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Continuity and change of religiosity. Selected results of sociological research on religious attitudes

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Abstract

Both continuity and change mark every process of culture, and hence belong to the field of religion. From another perspective, religion can be viewed as one of the most "conservative" constituents of culture. Consequently, it is not that easy, although interesting, for researchers either to observe different processes occurring in the field of religion or anticipate its long-lasting changes (e.g., in people's religious attitudes)[1].

[1] In Poland the interesting perspective on diverse and comprehensive issues of the methodological nature of the religious phenomena was provided, e.g., by Grzegorz Babiński. See Babiński, G. (1995). Dylematy metodologiczne socjologa religii [Methodological dilemmas of the sociologist of religion]. *Przegląd Religioznawczy*, 2, 31-42.

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1 Introduction

Social change is the opposite to continuation or continuity, and is defined as the alteration of the social system (group, organization) over the given time span. In sociology, such a model of considering religion is defined by the paradigm of continuity and change[2]. According to this pattern, researchers can describe, analyse, and interpret the basics of religion as a kind of continuum within the framework of different modern processes, such as secularization and pluralism, individualization and subjectivization or privatization. One can say that studies based on the paradigm of continuity and change are aimed to capture the deviation in the framework of religion, religiosity or religious tradition. Particularly meaningful is the definition of the change direction, for example, in case of people's religious attitudes, of the degree of their conformity according to the accepted model as a reference system (in various Polish studies on the attitudes of Catholics, it often constituted, e.g., the model of people's religiosity).

This article deals with the issues of continuity and change of religiosity, although no detailed description of such indicators or other studies will be given in order to receive the overall picture of changes in religiosity (seen in Catholicism in Poland). Then the attention will be drawn to its other dimensions[3], while preserving and recommending the narrow interpretation, taking into account the above-mentioned methodological notes.

2 Generational perspective in the study of religiosity

It is rather impossible to overestimate the cognitive value of studies, analyses and reflections on religiosity, or, broadly speaking, on the culture of a particular society, applying the generational perspective[4]. It is worth stressing at least two of the multiple reasons why this perspective appears to be particularly attractive. The first one belongs to the cognitive value of generational studies on religiosity, regardless of their territorial extent. It makes it possible in the most authoritative way to use the paradigm of continuity and change while analyzing the dynamics of the religious phenomenon in its various aspects. On the one hand, it

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2 Korzeniowski, M. (2004). Ciągłość i zmiana (paradygmat socjologii religii) [Continuity and change (sociology of religion paradigm)]. In M. Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, J. Mariański (Eds.), *Leksykon socjologii religii: zjawiska – badania – teorie [Lexicon of the sociology of religion: phenomena - research - theory]* (pp. 52-54). Warsaw.

3 The so-called dimensional model of analysis of the institutional religiosity allows for the use of the broad index of indicators to produce rich sources and conduct valuable analyses.

4 Korzeniowski, M. (2016). Religijność w przekazie pokoleniowym – ujęcie socjologiczne [Religiosity in generational transmissions - sociological frame]. In A. Barska, K. Biskupska, I. Sobieraj (Eds), *Przestrzenie pamięci. Świat wartości w przekazie pokoleniowym [The extents of memory. The world of values in the generational transmission]* (pp. 241-243). Opole.

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allows the researcher to grasp various pieces of socio-religious reality, be it the permanent elements or marginally changeable ones in spite of the transformations or accumulation of changes (in the economic, social or political areas of life). On the other hand, there is a rare opportunity to observe these features of social consciousness and attitudes, that can be the beginning of something new, uninvestigated before, given that they are mostly focused on the young generation.

The second argument in favour of the generational framework in socio-religious studies is its exemplary value, known to sociologists independently of their paradigm of research[5]. Generational perspective makes it possible to clearly reveal the changes that occur both on a qualitative and a quantitative level, showing them either in terms of character, type, or intensity, social range and scale. In this sense, it perfectly illustrates how the issue of generational communication and identification translates into the phenomenon of continuity or cultural integrity. As Margaret Mead observes, the continuity of cultures is based on the lively coexistence of generations[6]. One can say that the aforementioned generational perspective of the studies on religiousness implicitly assumes the "coexistence," meaning, first and foremost, that religious tradition as well as the degree of its internalisation are determined by the overall generational heredity and are deep in the culture of a particular family environment. Margaret Mead finds this particular basis of the continuity of every culture in the living coexistence of at least three generations[7], which is understood as the specific and direct form of their encounters in a given culture. Certainly, this system of analytical comparative reference in the study of transmission of religiosity, i.e., covering simultaneously three generations living at a certain time, seems to be cognitively valuable and fascinating. However, it must be noted, that along with the widely common sociological reflections on one or two generations (e.g., generations within a family: parents-children), comprehensive projects embracing three generations are quite rare[8].

