RELIGION IN MEDIA AGE. SOME REMARKS ON ROLE OF MEDIA IN RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE LATE MODERNITY.

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RELIGION AND MEDIA

The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz made a pertinent remark in one of his studies, saying that man is "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun." Geertz and other anthropologists believe that it is this accommodation in significance, or meanings that is the main feature differing man from other living beings. Man lives in a world, which he interprets, and he does not know and is not able to perceive any other world. Things are defined by their meaning. However, this meaning must be shared, which means it must be of an intersubjective nature. In order to be of such a nature, there have to be certain means of the "transfer of meaning", i.e. the media. The basic medium is our speech. However, mankind has gradually created further means of this kind, which enabled the maintenance of meanings for a long time in the relatively undistorted form or passing them on more effectively and quickly, or tools that facilitate both. Religion as a system that connected key meanings was necessarily related to these media since the very beginning. With regard to the importance of these media, it is not surprising they were attributed a sacred nature. Thus, we may encounter a sacred language, sacred books and other texts, or sacred pictures and statues in many religions. Their uniqueness lies both in the true depiction of "decisive meanings" concerning the origin of the world, its nature and rules

governing the world, and in the fact that they confer the status of something objective and clearly defined to the meanings they present. They present not one of possible meanings; they present the only possible meaning.

One of the most prominent experts concerned with the role of the media in a society, Marshall McLuhan noticed that it is the nature of the media that influences also the meaning of the thing they present. According to him the media cannot be seen as mere transferors of information that more or less fairly transmit meanings. On the contrary, the media in a substantial manner participate on the appearance and meaning of the information. In the case of religions this fact can be well illustrated on the comparison between literary and non-literary religious systems. If we disregard certain theologizing trends, which tend to regard literary religious systems as more developed and perfected, we cannot avoid noticing substantial differences in the perception of time and space, structuring of the world and its nature, and possibilities of influencing the world. That is one of the reasons why the study of religions, and study of religious changes in particular, should seriously deal with the role played in this process by the media and their transformation.

One of the often-cited examples is a very close relationship between the invention of the printing press and world reformation. The ownership of the Bible and its interpretation had been a unique privilege of a very narrow circle of experts, i.e. priests. Apart from theological reasons, there was the high cost of manuscripts. Therefore, key meanings were not mediated through the text itself, but through its authoritative oral interpretation and its symbolic depiction by fine arts. It is no surprise that sculptural decoration of medieval cathedrals was referred to as Biblia pauperum – the Bible of the poor. By means of easily understandable iconography having a nature of a sacred comic strip the believers learned all that is important about the world, faith and sacral history of the Christian world. All that was framed in the sacred topography of a cathedral, which was God's dwelling, but also an image of the world – imago mundi – in its symbolic and soteriological form.

Gutenberg's invention meant a cardinal turning point. The requirement of many medieval heretic groups such as the Valdese, the Cathars and the Hussites concerning free "delivering of God's word" slowly became not only theological declaration, but a real possibility. The Bible and its interpretations began to spread fast, and thus literate

townsmen obtained a powerful instrument of interpretation of the world, which had been kept back from them until then and which had not been affordable for them with a few exceptions. In this context, Luther's requirement of sola scriptura (by sole scripture) was of fundamental importance. The interpretation of the holy word ceased to be accessible to a narrow circle of priests and it became something of the public domain. This of course changed the status of priests, who due to Luther's principles of sola scriptura, sola gratia and sola fides lost their exclusive position of mediators of sacred matters. At the same time this changed the understanding of the Bible itself, which ceased to be the sacred and tabooed word of God, and became an everyday word of God and a "Baedeker" of a correct life.

Besides these rather dogmatic consequences, the printing press played a substantial role in the new presentation of religion. In the Middle Ages, any religious innovation and its distribution were dependent on the spoken word and itinerant preachers; the world reformation spread in a different way. The key role was again played by printed text, which enabled quick and mass spreading of reformation ideas all over Europe. We may say that reformation brought about the first media war. Both parties, Protestants as well as Catholics, used the printing press not only to spread their ideas, but probably even more often to denounce the opposite party. Europe was flooded with a number of posters and pamphlets, which in a clear, simple and comprehensible way portrayed enemies in the worst possible form and accused them of the worst crimes – murders, incest, blasphemy and heresy and pact with the devil.

