Dominik Zimny

Popular piety of the Eastern cultural borderland – a case study of southern Podlasie

Summary

The issue of popular piety has been a problematic and unexplained one for ages, especially on account of the obscure character of the phenomenon's very definition. Both scholars of such areas as culture, language, social or ethnographic studies, and of the Church, together with the Holy See and officials of various Christian churches, have attempted to capture the essence of the phenomenon. Although various cults of popular piety in the Christian religion have existed for as long as the religion itself, the issue has not been thoroughly researched by any clerical institution. An increased interest in the problem of popular piety appeared only in the 20th century, as it was then that such publications as the Ecumenical Directorium from 1967, drawn by the Papal Council for the Support of Christian Unity, or the second part of the document from 1979, as well as the 1993 Directorium for the Realisation of the Regulations and Norms of Ecumenism, were issued. A breakthrough of a kind brought a document from 2001 drawn by the Congregation for the Discipline of Sacraments and God's Cult, titled the Directorium of Popular Religiosity and Liturgy. Regulations and Recommendations, in which the Vatican clerics included a lot of precious information about the essence of popular piety and its role in the life of the Church. Although in Poland the considerations of this issue have been ongoing for many years, the subject was or has been approached by such theologians as priests W. Nowak, S. Cichy, H.J. Sobeczko, or S.Rabiej and Cz. Krakowiak, the investigations of the mentioned priests have been primarily based on the document of the Roman clergy. It is worth observing that though the Vatican document includes recommendations concerning regular priests in their parishes, the recommendations refer to the whole Church around the world, excluding certain Roman-Catholic practices from particular countries. Although the Polish clerics fully approve the suggestions of the Italian clergy, in their publications created after the release of the Papal text, they noted numerous other, precious guidelines for priests on the

national level, making it thus possible to more precisely determine the functions and aims of Christian manifestations of religiosity.

However, as was mentioned above, it had already been three decades earlier that popular piety was a subject which attracted considerable attention of numerous clerics, bishops or even cardinals and popes. However, a greater interest in the subject was generated by the 2nd Vatican Council, taking place between 1962 and 1965, as well as the above-mentioned document, which appeared in Poland in 2003, thanks to the Pallotinum publishing house of Poznań. The Roman clerics included in their text the most significant recommendations for Catholic bishops and parish priests regarding the position they should take on the subject of the cults of popular piety. The publication determines the functions those cults serve in Chrisitan life and how to organise Church celebrations so that individual and community manifestations of religiosity do not coincide with, defy, or dominate official, liturgical celebrations. The publication of the Directorium is truly significant, as even the clergy have had problems with determining and appropriately interpreting the issues of popular religiosity and popular piety, frequently mistaking the range of each of them and not distinguishing between religious practices (miracula) and magical acts (maleficia). Moreover, Christian popular piety plays, in times of cultural unification and advancing secularisation of the Christian masses, a huge role, serving the bonding, integrational, and patriotic functions for many of the faithful, at the same time leading the Church to a truly perceived God and Christian religious, culture, and ethnic-national community. An equally important role of popular religiosity has been observed by researchers of traditional culture, including such accomplished scholars as M. Zowczak, T. Smolińska, J. Adamowski and R. Tomicki who, in their research, on numerous occasions, have underlined a broader range of popular religiosity of the not fully defined phenomenon of non-liturgical cult manifestations, being simultaneoudly a precious link cementing the faithful and an element enriching the celebration of official holy masses. The significance of popular piety in the life of the Church was also remarked upon by Pope John Paul II, who observed that cults of popular piety are an authentic hunger for God stemming from real faith, which should be appreciated and developed, without which liturgy would have no reflection and would become void, unpleasant to God.

In the text of this doctoral thesis, the author refers to the definition of popular piety created by Roman clerics, who argue that popular piety includes "various cult

manifestations of private or communal character which, within the Christian faith, are frequently manifested not through liturgy, but forms emerging from the spirit of particular nations or social groups and their culture." The term is similarly understood by other clerics, who include in its definition also religious subjects, such as popular masses, prayers – usually private ones said at home, traditions and ritual customs, traditional religious songs, rituals – most frequently the non-concession or paraliturgical ones, but also acts accepted and practised by the Church, such as celebrations connected with particular sacraments, rituals connected with periods of liturgical holidays, cults of saints, with considerable emphasis on Marian celebrations, ways of the cross, rosary, or various blessings, including, for example, the blessing of the fields, waters, fire, crops, herbs, or foods. The rich variety of the practices of popular piety should also include prayers for the dead, though the clergy claim that such sacral forms constitute a separate group of verbal acts of the Christian cult manifestations. Numerous priests also claim that within all manners of expression of Christian popular piety should be included various gestures and behaviours, whose aim is to acknowledge God's majesty and worship in an appropriate way. In their opinions, it includes touching and kissing paintings and holy places, relics and sacral objects, making offerings, prayer on one's knees and prostration, lighting candles, censing with ritual smoke, bowing, as well as religious sighs and lamentations. A significant cleric group also claims that many of the cult forms of popular piety might include in their structure magical elements, that is why it is advisable to purify those forms and evangelise them as well as adjust them to the canon of the Catholic Church which, at times of contemporary culture and social change, appears to be risky and it might weaken the position of the Holy See.

