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## **Religious symbolism and contemporary culture. The case of Europe**

### **Contemporary Situation**

Contrary to opinions expressed by some students of modern societies, religious symbols are not things of the past in contemporary European culture. Such opinions seem to be based on an erroneous impression that in most domains of culture religious symbols were replaced by secular ones as a result of secularization. The latter is understood in many different ways depending on which aspect of social and individual life is taken into consideration. A number of scholars define it as an irreversible process that weakens the influence of religious institutions on other areas of society and culture. In terms of religious symbols, secularization means that symbolic universes of traditional religions become limited to enclaves of social and cultural life. In highly secularized societies religious symbols are usually displayed in spaces defined by religion, which are separated from the public sphere. Many European societies have more or less formal rules according to which religious symbols are used in public life. Although the secularization thesis has been very popular during last decades, it does not seem to be the last word on the matter. Rather, it is a theoretical description of some important processes which do have a considerable influence on religious meaning systems, but are not likely to destroy them completely. In recent years, many sociologists of religion have criticized the classical secularization theory showing that it should not be taken as a universal generalization. There are parts of the world where the resurgence of religion can be observed. Even seemingly secularized

societies undergo transformations which can be described in terms of the resurgence of religious symbols in secular societies.<sup>1</sup>

The place of religion, and especially that of religious symbols, in the public sphere is the subject of many debates. An important role in these debates is fulfilled by the liberal idea of a state neutral to religion. According to this view, religious symbols should not be displayed in the public sphere, but they should remain private. Certainly, there are different attitudes towards religious symbols in different European countries, and this differentiation results from complex historical determinants. Nevertheless, the secularization trend that consists, among others, in limiting access of religious symbols to the secular public sphere is visible in most European countries. On the other hand, in those countries where the respect for religious (Christian) symbols is still common in the public sphere, one can find many conflicts concerning the role and place of symbols. For example, many such conflicts have taken place in Poland. In the last several years the Christian cross has been the subject of debate between those who wanted to remove it from public places and those who wanted to see it in the Parliament, public schools and in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw. As it will be pointed out, even in highly secularized countries in Europe there are many conflicts regarding the place of religious symbols in public life.

Religious symbolism constitutes an irreducible dimension of European culture from the beginning of its existence. Since the history of Europe was above all interwoven with Christian religion, religious symbolism prevailing on this continent has Christian roots. Religious symbols are not only part of religious art or doctrine; on the contrary, they spring from religious life that is carried out in institutions such as churches, sects, cults, and new religious movements as well as in the lives of individual believers. Religious symbolism in Europe has never been limited to institutionalized forms of religion, but also appeared in other fields of culture, first of all in literature, art, politics, public life, and science. In the contemporary world the number of areas where religious symbols can be found paradoxically increased as a result of emergence of new forms of cultural activity. Today, religious symbols can be found in film, the Internet, computer games, in countless areas of popular culture, as well as in such different fields as marketing and politics. Here one encounters a paradox. On the one hand, one can observe advanced secularization in some parts of Europe which consists in eliminating religion from

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview*, in P.L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. 1999, pp. 6-7; J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994; R. Stark, *Secularization RIP*, "Sociology of Religion" 1999, no. 60, pp. 249-273.

public life and weakening of the influence of religion on state institutions. In spite of this, we can see proliferation of religious symbols in secular culture.

All these phenomena bring to one's mind the following questions: What is the reason that the previously marginalized religious symbols reappear in secular culture? Do religious symbols used in non-religious contexts retain their original meaning? What transformations do religious language and symbolism undergo in today's European societies? Answers to these questions may not only shed light on the contemporary changes in religiosity in Europe, but also helps to understand the problem of European identity. The latter was shaped under the Christian influence to such an extent that it is sometimes said that Christianity constitutes one of the pillars of this culture.<sup>2</sup> Following that, it can be expected that the transformations of religious symbolism will affect the European identity to a considerable degree.

It seems that these questions cannot be fully answered in terms of social and cultural processes. Social and cultural analysis is necessary yet insufficient in explaining religious symbolism. In order to be explained religious symbolism should be set in the context of non-cultural human needs. Thus, the thesis can be advanced that transformations of religious symbolism in contemporary Europe are manifestations of a universal human tendency to use religious meaning systems influence on religious meaning systems. It is not accidental that religious symbolism recurs today on a large scale in non-religious fields of culture and social life. This is the consequence of the fact that the human mind operates in a specific way. Elimination of religious symbols from various areas of social life, and especially removing them from public spaces, initiates processes of compensation which transfer symbolic activity to other fields of culture. The fundamental question concerning these processes is what transformations religious symbols undergo as a result of compensation and whether they can still be called religious.

