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# Religiousness and Morality in the Face of Challenges From Social and Cultural Pluralism

Janusz Mariański, *Pluralizm społeczno-kulturowy jako megatrend a religijność i moralność. Studium socjologiczne* [Social and Cultural Pluralism as a Megatrend vs. Religiousness and Morality: A Sociological Study], Wyższa Szkoła Nauk Społecznych z siedzibą w Lublinie, Lublin 2022, 266 pages

Before I discuss the monograph by the priest and professor Janusz Mariański, I first make a general reflection related to the issues in the book. For a long time, it has been assumed that religion will gradually lose its meaning (in the course of modernization), especially as a result of the processes of differentiation and rationalization, and that it will finally disappear. This thesis of secularization was based on the observation that the functional differentiation of social subsystems was increasingly separating the secular and religious spheres, and that the Church was thus losing more and more social power and influence. Consequently, the social structure ceased to be legitimized by religious interpretations, meaning that it was slowly losing relevance. When using the term “religion,” as is customary in the sociology of religion, one



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must be aware of the diversity of religious traditions and communities, which are the categories that assume both sociocultural and religious pluralism.

The phenomenon of individual religious orientation in modernity has meant the loss of a uniform religious interpretation of the world that applied to all members of a given society. Moreover, the rationalization that took place resulted in a “disenchantment of the world.” Man as an autonomous subject, as *homo faber*, was placed at the center of the understanding of himself and the world instead of the divine order. With scientific progress, religious dogmas and interpretations of the world were questioned, as a result of which religion was presented to science and modernity as something irrational. This change in mentality was accompanied by numerous resignations from the Church in the West, a steady decline in worship attendance, and an increasingly indifferent attitude or even rejection of religious beliefs and moral norms.

For the past two decades, however, there have been growing doubts and protests against the theory of secularization in the sense of an apparent decline of religion. The decrease in ecclesialization cannot be equated with a decline of religion and the concept of religion cannot be narrowed down to “ecclesiality,” especially as this would reinforce the defining power of the Church as an institution. Thomas Luckmann has even described the secularization theory as a modern myth that hides religious change more than it describes it. And here the climate change in religion was announced: Luckmann’s neologism, “new religious movements,” has become a widely accepted term for the central issue. In this way, we can notice that religions are still practiced, but in new, individualized forms and within relevant groupings. In this sense, we are dealing with “invisible or hidden religions.” More and more people are “remaking” various elements of different religious traditions into forms of “their own God” within a new spiritual culture. Expanding the notion of religion, a difference is increasingly being recognized between an institutionally specified (Christian) religion and the often unspecified religiousness of the individual. It is important to point out here, however, the Eurocentrism that characterizes this way of thinking, since “postmodern” or individualized, de-Christianized religiousness is familiar in other traditions. The key question is whether the individualization described

casts doubt on the epoch of modernity as such, both in the sense of intellectual and social history, or whether it is merely an erroneous (reduced) picture of it.

Sociologists adopt different perspectives in describing contemporary society; there is no all-encompassing theory of society accepted by all, but rather, depending on one's perspective, one speaks, for example, of a "risk society," an "experience society," or even a "post-modern society." Alongside the discussion of what is typical of contemporary society, there is, above all, no dispute over the socio-philosophical question of whether another, second modernity continues or should complete the "Enlightenment project," or whether modernity has been or should be abandoned and replaced by so-called postmodernity.

These scholarly considerations are within a very valuable book written by Janusz Mariański, entitled *Social and Cultural Pluralism as a Megatrend and Religiosity and Morality: A Sociological Study*. The monograph is a comprehensive sociological study. In his introduction, the author rightly draws our attention to the issues which correspond closely with the title of the publication, that contemporary societies in the globalized world are becoming pluralistic in both sociocultural and religious dimensions. In traditional societies, as Mariański points out, religions functioned as a kind of monopoly. People lived in environments that were homogeneous in terms of religion or worldview. Religious institutions played a significant role and enjoyed authority in the lives of individuals, social groups, and society as a whole. In terms of worldviews, contemporary societies are diverse. A pluralism of religious attitudes and permissiveness in terms of moral attitudes is clear. As the author of the publication emphasizes, for many people pluralism as such is a kind of "creed" and religion.

