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Religiosity research with reference to qualitative methods

It is my impression that the issue which I would like to address in my presentation did not exist for as long as empirical research treated religiosity as an independent variable, and thus its description was limited to external aspects, above all to a declaration of faith made by the studied group and their participation in religious practices. It was in this period that Gabriel Le Bras, among others, led to distinguishing the main indicators of religious practice, namely, *dominantes* and *paschantes*. It is emphasized nowadays that these indicators, despite their quite general character, may be used to describe the so-called religious vitality of a given community.

G. Lenski tried to describe the category of religiosity in a similar way by making distinctions in the way of perceiving it, and started to study two aspects of religiosity: as a form of participation in the religious practices of a given denomination, and as a form of beliefs and orientations comprising both doctrinal and pious dimensions. However, this two-dimensional insight into the issue of religiosity seemed too simplistic, and therefore more complex concepts of religiosity were developed in the 1960s by such researchers as Ch. Glock, who distinguished 5 dimensions: ritual, ideological, intellectual, consequential and experiential; or by M. B. King and R. A. Hunt who introduced a 10-dimensional concept of religiosity, which made other researchers aware of such an extended perspective. Yet, although increasing the number of dimensions of religiosity is statistically feasible, (with numerically larger samples), such an effort does not facilitate the understanding of this phenomenon. Hence, both psychology and the sociology of religion tend to simplify complex insights, which means returning to the five-dimensional proposal put forward by Glock and its possible modifications, or a return to one-dimensional concepts.

At the very centre of religiosity is the religious commitment of an individual, and so for example Clayton and Gladden understand it as an ideological commitment, whereas its other manifestations are the expression of the primary, religious? commitment.

From a methodological perspective, it should be emphasized that the perception of such a complex phenomenon as religiosity requires establishing a criterion which will combine individual manifestations of religious practice into dimensions fulfilling the requirements of semantic and structural coherence. The multi-dimensional concept is supposed to describe religiosity by endowing it with a certain structure established by theoretical constructs which allow us to cognitively present and 'organize' the phenomenon of religiosity, whilst at the same time we are also aware that the religiosity of particular individuals may not be subject to coherence in terms of the dimensions adopted by a researcher.

Therefore, being aware of the methodological determinants, mostly psychological contexts, contemporary research employs the description of religiosity as a multidimensional phenomenon, or establishes its specific typologies, depending on the assumed objectives. Frequently, a functional paradigm is invoked, according to which religiosity is presented in terms of certain functions defined in advance. Such an approach leads in consequence to the identification of the functional equivalents of religion (merely) with religion's rudimentary forms.

Religiosity as an internalized aspect of religion undergoes the same changes as the latter. Therefore, contemporary research into religiosity observes often contradictory phenomena, such as its turning to fundamentalism on one hand, but – to individualization, privatization or secularization, on the other.

Returning to the primary ordering of the notion of religiosity established by Le Bras, I would like to examine the questions posed by ethnology or psychology and try to explain the presented situations by giving possible answers – applying the sociological method of the grounded theory.

In my opinion, there is a hidden reality that constitutes a really interesting research area, e.g. a situation of a woman who was brought up in the Catholic religion but falls in love with a Muslim, gets married to him, adopts his faith, leaves for his Muslim culture country and experiences the night of 24th of December there. What are her inner feelings? Can they be described just as nostalgia, remembrance and longing, or should one try to look for the abandoned religious sensitivity among these feelings? After all, a similar question could be asked when describing a situation of a clergyman who has abandoned his ministry and how he too feels on the night of 24th of December at midnight.

An article epitomizing the atmosphere outlined by the questions above appeared in an August issue of the "Historia Do Rzeczy" magazine. It was exemplified by the biography of Jan Wierusz-Kowalski, a monk, a Benedictine, who became an apostate. The author of the text concludes it with a statement: "It is said that he started feeling remorseful before his death. A former Benedictine, priest, professor and an officer of [the] security service... [he] was even said to start attending masses. Reportedly, as it used to be in ancient days, he left the church before the presentation and consecration of the Body and Blood of Christ, as he assumed himself to be an unworthy witness of the greatest

miracle that God had left for people on earth. Perhaps he [had] managed to reconcile with our Saviour anyway"¹.

