

New forms of spirituality and the threat of sects in the context of religious security

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Abstract— The presented article is an attempt to show the relationship between the emerging new forms of spirituality and the threat of sects. The authors analyze the contemporary cultural context in terms of widely understood spirituality. They then come to the conclusion that subjectivization of religion leads to destabilization of the religious life of a given community and gives rise to possibilities of abuse in the religious space.

At the same time, the authors are aware of the urgent need to free religion from ossification, passivity, the feeling of siege, excessive institutionalisation. However, they want to draw attention to the dangers resulting from the simplification that is increasingly being heard, which can be formulated as follows: Let us move religion into the private sphere, and the problems of religious conflicts and abuses connected with spiritual life will end. The authors draw attention to the fact that the problem is much more complex and requires coordinated action on religious security.

Index Terms— religious security, sects, religious management, abuse, manipulation

I. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, postmodernity are terms used to describe contemporary society. The term "post-modern society" is used to describe a number of different concepts relating to the type of society: society of individuality, society of challenges, society of sensations or consumer society and society looking for safety. The multiplicity of types of societies is primarily a consequence of the process of socio-cultural transformations that have been taking place more or less since the industrial breakthrough of the 19th century. However, any transformation is not limited to socio-cultural issues, but also concerns the religious sphere, both individual and community. Human living conditions have undergone a huge transformation, which is still ongoing and has the effect of "making existing values, norms or patterns of religious life obsolete". (Mariański 2004, p. 300).

Socio-cultural pluralism is undoubtedly connected with the

process of secularization, which advocates the departure of society and culture from religious and church institutions. The religious plane has been replaced by scientific and technical definitions of reality, considering them more likely. Additionally, it was announced that religion would "die" and society would be deprived of the religious "yoke" that only makes life difficult for man. Finally, Frederick Nietzsche proclaimed the "death of God", and with it religion. It was widely recognised that secularisation goes hand in hand with technical development, which in turn led to the normative character of these relations. It is safe to say that Christianity has lost its monopoly on religious matters. The consequence of the Church's removal from the socio-cultural sphere is the creation of a "free space" which has been unanimously mastered by the "promoters of a new meaning" in both religious and secular matters. Moreover, as time passed, religion became entangled in crisis and lost its credibility (Mariański 2004, p. 301).

As a consequence of this crisis, legitimate security concerns have arisen in the area controlled by religion. Doesn't a religious person expose himself to the danger of losing something important? In the era of various types of fundamentalism, are we not threatened with another international religious conflict? Will the "empty" space created by the withdrawal of traditional religions not be filled by sects?

Especially this last question will be crucial for us because the aim of these analyses will be to try to describe the relations that exist between the new forms of spirituality and the threat of sects. All this will take place in the context of religious security.

In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to be aware of the complex and complicated religious context that is characteristic of today. It is impossible to speak of religious security in a convincing way without taking into account the broad horizon of contemporary spirituality.



II. NEW FORMS OF SPIRITUALITY

At the beginning, we must take it for granted that today's religion is not dying out, but only changing its face or form. Religion and religious practices have undergone an evolution - a modification that, in this new form, aims primarily at being more accessible to man. "The over-institutionalisation of religion is accompanied by the reassembly of beliefs and religious elements. Religion is shifting from public space to the private sphere" (Mariański 2004, p. 301). This disintegration does not mean at all weakening the individual religiousness of man. The secular culture is unable to fill and manage the "free space" that has been created, which in turn gives rise to the need for people to have religious values connected with the meaning of life. All religious needs are known in moments of danger, uncertainty or doubt, during which a person seeks a point of support for his/her person.

In the world as well as in Europe, new forms of spirituality and religiousness can be distinguished, which manifest their presence from the social to the individual level. In the sociology of religion it is assumed that today there is a renaissance of religion (Mariański 2012, p. 81).

Over time, however, the process of secularization has taken its toll in the form of a broad kaleidoscope of diverse religious attitudes. Man's return to religiousness is a response and opposition to the one-dimensionality of life and banality. The renewal of the spiritual dimension shows that man continues to search for his inner self, which is his personal centre, connected with self-confidence and dignity, while at the same time feeling the need to create human bonds.

