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The Place of Invisible Religion and New Media Folklore in the Social Construction of Reality

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to identify the point of convergence between folklore and religious practices through the lens of phenomenology and social constructivism. The author interprets contemporary verbal folklore as a form of invisible religion that fosters community through conceptual frameworks, symbolic universes, social norms, and patterns of perception and action. Folklore and religion exhibit several shared characteristics: 1. both phenomena serve a socio-integrative function; 2. both phenomena evolve in form and content over time; 3. both phenomena evoke intense ambivalent emotions; 4. both religious and aesthetic experiences elicited by folklore texts are characterized by a fusion of planes of representation (merging of an object and its sign); 5. both phenomena possess a pragmatic dimension shaping social attitudes and inspire their bearers to action.

KEYWORDS: digital folklore, invisible religion, social constructivism, the sacred, sensualism, reification, Rudolf Otto

The aim of this paper is to identify the point of convergence between folklore-generating practices – shaped by interactive media and social networks – and contemporary expressions of invisible religion. The interpenetration of folklore and religion was first highlighted by Alan Dundes, who traced the origins of canonized biblical texts to the verbal creativity of folklore (Dundes 1999). In Poland, contemporary relations between religious and folklore practices have been discussed by Piotr Siuda (2012), Zuzanna Grębecka (2006), Piotr Grochowski (2022), and other authors. In the context of pre-modern folklore, the category of *the sacred* has been addressed by Piotr Kowalski (2000, 2007) and

Jerzy Bartmiński (1995). It should be emphasised that the topic addressed in our text does not concern representations of supernatural phenomena, but, rather, manifestations of the so-called invisible religion (Luckmann 1967) – a form of religion that is largely unconscious and unnamed by its bearers, primarily because it is reproduced outside institutional settings such as churches. These manifestations are analyzed through the lens of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and the work of his followers, as well as from the perspective of social constructivism, as represented by Thomas Luckmann and Peter L. Berger. Central to the concept of invisible religion proposed here is the category of the sacred, which, as outlined by Rudolf Otto (1923), is understood not necessarily as a reference to supernatural phenomena but as a distinct type of experience.

The starting point for a comparative analysis of religious and folklore practices is Émile Durkheim's classic definition of religion in his work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1995: 44). Even though Durkheim based his definition on an analysis of tribal societies – i.e., premodern societies – it remains equally applicable to the modern world, provided two clarifications are made.

Firstly, the sacred, or *sacrum*, does not need to be limited to supernatural phenomena. It may equally refer to "natural" phenomena, provided one considers the distinction prevalent under early 20th-century scientism. In this sense, a mere mortal embodies the profane, not only in comparison to the Creator or divine beings but also in relation to so-called minor gods, such as deified show business stars, other celebrities, representatives of the world's financial elites, or VIPs. The sacred, as a reality inaccessible to the ordinary, profane individual, can thus encompass not only the Kingdom of Heaven but also, for example, the Cannes Film Festival, the Academy Awards gala, and the residences of kings, presidents, or Hollywood celebrities. During the era of traditional media, Andy Warhol likened the television screen to an Orthodox iconostasis (Widota 2017: 77–81), observing that both serve as means of mediation, similar to a window, allowing the mere mortals (profane people) to view images of a space inaccessible to them and, figuratively, the Kingdom of Heaven as such[1], represented by the multitude of saints whose images appear on the iconostasis. Warhol's proposal even aligns with the metaphorical term "all the saints", which in the Polish language refers to individuals of significance due to their professions and

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1   The spatial layout of an Orthodox or Greek Catholic temple reflects that of the Temple of Jerusalem (destroyed in AD 70), where the space housing the Ark of the Covenant was accessible only to the high priest and only once a year, on the feast of Yom Kippur. This sacred space was separated from the rest of the sanctuary by a curtain, the counterpart of which in the Eastern Church tradition is the iconostasis. In the Western tradition, there is no iconostasis separating the altar from the rest of the temple, which is attributed to the tearing of the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross (Mt 27, 51; Mk 15, 38; Lk 23, 45).

