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## NEW SPIRITUALITY: A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE?

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**Abstract.** According to many thinkers, Western culture (often referred to as the “Christian civilization”) has been in a deep crisis for decades. One of the symptoms of the ongoing transformation is the rapid (and, as it seems, irreversible) decline of Christianity, in particular at the level of institutionalized worship in the churches. This text attempts to identify the causes of these changes by invoking, among other sources, the teachings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Then, it addresses the issue of new spirituality—a phenomenon which, as is particularly evident in sociological studies, is now taking over the space that has been “emptied” of living faith and religious practices. The fact that the majority of society has moved away from organized religion does not mean that spiritual life has been generally abandoned. A growing number of Europeans and Americans are now embracing “new spirituality” as a way to “fulfill” their irresistible need to exist in the sphere of the sacred, to experience the Absolute or immerse themselves in the multifaceted (and ritually celebrated) sphere of the divine. The proliferation of alternative spirituality is a challenge to the Church and to her mission of salvation. At the same time, it also gives rise to the question of whether such spirituality can be a viable (and competitive) alternative to the rich tradition of Christian spirituality that has been proven over the centuries.

**Keywords:** spirituality, new spirituality, crisis of Christianity.

**Streszczenie.** *Nowa duchowość – realna alternatywa?* W opinii wielu myślicieli kultura Zachodu (czyli tzw. cywilizacja chrześcijańska) od dziesięcioleci przeżywa głęboki kryzys. Jednym z symptomów tej transformacji jest szybkie (i jak się wydaje – nieod-

wracalne) słabnięcie chrześcijaństwa, zwłaszcza w jego warstwie religijnej, czyli zorganizowanej w Kościołach. Niniejszy tekst jest próbą ukazania (m.in. w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II i Benedykta XVI) przyczyn tych zmian. Następnie zaś podejmuje kwestię nowej duchowości, która – co jest widoczne zwłaszcza w badaniach socjologicznych – zajmuje przestrzeń, „opróżnioną” z żywej wiary i praktyk religijnych. Odejście większości społeczeństwa od zorganizowanej religii nie oznacza powszechnej rezygnacji z życia duchowego. To w „nowej duchowości” coraz liczniejsi Europejczycy i Amerykanie „realizują” nieodpartą potrzebę egzystowania w sferze *sacrum*, doświadczania Absolutu bądź też zanurzenia się w różnie pojmowanej (i rytualnie celebrowanej) boskości. Upowszechnianie się alternatywnej duchowości jest wyzwaniem dla Kościoła i jego zbawczej misji. Każę też postawić pytanie, czy jest ona rzeczywistą (konkurencyjną) alternatywą dla bogatej i przez wieki sprawdzonej tradycji duchowości chrześcijańskiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** duchowość, nowa duchowość, kryzys chrześcijaństwa.

“New spirituality” is a concept that reflects the diversity of modern society and, to some extent, illustrates the internal contradictions that afflict the “modern” human, revealing the dramatic experience of a person who is trying to establish the truth and meaning of his or her existence by his or her own effort. Convinced of their absolute autonomy, people of the West attempt to compose their spiritual and (less and less often these days) religious creed on their own. This aspiration, stemming from the increasing pluralism of lifestyles and ways of thinking, should be seen in the context of the far-reaching changes that are now taking place in culture. What we have in mind is both the growing pluralism in social life (that is, religious and philosophical pluralism, ethical and moral anomie, preference for the individual, breakdown of consensus as to the understanding of the human being as a person, crisis of the “classic” family model, etc.) and the peculiar fashion for revolution that aims to supersede (or cancel, as in “cancel culture”) the entire existing cultural legacy. These trends are largely a consequence of the development and gradual dominance of new technologies, which not only affect economic issues, but also fundamentally transform human relationships and the manner in which specific individuals perceive themselves and their surrounding environment. Since “spirituality,” as we are going to argue, is part of human nature, the above transformation is also causing a shift in the “religious” sphere. For many decades, there has been a gradual decline of institutionalized religion in the

different churches throughout the West. In the case of Poland, this mainly applies to the Roman Catholic Church. It should be noted, however, that abandoning religious life (as Christianity understands it) does not always lead one into an absolute desert, a land of blissful irreligion, atheism, or practical materialism. Quite the contrary, it may encourage one to embark on a “spiritual” search, to construct one’s own individualized concept of personal development and pursuit of happiness (or “salvation”).

In our submission, we only tangentially address the classical, that is, Catholic definition of Christian spirituality, since it has been extensively covered from both historical and methodological points of view by the Polish school of spiritual theology.<sup>1</sup> Spirituality is rooted in the very nature of the human person, conceived of as a *compositum* of the soul and the body, which is why human beings as persons constantly transcend themselves and all reality.<sup>2</sup> Hence, there are a plethora of “spiritualities” associ-