How to describe an experience of this kind? How to reflect on the inner dialogue included in this kind of biography? Should it be described only in terms of psychology or private religious practice, or perhaps it should be more accurately referred to as the behaviour which can be described just as religious in the context of Le Bras or Lenski? Isn't this too little?

But this is not all. I have tried to analyze some of the studies on religiosity conducted by the Centre for Public opinion Research (CBOS) in the first decade of the 21st century.

The authors of the study on the faith and the religious practices of Poles which was conducted in February 2009, twenty years after Poland's political system's transformation was started, remark that religious practice was one of the few walks of life which had undergone unfavourable changes since the end of the 1980s².

Almost half of those surveyed were convinced that the religiosity of Poles had decreased in the studied period (48%). Only one in five of the surveyed (22%) observed its increase and the same number of people (22%) did not notice any changes in this respect.

Those surveyed who answered the question of what gives meaning to human life, pointed to strong faith and the need to find one's own place in society as sixth on the list of responses, behind family happiness, satisfying job, trust of other people, love, and a peaceful life. However, the study revealed that almost 95% of adult Poles constantly perceive themselves as Catholics and only two people in one hundred describe themselves as atheist or agnostic. There is another index which is interesting in terms of the research into religiosity, namely, participation in religious practices. 54% of those surveyed take part in them at least once a week and every twentieth of them several times a week. But only 18% of adult Poles follow religious practice once or twice a month on average, and almost the same number of them, namely 19%, participates in religious services several times a year. 9% of the surveyed are non-practicing whatsoever. Interestingly in the period of twenty years described in the study the declarations of faith as well as of participation in religious practices have not significantly changed. Thus, the overall trend of Polish religiosity in these aspects can be described as stable. Yet, another indicator is the most interesting. The declared total lack of engagement in religious practices, as well as infrequent participation in services, does not mean that the respondents consider themselves as non-believers. Almost three-fifths of people who do not participate in religious practices at all, still consider themselves as believers, 4% of whom perceive themselves as devoted believers. In contrast, of the 94% of those surveyed who attend religious practices only a few times a year, 3% are – according to their own words – devoted believers.

¹ „Historia Do Rzeczy”, 2013, no. 8, p. 56.

² See *Wiara i religijność Polaków 20 lat po rozpoczęciu przemian ustrojowych. Komunikat z badań. BS/34/2009*, CBOS, Warsaw 2009.

An important indicator of religiosity, from my point of view – considering its private aspect – is the frequency of prayer. The declarations indicate that 42% of the surveyed pray daily, over one-fourth do it at least once a week, and one-tenth at least once a month. Every eighth respondent (13%), by their own admission, prays a few times a year, and few of them (all in all 3%) – once a year or less frequently. Every twentieth Pole does not pray at all.

The last four years, in the studied period, 2005-2009, brought quite a significant decrease in this aspect of religiosity, with the percentage of people who pray once a year or less frequently and also those who do not pray at all not changing, but the number of respondents who declare that they pray every day decreasing by 14 points. The percentage of those who follow this religious practice a few times a year increased significantly by 7 points.

How may a researcher confront these seemingly contradictory statements? How to interpret the obtained results so that the resulting analyses can move closer to the truth about the respondents, their life and their outlook on the world?

The selected research material which serves the purpose of searching for aspects of religiosity, and which is analysed, should be treated as exceptional, because it is focused, to a large extent on the experiences, private observations and judgements of people as the main actors of the events described by a biography or made to define themselves by the questions which they were asked³.

When gathering research materials which can be used to explain the raised issues one should rather try to find those obtained from people who are inclined to speak about themselves, who have left their daily routine in order to talk about this routine. In this way the gathered data can be acknowledged as being filled with exceptionally deep self-reflection. As G. Gibbs points out “Creating a narrative or telling a story is one of the basic methods that people use to organise their perception of the world. By stories people lend significance to their past experiences and also share these experiences with others. A careful analysis of topics, content, style, context and the very act of story-telling makes it possible to discover how people perceive the meaning of crucial events in their lives or in the life of their community as well as reach cultural contexts which constitute the basis of their life experiences”⁴. Thus, in this context the research into religiosity will entail reference to meanings which people attach not only to their behaviours but also to the subjects and objects which they pay attention to. In this context of religious research it will be possible to give up the dichotomy of choices focused around the area of true and false for the benefit of the authenticity of people’s experiences. Thus, such studies have a chance to capture the significance of religious attitudes not in a quantitative and declarative sense, but in reference to elements which are of qualitative importance.