positions within the social hierarchy. Warhol interprets the secular religiosity of his time as a consequence of the deification of money (mammon). His "saints" possess substantial wealth, granting them direct access to this "god", and their "kingdom" is entered via red carpets (Widota 2017: 77–81). In addition to the television screen and the representations of "saints" it projects, participation in a reality inaccessible to mere mortals can also be facilitated by objects that once belonged to these "saints" and can, therefore, serve as their substitutes. The same phenomenon is observed in classical Orthodoxy and Catholicism in the form of relics. An ordinary guitar, which in material terms is often indistinguishable from any other, is transformed into a relic in the realm of experience if it is known to have belonged to Elvis Presley. The guitar Presley touched during his lifetime serves as a substitute for him, and, as a result, may command astronomical prices at auctions. In fact, anything can become an object of religious veneration. In addition to the icons of high society, these may include "cultural traditions", as well as idolized rulers who protect them, or their empires, overlapping with the cosmos itself, functioning like an invincible dam that shields the world from the abyss of chaos. A contemporary example would be the propaganda image of Holy Rus as the embodiment of divine order, heroically opposing the decadent and demonic West, portrayed as the domain of the Antichrist (Chawryło 2024).

Secondly, Durkheim's conception of the church should not be understood as a legal entity or institution comprising religious orders, intra-church movements, and similar bodies, organized through systems of functions, hierarchies, legal acts, and other documents. Nowadays, we are confronted with new forms of religion that have neither public representations, nor ceremonies accessible to the public, nor commonly shared religious dogmas, nor collectively celebrated rituals (Knoblauch 1991: 29–30). These forms of invisible religion – like the production and reproduction of folklore texts – arise from the need to understand the world and the desire for exceptional experiences, rather than from a need for a spectacular display of belonging to an institution.

Durkheim's notion of the church refers to a moral community defined not so much by explicit declarations as by often unconscious systems of relevance, value systems, habitual frameworks of perception, and interpretative keys – everything that constitutes the so-called "social lenses" (Schaff 1964: 220). This notion of the church is particularly important because, in the West, we have been witnessing the so-called deinstitutionalization of religious life at least since the second half of the 20th century. This refers to the fact that an increasing number of people are leaving church institutions, which does not necessarily mean that they are not religious.

Moral communities in the postmodern world tend to exist in concealment, in the sense that, on the level of declarations, their members may appear radically different from one another, yet in terms of their interests and actual actions, they may be surprisingly similar. The contradictions in opinions regarding phenomena such as the afterlife and sexual mores may illustrate how deeply significant

these topics are to individuals engaged in existential debates about them. Additionally, it should be noted that everyday (common) knowledge never constitutes a perfectly coherent system. It is, to varying degrees, self-contradictory, shaped by changing situations, and always partially unconscious (Schuetz 1944: 500). In the postmodern world, dominated by incongruous and mutually exclusive narratives of conflicting and combative communities, or even isolated social bubbles (Lyotard 1986: XI–XII), such moral communities – often formed unconsciously as an expression of invisible religion – are widespread and play a crucial role in shaping social order. Hence, the conclusion is that Durkheim's definition of religion, though rooted in an analysis of pre-modern cultures, still aptly describes contemporary religious phenomena and retains its validity.

Religion unites diverse individuals into a single social body. Through participation in shared practices, individuals adopt common value systems and conceptual frameworks, which shape shared ways of conceptualizing and categorizing reality. The world view created in this manner is what Thomas Luckmann refers to as the fundamental social form of religion:

> As the individual acquires his mother tongue and internalizes its inner form, he takes over the "natural" logic and taxonomy of a historical world view. The world view, as a reservoir of ready-made solutions and as a matrix of procedures for solving problems, routinizes and stabilizes the individual's memory, thinking, conduct and perception in a manner that is inconceivable without mediation of language. Through language the world view serves the individual as a source of meaning that is continuously available – both internally and socially (Luckmann 1967: 55).