The above-mentioned forms of worship served the characterisation and description of the most representative manifestations of Christian religiosity in the southern-Podlasie faithful of both Roman Catholic and Byzantine-Slavonic churches. On the basis of field research and related literature, the text explains in five chapters the questions connected with not only popular religiosity and piety or the position of these issues in the life of the respective churches, but also the broadly understood borderland, explaining the definition of the term itself and characterising the culture of the area of Podlasie located at the Eastern border of Poland. The region has been witness to the clash of cultural influences of both the Eastern and Western Slavs and, what is connected with

that, also religious beliefs of the inhabitants of those lands practised in the religiosity of both Roman Catholic and Byzantine-Slavonic faithful.

In order to illustrate the exceptional character of the southern-Podlasie cults of popular piety, the author has used, among others, the carolling custom of 'Brodacze,' which has been practised for ages in Sławatycze, a town on the Bug river. The characteristics of this unique carolling form is based on the principle of the New Year carol singers being characters from both the heavenly sacral dimension as well as the earthly, or profane, relating to farming culture. It is proved by the ritual behaviours of 'brodacze,' who on the last day of the year participate in a mass celebrated at the local church, during which they sing ritual carols, pass holiday wishes to the parishioners, and collect money in support of the local fire brigade, as well as their decorative and colourful costumes and certain gestures, foretelling a good harvest and fertility in future life, farming or private. An elsewhere unusual demonstration of Christian popular piety is the cult of St. Victor the Martyr, which has existed since the 19th century and has been celebrated by the community of the Holy Trinity church in Janów Podlaski. The local temple is the only one in the world to possess relics of the Roman legionary knight martyred for his faith. The relics, including the skull, numerous bones as well as a vessel with dried blood of St. Victor were brought to the Podlasie diocese by bishop Beniamin Szymański in 1859, a time of more intensified persecutions of the Podlasie Unites and the whole Roman Catholic church. The cult of St. Victor the Martyr has been quite controversial among the Tsarist authorities and officials of the Russian Orthodox Church, as in the 19th century it became a factor uniting Catholics with Greek-Catholics, leading the faithful of both denominations to one Church and commonly worshipped God. The character of St. Victor is therefore included in the cult forms of popular piety not only through the numerous forms of cult dedicated to the saint, such as pilgrimages, adoration of relics, pendants, songs, and prayers, but also through the national-liberational context, characteristic for popular piety, but in this case, referring to the worshipped religion.

In the doctoral dissertation, the author also addresses the question of private, home prayers, which originated from once widespread magical spell-casting or cursing, and together with the spreading of Christian culture, they acquired the value and character of the official concession prayers, though they were never recognised as such by the Church. An example of such a sacral formula is the Dream of Mary analysed in the work, whose content refers to both the old-Polish songs or prayers widespread in the old traditional

culture, revealing the initially mystical symbolism of words hidden in the sensual vision of 'covering' oneself with the cross or Mother Mary leaving the pages of the gospels, as well as magical acts of spell-casting, containing in its nature the motif of a metaphysical vigil, that is, a component characterising a symbolic passing in between the day and night zones, thus implying an anthropomorphic dualism signifying the nightly separation of the soul and the body, especially if the prayer was said before going to bed. Referring to the opinions of other scholars, the author observed that the Dream of Mary served as a complementation of the official church, morning and evening prayers, thus being included in the range of individually performed home prayers, constituting a verbal, religious act of apotropaic character, securing a person from all evil, as well as during the most dangerous moments of crossing the spheric or time boundaries, characteristic of the cycle of annual rites and the day and night cycle. This sacral prayer form was therefore included in the group of prayer acts of mediation character, but it was also an example of a home prayer with distinct features of a closing formula, thanks to which it also belonged to the magic rituals of Alkmene. An almost analogous characteristics is demonstrated by people's visits to the Podlasie faith healers or witch doctors, known in the past as village whisperers. Also these persons, in their verbal-gestic practices use sacral word forms, likely of spellcasting character, and other practices meant to inhibit evil forces, similarly to the magical rituals of Alkmene. In the course of the field research, the author registered the account of an interviewee, who recalled her visit to a healer prominent in the whole region of Podlasie, who in her practices used sacral prayer forms as well as ritual gestic practices of magical character.

