

Quest for the Alternative Spirituality: Construction of Religious Identity in Contemporary Lithuania

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Abstrakt

Czy alternatywna duchowość: konstrukcja tożsamości religijnej we współczesnej Litwie

Transformacje na płaszczyźnie religijnej wynikające z nowych form wyrażania religijności są zjawiskiem znanym na całym świecie. Moda na dokonywanie swoistego prywatnego bricoag'u wierzeń, wybierania dla siebie z wyznania tego, co nam odpowiada i odrzucania tego, co nam się nie podoba, jest bardzo powszechna. Na Litwie nie rzadko słyszy się o tożsamości religijnej, za którą nie stoi wiara. Socjologiczne fenomen ten można wyjaśnić korzystając z teorii konstrukcji tożsamości.

Artykuł prezentuje badania przeprowadzone w latach 2003 – 2004 przez Wydział Socjologii Uniwersytetu Vytautas Magnus. Celem prac było zbadanie procesu konstrukcji tożsamości religijnej przy założeniu czterowymiarowości identyfikacji religijnej zaproponowanej przez Hervieu-Leger.

Zebrane w zogniskowanych wywiadach grupowych dane dowodzą, że tożsamość religijna może być konstruowana na podstawie jednego lub kilku wymiarów identyfikacji, z jednoczesnym pominięciem innych. Proces ten jednak pozostawia w wiernych wątpliwości, co do ich religijności, szczególnie w kontekście religijności tradycyjnej.

Abstract

The transformation of religious area by arising of new modes of expressing religiosity is almost worldwide phenomena. The idea of making up personal bricolage of beliefs, choosing what fits and what does not is very popular mode of religiosity or spirituality today. To hear that one could choose religious identity without religious belief is not surprising in Lithuania today. Sociologically, it could be explained referring to the identity constructing theories.

This article presents the research that was performed by the Department of Sociology at Vytautas Magnus University (in 2003-2004). The aim of the research was to explore the process of construction of religious identity via applying Hervieu-Leger idea of four dimensions of religious identification.

The data of focused interviews confirms that religious identity could be constructed via one or few dimensions of religious identification excluding other dimensions. However, reference exclusively to one or few dimensions shifts traditional (or confessional) ways of expressing religiousness and still for somebody rises the question about her/his religiousness in general.

True and Bungle in the Theory of Secularisation

The discourse of theory of secularisation is necessary while approaching to the problems of religion and religiosity in the contemporary society. In the context of the problems

discussed in this article it is important as well. The controversies of the theories of secularisation highlight the theoretical and practical actuality of the approaching problems.

Although the ideas of development of religion have long history, the concept of secularisation in sociology was used for the first time by M. Weber, and were started to discuss in the middle of the 20th century. The theories of secularisation, in their nature classical and critically radical were dominating the sociology of religion.

These theories were echoing the ideas that promised the end of religion and that were emerged three decades before. Almost every generation of thinkers believed in the instant decline of religion. In 1710 Woolstone argued that Christianity would disappear till 1900. After half century Voltaire promised the end of religion after 50 years. Later Comte wrote that as a subsequence of modernization humankind will evolve from the stage of theologian social evolution and science will replace religion in the new stage. M.Weber analysed the process of modernisation and the disenchantment of the world was also partial to this topic. Z.Freud has announced religion as the biggest neurotic illusion and also claimed its fast decline.

In the middle of 20th century this assumption became known as the theory of secularisation. Next 20 years the theory of secularisation was celebrating its “golden age”. The essence of that the theory under the question might be revealed with the words of Berger, which he said in 1968 in his interview for “New York Times”: “... [by] the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture ” (Stark, 250.) The empirical and theoretical legitimacy of the theory of secularisation was not questioned for a long time. However in 1967 the article of Shiner was published. Shiner discussed the confusing the meaning of the concept of secularisation in it. The academic society reacted to the article it jug-handled. As Christiano and Swatos wrote, the publication of Shiner is an interesting case of what Merton has named “Mathew effect” in the science: Shiner began and went on non publishing his ideas in this topic, although his publication was cited but did not influence the prosperity of the theory of secularisation (Swatos, Cristiano, 210).

The other attempt “to assault” the theory of secularisation was made only after 20 years. In 1987 Hadden analysed this theory, its genesis and possible consequences in the article “Desacralizing the theory of secularisation”. He put forward few arguments. Later they became the main guidelines for the critic of the theory of secularisation. Firstly, according to Hadden, from its beginning the theory of secularisation was rather doctrine than theory. It was based on the assumptions that were understood by the social scientists rather as “self-explanatory” ideology, than a system of relative propositions (Hadden, 587-611). Hadden wrote that over time the idea of secularisations was sacralized. It became belief system itself. On the other hand, the theory of

secularisation is weak in its logical structure. Hadden thought, that it was just “ a jumble of loose ideas”. Thirdly, according to him, the theory of secularisations was not grounded with facts.