Today's spiritual kaleidoscope contains attitudes: "from *feng shui* to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy to weekend yoga exercises, from Christian mysticism to the New Age, from spirituality to business". (Wójtowicz 2010, p. 35). The diversity of attitudes indicates the renewal of the sacrum in non-institutional or even a institutional forms of modern society. The present century is characterized by rapid technical and cultural development, access to information resources on the Internet, magazines and television, which, moreover, allows for the rapid emergence of new trends, ideas or even phenomena. "The old cultural bugs are not able to accommodate all the richness of change, as a result of which certain elements disappear and are replaced by new ones, merging with the existing ones. (Wargacki 2010, p. 94). Contrary to appearances, people have not abandoned the subject of religiousness or spirituality, they have only changed their approach to these forms, bringing their needs to the fore.

A characteristic feature of postmodern society is the so-called new spirituality. The notion of spirituality today functions in a dual context - religious and non-religious. The word comes from the Latin *spiritualitas*, which has been known since the fifth century. However, it was not until around 1900 that the word *spiritualité* was introduced to the general public through French literature, and it also referred to the religious context, namely by means of this word the spiritual dimension of man was described. In the United States, the non-religious context of spirituality was clarified, underneath which there were expressions concerning what was dogmatic, institutional,

ecclesiastical, etc. With the promotion of new forms of religiousness, the spirituality moved to Europe, where it began to be used in the opposite sense to religion and not always in a positive way (Wargacki 2010, p. 307).

What is the "new spirituality"? Włodzimierz Pawluczuk defined the new spirituality as "beliefs and practices that are not related to traditional religious institutions, but are oriented towards some extra-human powers". (Pawluczuk 2004, pp. 90-91). Sometimes the new spirituality can replace religiousness understood as traditional, but it is more frequent as an additional option to choose from. Among this variety of contemporary phenomena, characteristic common features can be distinguished:

- Rejection of faith in a transcendent God, in favour of the power of e.g. cosmic origin. Sacrum is assigned an impersonal dimension.
- Pantheistic and pantheistic ideas are popular, e.g. gnosis Priceton or philosophy of T. de Chardin. Representatives of cults proclaim that nature is somehow alive and spiritual, which in turn allows for "scientific research" on the phenomenon of spirits.
- The promotion of magic and occultism has led to an increase in interest in all kinds of amulets and talismans, which are supposed to protect against misfortune. Faith in "energies" and their practical use, thanks to which man can be "cured" from illnesses.
- Fascination with different states of consciousness (yoga, zen, mystical ecstasy, drugs, etc.) and the phenomena of so-called "extra body experience" caused by the use of pharmacological drugs and even drugs.
- Strongly emphasized ecology and return to nature and traditional health care techniques.
- Feministic views, which proclaim the belief that the feminine element will enable salvation from various disasters, etc. The origin of these views can be found in the astral metaphysics of the New Age movement, according to which the Aquarius era belongs to the female element. In the new era there will be a union of nations and races, people will return to nature (Pawluczuk 2004, p.91-92).
- An important feature of the new spirituality is a kind of commercialization and easy accessibility for man. After all, the world is a global village which, thanks to the Internet and other forms of communication, is able to send a message to any place on earth in a matter of seconds or minutes. Certain patterns of behaviour known from economics, i.e. seller-purchaser, supply-supply or customer-service, have taken root in some phenomena of "new spirituality". This commercialisation of phenomena promotes the tendency to use commercial criteria in life. It changes the perception of things into objects of a commercial character, which in addition to the "bonus" can be an old man before a disaster, e.g. all kinds of talismans, herbs etc. (Kawecki 2011, p. 10).
- Individualism of an individual. Man chooses from among available options on the religious market, what he considers best for him.

All the "movements" entering the religious landscape usually

do not have official organizations or adequate administrative structures. However, despite the lack of such an important element, these movements are able to attract a large number of supporters of a given trend (Mariański 2010, p. 25).