The basic form of religion should, therefore, be understood as any symbolic universe that unifies the incongruous fragments of reality into coherent and ordered wholes (Luckmann 1967: 43; Berger, Luckmann 1991: 110–122), as well as the entire perceptual and interpretive habitus that underpins an intersubjectively relevant world view. It is for this reason that one can speak of a moral community created by invisible religion, even if it does not take the form of a church in the institutional sense of the word: "the world view, as an 'objective' and historical social reality, performs an essentially religious function and defines it as an elementary social form of religion". This social form is universal in human society (Luckmann 1967: 53). Peter Berger, who, together with Luckmann, laid the foundations of social constructivism, asserts in his work *The Desecularization of the World* that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is incorrect and that the modern world is – as it has always been – profoundly religious (Berger 1999: 2).

The Socio-Integrative Function of Religion and Folklore

Regarding the phenomenon of religious life, Durkheim made at least two related discoveries:

1. The foundation of a community's shared beliefs, convictions, and values – or, more broadly, the perspective through which the world is perceived – is social practice. This practice ensures the reproduction of a shared ideology, encompassing the tacit assumptions that shape our world view.
2. Religious practice serves a social-integrative function.

The same can be said of folklore practice, which likewise forms the foundation of a community of values. Social norms are upheld through the genres of folklore that are perpetuated within social circulation. An example of such a mechanism is gossip. Members of a community engage in gossip about those who deviate from the norm in some way – whether these deviations are factual or merely a product of social imagination. Most importantly, through the social circulation of gossip that penalizes deviations from commonly shared norms, it is possible for these norms to perpetuate themselves continuously. Other genres of historical and contemporary folklore, such as urban myths, ballads, or legends, can serve the same function.

The genres of folklore present in social circulation "instruct" their bearers about what is important, how the world should be perceived, and how it should be valued. Thus, there is no reason to deny folklore practice the socio-integrative function that Durkheim attributed to religion. In the context of the contemporary emphasis on individualism, it is worth noting that a sense of one's uniqueness and independence does not preclude the folklore and religio-generative aspects of an individual's participation in the social fabric. For, as Luckmann states, "The 'liberation' of individual consciousness from the social structure and the 'freedom' in the 'private sphere' provide the basis for the somewhat illusory sense of autonomy which characterizes the typical person in modern society" (Luckmann 1967: 97).

According to the findings of Peter Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson, folklore is a *langue*-oriented text with a poetic function (Jakobson, Bogatyrev 1980: 10). This function lies in the text's ability to evoke intense, often ambivalent emotions (fascination mixed with horror, attraction mixed with fear, etc.) in the recipient, while its *langue* orientation is reflected in either its repetition across different variants or the reproduction of its semantic layer (e.g., plot, stereotype, or motivation). The fact that a folklore text evokes an aesthetic experience in its bearers is a prerequisite for its transmission. The conventionality of a folklore text within a particular communicative community translates into the prevailing habitus, which governs the spontaneous (instinctive) perception of phenomena and shapes responses to them. In this respect, the *langue* orientation of a text serves as the foundation of the social construction of the world.