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5 The significance of this exemplary character of the analysis is primarily related to the qualitative research in which the exemplifying methods serve to illustrate the accepted suppositions with the help of empirical examples (e.g. in biographical methods); cf.

6 Mead, M. (2000). *Culture and Commitment. A Study of the Generation Gap* (p.128). Warsaw.

7 Mead, M. Culture…, op. cit., p. 25. The author herself dedicates the book in line with the consequently depicted generational triad regarding her ancestors as well as the descendants. „To my father's mother and to my daughter's daughter" – placing herself in the middle of this intergenerational meeting.

8 Generally, the sociological reflection on the representatives of a particular, one generation, two sometimes (e.g. family generation - parents and children), while the comprehensive studies embracing three generations are rather a rare phenomenon.

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3 Sociological concept of religiosity

In sociology it is often emphasized that religiosity is the internalized value of a religious culture and as such is reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of people (religious communities)[9], creating - as Jürgen Matthes puts it - a social form of religion[10]. This form is shaped as a result of socialisation in which both family environment and the local community together with the institution of parish communicate the same or similar values, norms and patterns of religious behaviour from generation to generation, thus forming more or less consistent attitudes and behaviours.

Understanding of "religiosity" may also vary, *inter alia*, depending on whether it is interpreted substantively[11] (semantically), or functionally. In the former case, only the actual content (referring to the supernatural, God) constitutes the criterion of identifying religious phenomena, while in the latter the function it fulfils is also taken into account. Proponents of the content interpretation of religion emphasise that the fundamental advantage is the ability to distinguish between the religious system of meanings and the secular one. Thus, the criterion used in this case not only indicates which functions are fulfilled, but also defines religion in particular.

Understanding of the term "religiosity" in this paper is based, among others, on Roland Robertson's reference to transcendence or the Absolute as a defining feature of the contentiousness of religiosity[12]. Moreover, this understanding is marked institutionally, socially and culturally, albeit without restricting the research to the pure reconstruction of the Catholic Church expectations. In this context, some Polish sociologists, such as Wladyslaw Piwowarski, have stressed the methodologically important research directives, which allow them to think in terms of methods available for a reliable research. These directives provide that: a) religiosity as an object of a sociological research is institutionalised, b) religiosity occurring in the social reality (the social form of religiosity) is restricted by socio-cultural context, c) religiosity can be understood but with the reference to non-empirical world (i.e., to the supernatural reality, the Absolute, God, accepted by the aforementioned believer).

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9 Piwowarski, W. (1996). *Socjologia religii [Sociology of religion]* (p. 44).

10 Cf. Korzeniowski, M. Religijność w przekazie [Religiosity in generational transmissions]… op. cit., (p. 246).

11 Mariański, J. (2011). *Katolicyzm polski, ciągłość i zmiana. Studium socjologiczne [Polish Catholicism, continuity and change. Sociological Study]* (p. 33). Cracow.

12 This general feature is defined by the statement that the non-empirical or "supernatural" reality is God, the Absolute. Robertson, R. (1970). Major Issues in the Analysis of Religions. In R. Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion* (pp. 36-77). Oxford.

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4 Continuity or change of religion?

After analysing the significant results of the sociological research conducted in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which undoubtedly demand further empirical verification, it should be noted that the collectivity of the south-eastern part of this region (mainly Kędzierzyn-Koźle)[13] was formed mostly by those who identified themselves as believers and deep believers. The latter represented the older generation born before the World War II, whose attitudes, on the one hand, resulted from the eschatological reflection on human life (a special type of faith motivation), and on the other hand, expressed the attachment to tradition. A similar relationship occurred between the generation category and the self-declaration of religious practices. It pointed to a gradual decline in the regularity of practices - the younger the generation, the more substantial the decline. However, in spite of the differences observed, the younger generational category was usually characterized by a high level of self-declaration of faith (exceeding the eighty percent limit at that time). On the other hand, a phenomenon of non-systematic and rare religious practices by people who declared themselves as believers and even deep believers, revealed the crisis of religiosity, attributed mostly to the younger generation. The above-mentioned observations testified to the existence of generational continuity of beliefs, norms and patterns of behaviour. However, the range of similarity of religious characteristics of the generations under examination differs according to their dimensions, suggesting that generational belonging is a factor that differentiates the attitudes. There are some distinguishable relationships between the older and the middle-age generations, the middle-age and the younger generations, and between the older and the younger generations. Typically, the direction of these dependencies is consistent with the general supposition that the greater the distance between the generations, the greater the diversity of their religiosity. However, there are some exceptions to those assumptions, namely, some obligatory religious practices, above all the communion of St. Easter, in which the representatives of the younger generation were placed somewhere between the older and the middle-age generations; and religious knowledge, the level of which was higher, though not satisfactory, among the younger generation. The level of conformity of different generations turned out to be dependant on the particular parameters of religiosity. The common feature of all three categories under examination was the widest range of beliefs about the central truths of God

13 Here is the reference to those issues of the author's sociological research the results of which - despite being conducted in the south-western part of Poland (Opole) - correspond to the national observations and could often be intrapolar in a wider dimension. See Korzeniowski, M. (2005). *Religijność pokoleń. Studium przypadku rejonu kędzierzyńsko-kozielskiego [Religiosity of generations. Case-study of the Kędzierzyn-Koźle region]*. Cracow. These are also referred to in this article in various places.

