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God in the World of 'Liquid Modernity': Zygmunt Bauman on Religion. Presentation and Criticism

Bóg w świecie „płynnej nowoczesności”.
Zygmunt Bauman wobec religii. Prezentacja i krytyka

ABSTRACT: In this article, the author reviews the expressed thoughts of Z. Bauman in the context of Christian motifs present in the texts of left-wing intellectuals. In this analysis of selected motifs of Bauman's work, the author first makes a short introduction, presenting the philosopher. Next, he shows Bauman's hermeneutics of Christianity. Finally, the author presents an assessment of Bauman's views in the form of apologia. Left-leaning intellectuals are critical of Christianity in their theses. Bauman, an agnostic, evaluates Christianity with a cool eye. He is concerned about evangelical radicalism and attachment to the truth. Therefore, he postulates that believers should open themselves to the world and give up their own confessional identity and start building a broad human coalition.

KEYWORDS: religion, revelation, transcendence, Christianity, left, Bauman

ABSTRAKT: W prezentowanym artykule autor, poszukując wątków chrześcijańskich obecnych w tekstach lewicowych intelektualistów, sięga do myśli Zygmunta Baumana. Podejmując analizę wybranych motywów jego twórczości, przyjmuje następującą sekwencję kroków. Najpierw dokonuje krótkiego wprowadzenia, prezentując myśl filozofa. Następnie ukazuje jego hermeneutykę religii i chrześcijaństwa. Na koniec zaś przedstawia ocenę poglądów Baumana, która przybiera postać apologii. Lewicowy intelektualista w swoich pracach krytycznie zajmuje się chrześcijaństwem. Bauman jako agnostyk chłodnym okiem ocenia chrześcijaństwo. Niepokoi go ewangeliczny radykalizm oraz przywiązanie do prawdy. Dlatego postuluje, by wierzący otworzyli się na świat i zrezygnowali z własnej konfesyjnej tożsamości i zaczęli budować szeroką ludzką koalicję.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: religia, objawienie, transcendencja, chrześcijaństwo, lewica, Bauman

Introduction

Religion's present situation, as remarked by I. Bokwa, may be successfully described as ambiguous. On one hand, Enlightenment assurances proclaiming the disappearance of religion seem to be losing their validity, and religion itself continues to exist and is nowhere near being removed to the prehistory of its dependent humanity while, on the other hand, the outlines of reality defined as religion are subjected to a far-reaching process of blurring and dilution.¹

Habermas, a classic of left-wing thinker, in his text *To Believe and to Know*, notes that 'post-secular society' isn't actually entirely secularised and that the role of religion today, even though limited in comparison to older times, remains significant.²

While observing the dynamic process of the return of spirituality, often adopting a non-confessional form³ and defined as 'spilling of the *sacrum*,⁴ we notice a simultaneous interest in Christianity among the representatives of the intellectual left, pertaining to neo-Marxist milieus (mostly the heirs of the Frankfurt School).⁵ Their notorious return to religion is described as a 'theological turn'⁶ by religion critics. It is strongly noticeable when it comes

¹ I. Bokwa, *Teologia w warunkach nowoczesności i ponowoczesności*, Sandomierz 2010, pp. 304–305.

² See: J. Habermas, *Przyszłość natury ludzkiej. Czy zmierzamy do eugeniki liberalnej?*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, Warsaw 2003, pp. 103–115. The evoked text appeared also in the monthly "Znak" (568) 2002.

³ See: J. Mariański, *Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym. Studium socjologiczne*, Warsaw 2010, pp. 195–242.

⁴ See: H. Seweryniak, *Teologia fundamentalna*, vol. 1, Warsaw 2010, pp. 98–100.

⁵ See: P. Artemiuk, *Deus otiosus, czyli lewicowa hermeneutyka chrześcijaństwa*, "Studia teologiczne Białystok–Drohiczyń–Łomża" (32) 2014, pp. 107–138. The introduction to the present article is a slightly modified version of the introduction of this previously written article.