In conclusion, we can say that the postmodern landscape of spiritual polyphony indicates that the new spirituality goes beyond the framework of ecclesiastical institutions and becomes a form of religious alternative. Persons who consider themselves “spiritual” or “spiritual” strongly dissociate themselves from identification with a particular traditional religion (Mariański 2010, p. 20). This state of affairs may lead to the appearance of sects that fill the void created by the withdrawal of traditional religions.

III. SECTS AS A THREAT TO RELIGIOUS SECURITY

Moving religion exclusively into the private sphere causes its absolute subjectivity. In the process of subjectivization of religion, the emergence of new forms of spirituality, which nowadays play an increasingly important role, discovers a huge role. These, in turn, open up space for emerging religious groups, which can cause danger.

At the beginning, a certain terminological clarification should be made. Well, we will use the concept of a sect in its pejorative sense. Currently, the term is used to describe a new religious movement, and the term sect itself does not appear in Polish legislation. In these analyses, however, we will use the term sect in the context of manipulation, abuse, environmental pathology and psychopathology in order to show the dangerous and incalculable side of sectarian life of many “communities” organized around the leader.

There is no room here for a detailed analysis of the characteristics that are characteristic of the sect phenomenon. Only those traits will be mentioned that clearly affect the religious safety of individuals, but also of the local community, but also, more broadly, of society. However, we will focus mainly on the safety of the individual.

The first important feature of the sect is the charismatic structure of the movement calling for members to obey the leader blindly. Unlike the institutionalised hierarchy of most churches, the sect is based on the charisma of its leader, who is often also its founder. It often happens that the leader considers himself to be the incarnation of a god. As Andrzej Zwoliński points out, it is the most dangerous kind of leader. He writes: “The divinity of nature and the messianic theses proclaimed by leaders allow them to create very strong ties in the group of followers they lead and to enforce absolute obedience. This is also the most dangerous type of leader” (Zwoliński 2004, p. 69).

However, other types can be distinguished within the leadership. The sect's gurus may consider himself another incarnation of a historical figure (e.g., King of France, Martin Luther, St Mark the Evangelist, Orygenes), which seems to be a more modest version of fanatical leadership. However, this does not fundamentally change the specificity of religious leadership in sects. Andrzej Zwoliński writes: “The specificity of a leader of a religious group lies mainly in the fact that he possesses a feature of the sacred, and thus has the ability to

apply supernatural persuasion, while appealing to supernatural laws and prerogatives. The sacral nature increases as contacts are reduced to the necessary, resulting from sacred duties, which does not mean that they are merely official, impersonal”. (Zwoliński, 2004, p. 51).

A leader who has forced his followers to believe in his divinity hates disobedience, and his followers do not discuss with his will, which in their opinion is the will of the deity itself. Hence, many followers do not think about the justification of the leader's will, but in blind obedience they perform the commissioned tasks. There is no need to convince anyone how much abuse can occur in sects where the leader is considered a god. Therefore, it seems necessary to develop clear management rules that take into account the level and structure of such factors as emotional intelligence (Sapiński, Ciupka, Tomanik, 2020, p. 81).

The second feature of the sect is exclusivity. Its members have a very strong sense of choice, a vocation to play a special role in the future fate of the world and even the cosmos. A strong sense of mission very often leads the members of the sect to perform even the most gruesome acts. A person who feels that the fate of the world depends on him will not retreat from anything and will obey his mission thoughtlessly.

The exclusivity of the sect members results from complex manipulative processes. The leader uses the available manipulative techniques, trying on the one hand to make the faithful feel that outside the sect they mean nothing, and on the other hand, they are persuaded by a sense of great dignity, choice, resulting from membership in a religious group. In this way, the leader gains believers ready for anything, convinced that outside the religious group they mean nothing. The basic methods of manipulation include: bombing with love, flattery, humanitarian aid, reconstruction of consciousness, brainwashing (Zwoliński, 2004, p. 235-243).