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(the existence of the Higher Power, the Trinity, and the crucifixion and death of Jesus for the salvation of men). The overall percentage of acceptance of the above mentioned truths exceeded ninety percent, and was slightly below this threshold among the younger generation. Elements of the generational similarity of religious attitudes were considered in the ritualistic dimension of religiosity, but from the point of view of the requirements of the Church, they did not always fully meet the expectations.

High levels of general participation in mandatory religious practices, which (by far the highest in case of the older generation) among all the generations exceeded the threshold of eighty percent, were noted. It was related to the ratio of "Sunday Catholics" as well as confession and the Easter communion. Nevertheless, the younger the generation was, the more it was shrinking in the category of people attending the Mass. Every Sunday, there was an increase in non-regular attendance (almost every Sunday).

Half of the first decade of the twenty-first century revealed generational compatibility with the generalized acceptance of marriage as a sacramental rite among all the generations, although it was noted that the importance attributed to this one-off practice turned out to be the smallest among the younger generation. The similarity of the generations, however, reflected the tendency, in this time away from the Church's recommendations, to irregularities in the fulfillment of non-compulsory religious practices (especially devotions), a manifestation of the increasingly frequent neglect of these religious activities. It was mostly the case of the middle-age and the younger generation than the older one.

And, if so, to what extent did the religiosity of generations of the Opole region of the first decade of the twenty-first century change? When looking for generational discontinuity, the relatively large range of change is characterised by religious normativity. First of all, there was confirmed the fundamental hypothesis formulated in that time on selectivity of the religious attitudes of people under examination, which was attributed to all the generations. Selectivity which is defined as a greater or smaller lack of religious conformity as a result of accepting only some elements of faith while rejecting others, was characteristic to the area of beliefs, religious activities, and moral norms. By contrast, the most selective is the set of norms regulating life in marriage, especially in the sexual sphere. Each of the generations under examination has proved the assumption - also accepted in sociology - that the intimacy of partner life is the most sensitive area of discrepancy between the expectations of believers and the Church requirements. However, this is the area where the greatest intergenerational gap emerged, with lowering the moral rigour along with the transition to the younger categories of generations. Here it is important to mention the issues of admissibility of sexual intercourse before the church wedding and of the use of contraceptives. The greater the permissiveness of these phenomena and the relativism, the less rigorously other

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moral norms were approached[14]. Hence, representatives of the middle-age and even younger generations are moving away from conformity in the issues of sacramental marriage, divorce, and abortion. The phenomenon of selectivity has also affected other dimensions of religiosity. It was found that religious attitudes and knowledge do not occur in the community in a completely coherent manner, and generally rarely constitute the complementary elements of religiosity of the generations under question (the greatest discrepancies between beliefs and religious authority occurred among the older generation, and the smallest among the younger one). The hypothesis of modest religious knowledge has also been confirmed. It can be stated that there is more often the belief and the acceptance of faith than the proper knowledge about it. In addition, there is the declarative character of the interest demonstrated in the professed religion, as seemed to be often the case. There has been found quite widespread, although superficial and rather potential than actual interest in the religious content, but it was rarely accompanied by individual cognitive activity (e.g., reading of the religious texts). A selective approach to the content of religious doctrine was the basis of the incompatibility found in the structure of the beliefs of the generations under question. First of all, it was related to the beliefs of Scripture (middle age and younger generations) and to the acceptance of eschatological truths (mainly the older generation). As it has been proved, the common belief that Scripture is the Word of God, corresponded to a much less convincing belief in its validity. On the other hand, universal belief in the existence of eternal reward or punishment was accompanied by a clearly weakening belief in the existence of hell, and even a weaker belief in the resurrection of the flesh (among all the generations). Inconsistency, manifested in the conjunction of belief in the eternal punishment and negation of the existence of hell, testifies to the inconsistency of belief in eschatological truths. However, these low indicators are not related to other fundamental religious truths (e.g., with the belief in the existence of God).