The socio-integrative function of folklore genres was overlooked within the Romantic paradigm, as represented by German ethnography in the tradition of *Volkskunde* (cf. Cocchiara 1981). This function was only later identified within the framework of British social anthropology, represented by Bronisław Malinowski, who explored the relationship between sacred stories (myths) and the social order in pre-literate cultures, where no distinction yet existed between

folklore texts and canonical religious texts. Malinowski demonstrates how myth fosters social consensus and thereby creates a community. He closely examines the practice, common on the Trobriand Islands, of ritually reenacting the story of the world's beginning, when the ancestors of humans, in the form of totemic animals, emerged from a hole in the ground. Among them were a pig and a dog who encountered an unclean plant along their path. The pig avoided it, while the dog sniffed it and ate it. From that point onward, the dog and its descendants were deemed unclean, in contrast to the pig and its descendants, who attained the highest social status, as the pig successfully passed the test. Malinowski observed that among the Trobrianders, the dog clan occupied the lowest position in the social hierarchy, while the pig clan held the highest status. Thanks to the myth, retold on various occasions and regarded as a sacred narrative of the original precedent, social stratification appeared to everyone as self-evident, self-explanatory, and a manifestation of the eternal order of nature. Anyone who identified with the primordial dog as their totemic ancestor accepted their lowest position in the social hierarchy *a priori* (Malinowski 1926: 68–69).

According to Malinowski, sacred narratives did not answer questions or "explain" anything (Malinowski 1926: 23). They served solely as a form of prevention, ensuring that no doubts about the prevailing social hierarchy could arise. After all, it is impossible to doubt the self-evident order of nature, sanctioned by the original – and therefore sacred – precedent. Here, the mythic narrative served to socially integrate and construct a collectively shared image of the past and its associated value system. In other words, it shaped the shared cognitive dispositions that defined the experiences of each member of the community. Contemporary cultural phenomena, such as the theme of the "American dream" in film and other popular culture genres, also serve a socio-integrative function. The story of a poor immigrant who comes to the United States and achieves success through his/her hard work serves to legitimize the "obvious" assumption that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy are responsible for their own circumstances. Such a narrative, therefore, functions as a mechanism for preventing social tensions. Narratives reproduced on a large scale within society have the power to transform historical inventions into natural necessities and self-evident truths (cf. Barthes 1972: 143), and it matters little whether these narratives are commonly associated with the religious or the secular sphere. The socio-integrative function of religion and folklore lies in their role as the foundation of a reproduced symbolic universe that unifies diverse phenomena into a coherent order of meaning, making it possible for them to be seen and valued in a similar way. Both religion and folklore function as tools of reification, understood as the perception of human inventions as integral parts of the eternal and divine order of nature:

> reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if
> they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature,

results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. [...] Typically, the real relationship between man and his world is reversed in consciousness. Man, the producer of a world, is apprehended as its product, and human activity as an epiphenomenon of non-human processes. Human meanings are no longer understood as world-producing but as being, in their turn, products of the 'nature of things' (Berger, Luckmann 1991: 106–107).

The Variability of Folklore and Religion

The similarity between folklore practice and religious practice lies in yet another aspect: both religion and folklore were predicted to vanish, primarily because both phenomena were mistakenly equated with their pre-modern forms and content. If folklore were limited to pre-modern forms only (e.g., beliefs in demons), the Romantics who predicted its demise would likely have been correct. The point is that folklore is of evolutionary nature (Jakobson, Bogatyrev 1980: 9), meaning that it can evolve in form and content while continuing to fulfil social functions that address current societal needs. The changes in modes of communication are secondary, as, in this context, it is not crucial whether the text is transmitted orally or through new media. Nor does it matter whether the text belongs to traditional (pre-modern) genres of folklore or to new forms of folklore (e.g., urban myths, hoaxes, internet memes; cf. Grochowski 2013a, 2022; Hajduk-Nijakowska 2023: 15–18). The themes of folklore texts are also evolving. Instead of guidance on protecting oneself from witches, for instance, the focus has shifted to concerns about defending against hostile elites who, through satellite radiation, allegedly attempt to control people's minds (Kelley 2013). In short, folklore varies not only geographically and socially but, above all, historically, just like religious practices and beliefs.