⁶ Similarly, postmodernism in its criticism and innovative ideas entered the religious sphere and made theology react. J. Życiński (d. 2011) believed that in postmodernism's case, we witness a 'deep transformation in the current that in its initial stage of development rejected both Christian tradition and Enlightenment philosophy, declaring the end of metaphysics on the verge of the postmodern era, this radically new stage of cultural development' (in: *Bóg postmodernistów. Wielkie pytania filozofii we współczesnej krytyce moderny*, Lublin 2001, p. 9). Don't these statements, however, sound overly optimistic? What return of religion are we talking about? Can we really talk about a turn in the perception of the question of faith? J. Sochoń (born in 1953) remarks that 'the postmodern culture, even though frequently declaring an atheist attitude, [as a matter of fact] reveal specific regret after the loss of God, [which is why] it still remains within the sacral radiation' (in: *Religia*

to philosophers as significant as A. Badiou (b. 1937),⁷ S. Žižek (b. 1949),⁸ or G. Agamben (b. 1942),⁹ who refers to Saint Paul's thought. But also, among such thinkers as P. Sloterdijk (b. 1947),¹⁰ T. Eagleton (b. 1943),¹¹ and Z. Bauman (d. 2017), who draw their own vision of the Christian religion.

If liberal intellectuals turn towards Christianity, it's worthwhile to examine their interest, evaluate the hermeneutics of the faith they practice, and ask about the image of God they propose and the role they assign to the Christian Revelation. It's also interesting to analyse whether their interpretation of Christianity outgrows the severe criticism and reaches to the core of it or solely remains a deconstruction of biblical motifs present in the culture. Theology, they claim, is too serious of a matter to be left to theologians, and

(...) religion – as left-wing philosopher A. Bielak-Robson underlines – is more than only an archaic assembly of dogmas – (...) it is also metaphysical speculation. (...) this speculation may concern not only the living God, present and providential, to whom we raise our intense prayers, but also, and in modern times, most of all, an 'absent God,' a 'withdrawn God,' or even 'a God who died.' *Deus absconditus*, better still – *deus otiosus*, as this formula contains the ambivalence that interests us here: a suggestive vision of God as simultaneously absent,

w projekcie postmodernistycznym, Lublin 2012, p. 14). Nevertheless, one should say that postmodern thinkers are simply unable to escape religious questions as the culture is so strongly infused with the spirit of Christianity, that ultimately, with every step, they stumble over something religious. This is why we need to adopt a critical attitude towards postmodernism and inscribe it within the context of Christianity.

⁷ A. Badiou, *Święty Paweł. Ustanowienie uniwersalizmu*, transl. J. Kutyla, P. Mościcki, Krakow 2007.

⁸ S. Žižek, *Kukła i karzeł. Perwersyjny rdzeń chrześcijaństwa*, transl. M. Kropiwnicki, Bydgoszcz 2006; idem, *O wierze*, transl. B. Baran, Warsaw 2008; idem, *Kruchy absolut, czyli dlaczego warto walczyć o chrześcijańskie dziedzictwo*, transl. M. Kropiwnicki, Warsaw 2009.

⁹ G. Agamben, *Czas, który zostaje. Komentarz do Listu do Rzymian*, transl. S. Królak, Warsaw 2009; idem, *Piłat i Jezus*, transl. M. Surma-Gawłowska, A. Zawadzki, Krakow 2017.

¹⁰ P. Sloterdijk, *O ulepszeniu dobrej nowiny. Piąta „ewangelia” Nietzschego. Mowa wygłoszona w Weimarze, 25 sierpnia 2000 r., z okazji setnej rocznicy śmierci Fryderyka Nietzschego*, transl. T. Słowiński, Wrocław 2010; idem, *Gorliwość Boga. W walce trzech monoteizmów*, transl. B. Baran, Warsaw 2013; idem, *Musisz życie swe odmieścić. O antropotechnice*, transl. J. Janiszewski, Warsaw 2014; idem, *W cieniu góry Synaj. Przypis o źródłach i przemianach całkowitego członkostwa*, transl. B. Baran, Warsaw 2014.