## **The concept of religious language and religious symbolism**

Symbols are fundamental constituents of religious language. The latter is not understood here as a certain kind of language, lexically or grammatically different from everyday or scientific language. Rather, the concept of religious

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<sup>2</sup> „It can be argued that the heritage of Europe is so imbued with Christianity that its development has made little sense without paying regard to the Christian theology which motivated many. Even the French Revolution with its slogan of '*liberté, égalité, fraternité*', had its roots in a Christian vision. Each of those concepts makes little sense outside a Christian context." R. Trigg, *Freedom of Religion*, in N. Brunsveld and R. Trigg (eds), *Religion in the Public Sphere*, Ars Disputandi, Utrecht 2011, p. 122.

language is defined as a kind of usage of everyday language. Religious language consists not only of specific spoken and written words and expressions but it also involves nonverbal symbols and images. Symbols play a significant role in religious communication. They are not just the same as signs. While a sign stands for its referent on the basis of a convention, symbol not only refers to its object but also participates in it. It is rather difficult to explain what it means that symbol participates in reality to which it refers, but it can be shown in the following example. Imagine that there is a name of a country (e.g. Spain) and the national flag of the same country (e.g. the flag of Spain). Now, try to imagine what would happen if somebody publicly destroyed the written name 'Spain' on the one hand, and the flag of Spain on the other. In the first case nothing would happen at all, because a name is only a sign and it does not affect the nature of an object it refers to. In the second case, on the contrary, there are usually violent reactions of people for whom the national flag constitutes a value in itself. We could say that the name of the country is just a sign, whereas the national flag is something more, namely, a symbol. Burning a national flag is directed against the national pride. The same is true of religious symbols. Suffice it to think about holy books of various religions or iconic representations of supernatural beings. They are all symbols in the sense that they participate in the sacredness of the objects they represent. Symbolic character of various things and persons is visible even in those religions which do not ascribe sacredness to the images of deities.

Another fundamental characteristic of a symbol is its ambiguity. Symbols can be interpreted in various ways since they contain many layers of meaning. Not all of them are visible at first sight. Religious symbols are usually involved in rituals; they are not only models of something (e.g. models of transcendent reality), but also models for something.<sup>3</sup> They constitute a part of the system of religious action and gain their meaning due to the interconnection with religious action. The pragmatic dimension of religious symbols is also based on their function in individual lives of those who use these symbols for religious purposes. Last but not least, religious symbols refer to what is interpreted as being beyond the horizon of our everyday life. In other words, religious symbols refer to transcendent or unconditioned reality. They gain access to the 'fifth dimension,' as John Hick would call the spiritual dimension of human life.<sup>4</sup>

Since the meaning of religious symbols is complex and depends on context, using them in another context may result in the changes of their meaning. But at the same time this context dependency of symbols shows that there are other important constituents of religious meaning systems such

<sup>3</sup> C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York 1973, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> J. Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, Oneworld, Oxford 1999.

as linguistic and extralinguistic context, the way in which religious symbols are used in communication, and the function they fulfill in communication. Religious symbols are not merely parts of a larger textual whole but they also constitute a system of religious action. The performative aspect of religious symbolism is apparent in the ritual where rule-governed action is associated with a symbolic meaning.

It must be emphasized that the transformation of religious language concerns expressions of this language which were used in contexts other than religious. It means that relatively closed communication systems of particular religious communities may remain largely intact even if their symbols and language expressions are used in nonreligious contexts. Nevertheless, it is usually difficult to establish what the semantic consequences of such a usage are, and to what extent manipulation of religious symbols from outside religious community affects the way in which people understand their religion. But one thing is obvious: religious people are usually sensitive to how their symbols are used outside religious community. For example, most Christians cannot sit quietly by when Christian symbols are desecrated; they protest, sometimes violently, against such abuses. Their reaction suggests that even outside religious context believers are not indifferent to what happens to religious symbols when they are improperly used. The problem is whether the change of function of religious symbols is followed by the change of their meaning.

In the parts of this article that follow, I take into consideration several areas of contemporary social and cultural activity, and present some examples of adaptation of religious symbols to secular culture. Before that, however, I will focus on more general and fundamental problems, i.e. the universal character of religious symbolism and the types of adaptations of religious symbols to new cultural conditions.