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<sup>1</sup> See Mirosław Daniluk, “Duchowość chrześcijańska,” in *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 4, ed. Romuald Łukaszyk, Ludomir Bienkowski, and Feliks Gryglewicz (Lublin: TN KUL, 1985), cols. 317–330; Marek Chmielewski, “Teologia duchowości jako dyscyplina naukowa. Zarys problematyki,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 66, no. 5 (2019): 115–132. Since the term *spiritualitas* had become less precise in meaning over the centuries, expressions such as “ascetical theology” and “mystical theology” emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, followed in the 19th and 20th centuries by “ascetics,” “mysticism,” “inner life,” “theology of inner life,” and “theology of perfection.” Cf. Marek Chmielewski, *Metodologiczne problemy posoborowej teologii duchowości katolickiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 1999); Marek Chmielewski, “Teologia duchowości w wybranych dokumentach Kościoła,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 47, no. 5 (2000): 93–101; Marek Chmielewski, “Duchowość teologa w świetle pism karmelitańskich doktorów Kościoła,” in *Mistyka w codzienności*, ed. Jerzy Wiesław Gogola (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karmelitów Bosych, 2009), 109–122. Cf. also Stefan Świeżawski, *Św. Tomasz z Akwinu. Traktat o człowieku. Summa Teologiczna 1,75–89* (Poznań: Pallotinum, 1956), 3–21, 57–73; Elżbieta Olczak and Irena Grochowska, “Refleksje nad compositum duszy i ciała z uwzględnieniem płci w myśli świętego Tomasza z Akwinu,” *Fides et Ratio* 4, no. 40 (2018): 44–66; Jean-Pierre Torrel, *Święty Tomasz z Akwinu. Mistrz duchowy*, trans. Agnieszka Kuryś (Poznań–Warsaw: Instytut Tomistyczny – Wydawnictwo “W drodze”, 2003), 35.

<sup>2</sup> See Magdalena Kapała, “Duchowość jako niedoceniany aspekt psyche. Propozycja nowego ujęcia duchowości w psychologii – kategoria wrażliwości duchowej,” *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska* 30, no. 1 (2017): 7–37; Marek Chmielewski, “Personalistyczno-chrystopologiczna terminologia duchowościowa w nauczaniu papieskim,” *Duchowość w Polsce* 15 (2013): 30–35; Sandra M. Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality. A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus* 3, no. 2 (2003): 165–166; Robert Ptaszek, *Nowa*

ated with a different, non-theistic relationship with the sacred (e.g., Taoism or Buddhism).<sup>3</sup> According to Waclaw Hryniewicz, spirituality is a “deeper strand” of the human self, an opening to the mystery of the world and of God, and an inner action oriented towards the very truth of being.<sup>4</sup> Janusz Mariański cites the definition of spirituality formulated by Maria Gołaszewska, according to which spirituality is an existential stance based on the intuitive (that is, internal and direct) knowledge and acceptance of the Supreme Good through inner experience.<sup>5</sup>

An issue which we are going to address more broadly, although still in rudimentary form, is the background (that is, the sources, mechanisms, and underlying mental, intellectual and social processes) of the phenomena that prepared the ground for what is known as “new spirituality.” This can-

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*duchowość* (Warsaw–Poznań: Wydawnictwo “W drodze”, 2023), 49–66; Jordan Aumann, *Zarys historii duchowości*, trans. Jan Machniak (Kielce: Wydawnictwo Jedność, 1993); Piotr Sroczynski, “Transcendencja osoby w myśli filozoficznej kard. Karola Wojtyły,” in *Kultura nie tylko literacka. W kręgu myśli Karola Wojtyły – Jana Pawła II*, part 2, ed. Dorota Kulczycka and Anastazja Seul. Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, Scripta Humana, vol. 10 (Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2018), 17–26; Piotr Moskal, *Filozofia religii* (Pelplin: Bernardinum, 2020), 130. For a broader discussion of the ontic status of the person, see Moskal, *Filozofia religii*, 124–130. See also Sławomir Chrost, *Homo capax Dei jako ideał wychowania* (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza “Impuls”, 2013), 155–171. Cf. Józef Kozielecki, *Koncepcje psychologiczne człowieka* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademickie “Zak”, 1997) 239–249; Ptaszek, *Nowa duchowość*, 23–45.

<sup>3</sup> Janusz Maciuszko, “Duchowość,” in *Religia. Encyklopedia PWN*, vol. 3, ed. Tadeusz Gadacz and Bogusław Milerski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2001), 296.

<sup>4</sup> Waclaw Hryniewicz, *Chrześcijaństwo nadziei. Przyszłość wiary i duchowości chrześcijańskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002); Jan A. Kłoczowski, “Dojrzałość – aspekt psychologiczny i duchowy,” in *Pamięć. Osobowość. Osoba. Księga jubileuszowa dedykowana Profesor Annie Gałdowej*, ed. Aleksandra Tokarz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011), 69–75; Paweł M. Socha, *Przemiana. W stronę teorii duchowości* (Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, 2014), 88.

