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Religious freedom and the marginalization of religion in the public sphere

The practice of modern liberal democracy contains an internal contradiction concerning the presence of religion in the public sphere. On one hand, liberal democracy guarantees a religious freedom on the basis of which individuals may choose, abandon, change, publicly profess and spread their own religion. This right is included in many legal documents such as constitutions and declarations of human rights, and it constitutes the foundation of democratic states. On the other hand, the structural and functional changes that take place in modern societies and the accompanying changes in consciousness result in restricting religious freedom to a specific area that has been defined from outside. In modern societies, there are in reality mechanisms of the marginalization of religion which make it difficult to exercise such basic human rights as religious freedom. The marginalization of religion concerns not only religious symbols, but also religious arguments put forward in the public discourse and normative statements that are proposed to be the foundations of law-making, professional ethos, the political system, educational system, etc. The marginalization of religion takes place through the decomposition and transformation (semantic and functional) of religious messages. Due to these mechanisms, the attempts to include religious contents in the public discourse are associated with a significant risk of distorting them, taking them out of context, and transforming them in the framework of nonreligious meaning systems.

To illustrate this thesis, I refer to phenomena which took place in Poland. Although the cultural specificity of Poland may play some role in the analysis

of the aforementioned phenomena, it does not distort the results of the analysis because the discussed phenomena also occur on a global scale in certain types of society. Both the mechanisms of the marginalization of religion and the mechanisms of the transformation of religious meanings take place in countries with different models of state-Church relations, different types of political culture and different levels of secularization. The examples do not involve instances of the outright conflict between rights and freedoms as e.g. in the situation in which religious freedom is limited by other basic human rights.

Religious freedom and marginalization processes: potential conflicts

In many European countries where religion has ceased to play an important role in public life, advocates of religious freedom claim that the freedom is now in danger and should be defended. What poses a threat to religious freedom are not only incidents of discrimination against religious believers, but also the popular idea that religion is a private matter of the individual or that it can be collectively manifested only in some separated enclaves of social life, i.e. in a space that is set apart and is under control of a religious institution. These beliefs, which are repeated uncritically over and over again in many European countries, including Poland, do not have to be a result of an aversion to religion – they are also promoted by people who claim themselves to be religious. Beliefs of this kind are usually not associated with any rational justification. For those who hold them, they do not need justification because they are usually taken for granted and constitute a part of the routine of everyday life. This does not imply, however, that there are no justifications of such beliefs and that they play no role in public discourse.

The idea of religious freedom can be understood in many different ways, depending on whether it is interpreted in the context of religiously pluralistic or monolithic countries. In religiously diverse countries, religious freedom is usually understood in term of cultural pluralism. The marginalization of religion in the public sphere is here justified by the need of guaranteeing equal rights and freedoms to the followers of different religions. By making the public sphere worldview-neutral, legislators restrict the possibility that the public sphere will be dominated by one or more particular religious worldviews. Such problems rarely occur in religiously homogeneous countries, where the issue of the role of a dominant religion in the public sphere comes to the fore. Here major disputes arise between those who advocate the presence of religion in the public sphere and cite the regulations concerning religious freedom, and those who oppose this presence and postulate the creation and/or maintenance of the secular public sphere.

The role of the media

Before the presentation of the mechanisms and examples of the marginalization of religion in the public sphere, it is necessary to emphasize the role of the media in this process. Religious messages pervade religious life and the public sphere by way of such media. The structure of media communication is complex today since it involves many forms of the media such as the traditional media using print, the media of mass communication such as radio or television, as well as the new media which enable more individualized and interactive communication. A special role in the process of the transformation of religious messages is played by the new media that involve thousands of users.

The significance of the media in the contemporary world is due to the fact that the access to and activity in the public space is to a considerable degree possible through such media. The media are governed by a specific logic of communication – they prefer particular types of transmission (e.g. audiovisual messages to written messages), particular types of communication (e.g. simple and witty remarks, contrasts that enable to emphasize selected features of presented phenomena), etc. This usually means that only those messages are successfully transmitted which are in accordance with the logic of communication typical of the media. In the case of new media it is difficult to predict what will happen to a message as it is transformed and re-interpreted by many participants in the communication processes. The sender of a message as well as the person and institutions to which it refers have limited possibilities to control its content and scope of its distribution.