³ See M. Oliwa-Ciesielska, *W poszukiwaniu kultury ubóstwa*, Poznań 2013, p. 87-106.

⁴ See G. Gibbs, *Analizowanie danych jakościowych*, Warsaw 2010, p. 108.

Using elements of an exploratory case study may facilitate the presentation of complex aspects of the world of people living in the time of a religious crisis, which as K. T. Konecki points out makes it possible to “conduct a preliminary recognition of the issue, and articulate main categories and research questions”⁵. According to R. Yin, records and archival data but also experiences related to everyday life, although not perceived by many as significant, and certainly not as the ones that may be important for a researcher, may constitute the material which is suitable for conducting such a case study.

Therefore, independent stories, in a way provoked by a researcher who does not rank or categorize them according to their importance, form not only a collection of information, but also a narrative which touches the most intimate and emotionally burdening experiences. They exemplify the content of the words expressed by I. Szlachcicowa, that “biographic narrative shows how an individual perceives him or herself, what shape he or she gives to their identity in various moments and how they integrate different periods of time into one whole”⁶. This whole does not have to be coherent with reference to religious experiences because the lack of coherence may indicate deep experiences in the area of faith and the significance of the quest.

The analysis of these statements and compilation of the materials should be accompanied with questions asked by other researchers using similar methods about “whose story are we telling, how we are telling it and how we represent those who tell us the stories”⁷. So the emphasis should be mainly placed on what we usually neglect, consciously or unconsciously, when studying such a nuanced field as religiosity. (Experiences of mystics describing their spiritual state as emptiness, dark night and loneliness, would be certainly for many [not only researchers] the indicator of a loss of faith, particularly if they allowed themselves, without referring to the essence and intervention of the sacrum, to support such theses expressed by people put to the religious test who believed in being ‘rejected’ or that God – the subject of faith is hiding from them). The basic question in relation to the issue ‘whose story we are telling’, should induce a reflection if it is possible for a researcher to understand the sphere of religious life, which is not quite understandable for the one who is experiencing the problems involved in it. Does he remain so helpless about his research that he must construct the meaning together with the surveyed and allow them to attach significance to their personal experiences? The issues involved in the story enable us to consider the non-verbal as significant – silence and stillness. As K. Charmaz writes “Moments of silence are of a very special importance in every study which is connected with ethical choices, moral dilemmas and social policy. Silence means absence, sometimes lack of awareness or inability to express words and

⁵ K. T. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana*, Warsaw 2000, p. 128.

⁶ I. Szlachcicowa, *Tożsamość biograficzna jako strategia życia – ciągłość czy zmiana?*, in: *Konstruowanie jaźni i społeczeństwa. Europejskie warianty interakcjonizmu symbolicznego*, E. Hałas, K. T. Konecki (eds.), Warsaw 2005, p. 270.

⁷ K. Charmaz, *Teoria ugruntowana w XXI wieku. Zastosowanie w rozwoju badań nad sprawiedliwością społeczną*, in: *Metody badań jakościowych*, N. K. Denzin, Y. P. Lincoln (eds.), scientific ed.: K. Podemski, vol. 1, Warsaw 2009, p. 736.

feelings"⁸. The research material may reveal many vital reflections made by the characters of the account, which contradicts the explicit opposition between scientific and common knowledge. Common explanations cannot be treated as naïve in the research into religiosity, they do not lose their meaning when contrasted with sociological theory which is open to experience, and oftentimes, e.g. as in the presented method of grounded theory, it is constructed on the basis of this experience. As J. C. Kaufmann points out: "Common knowledge is not a kind of non-knowledge but quite the contrary, it shrouds some treasures"⁹.