<sup>5</sup> Janusz Mariański, *Megatrendy religijne w społeczeństwach ponowoczesnych. Studium socjologiczne* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2016), 272–273. This stance implies a willingness to behave—that is, to act, think, speak, and experience—in a specific way, or, in other words, to adopt a “lifestyle” oriented towards the *summum bonum*. At the emotional level, this relationship involves praise and worship as the highest forms of acceptance. See Maria Gołaszewska, “Poetyka duchowości,” in *Oblicza nowej duchowości. Dyskusja o funkcjach piękna, dobra i prawdy na przełomie tysiącleci*, ed. Maria Gołaszewska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1995), 207–208.

not be done without at least a cursory analysis of the crisis of religiousness (and religion) in the “traditional” Christian churches and communities and of the mentality of the postmodern society. Next, we will provide an overview of the key characteristics of what is referred to in the social sciences (including sociology of religion, psychology, and cultural science) as “new spirituality” or “alternative spirituality.” Since we are dealing with a wide variety of phenomena to which the above terms apply, it is not possible to characterize this type of spirituality comprehensively and exhaustively.

Our reflection will conclude with an attempt to examine “new spirituality” in relation to Catholic spirituality. Naturally, we will only point to some of the differences and “fields of conflict” that emerge when juxtaposing the normalized Christian spirituality that has developed over the course of twenty centuries with the multifaceted, individualized and elusive “new spirituality.”

## 1. CRISIS OF THE (CHRISTIAN) CULTURE OF THE WEST

Many thinkers who analyze the transformation that is taking place in the minds and attitudes of members of the “Christian civilization” believe that we are faced with a “comprehensive crisis.”<sup>6</sup> What this means is that the transformation is not limited to the religious dimension (with processes such as secularization, rapid and systematic decline in religiousness, crisis of the “traditional” churches and denominations, privatization of religion, selective approach to truths of the faith and morality, etc.) and in fact encompasses all areas of social, family, and personal life.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, we are only going to outline some of the symptoms of that crisis. Since contemporary culture (by which we mean interpersonal relations mediated by electronic devices) has a hybrid nature and is increasingly leaning towards

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<sup>6</sup> See Chantal Delsol, *Czas wyrzeczenia*, trans. Grażyna Majcher (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2020); Chantal Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego*, trans. Piotr Napiwodzki (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2023); Charles J. Chaput, *Obcy w obcej ziemi. Życie wiarą w postchrześcijańskim świecie*, trans. Magda Sobolewska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sióstr Loretanek, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ptaszek, *Nowa duchowość*, 13–19.

“virtual reality,” both the traditional means of transmitting the Gospel and the tools that we use to gauge people’s actual state of mind and determine the causes of the “breakdown” of their bond with Christ and the community of the Church have largely been failing.<sup>8</sup>

John Paul II once stated that “a synthesis of culture and faith is a demand not only of culture, but also of faith. . . . A faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully embraced, not fully thought out and not faithfully lived.”<sup>9</sup> Even towards the end of the twentieth century, despite being perfectly aware of the power of the secular globalization processes in Western culture, the Pope argued for the inculturation of the Gospel in the “modern equivalents of the Areopagus,” the most important one being, in his opinion, the mass media (including digital communications).<sup>10</sup> Thirty years later, his ideas seem unrealistic (if not naive), or at least overly optimistic.

The world of the media (and the Internet in particular) seems to be resistant and impermeable to the Gospel. Therefore, if the world of faith no longer “communicates” with culture (both high and popular) and is slowly becoming a “backwater,” a space “sectioned off” for religion, private and irrelevant to public matters, then there is an ongoing process of deculturation of Christianity. This, of course, pertains to institutional and ecclesiastical Christianity, which—at least in Poland—is still “famil-

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the threat of manipulation (or even dictatorship of online media) that the virtual world poses to modern societies, see Grzegorz Osiński, *Cyfrowi niewolnicy. Transhumanizm w praktyce* (Warsaw: Prohibita, 2023); Jarema Piekutowski and Andrzej Zybertowicz, *Cyber kontra real. Cywilizacja w techno-pułapce* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Nowej Konfederacji, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> See Jan Paweł II, “Powołanie do życia Papieskiej Rady Do Spraw Kultury. List do kardynała Sekretarza Stanu Agostino Casaroli. Rzym, 20 maja 1982,” in *Wiara i kultura. Dokumenty, przemówienia, homilie* (Rome: Fundacja Jana Pawła II, Polski Instytut Kultury Chrześcijańskiej, 1986), 161.

<sup>10</sup> See John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, December 7, 1990, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html), sec. 37. Cf. also Agnieszka Kamińska, “Jan Paweł II między kulturą a komunikacją,” in *Jan Paweł II. Komunikacja i kultura. W 100-lecie urodzin Wielkiego Papieża*, ed. Robert Nęcek and Joanna Soczyk-Pająk (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arsarti, 2020), 191–199.

iar” and popular, and, in many of its manifestations, continues to have a mass appeal.<sup>11</sup>