¹¹ T. Eagleton, *Święty terror*, transl. J. Konieczny, Krakow 2008; idem, *Rozum, wiara i rewolucja. Refleksja nad debatą o Bogu*, transl. W. Usakiewicz, Krakow 2010; idem, *Kultura a śmierć Boga*, transl. B. Baran, Warsaw 2014.

but also unwanted, pushed away in weightlessness, concealed in the slumber chamber. This is a typical God of the modern era, which, in Jonas' perspective thrives on the element of the 'unconditional immanence': traces, phantoms of a God from a distant past.¹²

While investigating the Christian threads in the texts of left-wing intellectuals, I'll reach for Bauman's thought.¹³ I will take up the analysis of selected motives present in his work in the following sequence: first, I'll proceed to a short introduction presenting Bauman's philosophy; second, I'll trace his hermeneutics of religion that by default assumes Christianity; and finally, I'll present my assessment of the Polish sociologist's ideas, which will resemble an apologetic.

Bauman's idea of 'liquid modernity'

Z. Bauman¹⁴ is an internationally known sociologist, philosopher, theoretician of postmodernity, essayist, and one of the most influential observers of the changes taking place in contemporary societies, as well as a thinker with a clearly left-wing sensibility. According to D. Smith, he is among the most remarkable and most influential commentators on the human condition¹⁵ while his books and essays are of capital significance for comprehending the nature of the world we live in.¹⁶ Though remaining a sociologist, the thinker didn't allow his ideas to be locked up only in the academic formula: his writings'

¹² A. Bielik-Robson, *Deus otiosus: ślad, widmo, karzeł*, [in:] *Deus otiosus. Nowoczesność w perspektywie postsekularnej*, A. Bielik-Robson, M.A. Sosnowski (eds.), Warsaw 2013, pp. 7–8. *Deus otiosus*, meaning 'a passive God,' is a formula applied in religiology to define God the Creator, distant and not interfering with the affairs of the world, whom is not worshiped, but only evoked in dramatic circumstances. The concept of a passive deity has its place in deism. In turn, Saint Thomas, followed by Martin Luther, introduced the notion of *Deus absconditus* to describe the mystery of God's concealment and His distance; see: M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, Warsaw 2010, pp. 63–67.

¹³ In one of my previous texts, I took up analysis of the thought of P. Sloterdijk and T. Eagleton, see: footnote 6.

¹⁴ "Znak" (752) 2018 was entirely dedicated to Bauman and his philosophy.

¹⁵ D. Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman: Prophet of Postmodernity*, Cambridge 1999, p. 3.

¹⁶ Z. Bauman, K. Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*, Cambridge 2001 (*O korzyściach z wątpliwości. Rozmowy z Zygmuntem Baumanem*, transl. E. Krasieńska, Warsaw 2003, p. 10).

'literariness' (...) let him, unlike probably anybody else, follow the marks of the transforming society, capture human experiences, fears, anxieties and new ways of thinking. Out of necessity, it must be a personal voice, filled with metaphors, resembling a literary narration rather than a traditional model of scientific treatise.¹⁷

The most characteristic notion that knits and infiltrates Bauman's thought is the concept of liquid modernity.¹⁸ This representative idea puts him in the range of theoreticians and creators of postmodernism. Let's inquire then as to the meaning of this constitutive term.

Today's world, as sociologists highlight (i.e., U. Beck), has stopped being postmodern and has become fluid, ephemeral, liquid. We are then confronted, in a way, with a second modernity.

The term 'postmodernity,' as explicated by Bauman himself, was faulted from the first moment; it smelled of provisory solution and suggested erroneous ideas about reality. It was a temporary 'fill-the-gap' term: while expressing growing conviction that the dawning new world is unlike the one we used to know and we were able to talk about, knowing what to expect of it, and that the language we inherited from sociological ancestors, is quite unfit to describe what is happening; the term didn't reveal much about the properties of the new world, and even less about its own logic and about what drives it and recreates it; so in the end, even the term itself wasn't quite helpful in the understanding of the new world (...). Even though I used the term 'postmodernity,' for lack of a better one, my conscience is clear, in a sense that from the very first moment I defined it as modernity minus illusions (in the sense of delusions about the perfect order waiting at the end of the road, free of contingency, fortuity and ambiguity; transparent, predictable, and administrated by reason; about the inevitably approaching end of fortuity, contingency and ambiguity...). From the beginning, I was searching for a better term, better in the sense of more positive and not implying the necessity of resigning, in the *Jetztzeit* analysis, of the quite useful, and in my opinion, indispensable term of "modernity"; what helped me to coin the new term was the metaphor of liquid, a substance that is stochastically undetermined, subjected to even weak surface or cutting strengths, thus incapable of keeping its shape. This image allows to realise the nature of