To be precise, it should be noted that, in the case of folklore, one should not even speak of a strict opposition between change and continuity. Despite the modernization of forms and content in folklore, the "cultural grammar" underlying it can remain highly resistant to change. The structure of horror stories, whether pre-modern or modern, is often identical. The same ambivalence of the sacred characterizes narratives about bloodthirsty vampires; about Jews allegedly using the blood of Christian children to make matzah (Tokarska-Bakir 2008); or about members of the global elite purportedly involved in an international criminal network trafficking human organs and the blood of abducted children, as suggested by QAnon-style conspiracy theories (Friedberg 2020). Modern technology is purported to make it possible to produce an elixir of youth from children's blood, allegedly reserved exclusively for the wealthiest individuals.

Indeed, the motif of the bloodthirsty non-human or demonic human is a timeless element of verbal folklore. Suffice it to mention Elisabeth (Erzsébet) Báthory (1560–1614) – niece of Stefan Bathory, the king of Poland – who was dubbed the Bloody Countess of Čachtice/Csejte by the people of Upper Hungary (present-day Slovakia) at the time. She was said to bathe regularly in

the blood of young girls, which was believed to ensure her health and beauty. It remains unclear what precisely led to the documented trial of Countess Báthory in 1611, held at Bytča/Nagybiccse Castle, during which her servants' confessions were extracted under torture. One can only be certain of the magical logic underlying the entire rejuvenation procedure, where physical contact between two phenomena ensures a transfer of qualities from one to the other: whoever comes into contact with the blood of a young person will become like her, that is, younger (cf. Kajfosz 2021a: 112–128). Hungarian historian László Nagy proposes the thesis that the trial and conviction of Countess Báthory were based on rumors and legends politically exploited by the House of Habsburg, whose aim was to consolidate control over Hungary (Bartosiewicz 2018: 103–122). This example illustrates how instrumentalized and politically exploited folklore texts can produce very tangible consequences (cf. Hołda 2008). Popular texts of verbal folklore can be manipulated and used to influence public sentiment, thereby even generating social consent for violence.

The same holds true for religious practices and beliefs. The assumption that religion was destined for gradual extinction dominated the social sciences at least until the 1960s. It was first challenged by Thomas Luckmann, who, in his book *Invisible religion* (1967) addressed the then-widespread view that the world was undergoing secularization. He argued that the declining membership of churches should not lead to the hasty conclusion that religious life was vanishing. Luckmann cautions against unjustifiably equating the "privatization" of religious life with the disappearance of religion. If religious practices lose their institutional character, this does not necessarily mean they cease to exist. The only change is that religious experience is becoming increasingly private for Westerners, leading to a gradual decline in church membership. Religion, therefore, is not disappearing; only its forms are evolving. Far from that, human beings cannot give up religion in the functional sense. People will always bear socially conditioned cognitive and normative systems that shape their experience of reality and perpetuate themselves through social practice.

Ambivalence of Sensations in Religious and Aesthetic Experience

In the context of exploring parallels between folklore and religious practices, it is worth considering the similarities between aesthetic experience and religious experience as identified by Rudolf Otto, who was the first to apply Husserl's phenomenological method to theology and religious studies. Otto deliberately set aside the question of the existence of supernatural phenomena, which captivated the people of his time. Adopting a phenomenological perspective – based on reflective analysis of one's own experience – he asked what the experience of the sacred itself entailed for him and for others, an experience whose existence cannot be questioned if considered purely as an experience.

Otto argues that all religious experiences are irrational – not in the sense of being insensate or absurd, but as sensations that cannot be adequately expressed in the words of natural language. Any such language serves as an in-

strument of categorization, understood as the conceptual processing of reality. This process simplifies and immobilizes reality by diminishing or omitting certain aspects of existence while emphasizing or inventing others (Maćkiewicz 1999: 52–53). In this way, language simplifies and distorts every unique experience. Otto observes that no religion can be fully equated with an explicit world view, as religious experience cannot be entirely captured conceptually. It always transcends any description or "explanation" provided through the words of natural language (Otto 1923: 1–4, 49).