In his exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, John Paul II notes that while globalization holds great potential for development, it may also have a destructive effect if it does not serve the human person and the human person’s integral good. One of the threats is the “disease of horizontalism,” that is, the view that encloses human life in its worldliness (immanence).<sup>12</sup> While, as the Pope notes, there is a “widespread desire for spiritual nourishment,” the all-important question is what kind of spirituality we are dealing with. In 2003, Jonathan Rauch coined the term “apatheism,” which means indifference towards any religious values. Religious faith is treated as one of the “commodities” in the popular culture marketplace; it no longer means entering into a personal relationship with the Transcendent but rather fostering a superficial emotionality that involves pleasant experiences associated with religious events.<sup>13</sup> In his assessment of the “quality” of the religiousness (spirituality) of young Catholics and other Christians in the USA, Rod Dreher has come to a similar conclusion. He claims that they follow a “mushy pseudo-religion” described by sociologist as “moralistic therapeutic deism” (MTD). This “religion” focuses on “improving one’s self esteem and subjective happiness and getting along well with others.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> While the crisis of the churches throughout the West has consistently been confirmed by sociological studies, this does not mean that religious sensitivity and “private” religiousness are also disappearing. The secularizing tenets of the social sciences (including sociology of religion) are discussed extensively in Tomasz Kupś, “Komu zależy na sekularyzacji? Fakty i życzenia dotyczące przyszłości religii w krzywym zwierciadle WEIRD,” *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 2, no. 280 (2021): 79–95.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Marek Chmielewski, “Duchowość a horyzontalizm społeczeństwa europejskiego,” *Soter* 17, no. 45 (2006): 19–26.

<sup>13</sup> See Marek Chmielewski, “Potrzeba metodologii w teologii duchowości,” *Duchowość w Polsce* 12 (2010): 33.

<sup>14</sup> See Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 10. The author cites a study conducted in 2005 (and repeated in 2011) by sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda L. Denton, who identified the following attitudes (the “five basic tenets”) among teenagers who described themselves as Christians: “A God exists who created and orders the world. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. God does not need to be

In John Paul II's view, the remedy to anthropological reductionism and materialism (consumerism) is for society to become open to the Transcendent.<sup>15</sup> This, however, is hindered by practical agnosticism and widespread religious indifference, as well as by the "removal" of references to God from human relationships. As a result of this social climate, agnosticism has become "self-explanatory," whereas Christianity needs some "legitimization" for its presence.<sup>16</sup> Like Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, John Paul II notes the "dimming of hope" and "fear of the future" as signs of the "absence of God." Existential emptiness and loss of meaning of life make it difficult for people (especially young ones) to make commitments such as marriage or priesthood; it also discourages them from having children and breeds sorrow and despair.<sup>17</sup>

Joseph Ratzinger notes that the greatest threat to the Christian culture (and thus also to the Church) is the secularization of salvation. For many, "salvation" is now an "empty" word that is no longer part of the public discourse and has been replaced by "happiness." Unlike its predecessor, however, the latter concept does not apply to everyone; instead, it only concerns the individual, who only approves of his or her "quality of life" as long as it serves his or her "happiness." In this manner, faith (Christianity) has become an obstacle, an inhibiting factor in the progress

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particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. Good people go to heaven when they die." According to Dreher, we are dealing with a vague "natural religion" rather than true Christianity.

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, June 28, 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20030628\\_ecclesia-in-europa.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html), sec. 34.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, sec. 7.

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, secs. 7–8; John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, March 25, 1995, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html) sec. 22. See also Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, November 30, 2007, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html), sec. 10. Another issue noted by Benedict XVI is that Europeans are "tired of living" and are giving up on the idea of eternal life, which for many people is something that is both unrealistic and undesirable. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Zmartwychwstanie i życie wieczne. Studia o eschatologii i teologii nadziei*, Opera omnia, vol. 10, trans. Joachim Kobięnia (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2014), 463.



of humanity and an enemy of the future “happiness” (achieved through revolution).<sup>18</sup>

With the continuing fragmentation of the Catholic Church, which in many dimensions—at least in the West—has been rapidly aligning itself with the increasingly pluralized society, it is becoming more and more difficult to know what (and whom) this Church believes in (and why), how the God of revelation should be worshipped, and what moral and ethical principles stem from the faith and remain binding for Christians. Indeed, the Catholic doctrine has become increasingly blurred and fluid in the last few decades, as is now evident, for example, in the attempts to “modernize” the truths of the faith, beginning with that of Christ’s resurrection,<sup>19</sup> a trend in which some Catholic biblical scholars and theologians are leading the way. Moreover, since Vatican II, a similar process has been observed in the sphere of worship (with the liturgical crisis or renewal),<sup>20</sup> especially with respect to moral principles.<sup>21</sup>

One of the characteristics of the contemporary cultural landscape, largely resulting from the influence of popular culture, is that young

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<sup>18</sup> Ratzinger, *Zmartwychwstanie i życie wieczne*, 460–461.

<sup>19</sup> See Robert Skrzypczak, *Chrześcijanin na rozdrożu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Esprit, 2023) 273–283; Jacek Salij, “Nie ma zgody na zmienianie prawdy Bożej. O tym co zmienne i niezienne w Kościele,” in *Non possumus. Niezgoda, której uczy Kościół*, ed. Paweł Milcarek and Tomasz Rowiński (Warsaw: Demart SA, 2021), 69–91. In his book *Początki wiary w zmartwychwstanie Jezusa. Od Reimarus do Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI* (Zielona Góra: Pracownia Mitopoetyki i Filozofii Literatury, Uniwersytet Zielonogórski, 2022), Eligiusz Piotrowski uses the historical-critical method to “invalidate” the traditional Catholic doctrine of resurrection, and thus the foundations of the Christian faith.