As a result of the mediatization of the public sphere and the fact that this sphere is no longer a physical but rather a virtual space, or rather physical space virtually broadened and modified, the very presence of a phenomenon in the physical space is not of much significance to the social actors in modern societies. What is more important is the media presence of the phenomenon, which does not necessarily require the physical presence. A seemingly unimportant event in the public space may acquire major media significance. And vice versa, an event in the physical space which is important to social actors, may not be represented at all by the media. Thus the media operate as a lever that makes it possible to control the relevance and spread of a message. What is more, the leverage of the lever is not determined in advance and can undergo unpredictable changes, especially in the case of new media.

The mediatization of the public space has significant consequences for the communication of religious messages. First of all, the messages become associated with a considerable risk of being transformed, and subsequently

they disintegrate. Secondly, their content may be controlled by senders only to a limited degree and sometimes it completely gets out of control – senders cease to be active participants of the communication processes. Thirdly, religious messages become decontextualized, i.e. they are taken out of their proper context. Lastly, they are subordinated to a peculiar media logic as well as to the principles of functioning of the public sphere.

The marginalization of religion through the transformation of religious meanings

The functioning of religion in the public sphere of late modern societies often involves a considerable change in religious communication, especially the change in the meaning and function of religious messages. A religious message is rarely found in the public space in its “pure” form, by which I mean a form which is in line with the intention of the sender and at the same time generally corresponds with a given religious tradition. This is due to the fact that religious messages are communicated by media that follow their own logic. As a result, the content of a message is taken out of a particular religious community, where it was subject to religious interpretation, and put it in new interpretative contexts which are no longer religious. Many of these processes take place beyond the knowledge and control of the senders. Religious experts who are often the creators and senders of these messages are usually helpless in the face of what the media do with their religious messages. This is especially true in reference to the new media, which can globalize messages and transform the local into the regional or even the global. In the new media, a religious message starts to live its own life and can be subject to such interpretation that contradicts the sender’s intention. As an example may serve some statements of the Catholic hierarchs which, once interpreted in a certain way, escaped the sender’s control.

The changes in the meaning and function of religious messages are also due to the fact that the messages are being incorporated into nonreligious meaning systems that follow a logic different from that of the religious systems. This means that they are accompanied by a different mode of thought and type of rationality. Religious words and symbols that are used to attain certain religious goals can be subordinated to a completely different logic, e.g. the logic of supply and demand, the logic of advertising, the logic of power, the logic of art, or the logic of show business. Such a phenomenon can be called the instrumentalization of religious symbols and statements. Among the dominant forms of instrumentalization are political instrumentalization, artistic instrumentalization and the instrumentalization of religious symbols

in marketing. Many of them result not only in trivializing religious messages but also in distorting the original religious meanings, i.e. the meanings that are in accordance with the sender's intentions.

Mechanisms of marginalization: selected examples

The first example of the marginalization of religion in the public sphere concerns the "Declaration of Faith" published in March 2014 and signed by more than three thousand doctors and medical students in Poland.¹ It was preceded by an "Open Letter to Doctors and Medical Students on the Occasion of the Canonization of Pope John Paul II." The declaration is not only the confession of the Catholic faith but also a public manifestation of the religious beliefs of Catholic doctors and medical students concerning the issue of corporeality, sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, relations between divine and human law, and the freedom of conscience which is to be reserved to doctors when they perform their professional duties. The Declaration states, among others, that the human body as well as human life are sacred and inviolable, the beginning and the end of human life depends solely on God's will, God's laws have priority over human laws, and doctors' beliefs and freedom deserve respect. The declaration can be also understood as an attempt to defend the right to freedom of religion and conscience that is guaranteed by the constitution.²