According to Otto, the experience of the sacred comprises four opposing elements that can manifest in various combinations and intensities. The first is *fascinans* – the experience of something that irresistibly attracts a person. *Fascinans* coexists in a paradoxical contrast-harmony with *tremendum*, understood as its opposite. *Tremendum* is something that repels, frightens, and terrifies a person (Otto 1923: 31). The third element is *numinosum*, in the presence of which a person feels as though they are "nothing but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). The opposite of *numinosum* is *majestas*, understood as the experience of one's dependence on *sacrum*, and, consequently, the experience of one's connection with the *sacrum*. In relation to the sacred, a person is both insignificant and yet profoundly important, as God chose to redeem humanity through His death on the cross. The remoteness and absolute otherness of humanity from the sacred is here counterbalanced by the proximity of the sacred, for it is only in and through the sacred that humanity lives and attains salvation (Otto 1923: 50–59).

Rudolf Otto states that a religious experience is unique (*ganz anderes*, i.e., "wholly other") and cannot be compared to anything (Otto 1923: 25–26, 65). At the same time, the author assumes that it is most closely related to the aesthetic experience (Otto 1923: 8, 16–17). Given the contemporary state of research in the anthropology of experience, Rudolf Otto deserves recognition for at least two reasons. Firstly, both religious and aesthetic experiences are characterized by intense, ambivalent emotions that cannot be directly expressed through language. In this context, the author refers to blissful excitement, rapture and exaltation (Otto 1923: 37), which, from today's perspective, can also be associated with psychedelic experiences, i.e., altered states of consciousness. Secondly, a characteristic feature of both religious and aesthetic experiences is the partial and temporary merging (or fusion) of levels of representation, such as the blurring of the distinction between an object and its sign (Fernandez 1986: 159–187). Emotional intoxication and the indistinguishability of levels of representation are mutually dependent, as the sociologist Roger Caillois has aptly observed. According to this author, the confusion of the senses (*ilinx*) makes it possible to fuse the iconic sign with what it represents (*mimicry*). For example, a shaman wearing a tiger mask in the whirlwind of a ritual dance is perceived by the participants as an actual tiger (Caillois 2001: 87–97).

According to Rudolf Otto, the sacred is a type of experience. The author does not provide a precise or convincing explanation of how religious experience differs from aesthetic experience. He merely observes that the two phe-

nomena are similar. If one were to set aside the theological perspective and adopt a purely phenomenological approach, it remains unclear what the actual difference between the sacred and aesthetic experiences would be – perhaps only the intensity of excitement, intoxication, rapture, or ecstasy. Both religious and folklore practices offer such experiences to the participants involved. Intense, ambivalent emotions are the common denominator of collective practices, which are sometimes categorized as folklore or religion solely due to tradition and respect for individual faiths and religious institutions (cf. Dundes 1999).

Fusing the Planes of Representation in Religious and Aesthetic Experience
The aesthetic mode of perception is characterized by the dominance of spontaneous reaction over reflection (Husserl 1952: 4–11). In both religious and aesthetic experience, different levels of representation merge into a single perceived phenomenon. This can be seen in the perception of a cinematic film or theatrical performance, where the actor becomes the character in the eyes of the viewer, and a prop masquerading as a dagger transforms into a genuine murder weapon. Both types of performance are forms of play, where participants – if sufficiently engaged – begin to experience the represented world as if it were the real world. Today, this phenomenon is often referred to as immersion. If we take the player's perception as a point of reference, the pretended action within the game is transformed into a real action (Gadamer 2004: 105–105).

A partial and temporary merging of the planes of representation is characteristic of both aesthetic and religious experiences. In moments of emotional elation, the perceived image becomes identical to what it represents. In this regard, votive gestures directed toward Jesus on a roadside cross are not prayers to a wooden or steel figurine but to the real Jesus, who becomes one with His representation in a spontaneous experience (Trias 1998; Tokarska-Bakir 2000: 39–40; cf. Czarnowski 1948: 149; Niedźwiedź 2010).

