case of a slogan promoting a security agency: »Heavens keep an eye on you 24 hours a day«); yet sometimes they form the basis of quite complex storylines”²⁸.

Of course, in this case there is also the risk of abuse leading to scandals and protests. Due to the changing role of religion in various societies, however, we react indifferently to some incidents of such misuse, although this usually happens when Christianity is concerned. Protests of Catholics against the performative reading of

²⁶ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 23–24.

²⁸ B. Pawłowska-Jądryk, *Sacrum i skandal. O nawiązaniach do religii w przekazie reklamowym*, in: *Religijność w dobie popkultury*, ed. cit., p. 233.

the play *Golgotha Picnic*, the screening of the movie *Priest* or the excessive use of religious symbols for commercial purposes are often perceived as “ridiculous” and unnecessary. “Many people consider the use of religious symbols in other contexts than the traditional one to be a profanation or a blasphemy. Modern culture, however, is heterogenic in its very nature and gradually enlarges the set of traditions, the language of which it wants to use to express its own essence and ideals. It seems that this process cannot be stopped. Protests or bans (especially rash ones) may actually speed it up, since a **scandal** is a great way to advertise things. This is reason enough to summon the energy to reflect more deeply on phenomena which often give us an impulse to protest against them or ignore them”²⁹.

The significance of words and their meanings is clearly demonstrated by the way in which we try to show different faces of Islam. It is worth noting that in descriptions of attacks carried out for religious reasons the perpetrators are called “Islamists” and not “Muslims”. This choice of words may be an attempt to calm public opinion and protect ordinary Muslims from being ostracised. The name we use when referring to the Islamic state set up in Syria and Iraq also shows our attitude towards it. Depending on whether we call it IS, ISIS or Daesh, we may be sanctioning it or not.

When considering the role played by words, one must not forget blogs, websites and social platforms. Although photographs and other images seem to be the primary medium of modern culture, words circulating in the Web also gain additional power. People use the Internet in every corner of the globe, regardless of regimes which try to control it in various ways. The Arab world is an interesting example of this³⁰. “It is estimated that approximately 100 million young Arabs log into Facebook and Twitter. In Tunisia, one in five people under 30 years of age has a Facebook account. In Morocco, more than 3 million young people use social platforms regularly. It is no surprise that the events of 2001 [sic] were called the Facebook or Twitter revolution. Social platforms did not just enable communication and exchange of information. They gave their users the chance to escape from reality and to keep their privacy in a world which did not make it possible”³¹. The Arab Spring, which became the symbol of modern revolution, was born on social platforms where people put up calls for protests. When these started to be organised, it was an example of words turning into action.

Young Muslims use words not only as part of political rebellion but in the context of morality. Jerzy Zdanowski writes that „just like any other culture, the Arabic-

²⁹ Ibid, p. 243.

³⁰ The following paragraphs are a revised fragment of my bachelor’s thesis entitled *Rebellion and revolution. Short manual*.

³¹ J. Zdanowski, *Bliski Wschód 2011: bunt czy rewolucja?*, Oficyna Wydawnicza AFM, Kraków 2011, p. 139.

Muslim one creates a system of norms and values to which one must adhere in order to belong. This can be called cultural correctness. Arabic culture is for the most part Islamic, and the morality of the Middle Eastern people is characterised by a strong attachment to religion and a high degree of religiosity in daily life. In fact, for most of them there is no difference between cultural correctness and religious identity, which is determined by the holy writings of Islam. The Quran and the Sunna (a collection of stories about the prophet Muhammad) regulate in detail the behaviour and limits of religious correctness for those who wish to be saved, and limits of moral correctness for those who wish to remain members of a given social group. The culture of the Middle East offers Muslims a model of morality which shows them the way to salvation and commands them to strictly obey religious norms. This model assigns specific social roles to each sex and regulates the relationship between them. These roles are equally important to society but are not the same. A woman should be first and foremost a wife and a mother, and only after fulfilling these duties may she pursue her social ambitions and career goals. A man, on the other hand, must provide for his family. According to this model of morality, the family is the only appropriate place for procreation, while sexual intercourse outside marriage and homosexual relationships are prohibited. At least two trends in Internet discussions on the topics of the model of morality and political authoritarianism can be distinguished. The first consisted in contesting the government system and some of the norms of morality. The other proposed to modernise some of these norms but to keep the fundamental values and cultural symbols³².

Websites, groups set up on social platforms and all kinds of forums where issues important for a given community are discussed play a similar role. A good example is *mystealthyfreedom.net* website through which young Iranian women fight for the freedom to choose whether they want to wear a hijab or not. On the other hand, blogs and websites are tools used also by young members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who "... wrote on their blogs that nowadays young people look differently on many fundamental issues. The bloggers' movement reflected the politicisation of some representatives of the younger generation of the Brothers and the radicalisation of their beliefs"³³. The Arab world takes advantage of the achievements of civilisation more and more knowingly. K. Górak-Sosnowska notes that „Muslims are aware of the power of modern technologies. Even the radicals, who usually distance themselves from most displays of progress, use the new media. The ulema also recognize the potential of the Internet and more and more often set up their own profiles or websites. Young Muslims are a very big and varied target"³⁴. As a result, the Internet becomes

³² Ibid, p. 131.