<sup>20</sup> Benedykt XVI, “O znaczeniu Komunii,” in *Co to jest chrześcijaństwo? Testament duchowy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Esprit, 2023), 179–202. Cf. Skrzypczak, *Chrześcijanin na rozdrożu*, 35–36. The theologian extensively discusses the crisis in the Church caused by the “reformist” reception of the Second Vatican Council and by the propensity—common among theologians—to undermine the Magisterium of the Church (especially that of Pope Paul VI). He sees the adoption of the “demythologization” approach to the sources of Christianity in Catholic theology as one of the factors that contribute to the dilution of the identity of the faith.

<sup>21</sup> See Robert Skrzypczak, “Nie dać się zepsuciu. Wobec rewolucji seksualnej,” in *Non possumus. Niezgoda, której uczy Kościół*, ed. Paweł Milcarek and Tomasz Rowiński (Warsaw: Demart SA, 2021), 143–168. With regard to the moral instability of Western societies, the author attributes a major role to the “sexual revolution” that has dominated the public space since 1968.

people no longer associate themselves with tradition, universal values, or moral authorities. As John Paul II notes, “it is every man for himself,” and the most important thing seems to be the “unrestrained affirmation of self.”<sup>22</sup>

The breakdown of the religious (ecclesiastical) social consensus in Western Europe has been a gradual process. A major symptom of the decline of the “primacy of God” in Western societies was the French Revolution of 1789. According to Joseph Ratzinger, it was at that time that “God ceased to be the public *summum bonum*” and was replaced by the nation, then by the proletariat and world revolution.<sup>23</sup> From that moment onwards, the post-Christian Europe continued to move ever further away from its spiritual and religious identity, a process that further accelerated after World War II. The rationalism of the Enlightenment period evolved into the dominant scientism—a view according to which only what is experimentally verifiable can be considered reasonable (rational). Hence, the entire sphere of morality and religion falls “outside” the scope of what is reasonable, thus becoming “private” and “subjective.”<sup>24</sup> What is more, the deconstruction of the social paradigm built upon a religion that has its roots in the biblical concept of God was significantly facilitated by the post-Enlightenment conviction that the economy and technology would be the vehicles of true liberation for humankind. A radical turning point in that regard came with Marxism and its belief that since the world is a product of irrational evolution, humanity must “make” a rational world

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<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, “Homily of His Holiness John Paul II: Holy Mass for the Youth of Ireland,” Vatican website, September 30, 1979, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19790930\\_irlanda-galway-giovani.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790930_irlanda-galway-giovani.html), sec. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades*, trans. Michael J. Miller, J. R. Foster, and Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 162. As noted in a very recent sociological study, “dechurched” and dechristianization are processes that have been causing a systematic increase in the number of “irreligious” people (“the nones”). Trends toward secularization make the West (Europe) “exceptional” in comparison to the rest of the world. See Vidal Diaz de Rada and Javier Gil-Gimeno, “Have the Inhabitants of France, Great Britain, Spain, and the US Been Secularized? An Analysis Comparing the Religious Data in These Countries,” *Religions* 14, no. 8 (2023): 1005, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081005>.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 94–95.

of its own. The dogma of progress—caused by man alone—made “happy society” the ultimate normative moral idea: good things are those that help achieve common happiness, and bad things are those that stand in the way of that project. The “second Enlightenment” in the midst of which we now find ourselves, as Ratzinger puts it, proposes a “rational goal for the future” in the form of the New World Order—constructed entirely by man.<sup>25</sup> In view of the above, the reasons for the changing status of Christianity (with its crisis and the exodus of former Christians towards “new spirituality”) go beyond the appeal of alternative proposals and the loss of missionary zeal by the churches. In fact, the root cause of the crisis is the anti-Christian vision of reality shared (and internalized) by Christians. The socially accepted paradigm has shifted, rejecting metaphysics and the doctrine of creation (and, in consequence, the doctrine of nature together with the doctrine of natural law that derives from it). Human beings now feel that they are “creators” of themselves and builders of a utopian “better world.” The implementation of this utopia takes the form of a „soft totalitarianism,” marginalizing the “question of God” in public life.<sup>26</sup>

In the wake of the 1968 revolution in the West, the internal crises of the churches and the exodus of the faithful (the “progressive dissolution of religion,” as Ratzinger calls it) caused politics to become religion. Today, faith in transcendence no longer seems rationally defensible, and the “experience of being unredeemed” is growing stronger in the society as people expect redemption from “this world” rather than from God (religion). The dissolution of religion has given rise to many forms of “religious substitutes,” esotericism, occultism, magic, rites, and psychological practices. None of them require faith, but offer the possibility of “self-redemption.” In consequence, as Ratzinger argues, there has been a change in the “inner essence” of religion (or of what religion is associated with).<sup>27</sup> The processes outlined by Ratzinger have laid the ground not only for religious pluralism

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<sup>25</sup> Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow*, 40; Chantal Delsol, *Nienawiść do świata. Totalitaryzmy i ponowoczesność* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Prawdziwa Europa. Tożsamość i misja* (Lublin: Fundacja Rozwoju KUL, 2022), 139–147; Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego*.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World: Assessment and Forecast*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 161–162.

and extreme individualism (including the idea of self-redemption, or auto-soterism), but also for different forms of new spirituality, often in the form of the so-called “mystical religions.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, Benedict XVI argues that the dilution of the Christian faith has also been facilitated by the pluralistic theories of religion, which claim that there are different yet equivalent paths (religions) which lead to salvation. Karl Rahner’s thesis of “anonymous Christians”<sup>29</sup> seems to be consistent with such theories and, as we can see, clearly corresponds with some of the ideas of the new spirituality.