Phenomenologically defined, the sacred is a purely experiential category, and it is irrelevant whether it accompanies phenomena conventionally classified as religious or secular, such as football. During a match, football fans experience intense and ambivalent emotions, whether in the stadium or in front of the TV. There are even moments when they cry, whether from joy or disappointment. Such experiences are rooted in the fact that, during matches, players are identified with the groups they represent – reified abstractions such as cities, states, or nations. Because, in the fan's perception – at least temporarily – the distinction between the team and the abstract collective is blurred, the personified Poland can, for example, defeat Greece, with whom it is "fighting" during the match. The merging of levels of representation in aesthetic and sacred experiences is a prerequisite for constructing any sense of "we" in statements such as: "We won!". Sensualism understood as "taking representation for reality itself" (Robotycki 2012: 31), is the common denominator of religious experience, aesthetic experience, and immersion, understood as engagement in a game.

Religious and Folklore Practices in a Supposedly Secular World

In the process of folklore transmission, it is never guaranteed that even the most obvious *fabulate* – such as one originating from a joke – will not be transformed into a *memorate*, i.e., a story perceived as true, if it aligns with the grammar of collective imagery. As Joanna Tokarska-Bakir observes, the insistence on truthfulness stems from the very essence of religious thinking (Tokarska-Bakir 2008: 114). This type of thinking depends on popular narratives being translated within the community of their bearers into "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1993: 90).

If a digital narrative reproduces a shared system of values – a conceptual system, symbolic universe, or cognitive habitus – and simultaneously conveys a sense of mystery by evoking intense, ambivalent emotions among its bearers, it can be considered an expression of an invisible religion. Under the influence of a narrative accepted as true, the background knowledge that makes it possible to accept another narrative is altered. In this way, a belief is transformed into a firm assumption that, in turn, lends validity to other beliefs. A mystifying representation of the world, once accepted as true, makes individuals more susceptible to further mystifications and various forms of collective hysteria. People readily believe anything that aligns with socially reproduced perceptions, which serve as a reference framework for interpreting any new pieces of information.

Folklore has always been, and continues to be, a means of reproducing various kinds of beliefs. However, in the past, its impact was constrained by relatively stable hierarchies of power and knowledge (Kajfosz 2019: 29–31). A message appeared credible if its sender was someone who played a significant role in the individual's socialization. This could have been, for example, a teacher at school (whose credibility was validated by the educational institution they represented), a respected family member to whom the recipient was emotionally attached, a friend, or a respected landlord possessing the appropriate symbolic capital (cf. Szczepański 2003: 57).

In today's neoliberal and post-factual society – where truth is shaped by emotion, emotion reflects the impulse of the moment, and the need to persuade outweighs the need to convey truth – the potential for deliberate manipulation of public imagination appears almost limitless (McComiskey 2017). Free-market broadcasters operating within the so-called infotainment business can only survive in the market by continually competing for audiences through entertainment, "shocking", astonishing, or astounding them. The reproduction of the credibility hierarchy breaks down. Long-term authorities are being replaced by short-term figures of influence, such as film stars, singers, other celebrities, VIPs, bloggers, or YouTubers. Such authorities are constantly changing, as users of interactive media tend to be fickle, with highly volatile emotions. Informational discourse is dominated by everyday knowledge, which

means that there is no requirement for the opinions expressed to be consistent (cf. Schuetz 1944). One conspiracy theory can easily lend credence to another, even if the two contradict each other (Kajfosz 2019: 40).