After decade, in 1997 Bruce, who was a supporter of the theory of secularisation for a long time agreed with Hadden and arguing that “Golden age” from the perspective of organized attendance had never existed (Stark, 263). Fourthly, the emergence of NRM even in mostly secularised countries also contradicts the theory of secularisation. Later Swatos and Christiano in this line wrote: “...if people cease to believe that Jesus Christ is God and instead believe that Sathya Say Baba is God, no secularisation has occurred” (Swatos, Christiano, 233).

It is true that the end of the 90-ies brought huge metamorphoses of theoretical assumptions. Even Berger in 1997 acknowledged: “I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularisation was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It's very religious” (Berger, 974). Few years later Stark suggested writing a requiem for the theory of secularisation and bringing an end to the scientific belief in it, acknowledging that it was voluntary based product of thinking. He wrote that the change is not a decay. If next year in Canada everyone become pious Buddhists, this fact might be interpreted differently, but not on the basis of the theory of secularisation. According to him, everything what we need is a theory that might explain the changes of religion, tell us when and why some aspects of religiosity emerge, disappear or remain. In such case the theory of secularisation has the same value as an elevator only lifting down (Stark, 269).

Not all of the supporters of the theory of secularisation were and are content with the arguments of its opponents. In the discourse of secularisation two main trends might be seen. One is the transformation of the theory of secularisation and the other is further theoretical and empirical grounding of the arguments that were framed in the classical theories of secularisation.

Dobbelaere's theory might be attributed to the first trend. He systematized main processes that are typical for secularisation and argued that secularisation is a multidimensional concept that involves three levels: institutional, organizational and individual. Within institutional level secularisation means the isolation of religion from social control, the device of legitimacy, dominance or influential role in social policy and the transmission of its functions to bureaucratic institutions. Within organizational level secularisation means that religious groups will try to adjust to the requirements of the modern world. The transmission of the functions of bureaucratic institution and their development, as one of the features of denomination is the obvious example how it happens. The process of secularisation within individual level might be named conscious

secularisation. Dobbelaere describes with the concepts of individualization (the transmission of religion to the private sphere), non-believing, decline of church religiosity (Dobbelaere, 229-247).

The debates are already continuing for two decades. However the position of religion in modern world analysed in plenty researches as well as data of surveys conducted in the different places of the world allows formulating some of generalization.

Firstly, many sociologists of this field acknowledge that the theory of secularisation is a macro theoretical construct that might be applied describing social situation and changes, but might not be understood as a theoretical dogma, that gives indisputable perspectives of development of religion, makes prognosis about the consequences of the development of relations between society and religion, forecasts the perspectives of existence of religion. The thesis of secularisation may explain what challenges does religion face in the global society and how does it overcome them. However, because of many variables intertwined in the macro level, this thesis cannot forecast or to give the incontrovertible answer how this process will develop in the future (Beyer, 289-299). As Beyer proposes “the concept of secularisation is valuable as descriptive. Its “veracity” or “falsity” depends upon its descriptive possibilities, legitimacy of description and the essence of raised questions, but not upon possibilities of forecasting, based on the analysis of quantitative indicators of religiosity” (Beyer, 299). The purpose and the strongest side of the secularization theory are the analysis of social form and influence of religion, but not the analysis of quantitative indicators of religiosity.

Secondly, almost all existing theories of secularisation have one feature in common – they concentrate on problems that are associated with structural and functional differentiation and accordingly with the change of religion’s influence and place in the society. Wherefore, mostly they eliminate from their field of interest the analysis of qualitative indicators of religiosity.

Classical theories of secularisation were grounded with conception of religion as unchangeable phenomena. From sociological perspective there is no reason to approach religion as something fixed or absolutely stable. Religion is a pleiad of very different faiths and practices that help people give meanings to things, events, ideas, values, emotions and way of life. And the content of concepts religion, religiosity and spirituality has changed as has changed the meanings attributed to art, sport or culture. As Beckford argues, the boundaries of religion always change, they are retuned and rechecked (Beckford, 244).

In what does Lithuanians believe?

The transformation of religious area by arising of new modes of expressing religiosity is almost worldwide phenomena. The idea of making up personal bricolage of beliefs, choosing what fits and what does not is very popular mode of religiosity or spirituality today. It is widely established fact, that people can both claim some conventional religious position and at the same use mysticism, astrology, yoga, Feng Shui and the rest.