¹⁷ P. Tacik, *Socjologia Zygmunta Baumana*, Warsaw 2012, p. 7.

¹⁸ See: *Zrozumieć nowoczesność. Księga jubileuszowa Zygmunta Baumana*, A. Chrzanowski, W. Godzic, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (eds.), Łódź 2010.

our weird “world *ohne Eigenschaft*,” if we borrow the term from Robert Musil; speaking more precisely, without permanently assigned properties, indicating (implicitly, determining) identity in the time...¹⁹

In the already classic text, entitled *Liquid Modernity*, this is how the sociologist defines the term:

(...) there are reasons to consider ‘fluidity’ or ‘liquidity’ as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways novel, phase in the history of modernity. I readily agree that such a proposition may give pause to anyone at home in the ‘modernity discourse’ and familiar with the vocabulary commonly used to narrate modern history. Was not modernity a process of ‘liquefaction’ from the start? Was not ‘melting the solids’ its major pastime and prime accomplishment all along? In other words, has modernity not been ‘fluid’ since its inception?²⁰

Bauman notes that already the *Communist Manifesto*, a harbinger of modernity, stressed that all that’s permanent should be liquified; excessively static, coagulated society needs to be diluted and reality should be released from the ‘yoke’ of its own history. This may be done

only by melting the solids (that is, by definition, dissolving whatever persists over time and is negligent of its passage or immune to its flow). That intention called in turn for the ‘profaning of the sacred’: for disavowing and dethroning the past, and first and foremost ‘tradition’ – to wit, the sediment and residue of the past in the present; it thereby called for the smashing of the protective armour forged of the beliefs and loyalties which allowed the solids to resist the ‘liquefaction.’²¹

At the outset, the liquidising power of modernity hit stagnating institutions, political constellations, and social settings, aiming at breaking old forms. They were, however, rapidly substituted by new ones, which despite being enhanced, were equally rigid and inflexible as the old ones. People, released from the old

¹⁹ Z. Bauman, R. Kubicki, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Życie w kontekstach. Rozmowy o tym, co za nami i o tym, co przed nami*, Warsaw 2009, pp. 109–110.

²⁰ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2000 (*Płynna nowoczesność*, transl. T. Kunz, Krakow 2000, p. 7). Quotes by Zygmunt Bauman are from original English sources, unless marked otherwise – translator’s note.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 7–8.

cages, were promptly pushed into new cubbyholes, and every eliminated form was replaced by a new one. Effectively, in Bauman's view, this 'liquidising power' shifted from the 'system' to 'society,' from the 'politics' to 'life-policies,' generally speaking, from the 'macro' to the 'micro-level' of social cohabitation.²² Thus, today, we are dealing with

an individualised, privatised version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders. It is the patterns of dependency and interaction whose turn to be liquefied has now come. They are now malleable to an extent unexperienced by, and unimaginable for, past generations; but like all fluids, they do not keep their shape for long. Shaping them is easier than keeping them in shape. Solids are cast once and for all. Keeping fluids in shape requires a lot of attention, constant vigilance and perpetual effort – and even then the success of the effort is anything but a foregone conclusion.²³

The Polish sociologist notes that 'liquid modernity' influences deeply the conditions of human life.

The remoteness and unreachability of systemic structure, coupled with the unstructured, fluid state of the immediate setting of life-policies change that condition in a radical way and call for a rethinking of old concepts that used to frame its narratives.²⁴

Liquid Life

Having multiple meanings, modernity may be described in various categories. For Bauman, however, the notion of 'liquidity' is especially significant, and provides him with a perspective to analyse reality.²⁵ In such a constellation, human existence also appears as liquid, which implies that 'it cannot keep its shape or

²² Ibidem, p. 14.