As complementation of the presented ways of manifestation of popular piety, the work includes the description of the multi-context and present in both Christian churches, the cult of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, that is, the Marian cult (marialis cultus) widespread in all Slavic lands. A broad subchapter of the work is devoted to the Mother of God, presenting two of the most frequently encountered in traditional culture images of Mary, as the Mother of the Son of God – Jesus Christ, when her holy likeness is presented as loving and caring 'Bogarodzica,' as it is presented in the 'Lulajże Jezuniu' Christmas carol, as well as the Agonising and Suffering Mother mourning her beloved child, which is presented by numerous iconographic and painting depictions such as 'Matka Boska Cierpiąca,' 'Bolejąca,' 'Nieustającej Pomocy,' or 'Pieta.' While considering the borderland Marian cult, it is worth observing that regardless of the manner

of presentation, the sacral image of Mother Mary remains the same in both the Catholic and Orthodox faithful. In their minds, the perception of 'Bogurodzica' is connected with several roles of the Mother of God, but the most frequently mentioned include Mother – Advocate, Protector, Source of Hope and Faith, Merciful, Helper, Archangel Lady, Queen of Families, Queen of Heaven and Earth, Queen of Poland, or Queen of Podlasie.

The author observed and included in the final chapter – as a specific feature of the borderland popular religiosity – a certain meritoric link connecting one of the iconographic presentations of the likeness of the Mother of God of Undying Assistance with the customs of annual rites traditional in the Eastern Church. Those common connotations are reflected by two holiday dishes, that is, the Christmas 'kutia' and Easter 'pascha,' that is, dishes present in celebrations symbolising two stages of Christ's life, his birth and death. In the author's opinion, the mentioned ritual dishes are connected with the Byzantine icon of the Mother of God of Undying Assistance, and the factor cementing the relation of the two holiday-sacral artefacts could be the thesis included in the dissertation, claiming that such connections illustrating biblical Nativity and Easter, paschal crucifixion of the Saviour, are a typical iconographic presentation of the Orthodox vision of the Christian religion. According to the literature devoted to the Byzantine religion, the Orthodox emphasise to an equal degree the coming of the Son of God to the world and his agony on the cross, signifying in its essence a victory over death and a rebirth of life both in the nature aspect as well as the religious one. In light of a conducted study of the theological symbolism of the image of the Mother of God and the significance of particular holidays of the annual ritual cycle and ritual dishes included in it, a hypothesis seems to be in order claiming that the mediaeval, Byzantine icon of the Mother of God of Undying Assistance, through the depiction of the iconographic image of the Christian vision of religious faith on her likeness, presenting Mary, the newly-born Jesus and heavenly characters foretelling of His future death, is connected with Christmas and Easter. The icon, through these two holidays, is thus connected with the ritual dishes, that is, kutia and pascha, for the preparation of which, ingredients symbolising death and the underworld, but also products signifying abundance, fertility, and plenty, as well as revitalisation of the whole natural world, including the spring rebirth of human spirituality, that is, also Christian life without the stain of sin.

The above characteristic feature of the ritual dishes and Christian sacral images also reveals a religious syncretism, based on connecting two chronically opposing values,

as it is known that both 'kutia' and 'pascha' present the beliefs of pre-Christian peoples, opposed to the Christian era, which accepted the New-Testament image of the world in which exist both the coming of Baby Jesus to the world as well as the later death of the Saviour. In the final chapter of this paper another thesis is included, claiming that in the case of religious syncretism, it is advisable to interpret almost all ritual and everyday celebrations and verbal-gestic rituals, and what is connected with that, also all manners of demonstration of the cults of popular piety.