The Lithuanian context doesn't distinguish either. Historically, it is a Christian country, with almost 6 hundred years of Christianity. According to the 2001 census, 79 percent of Lithuanian inhabitants say they are Roman Catholics.¹ Other 6 percent of the population declares their belonging to other Christian denominations. However, the European Value research conducted in 1999 revealed that 76 percent of population believed in life after death, 43 percent believed in reincarnation, 76 believed in telepathy, 33 percent were reading horoscopes every week (Ziliukaite, 213-251).

So, to hear that one could choose religious identity without religious belief is not surprising in Lithuania today. However, such situation rises a lot of question for sociologist.

Hervieu-Leger Ideas of Religious Identification in Modern Society

This article presents the research that was performed by the Department of Sociology at VMU in 2003-2004. The aim of the research was to explore the process of construction of religious identity and to describe the way of being religious in Lithuania today. The focused interviews were conducted done with 10 informants from 5 different Christian youth NGO's and 10 informants who do not participate in religious NGO.

The process of religious identification and main ways of expression of religious identity were analyzed via applying Hervieu-Leger model of religious identification. Hervieu-Leger points out four main dimensions of religious identification: communal, emotional, ethical, cultural (Hervieu-Leger, 213- 228).

When identification with religious tradition entails all four dimensions, balanced in particular way, confessional religious identity (stereotypically understand as true religiousness) is formed.

¹ See http://www.religija.lt/reli_liet-gyventoju_tikybos.htm

The institutions which present themselves as the safeguards of religious tradition, are responsible for construction of confessional religiousness (Hervieu-Leger, 222).

But what does happen in a modern society- in the society where fragmentation of “ultimate true” takes place? What does happen then the traditional and historically very influential religion to rule over the whole of society and to govern the life of every individual become unreal because of the developed capacity of individuals to make their own choice and combination of beliefs? In modern society individuals are led to produce for themselves (if they choose to produce) their relationship to the ” believing lineage” from which they take their identity. And then the question for sociologists is how do individuals themselves construct their identity?

To account for how do people believe or how they are religious in the XXI century and what does empirical data reveals, Hervieu-Leger advances the hypothesis that in the situation then individuals reject “ready made” identities and construct them themselves they start from different *experiences and travel through different experiences constructing and reconstructing their identities*. In the society where individuals practice bricolage, where religious institutions very often fail to control the process of the construction of religious identity and where identification strongly depends on personal experience. Further more, each dimension of religious identification (or combination of few of them together) could become itself the axis of religious identification “ by reintegrating, on the basis of its own dynamic at least a part of the logics of identification with the believing lineage which are found in each of other registers” (Hervieu-Leger, 223). In this case identity is analyzed not like inherited identity but as the result of *a trajectory of identification*. However, reference exclusively to one or few dimensions removes from religious identity the confessional character of it and rises the question “Is he/she religious or not in general?”

Dimensions of Religious Identification

The first dimension of religious identification is *communal dimension*. It includes social and symbolic markers which define the boundary among religious groups and allows people to distinguish “those who are in” and those “ who are out”. Communal dimension means identification which goes via formal and practical belonging (for example, the fact of being baptized). Communal obligations can be more or less extensive or intensive, depending on the type of religious community. However, submitting or not submitting oneself to these obligations is a key feature of the process of identification.

Religious identification of communal type could be illustrated at first by answers of informants, who define themselves as Catholics on the bases of formal criteria. For example,

answering to the question “Can you define yourself as being Catholic?”, some informants indicated:

- a. “I can. Because I am baptized” (Gytis)
- b. “Well, I am Catholic, of course, because my parents are Catholics and my grandparents are believers too (Zydre).

Religious identification of communal type is also used by those informants who participate in religious NGO or belong to any religious community. However, religious organization, according to their life stories is meaningful for them because belonging to the organization meets their human needs in the first place.

- a. ”We are like a big family, just when you come you know that here are your friends and you know that you can spend a good time here and you know that if you have a problem or there is something else you can address them anytime” (Rasa).
- b. “They [people in Taize] smile and it seems that you are interesting to them, this means they pay attention to you and you think that you are nice person and that means you are interesting to them”(Jonas).

Emotional dimension of religious identification is related to emotional experience or, using Durkheim’s words, feeling of “merging of consciousness.” However, emotional experience which produces the feeling of “us” is more and more often “the moment at which a primary experience of belonging becomes established, regardless of whether it is capable of being fixed in the form of identification with a community” (Hervieu-Leger, 220). Identification via emotional dimension results in religious identity of emotional type.