Although the role of preachers remained important, it was the printed text that prepared grounds for them and helped to persuade those who had not been persuaded and those who had been dissatisfied. Luther and other reformers realized that they could address the lowest social classes only if their ideas were expressed in a comprehensible way. That meant they had to be expressed in a comprehensible language and in a manner enabling to formulate key ideas in a relatively small space. Key meanings thus leave the preserve of sacred languages – Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and they enter the everyday world structured by forming national languages. At the same time their form transforms – the more radical the proposed reform, the closer the form resembles the language of pamphlets.

Besides "publicity" of theological disputes, the printing press enabled rise of mass production of religious texts of different natures, which according to many statistics today represent the most important item in the economy of many a religious group. For instance, in the USA religious literature worth 685 million dollars was sold in 1986. In 1999, it was 1.2 billion dollars and large evangelical churches sold literature and other printed matter for 2.5 billion dollars (Nelson 2000:39).

A similar revolution was caused by means and technologies related to contemporary mass communication, i.e. newspapers, radio and television. Here it also applies that new "media" brought new "types of meanings". Razelle Frankl points out that this accession of mass media and transformations caused by it are closely connected with the so-called urban revivalism (Frankl 1984). This movement, which appeared in the United States in the first half of the 19th century, was one of components of the 2nd Great Religious Awakening, and its main feature was an effort to address broad masses of urban inhabitants through means of expression of the originating industrial society. Its main representatives, Charles Grandison Finney, Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday demanded that biblical message was communicated to people in a comprehensible form and all available means were used for its spreading.

The foundations of the whole system were laid by Charles Finney (1792 – 1875), who in his book *Lectures: On Revivals of Religion, 1860* explained the principles of a successful mission leading to the real conversion to God. According to him the key is above all the form of sermon, which should resemble the technique of sale of goods: it must be clear, comprehensible and convincing. Therefore, he unambiguously rejects theologically sophisticated doctrines and he bases his lectures on literal interpretation of the Bible, using refined rhetoric.

Another of the key figures of urban revivalism Dwight Moody (1837 – 1899), implemented its rationalization and routinization, whose base was acceptance of "business spirit and corporate structure". He founded a network of Biblical Schools, among which Moody's Biblical Institute in Chicago was the most prominent one, offering highly professional training in religious marketing and effective use of mass communication media,

which in Moody's times were mainly represented by the press and later also radio and television.

The third mentioned preacher Billy Sunday (1862 – 1935), who referred to himself as "God's Salesman" gave this system the final touch by further commercialization and also by adding a certain entertaining feature. Religious broadcasting, at first in the radio, was a real show, during which people achieved salvation through "entertainment". This enabled using communication potential, inherent to mass media – to address a large number of people in one instant. The influence of urban revivalism fully manifested itself in the 1920s and 30s, when radio broadcasting started to spread on a mass scale. Its great opportunities were soon noticed not only by totalitarian political systems, which made it an inseparable part of their power, but also by religious groups.

The American sociologist Ben Armstrong conclusively showed that in the USA, whose radio broadcasting spread most quickly and since the beginning it was a mass issue, more than half of the stations included religious features and more than one tenth of all stations was owned by a religious group. There were a lot of religious groups, who clearly realized that radio may serve not only as a "modern voice notice board", but that it may also provide much more, including new possibilities of ritual and cult life. As early as in 1921 the Christian station KDKA started to broadcast Sunday services. However, both "evangelization" and "rituals" had to accommodate to the new medium. They could no longer be based on rationally chiseled argumentation, dialogue, and gradual refuting of comments in the case of evangelization or on the unique feature of sacral time and space in the case of ritual. They had to correspond to the limited possibilities of the radio. It is no surprise then that we encounter the "radio" and "television" Christianity above all in the environment of evangelical Christianity, from where also the above-mentioned urban revivalism rose. These groups were very well prepared for the use of new means of mass communication, and this both in theology (every space and time is sacred) and from the point of communication strategy (the basis of Christianity is the literal wording of the Bible and not complex doctrines) and the structure of functioning (religious groups function as commercial companies). This was repeated also in the 1950s and 1960s in connection with the spread of television and in the 1990s with the internet.