The profound cultural changes, lasting for more than two centuries, have made the ground ripe for the emergence of “new spirituality.”

## 2. NEW SPIRITUALITY

“New spirituality” first emerged as a distinct category in religious studies (i.e., sociology and psychology of religion) more than thirty years ago. This type of spirituality is not a religion, but it is not merely a philosophy or a world-view, either. As a diverse phenomenon, it is by and large impossible to define. For some, it is an equivalent form of religion and an extra-ecclesial manifestation of religiousness (spirituality). Others see it as an “invisible religion” or a postmodern variety of popular piety, an alternative form of the modern-day spiritual search, or even post-religious spirituality without God.<sup>30</sup> Its boundaries are no longer delineated by institutionalized religion (churches) but rather by the individual subject and his or her own religious experience. Hence, there is a connection in the Western world between the crisis of the Christian religion (churches) and the widespread adoption of new spirituality.

The proliferation of spirituality and the decline of religion are correlated. In her discussion of the relationship between the two phenomena,

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<sup>28</sup> Benedykt XVI, *Co to jest chrześcijaństwo*, 33–34.

<sup>29</sup> Benedykt XVI, *Co to jest chrześcijaństwo*, 132–136.

<sup>30</sup> Mariański, *Megatrendy religijne*, 270–271; Wioletta Szymczak and Justyna Szulich-Kałuża, “Religious or Spiritual? Empirical Manifestations of Contemporary Changes in Poles’ Self-Declarations and Media Representations,” *Verbum Vitae* 40, no. 4 (2022): 813–842.

Sandra Schneiders considers three models. The first model treats religion and spirituality as “separate enterprises.” This view is shared by those who “respect the religious involvements of others but are simply not interested in participating in religion themselves” and those who “consider correct and faithful religious practice quite adequate to their needs without any superfluous spirituality trimmings.” The second view is that religion and spirituality remain in a permanent conflict and that “the more spiritual one is the less religious, and vice versa.” This concerns those who “have repudiated a religion that has hurt them or who simply find religion empty, hypocritical” or those who believe that their “dependence on religious authority is threatened by spirituality which does not ask clerical permission.” Still, the prevailing view is the classical conviction that there is a symbiosis (synergy) between religion and spirituality and that they constitute a single reality representing the whole human person in his or her search for God. Hence, even those who oppose institutionalized religious structures associate spirituality with religion. Schneiders notes that separating oneself completely from one’s home culture (that is, from Christianity in the Western world) is difficult and requires significant intellectual effort. As a result, when a person chooses a “new spirituality” or even rejects all religious tradition, he or she continues to “operate” to some degree (e.g. in terms of concepts, vocabulary, or symbols) in the context of the very religious tradition he or she is rejecting.<sup>31</sup>

Janusz Mariański and Stanisław Wargacki propose the following—admittedly rather general—account:

New spirituality is one of the megatrends of the beginning of the 21st century. It is an experience of the sacred, sometimes nameless, understood as something personal, intimate, and relating to the inner power of the human being. New spirituality emphasises the role of experience and spiritual exercises, sees the human body as a container filled with inner, spiritual sense and as a manifestation of the creative power of the Spirit, respects nature, promotes healthy eating, attaches great importance to human bonding based on fidelity and love, refers to moral values it considers applicable, is sensitive to art, and emphasises gender equality. It is holistic, democratic,

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<sup>31</sup> Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality,” 163–185.

accessible, and non-hierarchical. It stands in opposition to institutionalised religion, which means that it is beyond the Church.<sup>32</sup>

As we can see, “new spirituality” escapes clear definition. In fact, one might get the impression that attempts to define this concept are, to an extent, contrived. For example, it is unclear to what “Spirit” the authors quoted above are referring. This leads to the conclusion that if we refrain from using religious (Christian) correlations and references in describing “new spirituality,” we may find it impossible to interpret and explicate this phenomenon properly. Janusz Mariański himself notes that the term “new spirituality” is a “container” capable of holding almost anything that is not associated with religious tradition and its institutionalized forms. Nevertheless, this does not preclude us from outlining some key characteristics:

1. New spirituality, which is becoming one of the main socio-cultural trends of today, draws from various religious and spiritual traditions (including Christianity and pre-Christianity as well as esotericism and oriental spiritualities). It traces its roots to the ideas of the counterculture of the late 20th century and to New Age and takes inspiration from the changes that are taking place in contemporary culture.
2. New spirituality is directed towards “spiritual” experiences and sensations, which are no longer restricted to the initiated few (priests, experts, or religious virtuosos) but accessible to everyone. An experience of transcendence, if there is one to begin with, may manifest itself both in “extreme” acts (sudden conversion, extasy) and in day-to-day events. New spirituality stands “outside religion,” and new forms of spiritual experience lead to the resacralization and re-spiritualization of daily life, that is, of the profane. In other words, it “fits” the individualistic mentality.