The experience of participation in Taize camp, for example, shows how important could be the emotional identification for youth when they construct their religious identity:

- a. “<...> [speaks about Taize] I saw, that the same young guys like me are sitting in the Church and sing (speaks slowly), grunge like punks, like me... And I think that it is cool, when you see, that these cool guys – these punks, like... are singing like me <...> (Jonas).
- b. “<...> in the evenings after work you might be losing touch with your home, with your ordinary life, being in the other little world, with other young people, with leaders and there in the light of candles there were such beautiful evening prayers (speaks nostalgic) and guitars, and such a time without troubles. It helps you to relax and somehow to feel each other and then you experience unity ... with people, with environment and it helps to feel a part, a part of God, in yourself that really unites everybody. And then you fell in yourself and see in others that this feeling emerge (Asta).

The *ethical dimension* means identification via acceptance of the values of particular religious tradition (regardless of is it long tradition of historic religion or short tradition of NRM). Hervieu-Leger notes, that this dimension is more and more frequently dissociated from the communal dimension. This means that one can accept values of religious tradition without membership in religious community which represents that religious tradition.

According to Hervieu-Leger, this type of religious identification constructs the humanitarian religiosity (Hervieu-Leger, 224). Such religiosity is sensitive to the injustice in the world and calls for the active charity of individuals. The best example of it is the young people, who are engaged in humanitarian organizations to “do what one can” to help others and it matters little for them whether the organization is religious or not. This assumption could be illustrated by following data:

- a. “ I really never enjoyed [going to the church]. I like those ideas, that are spread by Christians, but really don’t like structures like Church. Well, I don’t know... those values, like” don’t make harm to another”, you have to share something with somebody, that’s cool, but I don’t like that you have to go to pray” (Rokas).
- b. “Volunteers from “Patria” came and invited to participate in the project “Jump in the cart”, <...> I took up, because in that time I had a wish, I began to think what to do, maybe to help somebody, my good heart showed itself” (Lukas).
- c. “When you help somebody, I think you experience such feelings that are much related with faith” (Asta).
- d. “There is a relation with youth, you become active, you may persuade environment to change into the good side, to take part in the fight between good and evil” (Tomas).

Cultural dimension of religious identification is related to cultural heritage of the religious tradition - ideas and ways of thinking sedimented in social practices, habits, arts, scientific knowledge. This dimension indicates how deeply – especially in the case of traditional religion - the religious tradition can be rooted in the culture of the society. Cultural dimension can also be appropriate in the form of “shared culture”, without necessary engagement in the particular system of believe and/ or religious community: “One can claim “Jewish roots” or “Christian roots” without defining oneself as a member of any particular community, or as a believer in any faith” (Hervieu-Leger, 220).

This dimension is more intensively expressed among informants, who are not engaged in religious NGO activities. For example, all of them, including those, who are not sure that they believe in God, are going to baptize their children and to be married in the Church:

- a. “Baptism meant... well, it must be so” (Vytas).

- b. "... well it is better for kinds, because when they grow up, they will marry <...> and if you are not baptized, you'll have much trouble" (Simona).
- c. "If there are such traditions they must be somehow kept" (Rimas).

The interview data also confirms that not all dimensions of religious identification are equally meaningful for informants. Defining themselves as believers and stressing the importance of participation in the religious organization or/and implementation of religious values in practice, at the same time, almost all informants do not attend the Church regularly. Even more, they say that they don't need it at all. They use to criticize priests, to reject main Catholic dogmas or to interpret them in their own ways:

- a. "Religion as confession doesn't have particular literal meaning to me, something... For instance Bible doesn't make much influence on me" (Rasa).
- b. "No, I don't pray, I don't go to the church... There is no something else in me" (Rokas).
- c. "Anyhow I don't need a Church, I don't go there. Well only during feast days, during other rituals – baptism, funerals, weddings..." (Rimas).
- d. "I don't remember the commandments of the church. I don't live according them" (Simona).

To come to a conclusion, the research confirms existing diversity of individual understanding of what does it mean to be religious for young people in Lithuania. This phenomenon is explained by analyzing the process of constructing of religious identity in modern society. The research data confirms that religious identity could be constructed via one or few dimensions of religious identification excluding other dimensions. However, for somebody the shift from traditional (or confessional) way of expressing religiousness still rises the question is he/she religious or not in general. Research data does not allow making wide generalizations. It only calls for more complete and systematic empirical and theoretical developments of the problem.

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