All three chapters of the publication under review are very coherent in terms of the subject and methodology. In the first chapter, entitled "Pluralistic Society Between Tradition and Changing Modernity," the author focuses on the dynamics and mobility of contemporary societies. In a pluralistic postmodern world, everything undergoes constant changes, making nothing certain. The relatively unrestricted cooperation and competition of different meaning systems and meanings, as well as groups and social institutions, leads to far-reaching sociocultural and religious transformations. Past

experience shows that in traditional societies, tradition and customs exerted a strong influence on the lives of individuals. Values and ethics provided people with the correct direction, showing them how to live and how to behave. Nowadays, however, to a much greater extent each person can shape their lives on their own.

An open, informative, and pluralistic society is today approaching the state of an individualistic society. Such societies are characterized by an individualistic understanding of values and a subjectivization of lifestyles, worldviews, and morality. Skepticism about the valid, common ideals is widespread in such societies, as well as relativism in matters of religion and religiousness, and often even moral nihilism. In this chapter, Mariański provides the general characteristics of a pluralistic society and analyzes in detail the phenomenon of sociocultural pluralism in societies of liquid modernity or postmodernity. A modern pluralist society is characterized by a far-reaching differentiation of individual areas of life, which include the economy, politics, education, leisure, healthcare, culture, morality, and religion. These areas even form autonomous structural systems with their own codes of conduct and laws, as well as their own logics of action and rationality. This reality of social life consequently leads to individuals being confronted with different, sometimes conflicting obligations.

In his concluding remarks to this chapter, Mariański also draws constructive conclusions based on the literature on the subject. He rightly observes that the transformations taking place in postmodern society cannot consist in an absolute negation of traditional society, as such an approach would entail enormous risks. In fact, as he points out, we are dealing with a kind of coexistence of modernity and tradition, with a fluctuation between the traditional and the modern shape of society. There is no doubt that modern pluralistic societies, while posing many dangers and threats, also offer the opportunity for significant progress and improvement. Pluralism itself, as a feature of modern or postmodern society, especially in its radical forms, is judged by some as an ambivalent or even negative phenomenon and by others as a positive one, because it abolishes former coercive and totalitarian tendencies. The individual, according to the proponents of the latter, can feel “liberated.” Here, however, the question should be raised as to the hermeneutical sense of this alleged “liberation” of the human being.

The second chapter, entitled “Sociocultural Pluralism vs. Religion and Religiousness,” tackles the decomposition (deregulation) of the religious tradition in the conditions of modernity, and especially postmodernity. In it, the author discusses the issue of the changing relations of sociocultural pluralism, in terms of both religion and religiousness. Mariański emphasizes that in a pluralistic society, religious, moral, and cultural definitions of reality lose their status of certainty and become a matter of free choice. The development of social and cultural pluralism enhances the process of individualization, which also includes religion. As the author points out, sociologists do not agree about the impact of sociocultural and religious pluralism on the ongoing changes in religiousness in contemporary societies. Some of them assume that the formation of a diverse religious scene and competition in the “religion market” may even lead to the revival of the Christian faith, or at least a change in the level of religiousness.

Experts in the field emphasize that religious authorities are losing their importance, while religiousness is influenced by individual consciousness and is linked to the personal experience of an individual. Therefore, orthodoxy is not important; what matters is preference and option. Professing a faith or belonging to a particular religion does not necessarily mean remaining in it for life. The American sociologist Peter Berger, whom Mariański often cites in his monograph, points out that in North America, as well as in Europe, pluralism has transformed religion in both institutional and individual perspectives. Religious institutions, which are used to their monopoly, have to find a way to survive in a competitive religious market. As a result, individuals have to make choices within this religious market. In this context, Berger emphasizes that, at the level of individual consciousness, this means that religion is no longer transparent, but becomes—like an increasing part of the tradition that shapes us—an object of reflection and decision.