³³ Ibid, p. 136.

³⁴ K. Górak-Sosnowska, *Muzułmańska kultura konsumpcyjna*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie DIALOG, digital edition, Warszawa 2014.

not only the weapon of rebels but also the tool of the current centres of power (both governmental and religious) used to exert control and influence. The Western cultural model is not being repelled but creatively adapted to Eastern conditions. "Muslim consumer culture is an element of daily rituals and activities. References to Islam are more subtle in form, even if their meaning is explicit. The new Islamisation does not strive to establish a Muslim state with an all-encompassing Islamic ideology; it is an individual project based on a deliberate pursuit of deeper knowledge of religion. Therefore, it is not on the defensive and does not withdraw under the pressure of modernity; it seeks new channels which enable it to gain new followers and keep the old ones in this modern global world"³⁵.

Using Internet in this way is not, of course, limited to followers of one faith. Various churches and religious associations, e.g. parishes of the Catholic, Russian Orthodox and Protestant churches but also Zachodniosłowiański Związek Wyznaniowy "Słowiańska Wiara" (The Western Slavic Religious Association "Slavic Faith"), take advantage of this medium and have their own websites. Preaching on the Internet is done in many different ways: religious retreats are organised, matters of faith are discussed, advice is given and doubts are dispelled. The word spread in a virtual world is still powerful.

Whence we came, to where we are going

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, religions have played a significant role in the emergence of social identities and have shaped our world. Thanks to them, we live in this particular culture and hold these particular values. Even if we admit that a gradual secularisation of societies is taking place and accept the primacy of so-called universal values over religious consciousness and affiliation, we cannot deny that religions are the cornerstone of our current reality. The complexity of the modern world raises questions about the further social role of religion and whether the private (including the system of beliefs chosen by an individual) should be separated from the public or should these two spheres cooperate. Finally, since it is now clear that radical religious associations pose a threat to others, can they coexist with the ones that are more moderate or at least be controlled by them? Tadeusz Buksiński notes that "many nations have shaped their collective identity (fundamental norms, values, traditions that bind citizens together) thanks to dominant religions. In the era of globalisation and transnationalism, this identity is being undermined by anti-religious groups and religious minorities which want to enjoy privileges that are disproportionate to their number and social status. They demand to be exempt from criticism and to be given preferential treatment in the public sphere, which

³⁵ Ibid.

they often obtain by coercion. They invoke human rights, freedoms, the notions of multiculturalism, even though they themselves do not respect these freedoms in their internal and external relationships³⁶.

It is just one of the potential risks posed by the current development of societies and the place occupied by religions. Moreover, it should be remembered that new problems, which we have not yet had to face, are created by changes in the functioning of national states. Grzegorz Babiński rightly notes: "Will the disappearance (or maybe just change?) of many important functions of the state, mostly external ones, due to the development of transnational structures, cause religious identification to become once more an important component of national identities? The current reversal, to some extent, of the processes which took place during the formation and stabilisation of fully independent national states points to this conclusion. As it turned out, every nation needs a stable protection from the outside world. ... Do states participating in the transnational integration, which involves »blurring« their frontiers, offer such protection? Will the less distinctive sovereignty of these states not cause unease about the durability of national distinctiveness? Do modern, fully-developed nations need state frameworks for a secure existence not in the political but the ethnic sense? More questions of this kind can be raised but it seems that there are no answers, only hypotheses. The shape of united Europe is also an issue here"³⁷.

André Malraux has stated that "the 21st century will be spiritual or will not be". Religions have endured and still seek new followers ready to defend their beliefs. Their potential for changing the world according to their ideals may yet come into play.

Translated by Aleksandra Zych

Ewelina Kaufmann – WHEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE MEET. RELIGION AND CULTURE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Religion is one of the foundations of culture. Europe was shaped by Christianity, just like Islam influenced both the emerging statehood and culture with its material manifestations in the Arab countries. The inevitable changes in the functioning of societies in Europe have of course altered the way the role of religion is perceived. In European culture, asking someone about their denomination is often considered to be a violation of their privacy. At the same time, as popular culture started using and transforming them, religion and its symbols began to function outside the sacred sphere.

Europe today seems to be dominated by two great religions: Christianity and Islam. For several months now it has been struggling with a wave of newcomers whom some call refugees and others – immigrants. However, the undisputable fact is that they come from a different

³⁶ T. Buksiński, *Publiczne sfery i religie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 2011, p. 191.

³⁷ G. Babiński, *Religia i tożsamość narodowa – zmieniające się relacje*, in: *Religia i kultura w globalizującym się świecie*, ed. cit., p. 199.

culture, bringing with them a religion which so far has not been predominant in Europe. This raises questions about whether it is possible for different systems to coexist and what impact this may have on the functioning of European societies, as well as the issue of fundamental values and their roots. Thus, religion becomes one of the main topics of discussion on the future shape of the world, and culture is used more and more consciously as a tool by all interested parties.