## **Is religious symbolism a universal tendency of human beings?**

What is the reason that the previously marginalized religious symbols reappear in secular culture? It may be hypothesized that religious symbols are not culturally contingent phenomena, but that they constitute a universal dimension of culture and are deeply rooted in the human mind. The human tendency towards religious symbolism is so strong that whenever religion as a social institution is marginalized, religious symbolism is adopted (and considerably transformed) by other fields of culture. This compensation of religious symbolism takes place due to the universal human tendency towards

symbolism and religion. However, it is rather difficult to explain the very tendency, and as a result, to answer the question why human beings represent their religious worlds in a symbolic way. The answer to this question can be found in the cognitive approach to religion which focuses upon cognitive mechanisms constraining religious thought and action.<sup>5</sup> From the point of view of this approach, religious symbols and ideas are pervasive and recurring in human culture because they are by-products of the evolved cognitive architecture. Most religious ideas taken from known religious traditions are easily acquired and effectively transmitted through generations as a result of two factors, the first being a particular structure of religious representations, and the second - the susceptibility of the mind to particular kinds of ideas. Therefore, the ubiquity of some religious ideas in human cultures is not an accident but the result of the way in which our minds operate. By those attempting to affect the human mind or control human behaviour religious symbols and ideas can be used as instruments. It seems that religious symbolism appeals to the human mind much more effectively than discursive thought. Moreover, since mental processes engaged in religious symbolism operate beyond consciousness, messages based on them are not easily susceptible to rational persuasion. Religious symbols and ideas turn out to be a good source material for creating evocative ideas and messages in secular culture.

According to the view presented by cognitive scientists of religion, mechanisms generating religious ideas are nothing special. These are natural processes of the human mind which are shared by all human beings. The universal architecture of the mind constrains the way in which religious representations are distributed in culture and makes religion a culturally universal phenomenon. Human beings have a kind of "God instinct" – a natural tendency to identify supernatural beings in the surrounding world.<sup>6</sup> Although there are individuals devoid of religious beliefs, it would be difficult to find a culture completely devoid of religious representations. Investigators in the cognitive science of religion come to a conclusion that religion cannot be entirely eradicated either from culture or from the mind. It would be naïve to think that one day religious thinking will be replaced by the scientific one. "As a way of thinking, God is an inherent part of our natural cognitive systems, and ridding ourselves of Him – really, thoroughly, permanently removing Him from our heads – would require a neurosurgeon, not a scientific teacher."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA 2004, p. 21; P. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994, pp. 14-15; I. Pyysiäinen, *Bridge over Troubled Water: Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries, "Method and Theory in the Study of Religion"* 2004, no. 16, p. 340.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Bering, *The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London 2011.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200.

## **Instrumental and non-instrumental adaptations of religious symbols**

It is probable that the universal tendency towards religious symbolism underlies the phenomenon characteristic for many secularized European countries: on the continent where a considerable number of people define themselves as non-believers religious symbolism is adopted by other fields of culture. All these fields are composed of human actions that have either instrumental or non-instrumental character. Therefore, having in mind the differentiation between religious and nonreligious use of religious symbolism, one can differentiate between two kinds of adaptation of religious symbols to other meaning systems: instrumental and non-instrumental one. Non-instrumental adaptation consists in using religious symbols as a means of religious self-realization of human beings. In this form of adaptation religious symbols are adapted to a new system but still retain their non-instrumental value. For instance, symbols of an established religious tradition are used by other religious systems, new religious movements, and various forms of new spirituality. The second type of adaptation, instrumental adaptation, is much more interesting from the point of view of this presentation and refers to using religious symbols as means for nonreligious purposes. Among the examples are uses of religious symbols in some forms of art, in marketing, politics, and the public sphere. Here religious symbols have a function fundamentally different from the function fulfilled in religious discourse.

Incorporation of religious symbols into new meaning systems is not a novel phenomenon. The history of religions knows many situations in which religious symbols created within one religious tradition were used by other religious meaning systems. The process of Christianization is a good example of this phenomenon. But in the case of interaction between religion and forms of action characteristic of modern society, the nature of symbolic adaptation is substantially different. In this case religious symbols are not adapted to a new religious meaning system but are used by nonreligious systems, i.e. within the secularized areas of society.