What is interesting here is not so much the declaration itself – its legitimacy, acceptability and its possible practical, ideological, ethical and legal consequences – but rather the public responses to this document. The arguments put forward by the declaration's opponents were not limited to the criticism of the commitments and beliefs included in it, but in many cases concerned the very fact of the public expression of these commitments and beliefs. In other words, there was a two-way public response to the declaration, although the two ways were not always clearly separated. The first response concerned the content of expressions included in the declaration. It was focused on the essential facts, values and norms, and based on rational argumentation. This kind of response could be observed in such media as newspapers, television and radio, where the persons who enter the debate

¹ „Deklaracja wiary lekarzy katolickich i studentów medycyny w przedmiocie płciowości i płodności ludzkiej,” <http://www.deklaracja-wiary.pl> [19.12.2014].

² *The Constitution of the Republic of Poland* guarantees freedom of religion in the article 53 § 2 which states: "Freedom of religion shall include the freedom to profess or to accept a religion by personal choice as well as to manifest such religion, either individually or collectively, publicly or privately, by worshipping, praying, participating in ceremonies, performing of rites or teaching. Freedom of religion shall also include possession of sanctuaries and other places of worship for the satisfaction of the needs of believers as well as the right of individuals, wherever they may be, to benefit from religious services."

are not anonymous. The second response was directed towards the fact of manifesting one's religious beliefs and arguments in the public health service. It was based on the assumption that public institutions should be religiously neutral and that there is no room for religious arguments in public institutions. According to this view, declarations of this kind should be eliminated from the public discourse because they do not fulfil the criteria of public reason, i.e. they cannot be translated into such language that is understandable for all those who participate in the public discourse.³ What is important here is that this assumption was used for marginalizing religious reasons and arguments in the public sphere. In the case of the public debate concerning the "Declaration of Faith," the assumption was not only quoted by participants who rationally debated on essential facts, values and freedoms, but also by anonymous users of internet forums whose arguments were emotional, and who urged to reject and negate the declaration without submitting it to a rational discussion. The situation is here paradoxical: the declaration is criticized for being untranslatable into the language of public reason, while at the same time this criticism does not meet the standards of rational discussion – it uses emotional arguments, ridicules adversaries, rejects criticized beliefs without consideration of the arguments, etc.

The example of the "Declaration of Faith" illustrates mainly the marginalization of religious arguments in the public space. It seems that there is no general agreement in Poland about whether such arguments can be freely expressed in the public debate. It can be argued that the liberal principle according to which untranslatable arguments should not be taken into account in the public sphere is respected not only by declared liberals, but also by some religious people who, consciously or not, put aside their religious beliefs before entering the public debate.⁴

Another Polish illustration of how mechanisms of marginalization operate within the public sphere is the example of the debates on the Catholic cross in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw. The cross was erected by scouts on 15 April 2010, several days after the crash of the presidential plane in Smolensk, to commemorate the casualties of the accident. The event soon excited major controversies about whether erecting the cross in a public place in front of the Presidential Palace is the best way to commemorate the plane crash, and about the acceptability of religious symbols in general in the public space. In the context of these controversies there were the debates over the presence of the Catholic cross in public schools, offices, and in the

³ J. Rawls, *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, "The University of Chicago Law Review," 1997, nr 3(64), p. 7.

⁴ S. Sztajer, *Argumenty religijne w sferze publicznej: uwagi o postulatcie prywatyzacji religii* (Religious arguments in the public sphere: Remarks on the demand for privatization of religion), „Przegląd Religioznawczy,” 2012, nr 4(246), pp. 47–48.

Sejm, which had taken place before, as well as social and political divisions that were expressed and reinforced during these events.

The Catholic cross was used not only as a religious symbol but also as a symbol of those divisions. If the cross in front of the Presidential Palace was interpreted just as a religious symbol whose presence is unacceptable in the public space, it would be difficult to explain why there are no people who protest against the public presence of thousands of crosses scattered all over Poland. In this case the cross had a function of a symbol integrating the community gathered around the cross, including people who sympathized with certain beliefs. The cross could in this case express a unity of attitudes and beliefs, as well as mourning after the accident.