Of course, this does not mean that modern means of mass communication were not used by other Christian groups such as Catholics or large protestant denominations. The fact is that these groups were not able to fully use their potential and used them rather as a necessary complement to traditional forms and methods. There are exceptions, though. An example of one of them is activities of the Polish clergyman Tadeusz Rydzik, who managed to create a very effective media empire, whose core is Radio Maryja. He, similar to American evangelicals, understood that effective communication through the media must be brief, understandable and "iconic". This ruthless logic, which is inherent to all commercially successful mass media and which originates from the basis of modern mass media, in this case united forces with fundamentalism, stereotyped seeing of the world expressed by black and white simplification. The world as seen by Radio Maryja and today also the TV channel Trwam, is simple and comprehensible in the same way as Latin-American telenovelas. Since the very beginning it is clear who is the villain (Jew, liberals and the European Union) and who is the oppressed hero (conservative Catholics and "true" Polish people). Those who stand somewhere in between have to choose which of the two extremes they will join, as there is no compromise and no third way either.

No wonder that Rydzik and his media and iconic Catholicism conflicted with the church hierarchy. Bishops and other high representatives of the Catholic Church in Poland reprove him for disrespect of ecclesiastical authority, as well as contradictions with the official teaching of the church. However, even though it is not admitted, they are more concerned with the revivalist nature of his conception of Catholicism, bearing a strong charge of protest and striving for complete spiritual, social and political revival of the world, which must use all available means.

Rydzik's "anti-modernism", as well as "anti-modernism" of American TV evangelists, who are direct followers of urban revivalists, is not in fact a result of a conservative reminiscence of good old times. The contrary is true: it is an inseparable part of modernism, more precisely, a highly modern protest to modernism, articulated in a modern iconic language and through modern means of mass communication. Despite seeming similarity, Rydzik's anti-modernism is not a follower of anti-modernism of encyclical letters such as Quanta Cura, Lamentabili or Aeterni Patri. It is closer to protest movements of the 20th century, with which it shares the criticism of apparent weaknesses and contradictions of

modernism, of which the most often cited are value relativism, sharp social differences, pluralist democracies drowning in their own procedures, and disintegration of traditional ("natural") social structures.

Another interesting feature of these media and revivalist groups is that any polemics conducted in other means of expression than their own have almost no effect. Rationally articulated arguments based on the knowledge of theology, philosophy, or other disciplines originate in a completely different context of discourse. Audiences addressed by media and revivalist groups not only do not understand them, but are turned into chaos, which only supports the conviction of the necessity of change and negative assessment of the majority, confused society.

Inability, or better, impossibility to present a rational dialogue, which forms a basis of philosophy, science and after all theology, through mass media is conclusively proved by Niel Postman. In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* he shows transformations of politics and political culture in modern society in connection with the spread of mass means of communication. With expertise, he compares the progress of political campaigns and political argumentation in the era, when the only wide-spread mass media were newspapers and at present, when we are substantially influenced by the radio and particularly television. Key differences of both politics, media and pre-media, consist in the different manner of expression and presentation of a politician and his image. Whereas the "traditional" pre-media politics is more of less based on rationally construed argumentation presented in drawing rooms and at political rallies, contemporary politics is realized through brief iconic communications, which are "focused" only on the so-called important matters. It is inadmissible to explain fundaments at length or to express nuances. The broadcasting time is too expensive for the spectator to be bored and to have to think too much. At the same time, a politician must be sufficiently photogenic and in line with aesthetic standards of the era of the media. As Postman remarks, it is quite improbable that Abraham Lincoln with his square head and big nose would win contemporary presidential election. Appearance, presentation in the media and ability to express oneself in a simple way and iconic language are the main qualification to a political office nowadays.