## **Religious symbolism as a source material for popular culture, marketing, and politics**

Today the aforementioned universal tendency towards religious symbols, ideas and narratives is exploited by various interest groups who attempt to realize their particular interests. In these attempts, religious symbols are instru-



mentally used and abused. The problem is whether religious symbols adapted to new uses are not deprived of their religious nature? Even if it is the case, they retain their primary structure and content, although the latter is usually interpreted in a different way. Therefore, changes in the function of religious symbols do not necessarily entail changes in their structure and content. There are, however, many cases in which their content is radically changed. Some of these symbols are deprived of their religious meaning and become entirely secular. In the examples that follow one can find transformations of some aspects of religious symbols as well as their radical desacralization.

There are many areas of social and cultural life where religious symbolism is present. Among them, the most important are: popular culture, modern art, politics, public life, and marketing. Here are several examples of using religious symbols in non-religious contexts. First of all, religious symbols are widely used in popular culture and in modern art. Suffice it to say that they play an important role in numberless films which use mythical narrations and religious ideas. The religious symbolism present in popular culture is usually a part of implicit religion. It is not clear whether popular culture can be described as containing genuinely religious elements or it should be described as a substitute for religion<sup>8</sup>. While in the first case religious symbols incorporated into popular culture continuously retain their religious meaning, in the second case they are deprived of religious value but are similar to genuine religious symbols in that they perform much the same functions. This means that although they are no longer used in a context of traditional religions, they can have psychological or other effects similar to those which are produced by religious symbolism.

In popular culture mythical narratives are deprived of their religious character; they become elements of literary or cinematic fiction. In the fine arts religious symbols are used for artistic purposes. They are usually taken out of their natural context and set in a quite different system of meaning. Among the most radical examples of the degradation of religious symbols in arts is so called critical art that developed in Poland in the 1990's. Representatives of this artistic current use religious symbols in the way that is perceived by the majority of religious people as offensive and sacrilegious (e.g. a picture of genitals on the cross by Dorota Nieznalska). Similar examples can be found in other countries: a sculpture of Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan which shows Pope John Paul II crushed by a meteorite. According to critics, the role of critical art is to provoke members of an audience. However, regardless of its social function, it may change the way in which religious symbols are interpreted by the general public and be unacceptable to some religious people.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Porter, *Implicit Religion in Popular Culture: the Religious Dimensions of Fan Communities*, "Implicit Religion" 2009, no. 12, pp. 271-272.



Another example of using and abusing religious symbols in non-religious contexts is today's marketing, and especially advertising. Religious symbols are readily used by professionals because they appeal to deeply rooted intuitions and archetypes, arouse intense emotions as well as motivate to action. Some advertisements parasitize religious symbolism. It seems that advertising changes the semantics of religious symbols. They no longer refer to ultimate reference, but their meaning is redirected to a new purpose. They are to focus attention on consumer products. However, the relation between marketing and religion is multi-faceted: religious symbols and images are not only used in marketing, but also marketing is used by some religions. There are religious movements that are more like international corporations than traditional religions (e.g. scientology). One of the most interesting cases of adaptation of religious symbols to marketing is the case in which religious symbols and linguistic expressions become a source material for marketing. It is the situation in which religious language is used and sometimes – from the point of view of religious adherents – abused by experts who do not have anything to do with religion, but try to use religious meanings as tools to attain non-religious goals. As an example we may here refer to advertising which uses religious symbols. By basing advertising messages on religious symbols, motifs, metaphors, or myths, one can easily attract the attention of the public. Moreover, nonreligious content is probably more easily remembered when it is associated with religious counter-intuitive ideas which, according to some research, are more easily remembered and recalled by people than other ideas<sup>9</sup>. It is difficult to say whether and if yes, to what extent, this phenomenon translates into marketing practice, but if the popularity of advertisements using religious representations (symbols, plots, narratives, metaphors etc.) can be a signal of their effectiveness, such a practical application is doubtless. In case of advertising based on religious symbols the content of a given religion is instrumentalized. According to the programs of advertising agents, religious symbols are to refer to advertised products, in result of which their ultimate (non-instrumental) meanings are pushed into the background. Although it is sometimes argued that the spread of discussed advertisements do not transform the meaning of the expressions of religious language, such an argument seems to be unjustified because instrumentalization of religious symbols meets with a hostile response from the believers. Desacralization of religious symbols in advertisements is perceived by them as posing a threat to religion and sometimes as an offence against religious feelings. The instrumentalized religious symbol, apart from its original content, begins to symbolize things fundamentally different from its original reference.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Barrett, *Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion*, "Trends in Cognitive Science" 2000, no. 4, p. 30.