²³ Ibidem, pp. 14–15.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 15. These notions are: emancipation, individual, time/space, work and community.

²⁵ See: idem, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge 2006 (*Płynne czasy. Życie w epoce niepewności*, transl. M. Żakowski, Warsaw 2007); idem, *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World*, Cambridge 2010 (*44 listy ze świata płynnej nowoczesności*, transl. T. Kunz, Krakow 2011); idem, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Cambridge 2011 (*Kultura w płynnej nowoczesności*, Warsaw 2011).

stay on course for long,²⁶ but is filled with uncertainty, constant anxiety and fear. 'Liquid life' is characterised by a dictate of an 'expiration date,' a whole line of 'new beginnings,' 'new openings,' the incessant drive to modernise as the 'life in the liquid modern society cannot stand still.'²⁷ In such a world,

the greatest chances of winning belong to the people who circulate close to the top of the global power pyramid, to whom space matters little and distance is not a bother; people at home in many places but in no one place in particular. They are as light, sprightly and volatile as the increasingly global and exterritorial trade and finances that assisted at their birth and sustain their nomadic existence.²⁸

People living in the society of liquid modernity more often than not constitute a 'spiritual lumpenproletariat.' This controversial notion used by Bauman has its genealogy. It was first used by Josif Brodski (then recalled by Andrzej Stasiuk²⁹), to characterise people who,

materially affluent yet spiritually impoverished and famished contemporaries, tired like the residents of Calvino's Eutropia of everything they have enjoyed thus far (yoga, Buddhism, Zen, contemplation, Mao), and so beginning to dig (with the help of state-of-the-art technology, of course) into the mysteries of Sufism, kabbala, or Sunnism, to beef up their flagging desire to desire.³⁰

Contemporarily, people infected by the virus of 'spiritual lumpenproletariat,' stresses Bauman, live only for the sake of living, as what matters for them is the present only. The world is no longer their home nor property, that's why they see no evil in blatantly exploiting its resources; flattened

into the perpetual present and filled to the brim with survival-and-gratification concerns (it is gratification to survive, the purpose of survival being more gratification), leaves no room for worries about anything other than what can be, at least in principle, consumed and relished on the spot, here and now.³¹

²⁶ Idem, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge 2005 (*Płynne życie*, transl. T. Kunz, Krakow 2007, p. 5).

²⁷ See: ibidem, pp. 6–8.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 9.

²⁹ A. Stasiuk, *Duchowy lumpenproletariat, Rewolucja, czyli zagłada*, [in:] idem, *Tekturowy samolot*, Wołowiec 2000.

³⁰ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Life*, op. cit., p. 14.

³¹ Ibidem, pp. 14–15.

In such a reality, devoid of thinking about eternity, there is room for infinity.

The present may be stretched beyond any limit and accommodates as much as once was hoped to be experienced only in the fullness of time (...). Thanks to the hoped-to infinity of mundane experiences yet to come, eternity may not be missed; its loss may not even be noticed.³²

'The trick is to compress eternity so that it may fit, whole, into the timespan of an individual life.'³³ If eternity was effectively eliminated, is there still room for religion in the world of liquid modernity? What's Bauman's outlook on this reality?

Religion – an attempt at a definition

The very notion of religion, in particular Christianity, is slightly troublesome for the Polish thinker, as we tend to comprehend it until we're required to define it.³⁴ Modern times condemned religion to banishment, for the modern scientific mind couldn't deal with it. Nevertheless,

The postmodern mind, naturally milder than its predecessor and more aware of the weaknesses of human knowledge, took down the stigma of infamy, granting it [religion] a permanent stay permit. The postmodern mind conceded to the fact that definitions conceal as much as they reveal and that they cripple and obfuscate the reality they are supposed to straighten and explicate. The postmodern mind accepts that more often than not, human experience and sensations break out of the cages in which we would want to enclose them, that there are things impossible to talk about, and therefore one should not talk about them, and that what is impossible to say is as much an intrinsic part of human existence as the verbal web in which we try (in vain as it turns out, but nevertheless no less persistently) to catch them. (...) The postmodern mind is too modest to forbid and too weak to condemn to banishment, so few are the chances to remedy the excesses of frisky modern ambitions.³⁵

³² Ibidem, p. 15.