An important role in these events was played by the media, which transformed a local event into a nationwide phenomenon. Thanks to this, thousands of people from all over Poland could feel solidarity with those who stood under the cross, or on the contrary, protest against the instrumentalization of religious symbols. This division did not coincide with the division between believers and unbelievers, Catholics and non-Catholics, but correlated with different types of religiosity. What is important to note is that, generally in Poland, the criticism of the presence of religious symbols in the public space is approved by many persons who claim themselves to be religious.

Controversies over religious symbols clearly illustrate a mechanism of a marginalization of the religious in the public space. What is meant here is not the legitimacy or illegitimacy of beliefs justified with religious reasons, but rather the acceptance or rejection of some ideas about the public space. This acceptance and rejection has not much to do with rational argumentation, it is rather an ideological legitimization of a certain type of social order in which the secular public space plays a considerable role. Those who were against the presence of the cross in front of the Presidential Palace often claimed that the cross should be moved to the church, where it would be in the right place. However, this claim was stated with no argumentation – and perhaps because of that it was taken for granted.

As it will be pointed out in the following parts of this text, the marginalization of religion is not always carried out unreflectively by unconsciously following the rules of action that constitute an integral part of the practice of modern societies. In such cases one can talk not only about the mechanism of marginalization but rather about conscious strategies of marginalization. One of the most frequent strategies of the marginalization of religious messages is to ridicule them. An example of such a phenomenon is a transformation of the religious message of a Polish Catholic priest and theologian, Father Piotr Natanek, who represents the conservative current within the Catholic Church. Again, what is interesting here, however, is not the content of this message but rather the way in which it was transformed and decomposed by the new media.

The media career of Piotr Natanek as well as several other representatives of the Catholic Church in Poland was founded due to the fact that they mediated and made public some controversies within the church. This means that they resigned from the communication inside the religious institution, which in the case of the Catholic Church follows specific rules, and chose instead to mediate their ideas through the mass media and new media. In the case of Father Natanek, it resulted in a radical decomposition and transformation of his religious message. The considerable popularity of his sermons (the most popular fragment of a sermon published on YouTube had more than two million views) both in the mass media and the new media is not only due to the fact that Father Natanek launched his own internet television channel connected to the Niepokalanów Hermitage in Grzechynia, but also the result of the fact that the content of his sermons violated fixed and widespread notions about the Catholic Church in Poland and its role in today's world.

The paradox of Father Natanek consists in that his popularity is negative in character. His message was used in the public space in order to define such a form of religion and religiosity which is accepted neither by religious believers nor by nonbelievers. The message was used in a series of popular internet video clips that was edited out of the fragments of sermons taken out of context, audio-visually manipulated, connected to external content, etc. A statement of Natanek was also used as a key slogan in the advertisement of Tesco supermarkets. Most of these video clips aimed at using the sermons for entertainment and ridiculed their author by attributing e.g. devilish intentions to him.

What is interesting in all the aforementioned examples is not the reaction against the appearance of religious symbols and ideas in the public space, but rather a constant readiness of the media, public opinion and social networking sites to quickly react to such events. In many cases relatively unimportant events are represented by the media in such a way that they become widely discussed by the public opinion. One can have the impression that the mechanisms and strategies of marginalization constitute a complex system that monitors the public space. The operation of this system is not based on conscious actions; there is no governing centre and no institution coordinating these actions. It is, rather, operable through the mobilization of thousands of scattered individuals who share a common set of ideas and sensitivities about religion and its place in modern society.

Mechanisms and strategies of marginalization

On the basis of the examples quoted above it is possible to point out several basic mechanisms and strategies of marginalization. First of all, the marginalization is carried out through the decomposition and transformation

of religious symbols and messages. This can be done through decontextualization i.e. by separating these symbols and messages from their original context and putting them in a new context which transforms their meaning and function. The mechanism of decontextualization is often used to ridicule both the messages and their authors. The ridicule is a strategy that consists in the depreciation of the religious messages and questioning of their relevance by means of a mocking imitation (e.g. a cross made of beer cans, Flying Spaghetti Monster as a deity), comparing religious messages with other messages (e.g. religious doctrines with scientific theories), and transmitting these messages by means of the media – which are not appropriate for religious communication.