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<sup>32</sup> Janusz Mariański and Stanisław Wargacki, “Nowa duchowość jako megatrend społeczny i kulturowy,” *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 4/242 (2011): 135–158. English translation after: Janusz Mariański, “New spirituality as a social and cultural megatrend,” in *Metamorphoses of Religion and Spirituality in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Sławomir H. Zareba, Maria Sroczynska, Roberto Cipriani, Marcin Choczyński, and Wojciech Klimski (London: Routledge, 2022), 66–76.

3. As a result of individualization and subjectivization, new spirituality stands in opposition to institutionalized religion, and thus to religiousness, although it does not exclude a certain communal dimension. The subjectivization of spirituality shifts the emphasis to personal development and self-improvement. Individualized “faith” leads to the privatization of the sacred, although this does not mean abandoning social commitments (as is the case, for example, with anarchist movements).
4. While spirituality cannot be defined without reference to transcendence, it does not have to manifest itself in a theistic or religious manner. It is post-religious (or even a-theistic in some of its variations), prioritizing individual experience (and making it the highest criterion).
5. New spirituality is “non-religious” in principle and typically involves some kind of “minor transcendence,” that is, rising above the human condition in its biological dimension and searching for values that give meaning to life, for positive states and sensations, and for mental well-being and harmony with nature. With this type of spirituality, “salvation” is not expected from God (the Church) or religion; instead, it is within the individual’s powers and initiative. This autosoterism is founded on the assumption (or belief) that the human person has an infinite “potential” which he or she can activate as a “spiritual” creature.
6. In many respects, new spirituality draws on New Age, but it does not identify with that movement. By questioning the sacred–profane dichotomy, it enables the sacred to expand to all spheres of existence (in a process known as resacralization or re-enchantment of reality).
7. New spirituality offers a new lifestyle and a new awareness that aim to bring worldly happiness and mental well-being, and promotes spiritual development and inner self-improvement as means of achieving greater individual benefits. In this sense, it stands in opposition to religions (such as Christianity or Islam), which prioritize faith, that is, a relationship with a personal God.
8. In new spirituality, religious faith is replaced by faith in one’s own subjective self and by an orientation towards immanent values

and goals. This extra-religious spirituality can be used by the individual to transcend, that is, to meaningfully rise above daily life.<sup>33</sup>

It is debatable whether the cultural phenomenon referred to as “new spirituality” can in fact be considered “spirituality” from the perspective of the broadly-defined Christian spiritual tradition.<sup>34</sup> Some scholars are skeptical about the term itself and about what it purports to “contain.” By emphasizing the fact that “new spirituality” is a product of radical individualization (i.e., focus on the self), they argue that it is a camouflaged form of narcissism. Some interpret it as an effect of the decadence or trivialization of (mostly secondary) elements of the great religious traditions or as a symptom of secularization and dominance of unsustainable (at least in the long run) social relations devoid of love and respect. Others perceive new spirituality in terms of the inherent “dispositions” of a person, seeing it as a “return of the sacred” after an era of the dictatorship of instrumental reason.<sup>35</sup>

As Piotr Krakowiak states in his article on spiritual well-being (as defined by WHO), there are three types of spirituality “on offer”: religious spirituality, spirituality construed as a product of spiritual (inner, mental) life, and autonomous (humanistic) spirituality. In our European cultural context, the “first choice” is prayer and Christian spirituality.<sup>36</sup> Robert Ptaszek, on the other hand, offers a critique of new spirituality, arguing that many of its manifestations and components are associated with New Age and characterized by a perspective that is both anti-metaphysical (anti-ra-

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<sup>33</sup> Mariański, *Megatrendy religijne*, 299–302.

<sup>34</sup> Stanisław Wargacki, “Duchowość w kulturze ponowoczesnej,” *Zeszyty Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II* 59, no. 4 (2020): 28–35; Józef Baniak, “Socjologiczne ujęcie zjawiska religii, religijności, duchowości i nowej duchowości,” *Konteksty Społeczne* 9, no. 2(18) (2021): 90–97.

<sup>35</sup> Dominika Motak, “Religia – religijność – duchowość. Przemiany zjawiska i ewolucja pojęcia,” *Studia Religijologiczne* 43 (2010): 212. The author adds that spirituality is most often associated with holism: union with the Absolute and with nature, prayer and meditation, paranormal abilities, mysticism and self-transcendence.