T. Rapley indicates that in the analysis of the written records, the rhetorical power of the text may be as interesting as the account itself, which means the way in which the author structures and organizes the addressed issues and how he argues for the validity of its interpretation¹⁰. As G. Gibbs states "The attention of the person conducting the study is not focused here on the content of the accounts of the surveyed or the things and occurrences described in their records, but also on the manner in which they speak about them, why they decided to speak about these particular events and what feelings they experienced. Narratives enable us to find out how our interlocutors attach meaning to their experiences. Moreover, they give the surveyed the floor, which makes it possible for us to understand how they experience their own lives"¹¹.

As already stated, it should be emphasized that in the context of the research into the delicate matter of religiosity, which is characterized by many imponderables, the categories of settlements like true and false should be limited in favour of the notion of the 'authenticity' of the recorded accounts, feelings and opinions. An autobiographic account, similarly to a poetic statement, remains beyond the area of true and false¹². It means that it can be changed.

As Kaufmann points out "An average person lies on purpose only in some cases. Rarely they deform, rather they give their own form in order to establish a meaning, or even the truth, their own truth. (...) Instead of jumping to the conclusion that we have to do with a deformation (thus the material gathered in this way cannot be analysed), we had better try to understand the logic behind establishing the meaning"¹³. Similarly, it can be assumed that the material gathered is a significant reflection of the individual's reality which should undergo a verification in terms of authenticity. As D. Silvermann indicates "[The] (c)onstructionist approach adopted by many researchers using qualitative methods makes them devote their attention to processes which are employed in texts to describe 'reality' rather than establishing if the content of the analysed texts is true or

⁸ Ibidem, p. 736.

⁹ J.-C. Kaufmann, *Wywiad rozumiejący*, Warsaw 2010, p. 35.

¹⁰ See T. Rapley, *Analiza konwersacji, dyskursu i dokumentów*, Warsaw 2010, p. 197.

¹¹ G. Gibbs, *Analizowanie danych jakościowych*, Warsaw 2010, p. 130-131.

¹² H. Palska, *Badacz społeczny wobec tekstu. Niektóre problemy analizy jakościowej w socjologii i teorii literatury*, in: *Spojrzenie na metodę*, H. Domański, K. Lutyńska, A. W. Rostocki (eds.), Warsaw 1999, p. 169-170.

¹³ J.-C. Kaufmann, *Wywiad rozumiejący*, op. cit., p. 97.

false"¹⁴. Devoting attention to processes in the research into religiosity has nothing to do with revealing, e.g. by the Centre for Public opinion Research, nationwide changes in religious practice in Poland, which do not reflect anything else but the behaviours of individuals in institutionalised areas. M. V. Angrosino shows similar aspects of an apt search for important research settlements: "What is 'genuinely true', as some researchers put it, are the methods employed by individuals to create, sustain and sometimes also mutually modify their sense of order"¹⁵.

Similarly, in religious research it can be adopted that what people think and say about reality and the meaning they attach to it is equally important as the reality itself¹⁶. In written biographies, narrative interviews and free digressions on a given topic, facts evoked from memory become interpreted by their authors, which means that they gain 'a subjective sense' according to the attached structure of meanings, which is a particularly important aspect of behaviours perceived as religious¹⁷. A researcher is supposed to, if possible, conduct a communicative validation – i.e. make sure in the course of the research to what extent the transformation of the sense which is obtained is close to the experience of the surveyed. The knowledge of one's own life is important as it is a part of general knowledge involving people in a similar position and those who are in a decidedly better situation. Similarly, as U. Flick states, "Similarly to what U. Flick states, the knowledge "consists of diverse elements: of explicitly episodic fragments referring to given situations with their specified time-spatial parameters; of distinctly semantic parts comprising notions and relations derived from specific situations, and finally, of hybrid forms created from mixing these two kinds of knowledge as in the case of schemes illustrating the course of events or processes"¹⁸. Consequently, an experienced researcher must be aware that the account which he is dealing with may be merely a reflection of a momentary conviction, ungrounded knowledge and a stage of a quest which will eventually lead the respondent to a point which they could not have projected. It may as well be an episode which is not taken out of context, which together with other similar episodes creates a constant grounded scheme of patterns, norms and religious values.