Religious symbols are also used in politics. It is beyond doubt that the political instrumentalization of religious symbols is almost as old as politics itself. Religious symbols proved to be effective instruments of legitimation of political power. Although in most European democracies of today the separation of state and religion is carefully guarded, there are situations in which religious symbolism is moved to the very centre of political and public debates. For instance, Poland is one of European countries where religious symbols, especially Christian ones, have been instrumentalized by politicians since the systemic transformation of 1989. It was due to the fact that the Catholic Church in Poland was a mainstay of anti-communist opposition. Religious symbols were used during the transformation in order to legitimize the processes of democratization. After that time, however, the manipulation of religious symbols has not come to an end. On the contrary, Christian symbols are used in political debates by those who represent both right-wing and left-wing parties. When used in political discourse, religious symbols start to serve particular political interests.

Even in most secular countries in Europe – for example in France – religious symbols are still present in the public sphere. It is connected with the fact that there are more and more immigrants who came to Europe with their own religious background and who are usually much less secularized than native Europeans. Even in secular countries it is difficult to impose rules of secular law on people for whom public displays of religious symbols are an essential part of their religious tradition. Moreover, in such cases religious symbols can play an important social function – they build, maintain and reinforce collective identity. Multicultural parts of today's European societies are exposed to the political instrumentalization of religious symbols.

## **The consequences of adaptation**

The secular culture of contemporary Europe is full of religious and quasi-religious symbols. It does not mean, however, that religious symbols incorporated into secular culture remain unchanged in respect of their content. On the contrary, they undergo fundamental transformations. The meaning of particular religious symbols depends not only on the context in which they are used but also on a symbolic system of which they are parts. Taking symbols out of a context and connecting them to other meaning systems result in transformations of their content. Moreover, the instrumentalization of religious symbols deprives them of their primary function.

The meaning of religious expressions is strictly connected to their place in the religious meaning system. It is not possible to fully comprehend religious

meanings outside this system. For instance, some religious expressions are used in a ritual context, and become incomprehensible when taken out of context. Others constitute an integral part of a particular doctrine, and seem to be meaningless for those interpreters who do not know the doctrine. Still other expressions are associated with religious emotion and experience. This leads to a conclusion that taking religious symbols and symbolic expressions out of their natural context brings about the changes of their meaning. Here, the meaning is not understood as something intrinsic to symbols or other expressions, but rather as something contextual and pragmatically determined. It can be said that, at least in the case of religious language, pragmatics determines semantics to a certain degree. A religious meaning system is a partly closed system of communication which means that it can be fully understood only through participation in religious reality.

### **Prospects for the future**

On the basis of the above sketchy analysis of religious and quasi-religious symbolism in contemporary European culture, it is possible to present a provisional diagnosis of the religious and spiritual condition of this culture. It seems that today we face the problem of oversimplification of European culture that consists in transforming the traditional language of European culture with its symbols, images and ideas into the codes of popular culture and instrumental action. As a result of these processes the specific logic of religious language is transformed into the logics of non-religious discourses. The transfer of religious symbols to other fields of cultural activity usually entails their involvement in the system of instrumental rationality. Religious symbols lose their original meaning and function but at the same time secular culture becomes enriched in the new symbolic dimension.

The aforementioned changes do not result in the irreversible destruction of religious symbols. Rather the contrary seems to be closer to the true. The analysis of these changes in culture and society leads to the conclusion that religious symbolism is still present and that its disappearance is unlikely. Reduced and transformed religious symbols are widespread in many areas of social and cultural life. What is more, latest research on the human mind and its role in maintaining religious representations allows making predictions about the future of religious symbolism. It is thus probable that religious symbolism will remain one of the fundamental dimensions of contemporary European culture.

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*Sławomir Sztajer* – RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE. THE CASE OF EUROPE

The aim of this paper is to analyze the ways in which religious symbols are present in non-religious spheres of contemporary European culture. It is widely known that, as a result of secularization, religious symbolic language is no longer present in the public sphere and culture of contemporary European societies in the same way as it was in the past. At first sight, it seems that it has lost its relevance for other fields of culture as well as for everyday communication, and that religion has become a relatively closed system of communication. However, more thorough investigation shows that various religious symbols are widely used in many fields of secular culture. The fundamental question concerning religious symbols is whether and, if yes, in what particular way, they change their meaning as a result of being used in non-religious cultural activity. What is the reason that previously marginalized religious symbols reappear in secular culture? It may be hypothesized that religious symbols are not culturally contingent, but they constitute a universal dimension of culture and are deeply rooted in the human mind.

Keywords: religious symbolism, European culture, popular culture