This process of Disneyzation, as it is referred to by David Lyon, happening in politics is also reflected in contemporary religions, and an utterly key role here is played by the media. However, this statement cannot be understood as an expression of contempt following from the belief that present "media" religions and their proponents such as TV preachers are greedy opportunists, who will do anything for their own benefit and the benefit of their religious group, including intentional simplification of the "mystery" of faith, false miracles, hollow moralizing and abusing trust of simple and less educated believers. Media religious groups of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries are, similar to other late-modern or post-modern institutions, voluntary, market-oriented and technologically developed organizations which respond to needs of the society and use opportunities it provides. In the same manner as the whole modernism, these religious systems are based on rationalization, economic thinking, effort to achieve the most possible efficiency and quantification of reality, which is best reflected in the proverb "time is money". As Quentin Schultze remarks, each broadcasting costs a lot of money and the money has to be earned. Therefore, it is necessary to accommodate to the rules of media environment.

RELIGION AND INTERNET

The 1990s bring another challenge induced by technological innovation and modern mass communication means. We are talking about the internet. In the latter half of the 1990s, 12 % of adult Americans who had access to the internet used this new medium to purposes related to religions. Today's internet is literally loaded with religious websites or links to religions. Using certain overstatement, we could say that religion together with pornography is becoming the most popular content of websites and the most often aim of internet surfers.[1] The almost unlimited virtual space of the internet offers an endless range of religious texts, talismans, magic objects, as well as possibilities of virtual pilgrimages and services and lately also an increasing number of chats on religious topics. The manner of the

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[1] There were 867.000.000 links connected with term "Religion", 1.830.000.000 with "God" and 3.130.000.000 with "sex" on Google in September 2017.

use of the internet is diversified too. We can find websites with spiritual nature that serve as a suitable "basis" providing texts and instructions for various meditations and exercises, as well as internet shops offering "religious products" of different kinds. These more of less conventional ways of using the internet only show part of the potential that the internet has.

The potential of the internet can be shown on the example of the "virtual diocese" of bishop Jacques Gaillot, who was deprived of his episcopacy in Evreux (France) by the Vatican in 1995, for the reason of "inappropriate behavior" and presentation of teaching that "contravenes Catholic doctrine". Gaillot refused to accept his dismissal and thus his diocese was declared officially vacant. From the point of canonic law Gaillot still had his episcopal ordination, but he did not have a place where to assert his authority. Therefore, he used a possibility, known by the canonic law, and he declared himself a bishop *in partibus infedelium* in the non-existent diocese of Partenia, which in the antiquity was located in the northern part of today's Algeria. He could not perform his duties in the new diocese because the village has not existed since the sixth century and no people have lived in the location covered with sand since the eight century. Not that this was his aim. With the help of a top designer and an internet company he created the virtual form of his new diocese (www.partenia.fr), called it the "Diocese without boundaries" and offered it to all Catholics who long for a "place of freedom". Gaillot's conception of the "virtual diocese" was not restricted to technical possibilities of the internet and specific interpretation of canonic law. it was supported with elaborated ecclesiology. According to Gaillot, the primordial church was an interpreter of a kind, which according to him was one of the reasons why it resisted the pressure by the Roman Empire. "Primordial Christian understood that what matters is not proclamation of physical power in an existing place, but creation of a network of believers, i.e. being online." Already in the first year of its existence, the virtual diocese marked more than 200 thousand visits. Gaillot's Partenia shows that we face not only a new means of communication, but also a new space offering possibilities yet to be discovered by religious missions, polemics, or even new forms of religious groups.

In terms of importance, quality, and capacity the Internet is one of the most significant inventions in human communication as well as it is a crucial factor for transformation of this communication in present era. It is a new contribution to the evolution line of communication tools (language, writing, printing…), which serves to

mankind for interpretation of the world and for distributing these interpretations in society. The arrival of this new type of media anticipates and possibly defines changes that are taking place in the interconnected world at the turn of a new millennium.

Key problems in research of these transformations arise above all from changeability and persistent progress of this media. The very origins of the Internet can be traced back to 1960s, while its more systematic use did not start before 1990s, when wider strata of society and a bigger number of individuals were involved in the Internet use. That means that there is more than 20-year lasting development of this media and just one decade when its influence was significantly immense, global and having consequences for society as a whole. In other words, research of religion in Cyberspace is extremely complicated due to recency of the investigated object (Internet) and due to fluidity in its use.