The difficulty in distinguishing between accurate representations of actual events and fictions – understood as inventions of the social imagination unsupported by facts – can be easily exploited for political purposes. At this point, one need only recall the words of Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to the President during Donald Trump's first term, who defended his erroneous statements by arguing that there are "alternative facts" alongside the facts (Blake 2017). At the time of the coronavirus pandemic, the democratically elected President of the United States publicly announced that the disease could be controlled by injecting intravenous disinfectants into those affected (Clark 2020). Even though he quickly backtracked from his statement, claiming it was only intended to test the vigilance of journalists, there remains sufficient reason to believe that in the modern West, a tolerance for ignorance can persist even in the highest institutions of the state when it serves the immediate interests of politicians.

Another example is the political exploitation of QAnon conspiracy theory supporters who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Donald Trump convinced them – by the authority he derived from the supreme institution of the state he represented – that the results of the presidential election were rigged not only by the Democrats but also by the so-called deep state in general (Biesecker et al. 2021). According to QAnon-style conspiracy theories, the *deep state* is a sort of state within a state, allegedly created by an international criminal network composed of celebrities, the economic and social establishment, and members of the Democratic Party. The executive power of digital genres of folklore is also evident in the case of Edgar Maddison Welch, who in 2016 carried out an armed attack on the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, D.C., because he was convinced that kidnapped children were being held in its basement. Fortunately, no one was injured in the incident, and upon inspection of the facility, it was found that there was no basement at all (Hsu 2017). The aforementioned attack on the Capitol can be seen as the result of the political instrumentalization of digital genres of folklore, functioning as a form of invisible religion. In other countries, the so-called troll factories were established for the production of such texts to be used as tools in hybrid warfare. An example is the Internet Research Agency, which has been operating in St. Petersburg since 2013. Notably, bots are now playing an increasingly important role in these activities, replacing live trolls.

To sum up, it should be emphasized that the focus of this inquiry was not folklore texts referring to the sacred understood as a supernatural reality (e.g., stories about demons, saints, or the afterlife), but, rather, those that refer to the sacred as a specific type of experience. Such an experience is characterized, first, by intense ambivalent emotions and, second, by a fusion of levels of representation in spontaneous perception. The *sacrum*, understood in this way (as a purely experiential category), engages people in a manner that makes it

difficult for them to distance themselves from socially shared content, thereby hindering reflection. The growing importance of new media folklore in public space can be seen as an expression of the dominance of emotion over facts and their factual analysis, a phenomenon attributed to the post-factual era (also known as the post-truth era).

Intense ambivalent emotions and the fusion of the worlds represented in various narratives with the real world in the perception of communication participants can result from both religious and folklore practices. For example, the reproduction of certain genres of new media folklore, such as conspiracy theories, can provide their bearers with extraordinary emotions while simultaneously taming the incomprehensible, even when considered natural (e.g., new technologies). This type of text can be regarded as a manifestation of the so-called invisible religion if, in a specific situation, it serves a socio-integrative function by creating a community of people who share a specific "symbolic universe", to use Luckmann's terminology. In his concept, invisible religion does not require the supernatural. Its manifestations are the "conceptual apparatuses", understood as the social lenses through which people perceive the world. With a given instrument, people think in a similar way and are able to function as a cohesive community. An excellent instrument for the reproduction of social lenses is folklore, which, by definition, is popular and systemic: it is *langue*-oriented.

Bearers of invisible religions can associate within interactive virtual communities, such as those centered around conspiracy theories. Other similar communities can take the form of social bubbles. The impenetrable mysteries explored within them tend to function as the sacred, as it is phenomenologically understood. It can take the form of an elixir of youth made from children's blood, nanochips injected into people together with compulsory vaccinations, or satellite radiation through which the powerful of this world can influence people's minds. Given that a folklore text can relatively easily become an instrument for reproducing dangerous prejudices and a hotbed for violent acts, one might expect that the "dark side of internet folklore" (Grochowski 2013b; cf. Peck, Blank 2020; Kajfosz 2021b: 330–332) will become the most important folklore category.

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