Although many postmodern societies can be described as religiously pluralized societies, it is no longer proper to call them secularized societies. The boundaries between religion and secularism run in different ways in different modernizing or modernized societies. The relationships between religious pluralism and secularity are also different in these societies. In Western European countries, a cultural and religious plurality of identity has been spreading since the 1960s,

while the overall level of religiousness, as measured by formal membership in churches, participation in religious practices, and declared religious beliefs, has been declining over the same period. Empirical studies conducted by Detlef Pollack demonstrate that religious pluralism weakens the vitality of religious communities. This does not contradict the thesis that the commitment of minority believers can be stronger than when they are in the majority. In general, the impact of pluralism on religious issues tends to be negative.

In the summary of this chapter, Mariański makes a very interesting observation, claiming that the Church, in the face of the trends characteristic of postmodern societies described above, is not without opportunities. Although he does not have the tools to provide appropriate therapeutic prescriptions, he can make some suggestions and recommendations. Above all, he recommends abandoning ad hoc reactions to changes in society and complacency with the existing solutions (“we have always done it this way”). The belief that the Church has always been able to solve its problems effectively by traditional means may prove to be ineffective. A new development strategy favoring a so-called ministry of communication (“Kommunikationspastoral”), which consists of seeking new forms of influence and action within the framework of an offensive ministry, can be useful for the Church. In these new social spaces, the Church must be in constructive dialogue with the modern world and it must punctually and adequately read the signs of the times in the kairological dimension, but this must not be an uncritical adaptation to the requirements and expectations of the times.

In the third chapter, entitled “Sociocultural Pluralism and Morality,” Mariański analyzes the modernization processes entailing rapid social change. These are associated with a shift from a “world of fate” to a “world of choice,” from absolute commands to relatively unlimited possible choices. The almost unlimited growth of technological and institutional possibilities has resulted in the fact that the entire biography of human life is no longer the product of “fate” or “destiny,” but the object of individual decisions. The pluralization of human life means, on the one hand, an expansion of the “space” of freedom and a sense of liberation from sociocultural compulsions and, on the other hand, a sense of insecurity associated with the abandonment of stable

values and norms. This is also associated with disorientation about the right forms of thinking and acting, and with other difficulties.

In Western Europe, an accelerated process of secularization has been evident in recent decades. There has been an increasing de-Christianization and an elimination of *sacrum* from social life and cultural products. There is no longer a single system of values and norms in postmodern societies. A manifestation of the postmodern attitude is the questioning and rejection of all norms of an absolute and objective nature. Good and evil as objective categories make no sense. The negation of traditional moral values, especially those originating from religion, reaches all social groups (particularly the youth), even if this does not always mean an attitude according to which all values are equal or that one should live without rules, in axiological chaos.

The changes taking place in postmodern society also mean further secularization and individualization of attitudes toward life. The choice of individual values depends on one's own interests and preferences. There is no longer a uniform moral order in modern societies. Pluralism results in the relativization of traditional normative orientations; an individualized lifestyle of self-fulfillment becomes the most important goal of the individual. It should be noted that the Catholic Church is also influenced by pluralism in its various layers, which was clearly reflected in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, in the process of evangelizing all cultures, the Church and theology today face new tasks. In particular, it is a question of new insights, of opening up to what is new. In this context, it is worth quoting the reflections of Stefan Swieżawski on openness and tolerance, whom Władysław Tatarkiewicz called a philosopher of the cultural borderlands. His philosophical writings boiled down to the thesis that the assimilation of identity-shaping content should take place in the process of intercultural education, with an openness to the values present in different types of borderland environments.

The axiological richness of multiculturalism makes it possible, through appropriate education, to overcome many barriers and leads to new dimensions of reality. Only then can one speak of an adequate transmission of faith if one takes care of the greater right of human subjectivity. This process is not possible without educational values and objective cultural goods. It must be remembered, however, that

neither objective culture, as the sum of cultural values, and subjective culture, as the process of educating individuals and specific groups, provide a ready pattern in this matter. All these values are rooted in historical traditions and their existence depends on the relationships that take place between objective and subjective culture. Morality, too—as one of the factors of culture growing or weakening—depends on the condition of a given culture.