This dissertation also addresses the issue of a broadly defined borderland and equivalence of traditions and ritual customs, and at times, also liturgic, which can constitute another unique feature of the Podlasie popular religiosity. The most representative manifestations of borderland character, the author included a particular, Eastern, borderland speech and characteristic features of the local language, which differentiate the multicultural dialect of southern Podlasie from other regional forms. The separate character of the southern-Podlasie dialect manifests itself both against the background of other regions or countries, that is, the Lubelszczyzna region, Podlasie, and to a lesser degree, eastern Mazowsze, and Belarus or Ukraine, as well as in the whole country. The analysed issues included, what is more, such cultural questions as identity and origins of the Podlasie communities, settlement, historic migrations, history of particular communities, persecutions of the Unites and the issue of forced deportations, especially of Ruthenian or Ukrainian people, together with their ethnic minorities, winter and spring annual rites, including characteristic customs and traditions, folk songs, the phenomenon of bilingualism – two-speech, and in reference to religion, regional necropolises and coexistence of various sacral and parish co-worshippers, declaring either Catholic or Orthodox affiliation, and at times, religion altogether different from the Christian religion.

In correlation with the specific character remains the subject of equivalence, which concerns especially tradition and customs of annual rites, but also Slavic folk beliefs, as well as religious rituals inside and outside of the church, and religious services. As demonstrated by the research, the equivalence of meanings and symbols is noticeable, first of all, in typically folk ways of celebrating, such as common forms of blessings for Catholic and Orthodox faithful. Additionally, an analogous symbolism of cult forms of demonstrations of religiosity is revealed in slightly different ways of expressing one's own concession, a clear example of which are cults of selected sacral characters. As an

example of equivalent understanding of sanctity, the author has suggested the character of St. Onufry, who receives his cult both among the Catholic and Orthodox faithful. St. Onufry, in southern Podlasie, possesses not only his cult centres in both branches of Christianity, as he is patron saint of both the Catholic chapel in Horodko and Orthodox monastery in Jabłeczna, but his holy persona also determined the creation of numerous Christian cults of popular piety, which present a far-reaching religious synonymity demonstrated by the both Catholic and Orthodox tradition of pilgrimaging, together with rituals assigned to it, such as singing special songs praising the saint or dedicating prayers to him. What is more, in both denominations exists an unfaltering conviction of extraterrestrial, sacral power of St. Onufry, who according to folk beliefs, possesses a miraculous power of healing, which is presented by the archive entries of parish books of graces and accounts of Podlasie pilgrims who themselves experienced the divine gift of healing or heard of such cases. Every one of the mentioned forms of manifestation of Christian religiosity was noted and presented in this text.

The author also attempts to answer a truly problematic question, that is, what in reality distinguishes religiosity from folk piety and what the role of paraliturgical forms of manifestation of Christian religiosity in the life of the Church and during the celebration of official holy mass is. Although the two issues are so closely connected with each other, and their definitions obscure, in the author's opinion, the solution to the problem can be found in the contemporary concept of 'experienced' religion, which refers both to Christian popular piety and individualised religious spirituality. A result of such an interpretation of the issue of popular piety, its features should include an immense richness of various cultural, religious acts, illustrating both verbal and gestic practices. However, the problematic character of popular religiosity and piety stems not only from the obscure character of the issues themselves, but also the specific character of the researched area, which for ages has been inhabited by a multicultural society, coming from various European countries or other regions of the Slavic world. The richness of various forms of Podlasie religiosity resulting from its multicultural character therefore reveals a general, social, universal dimension of Christian behaviours and gestures, confirming the multicultural dimension of popular piety, serving the function of interreligious dialogue. The methods of expressing popular piety presented in this thesis are an essential factor integrating and bonding the community of Christian churches regardless of their concession and liturgical rites. On the basis of numerous interviews

with Catholic and Orthodox faithful of southern Podlasie and observation of numerous local centres of religious cult, it has also been observed that even at times of contemporary, civilisational and social changes, and the constant unification of cultural values, the Podlasie forms of cults of popular piety – both in relation to the faithful of both denominations – reveal lively connections with the religiosity of the people living in the past. It is common knowledge that the representatives of traditional cultures attributed the dominating function to such values as the cult of the sun and the deceased, and the farming culture connected with them. It should therefore be assumed that the Christian popular piety, though mostly Christianised in modern times, reveals firm roots in ancient cultures, at times even pre-Christian ones. It is only significant to the contemporary religion and the Christian church itself that those traditional demonstrations of faith or, more broadly, the sacred, allow the doctrine truths of the Church to survive, even at times of intense secularisation and de-sacralisation of all religious values. It indicates an incredibly solid position of the Church and clergy in the lives of the southern-Podlasie communities, and what is more, it presents Christian cult forms as one of the most representative cultural characteristics of the Eastern land, shaping people's cultural and religious identities.

Key words: popular piety, popular religiosity, Christian religious cult, religiosity in Eastern Polish Borderlands, piety in Eastern Polish Borderlands, manifestations of Christian cults