There is no place here for a detailed analysis of the above mentioned manipulative techniques, it is enough to mark their essence and the fatal consequences for the members of the sect. The essence of manipulative techniques is the capture of individual believers by the leader or management group of a given sect (Hassan, 2004, p. 89). The entrapment of a believer leads to a loss of autonomy and individual character traits. The last stage of manipulation is to disrupt the organism and break down the personality structure of the faithful (Zwoliński, 2004, p. 243).

So we are dealing with a certain paradox. A member of a sect, by being manipulated, is deprived of autonomy and personal dignity, while at the same time being aware of his unusual vocation, his choice, his destiny for great things. But this greatness is absolutely dependent on belonging to a sect and attachment to the leader.

The third characteristic of sects is the strong eschatological attitude of its members. It is a determinant which, on the one hand, gives the members of a sect group the dispensation of responsibility for their deeds and, on the other hand, gives them strength and increases their motivation to the point of being determined to do works for the new order. A strong eschatological attitude, a feeling that the end of the world is

near, in a way relieves the members of the group from responsibility for the crimes committed, gives birth to criminogenic behaviour, deprives them of the ability to rationally assess reality, forces them to obey in giving up temporal goods, creates an atmosphere of cynicism and nihilistic morality. In a word, eschatology understood in this way leads to a loss of autonomy, control, leads to the breakdown of the personality of the group members.

The sector is also characterized by the concealment of norms that significantly regulate the lives of its members; they violate fundamental human rights and the rules of social coexistence, and their impact on members, supporters, families and society is destructive. The atmosphere of destruction, individual disintegration of the sect's members and the disintegration of social bonds is a factor constantly present within the sect. The lack of integration in the process of group management by the leader is evident here. Integration in the management of individuals, which is an expression of the ability to resolve conflicts within the community, is a necessary condition for the normal functioning of the group (Sapiński 2019, p.1). In sects, on the other hand, the leader aims to incite conflicts and slow individual and social disintegration. He does so in order to gain absolute control over group members.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, several important conclusions should be highlighted. First of all, we must consider the spiritual climate of our era as conducive to the formation of sects. The theologian Jean Verette aptly paraphrases the choices of post-modern people "if it suits you, it is true". The spiritual life of a human being can be characterized by two attitudes: the seeker or the person experiencing a fact, finding the revealed religious truth. Nevertheless, the attitude of the "explorer" has been pushed to the margin, because the fact of finding and submitting to the doctrinal requirement of a given religion is understood and even identified with a certain threat or threat of incapacitation.

Secondly, it should be stressed that the new spirituality, and with it, religious life appears to be an active search for oneself, by solletting the criterion of inner experience. After all, man has free will and is supposed to make appropriate choices himself, without pressure from outside. Moreover, the new spirituality does not deny the existence of supernatural beings, it is treated as an obvious and necessary layer. Post-modern man can be manipulated and deceived in order to achieve happiness and possessions in the worldly life.

Thirdly, the new spirituality creates an opportunity for sects to exist. This is because it lacks objectivity, institutionalization and, consequently, relative transparency. We often complain that churches are institutionalized, burdened with bureaucracy, but then we forget about the role of the institution, giving objectivity to something as fleeting as religious beliefs.

Fourthly, sects have a destructive influence on the individual and on society. A member of a sect exposes himself or herself primarily to manipulation, fraud, sexual abuse, complete disintegration of personality, deprivation of autonomy. Very often it is difficult for people who leave the sect to return to

normal life. It is often a long and painful process, bought with suffering and misunderstanding from society.

Fifthly, the important role of the official religion in religious security should be pointed out. The official church, with its institutionality, and even one could even say that thanks to it, becomes a transparent reality for society with a clear hierarchy and open teaching. This fact is very important for religious security.

The presented article shows, on the one hand, the danger of sects and, on the other hand, defends the traditional understanding of the role of religion in social life. Of course, the ossification of traditional religious forms is a great challenge for the modern world, but the opening to new forms of spirituality must be done with caution and with the awareness of the contemporary threats.

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