Mariański has already addressed these issues in his earlier books (*Socjologia moralności* [*The Sociology of Morality*], [Lublin 2006], *Spółczesność i moralność. Studia z katolickiej nauki społecznej i socjologii moralności* [Society and Morality: Studies in the Catholic Social Teaching and Sociology of Morality], [Tarnów 2008], and *Moralność w kontekście społecznym* [Morality in the Social Context], [Kraków 2014]). These are the author's constructive reflections on the study of moral issues from a sociological perspective, but they are also very important to the academic discourse within education in its broadest sense. There is no doubt that the phenomenon of moral degradation is noticeable in highly developed civilizations, but objective cultures cannot be changed or inhibited subjectively. This problem is also closely linked to moral education assuming the category of self-education, which, in turn, does not mean that this happens without interaction with the outside world. Using another term in this context, namely “moral pedagogy,” we mean a description of the entire process of moral upbringing with all possible appropriate means and methods for this process. While analyzing the issue—society and morality in the context of Catholic social teaching—Mariański shows the Church as an institution that supports citizens. He refers to the important thesis that “a Church that refrains from direct interference in the functioning of the political society can actively participate in the public sphere of the civil society.”

In his teaching, Pope John Paul II emphasized that the Church should act so that the nation can effectively resist those tendencies of modern civilization which suggest abandoning spiritual values in favor of unlimited consumption or the abandonment of traditional religious and moral values for a secular culture and ethical relativism. In turn, Pope Benedict XVI, speaking about the crisis of education, pointed out that relativism is seen as dogma. It comes to the point where a society living in a culture of relativism very often makes it



a supreme value. In the age of constant change and ever-changing reality, Christians are faced with the need to make choices between values and pseudo-values. It should be emphasized here that the lack of the light of faith in society contributes to the emergence of various doubts, including the question of the meaning of human life. In the face of such phenomena, all educational actors, starting with the family, face a huge challenge, as otherwise the perceived crisis of upbringing may cause a further breakdown of basic values.

To conclude the third chapter, “Sociocultural Pluralism and Morality,” it is important to focus on one aspect which Mariański clearly points out: that morality is also visible in the constitution of public institutions (family, property, etc.) and, ultimately, in the economic, social, political, and cultural order. Morality creates an order—by no means free of internal tensions—which is binding on individuals, small and large groups, and entire cultural circles and which constitutes the distinction between belonging and alienation. The social function of morality is to be able to live according to moral principles and to judge the behavior of other people according to these moral norms.

Sociocultural pluralism and the associated religious pluralism do not necessarily threaten religiousness associated with and shaped by the churches, although they undoubtedly pose important challenges to such religiousness. Religious pluralism and the associated subjectivization of faith can also lead to a more conscious commitment to and responsibility for religious values and norms in everyday life. It can be a threat to traditional religiousness that is not based on personal reflection and experience, but it can also be an opportunity for inner, personal, and experienced religiousness, including one with ecclesiastical references.

In Western sociology, there is an ongoing debate about progressive secularization, but also about the megatrend of religion, about a new re-spiritualization, a new spirituality, new forms and ways of expressing religion outside of churches. On the one hand, the traditional Christian churches are facing a multiform crisis, while on the other hand, religiousness and spirituality outside of churches is experiencing a kind of boom. One could say, as the author also points out in the conclusion of the book, that Western societies are being de-Christianized, but are not irreligious: they are religious in



a different way. Sociologists describe contemporary trends as a crisis or decline of the traditional churches, but they also notice the reality of a rebirth of *sacrum* in non-institutional forms. In analyzing these phenomena, they speak of new opportunities for spirituality in a globalizing world.

In conclusion, it should be stated once again that Mariański's latest publication contains a wealth of extremely substantive and constructive analyses around the issues it raises, together with relevant conclusions for the development of interdisciplinary theory and practice. The author has undoubtedly enriched the publishing market in Poland with his research. The bibliography, especially foreign, is also impressive, bringing us closer to the latest thinking in the available literature on the subject.

Prof. Janusz Mariański, an outstanding expert in the fields of sociology of religion and morality and Catholic social teaching of the Church, is an unquestionable authority in Poland and in Western European circles. I recommend his monograph, above all, to students of the social sciences and humanities, students of theology, especially catechetics and the pedagogy of religion, and to all representatives of various educational subjects who face the challenges of sociocultural and religious pluralism.

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