An important issue about the research into religiosity is that remembering one's own experiences is organised individually, and has a contextual and sequential character. The fragmentary character of the knowledge conveyed by the surveyed does not lessen its value, if the objective of a researcher is to present the reality included in these limited accounts as precisely as possible¹⁹. The events recalled by individuals are usually placed

¹⁴ See D. Silvermann, *Prowadzenie badań jakościowych*, Warsaw 2008, p. 203.

¹⁵ M. V. Angrosino, *Obserwacja w nowym kontekście. Etnografia, pedagogika i rozwój problematyki społecznej*, in: *Metody badań jakościowych*, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁶ See M. Szpakowska, *Chcieć i mieć. Samowiedza obyczajowa w Polsce czasu przemian*, Warsaw 2003, p. 12.

¹⁷ See I. Szlachcicowa, *Tożsamość biograficzna jako strategia życia – ciągłość czy zmiana?*, in: *Konstruowanie jaźni i społeczeństwa. Europejskie warianty interakcjonizmu symbolicznego*, E. Hałas, K. T. Konecki, (eds.), Warsaw 2005, p. 270.

¹⁸ U. Flick, *Projektowanie badania jakościowego*, Warsaw 2010, p. 103.

¹⁹ See D. Silvermann, *Prowadzenie badań jakościowych*, Warsaw 2008, p. 83.

among pieces of biography; they do not have any chronological time but the time measured by a personal calendar of an individual²⁰. And this is above all a warning against constructing an explicit way of religious transformations in the lives of individuals.

In the light of the above, it is natural to adopt that a person describing their actions rationalizes them after some time and speaks about the objective of the undertaken action, which is more prone to verification than the motives. When it comes to religious experiences they will probably more easily describe the final reference to their actions than particular sequences of behaviours. Thus, they might be more aware of what their participation in religious practice has led them to, rather than why they found themselves in a given area of the sacrum. In order to simplify, it can be stated that a person is more inclined to reconstruct what they wanted to achieve, from a time perspective, rather than why they were pursuing it. Regardless of the extent to which the narratives reflect the reality, it is important that "Narratives attach some meaning to the past: determine the course of events, their timely sequence, and at the same time, they emphasize some of them while neglecting or underestimating others. By the way they describe a cause-and-effect chain of events, they lead to [a] conceptualisation of their interpretations, [and] establish their conditioning and effects"²¹. Taking the above into consideration, it is not difficult to assume that a person who is deprived of the need for religious research or who has declared themselves as religiously indifferent will perceive past experiences in the area of religiosity in a different way than before (non-religious), or even neglect them; while quite the contrary, a convert will define past events which were deprived of religious meaning as e.g. a religious quest.

In this context it should be assumed that biography studies record a subjective interpretation of a man's own life, which is often a far-reaching idealisation of reality, or even a method to solve their own problems developed later on, an attempt to rationalize their own biography, own life and own choices²².

The multiple aspects which should be taken into consideration when studying religiosity and its exceptionally complex and impenetrable character, as well as the indications above, argue that the presented narratives constructed by individuals constitute a firm basis for analysis. Just for the fact of being highly individualised. They are not only a record of facts but also the experiences on the basis of which people define themselves and their social surrounding. Thus, they have an opportunity to show not only outer manifestations of religious behaviours, but most of all their internal premises. This 'precisely' captured material undoubtedly makes it possible to construct a theory which has both a factual and formal character, as the grounded theory argues.

In such an approach, a lot depends on the genuine attention of the researcher – who can analyse data in a broader context. This method is exceptionally adequate to the

²⁰ See J. Nowak, *Spoleczne reguly pamietania. Antropologia pamieci zbiorowej*, Kraków 2011, p. 62.

²¹ M. Golka, *Pamiec spoleczna i jej implanty*, Warsaw 2009, p. 54.

²² *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski (eds.), Warsaw – Poznań 1990, p. 6.

assumed analyses as it allows 'not losing track' of the peculiarity of the studied subject in the course of the research. Thanks to this grounded method, which makes it impossible to launch the study with a prepared list of the research issues, one may discover something that could have been overlooked when using other research methods, as an 'unscheduled' area of questions.

It seems only that only by undertaking such complicated research activity may one discover a coherent nature of seemingly excluding behaviours or answers to the questions posed and discover a new nature of the religious aspects of any complex incoherence in human life.