<sup>36</sup> Piotr Krakowiak, “Religijność czy duchowość? Modlitwa czy medytacja?,” in *Jak żyć, panie doktorze? Psyche*, ed. Daniel Śliż and Artur Mamcarz (Warsaw: Medical Education, 2021), 199–209.



tionalistic) and anti-personal, since it does away with the self and with the classical understanding of the human person, putting practice above theory. In addition, as he notes, it readily draws from Asian ideas and philosophies.<sup>37</sup> In view of the above, it is difficult to see new spirituality as a true (or valuable) alternative to Christianity. The Christian religion develops and perfects human beings in faith (that is, in a relationship with God who has revealed Himself), leading them towards fullness, or holiness. Conversely, new spirituality is the work of the human mind. As such, it encloses human beings within the sphere of their own selves, of their “experiences” and their “needs,” making its followers prone to mistakes and errors.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, in comparison with the centuries-old and “proven” Christian spirituality, the so-called “atheistic spirituality” is also a road to nowhere.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the impact of new spirituality on the integral development of personality is also uncertain (or dubious).<sup>40</sup>

As it turns out, broader studies on spirituality (including the “spiritual but not religious” category) conducted in the USA have shown that this phenomenon remains strongly dependent on religion and religiousness. Respondents usually consider their spirituality to be an expression of religiousness and a reason for denominational affiliation. Only a minority see their spirituality in opposition to religion and abandon the latter in favor of spiritual development.<sup>41</sup> New spirituality is still a niche option that few choose, even though some of its components are common among those who declare religious (e.g., Catholic) affiliation.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, it would

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Ptaszek, “Dlaczego nowa duchowość nie może być realną alternatywą dla tradycyjnej religii?” *Paedagogia Christiana* 1, no. 35 (2015): 113–126.

<sup>38</sup> Ptaszek, “Dlaczego nowa duchowość,” 121–124; Ptaszek, *Nowa duchowość*, 69–98.

<sup>39</sup> Ptaszek, *Nowa duchowość*, 107–117.

<sup>40</sup> Dariusz Krok, “Religijność a duchowość – różnice i podobieństwa z perspektywy psychologii religii,” *Polskie Forum Psychologiczne* 14, no. 1 (2009): 126–141.

<sup>41</sup> Motak, “Religia – religijność – duchowość,” 213–216. Notably, as early as the beginning of the 20th century, there was a strong tendency in German Protestant circles (as exemplified by Ernst Troeltsch) towards religious individualism and towards seeking one’s “own” path of spiritual development.

<sup>42</sup> See Szymczak and Szulich-Kałuża, “Religious or Spiritual?,” 817. The authors state that according to a survey conducted in Poland in the late 1990s, around 1% to 2% of Poles were involved in non-religious new spirituality.

be unwarranted, at least for now, to claim that there is a “spiritual revolution,” a mass exodus from religion (the Church) to “new spirituality,” and even if this were the case, it would be impossible to properly diagnose or determine this trend.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, what is “quantifiable” and lends itself to being researched is religion, whose inherent (or even constitutive) characteristic is social communication.<sup>44</sup> In the context of “constructing” one’s own spirituality, Max Weber’s comment is highly relevant:

Never as yet has a new prophecy emerged . . . by way of the need of some modern intellectuals to furnish their souls with, so to speak, guaranteed genuine antiques. In doing so, they happen to remember that religion has belonged among such antiques, and of all things religion is what they do not possess. By way of substitute, however, they play at decorating a sort of domestic chapel with small sacred images from all over the world, or they produce surrogates through all sorts of psychic experiences to which they ascribe the dignity of mystic holiness, which they peddle in the book market. This is plain humbug or self-deception.<sup>45</sup>

This article offers a reflection on the relatively new phenomenon of “new spirituality.” For centuries, spirituality was quite rightly considered a correlate of religion, a function and integral part of it. In the view of Christian (Catholic) tradition and theology, spirituality is not so much the fruit of human effort as it is the effect of God’s action in believers. The reflection is followed by a discussion of selected manifestations of the crisis of Western (Christian) culture, and in particular of church-based religion (and religiousness). This crisis, which has been ongoing since the Enlightenment, has prepared the ground not only for unbelief and atheism, but also for the (now waning) New Age revolution and the so-called “new spirituality.” The latter, although it currently seems to affect a rela-

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<sup>43</sup> Wioletta Szymczak and Justyna Szulich-Kałuża (“Religious or Spiritual?,” 818–819) show that this number is rapidly increasing, especially among younger people. Growing even more rapidly is the percentage of individuals who declare themselves as neither religious nor “spiritual.”

<sup>44</sup> Motak, “Religia – religijność – duchowość,” 216–217.

<sup>45</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), 216.

tively small proportion of Western societies, is an integral component of a broad-based cultural transformation. Programmatic and actual pluralism, coupled with the idea of radical emancipation of the individual, favors the search for one's own spirituality. At the same time, however, this spirituality is subordinated to the principle of individual self-development and to the pursuit of "happiness" constructed according to the individual's own recipe. In this respect, the gap between new spirituality and integral (model) Christian spirituality becomes evident. The latter, proven over two millennia, has an objective salvific (soterial) character that is guaranteed by God's revelation in Christ.

There is no doubt that postmodern culture systematically and effectively "levels" the bastions of the "old order": rootedness in and intergenerational transmission of tradition, grounding of the society in the life-giving (and meaningful) sacredness "provided" by the inherited religion, reliance on the family and local community, and belief in the general continuity of culture and the patterns that it provides. Instead, it offers a "free" search for spiritual well-being and the ability to freely construct one's own spirituality (within the framework of cosmotheism, pantheism or panentheism). The main concern that this entails is whether such spirituality can replace the "spring of living water" that Christ has brought us.

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