Another strategy is a relativization of religious messages, which aims at demonstrating that every message is one of many parallel cultural messages and thus it should be treated equally with other messages communicated in a pluralistic society. In this strategy, validity claims connected to some religious messages are called into question, and as a result of such questioning of these claims the religious messages and symbols lose their original status that was attached to them by a religious community.

An important mechanism is the privatization of religion, understood not so much as a process in society but rather as a public demand. The demand is based on certain assumptions regarding what religion is and what it should be. According to these assumptions, religious beliefs are a private matter of every individual. They are similar to intimate matters such as love for one's family and friends or sexual affairs. As a phenomenon belonging to the private sphere, religiosity should not be manifested in the public sphere or, at least, it should be limited to selected enclaves of public life (churches, graveyards, etc.).

Ignoring is another important strategy of marginalization. It is called a strategy rather than a mechanism because it can be a conscious and intentional action, not only the unconscious ignoring of religion. Ignoring has its roots in some traditions of political liberalism and in the very idea of tolerance seen from the angle of these traditions. An example of such an approach to religion is the conception of John Rawls, especially his idea of public reason which – according to Rawls – “does not trespass upon religious beliefs and injunctions insofar as these are consistent with the essential constitutional liberties, including the freedom of religion and liberty of conscience.”⁵ The presence of religion in the public discourse should be possible only provided that religious discourse can be translated into political discourse.⁶ This view implies ignoring the purely religious reasons that cannot be translated into the language of politics. Ignoring may also concern the most fundamental

⁵ J. Rawls, *The idea of public reason revisited*, “The University of Chicago Law Review,” 1997, nr 64(3), p. 803.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 783–784.

dimensions of religion such as, for example, a considerable part of doctrine, morality and religious experience. As Michael Sandel pointed out, such a view requires that we “respect our fellow citizen’s moral and religious convictions by ignoring them (for political purposes), by leaving them undisturbed, by carrying on political debate without reference to them.”⁷ Instead of this liberal conception, Sandel proposes an alternative, deliberative view, on which “we respect our fellow citizen’s moral and religious convictions by engaging or attending to them – sometimes by challenging and contesting them, sometimes by listening and learning from them – especially when those convictions bear on important political questions.”⁸ The liberal conception of Rawls and others creates the danger of cutting oneself off from the cultural resources accumulated in religious traditions such as norms, values, behaviour patterns, and ideals which (1) can turn out to be useful in solving political problems, (2) constitute an irreducible dimension of culture. Rupert Read is even more radical in his criticism of Rawls view when he claims that this kind of liberalism nihilates religion by being *more* hostile to it than Enlightenment liberalism. Indifference towards all those religious messages that cannot be translated into the language of public reason is more destructive to religion than outward hostility towards it.

Another important mechanism that operates on the plane of individual consciousness, and that is a result of structural and functional transformations on the plane of society, is a separation of different areas of “knowledge.” The separation of different areas of knowledge refers to the separation of everyday knowledge, and the knowledge functioning in the public sphere, from religious knowledge and from experience that transcends everyday experience. The experience of the transcendent is being marginalized and pushed into the private sphere as something individual, personal and intimate. The mechanism of the separation of different areas of knowledge has both a psychological and sociological foundation. In modern societies the separation of different areas of knowledge and experience enables an individual to build a relatively coherent image of the self and worldview in the social reality, which is structurally and functionally differentiated to a considerable degree, and in which an individual is expected to play roles requiring knowledge from different areas.