It is interesting that, in spite of unorthodox attitudes toward some eschatological truths typical to all the generations, these are the final issues that outline the area of religious experience. All the three generations (the older generation to the larger extent) strongly believe that only faith could give people confidence within the last hour of life. However, the younger the generation, the

14 In his research on youth Józef Baniak argues that deep believers and believers strongly reject the immoral behaviour of people in the sphere of marital and sexual life categorising it as unlawful. See. Baniak, J. (2010). *Małżeństwo i rodzina w świadomości młodzieży gimnazjalnej na tle kryzysu jej tożsamości osobowej [Marriage and family in the minds of junior high school students at the background of crisis of their personal identity]* (p. 64); see also: Mariański, J. (2012). *Małżeństwo i rodzina w świadomości młodzieży maturalnej – stabilność i zmiana [Marriage and family in the minds of junior high school students - continuity and change]*. Torun.

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less often religion was the source of help in everyday situations. The younger generation tend to perceive religious beliefs as one of the multiple sources of the purpose of life ("not only faith gives the life a real meaning"). It is interesting and worth investigating whether these non-religious sources of the meaning of life - such as family, work, world, love, friendship - appear to be considered compatible with religion or are alternative to them.

The reflections have shown that in today's pluralistic society, full of various propositions, opportunities for a free choice of values, but also undesirable threats to the sacred, the institutionalized religion continues to play an important role in the consciousness of generations. For the majority of each generation, the Church is a community of believers, while the parish is its local realisation. As it has been pointed out, the vast majority of each generation (though with the predominance of the older one) attend the church in their parish.

5 Conclusion

Do the research of the first decade of the XXI century and to what extent correspond to the current socio-religious phenomena? It has been shown that almost all the deviations among younger generations from the pattern of religiosity realised by the older generation in the first decade of the XXI century meant greater or lesser deviation from the model of religions propagated by the Church. The closest to this model were the religious attitudes of the older generation. Among the middle-age and the younger generations, however, the changes in religious attitudes did not consist in abandoning religion and its total repudiation. The tendency to individualise religion and distance from its institutional character (church indifferentism) has become more evident. These tendencies are, as Sabino Acquaviva observes, an aspect of the overall process of privatisation of life[15]. It seems, however, that they do not mean, at least in relation to the described community, the complete subjectivity and autonomy of the religious life, but rather the reduction of institutional obligations towards the Church, while at the same time widening the areas of one's own decision.

It's worth to mention one more regularity that has been detected and is still valid nowadays, according to which the religiosity of the younger generation increases in the dimension of faith (the truth of the faith) according to the magnitude of the declared influence of the family. People who are aware of such an

15 Acquaviva, S. (1983). Rozdźwięk między teorią religii niewidzialnej a jej weryfikacją [Discord between the theory of invisible religion and its verification.]. In F. Adamski (selection and elaboration), *Socjologia religii [Sociology of religion]* (p. 347).

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impact on their attitudes are markedly higher in religious beliefs[16] than those who do not perceive similar influences. At the same time, the observed extent of deviation from traditional sexual morality conforms to the observation of a specific moral and even ethical revolution, and the hypothesis of the discursive "areas" of discontinuity. This kind of religious change converges with sociologists' current observations on the attitudes of young people. As a result, the dynamically changing reality is not detached from the religious condition of the young generation. Sociologists are increasingly aware of the shift, often quite obvious, towards religious indecision, indifference, or disbelief (e.g. the opinion that "people can be religious without the Church" as the People of God)[17]. It is reflected in less regular participation in public religious practices (Sunday Mass, receiving communion) or further liberalisation of moral beliefs (increased acceptance of divorce, premarital sexual intercourse - treated as a "private sector"). On the other hand, sociologists of religion are much more cautious evaluating the religiosity of modern societies or young generations[18], which is particularly visible in relation to the so-called thesis of secularism. The processes of decollectivisation in the sense of the development of autonomous religiosity and spirituality are also increasingly recognized.

The mentioned issues give rise to the need for further empirical verification by drawing an interesting and worthwhile exploration prospect.

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16 Consciousness of young generations of the meaning of their parents in preserving traditions and religious identity is observed by researchers not only in the christian culture. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2013). Inter-Generational Negotiations of Religious Identity, Belief and Practice: Child, Youth and Adult Perspectives from Three Cities. In J. Garnett, A. Harris (Eds.), *Rescripting Religion in The City. Migration and Religious Identity in the Modern Metropolis*. Farnham (Surrey).

17 Cf. Borowik, I. (2017). Religion in Poland between tradition and modernity, or religious continuity and change in conditions of transformation. In S.P. Ramet, I. Borowik (Eds.), *Religion, politics, and values in Poland. Continuity and Change Since 1989* (pp. 196-197). New York.

18 Mariański, J. (2013). *Sekularyzacja, desekularyzacja, nowa duchowość. Studium socjologiczne [Secularisation, desecularisation, new spirituality. Sociological study]* (p. 64). Cracow.

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