The term fluidity is understood as transformations of strategies and practices, which have been employed for communication in the Internet in just a short period of time. The Internet started as a hi-tech (US) military technology, it soon transformed to an information exchange platform of (western) academic world and later to a community mail or bulletin board service. After the invention of web pages, it expanded in a global market offering everything from information, disinformation, products and all kinds of services including religious or erotic experiences. Recently, another revolution in Cyberspace has occurred, labelled with trademark Web 2.0. Now, a simple scheme author – recipient has been abolished and the Cyberspace became a place where everybody offers anything and everybody consumes anything and where complexity of social networks (Facebook, Twitter) or intensity of volunteer engagement in collective projects (Wikipedia, YouTube) is more important than visit rate or database size. Very interesting experiment concerning to the reflection of religion on so called new media (concretely YouTube) was done in the frame of project *Future of Religion*. As a part of activity DialogLab was created by one of famous Czech youtubers short video on religion and its reflection among young people (see http://www.budoucnostnabozenstvi.cz/dialoglab/).

The first attempts to describe the encounter of religions with the Internet were undertaken some time ago.[2] The first efforts were given to assort and classify chaotic samples of religious manifestations that were leaking from offline reality into the Cyberspace. It was necessary to establish a systematic order in amounts of information, web pages, discussion rooms and thousands of other links that jumped out of any search engine after typing words like "God", "Religion" or "After-life". That explains why the first simple and functional classification systems presented by Christopher Helland and others (Helland 2000), were welcome with much enthusiasm. Helland had divided religious imports in the Cyberspace in two groups. The first group are imports with just informative or communicative characteristics, when the core of religious life and message is situated outside of the Cyberspace (religion online). The second type of imports are those where the axis of religious life is moving completely to the Cyberspace (online religion) including community meetings, rituals, proselytizing, conversion etc. Although this classification concept soon became a target of some criticism (see Young, G. 2004: 93-105) and was revised by its author himself too (Helland 2002: 293-302), majority of following research projects on religions in the Cyberspace have been built on these fundaments until the present days. A hunt for a quite exotic species of *online religion* became popular, as the species was seen as a representative model for the future symbiosis of religion and the Internet, and it was supposed to be an essence of future cyber-religious society transformed by CMC. The early research was also influenced by an evaluative dispute between techno-optimists and techno-pessimists considering directions of the Internet and other IT technologies development. Nevertheless, the whole Internet and its employing methods were, as stated earlier, involved with structural changes in its short history and these mutations caused the fact that the classification, once maybe valid and useful, became antiquated and rather confusing.

In spite of perception of the Internet as a unique sort of space, it is necessary to remember that nowadays there only exists "place" for communication in the Cyberspace. The fact that this space sometimes acquires other that just purely informational extensions (it can become a place of a love adventure, of definitive commitment to God etc.), just

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[2] The first serious academic works on relation between religion and the Internet appeared in the second half of 1990´s in USA, e.g. studies by David O'Leary (1996), J. C. Rama (1996), T. Brooke (1997) or Jeff Zaleski (1997).

happens thanks to projections of CMC into the real world and because of primary importance of communication for the human being as a part of community. Through communication in the Cyberspace, people are developing meanings inside this artificial space, which are then distributed in this space and result in digital "webs of significance" (Geertz) that are grown deeply in human life as its integral parts. CMC practised by different religious communities can consequently transmute offline forms of community appearance, structure, authority hierarchy, identity perception and even community´s religious message (McLuhan).

The variety of methods that are employed by different religious traditions to „colonize" the Cyberspace is related to different types and the pre-Internet histories of particular religious communities. It is possible to distinguish certain Internet usage trends and characteristics shared by older, more traditional, populous and homogenous religious groups from those employed by new religious movements (NRM), loosely organised and undersized groups or those in opposition to mainstream and surrounding society. A growing global community of migrants and full-time travellers will choose a different strategy for their religious presence on the Internet than an also growing community of territorially settled but religiously unsettled "spiritual seekers".

Therefore, is necessary to pay attention to deep analysis of cyberspace and its transformation in the context of transformation of relation between religion and modern society. Especially we have to focus on internet as a specific space with specific rules and forms of communication, which are able to influence off-line social relations and vitally affect interpretation of everyday reality as well as our attitudes toward such phenomenon like religion is.

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