The marginalization of religious symbols and messages is carried out by appropriating them for the purposes of nonreligious meaning systems by changing their form. This is connected to the aforementioned transformation of religious symbols and statements by incorporating them into a nonreligious system of meaning such as art, literature, marketing, advertising, politics and

⁷ M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge 1998, p. 217.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

entertainment. As Neil Postman pointed out, the very use of media such as television for the purposes of religious worship and in the social transmission of religious messages can significantly change the religious message.⁹ Television spreads religious content but at the same time it subordinates religion to entertainment, seen as a paramount lifestyle. Making religiosity part of entertainment results in blurring the internal cognitive divisions that constitute religious consciousness such as the division between sacred and profane objects, transcendence and immanence – something that transcends everyday experience and something that is a part of it.

Mechanisms of the marginalization of religion in the public sphere include (1) mechanisms triggered by actors who act intentionally in the public sphere and criticize the presence of religious symbols and messages in this space; (2) mechanisms operating irrespective of the intentional actions of individuals and groups, which can be seen as objective processes determined by the changes in religiosity and the functioning of the public sphere as well as by the functioning of the social system as a whole. Among other things, the processes of marginalization are supported by the “logic” of the modern social system, which is based on advanced functional differentiation. This means that only those actions within the system are supported and encouraged which reproduce the existing functional divisions, whereas those which transcend functional divisions are marginalized. The aforementioned examples of marginalization illustrate different kinds of reaction to a situation when religion enters other functional subsystems, especially the public sphere – which overlaps with several functional subsystems.

Secularity principle and behaviour of religious actors

The secularity principle, according to which the public sphere should generally remain free from religious symbols and purely religious arguments, is strong and widely accepted not so much because it operates in societies where non-religious citizens impose their worldview and way of life on religious minorities – in fact it is not the case in most European countries – but rather because it is respected by religious people themselves. This phenomenon can be also explained in terms of secularization, which transforms the ideas of religious people about their functioning in the public space. Members of churches and other religious organizations participating in the public space of liberal democracies usually respect the secularity principle whether or not they express their approval of it.

⁹ N. Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*, London 2006, pp. 116–119.

As it was pointed out elsewhere, both religious institutions and individual religious believers themselves submit to the principles of the functioning of the public sphere as defined by political liberalism.¹⁰ Even if they do not declare themselves as political liberals or openly criticize liberal ideology, they still respect the principle according to which in public debate religious reasons should be translated into secular reasons. As a consequence, and paradoxically, religious participants in public debates often unconsciously push religious motives and arguments into the background.

Conclusion

The processes of the marginalization of religion in the public sphere have a significant implication for understanding the idea of religious freedom. In many of today's European countries religious freedom is perceived as endangered by the liberal democratic state, which traditionally was taken to be a mainstay of religious freedom. This paradox comes not only from internal contradictions of the liberal ideology but also from transformations of the modern societies. This is, first of all, a consequence of secularization processes as well as a result of transformations of the public sphere and popular ideas concerning religion and religiosity. Irrespective of the latter, political liberalism, or at least some of its most widespread variants, contains internal inconsistencies. On the one hand, it promotes religious toleration, while on the other hand, it establishes such principles of the functioning of the public sphere that can be interpreted as an attempt to curtail religious freedom, for example, to restrict the freedom to express one's religiosity and use religious symbols in the public space as well as the freedom to use religious arguments in public debate without translating them into secular reasons. Perhaps the inconsistency is present in the very idea of the toleration – which for many people remains problematic.

Sławomir Sztajer – RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Modern liberal democracy contains an internal contradiction concerning the presence of religion in the public sphere. On one hand, liberal democracy guarantees a religious freedom on the basis of which individuals may choose, abandon, change, publicly profess and spread their own religion. On the other hand, the structural and functional changes that take place in modern societies and the accompanying changes in consciousness result in restricting religious freedom to a specific area that has

¹⁰ S. Sztajer, *Argumenty religijne w sferze publicznej...* (Religious arguments in the public sphere...), p. 47.

been defined from outside. In modern societies, there are in reality mechanisms of the marginalization of religion which make it difficult to exercise such basic human rights as religious freedom. The marginalization of religion takes place through the decomposition and transformation (semantic and functional) of religious messages. Due to these mechanisms, the attempts to include religious contents in the public discourse are associated with a significant risk of distorting them, taking them out of context, and transforming them in the framework of nonreligious meaning systems.