³³ Ibidem. See: idem, *Society Under Siege*, Cambridge 2002 (*Spoleczeństwo w stanie obłączenia*, transl. J. Margański, Warsaw 2006, pp. 208–278); idem, *Consuming Life*, Cambridge 2007 (*Konsumowanie życia*, transl. M. Wyrwas-Wiśniewska, Krakow 2009).

³⁴ See: Z. Bauman, S. Obirek, *O Bogu i człowieku rozmowy*, Krakow 2013, pp. 5–57.

³⁵ Z. Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, New York 1997 (*Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, Warsaw 2000, pp. 277–278). Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

Bauman remarks that the postmodern reflection on religion is not accompanied by a perspective of 'locking the world up in a cage of rigid categories and clear divisions.'³⁶ While seeking an understanding of religion and religiousness, we need to argue less about the correct definition and more to find out

how up till now the social mechanism was able to operate, pointing out what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept, rest. Perhaps in the case of religion, more than in all other cases, because religiosity is, after all, nothing else but the intuition of the limits to what we, humans, being humans, may do and comprehend.³⁷

Bauman believes that a correct reading of social mechanisms shaping religion will provide us with a sufficient explanation of its core nature. He begins his own analysis with the criticism of the definition of religion by Leszek Kołakowski.

Dreadful fear, stemming from a feeling of insufficiency that in his [the Polish philosopher] opinion makes us look for help in religion, was a result of life tasks that exceeded the skills and efficiency of available tools for those who are supposed to complete them: it is in this dissonance between goal and means that the sense of insufficiency is embedded.³⁸

But together with the appearance of modernity

the organisation of daily life revolves around concerns that seldom, if ever, include worry about the ultimate limit of things. These worries, problems 'of no practical meaning' (tasks that one can do nothing about) were taken off the agenda of regular individuals (non-philosophers, non-poets). Modern revolution constructed the life agenda in such a way that little or no time was left to attend to such worries, and one may also say that it consisted of plugging one's ears to the homilies of redemption and salvation and closing one's eyes to pictures of posthumous bliss or doom.³⁹

³⁶ Ibidem, pp. 282–283. Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 283.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 284. Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

³⁹ Ibidem, pp. 290–291. Adapted from the original by S. Barnett.

'Problems' during that time were defined as everyday tasks, ready to be instantly solved. Bauman claims that for the generation that witnessed the

collapse of the old (...) it was clear that there would be as much (and no more) sense and order in the world as its human inhabitants managed to insert into it; and that the ordering work on the top must be replicated by the work at the bottom – each individual having to shape and direct his or her own life, which otherwise would remain shapeless and bereft of purpose. Modern life strategy was not a matter of choice, wise or foolish, but a rational adjustment to totally new life conditions never visited before. In this process of rational adjustment, there was little use for religion.⁴⁰

Does postmodernity add anything to that vision of a world without religion? Certainly, postmodern people, affected by ontological insecurity, are condemned to incessantly choose. That's the reason why they need advice. This variant of insecurity, however, doesn't entail demand for eschatological visions characteristic of religion.

Men and women haunted by the uncertainty of postmodern style do not need preachers telling them about the weakness of man and insufficiency of human resources. They need guides who will convince them that they can do everything needed for a prosperous life, and will brief them about how to do it; who will reassure them, proving that every problem has a solution and that these clients/patients are able to do anything as long as they listen to their advice and heartily apply it.⁴¹

Are they bereft, however, of any spiritual desires or inner quests? They certainly aren't, but in Bauman's opinion, these inner struggles mean simple human activities in which what matters most is the technical aspect, aiming at gaining indispensable skills required for mastering due technology.⁴² The sociologist calls this process 'sensation gathering,' a search for 'peak experiences.'

'The whole experience' of revelation, ecstasy, breaking the boundaries of the self and total transcendence, once the privilege of the selected 'aristocracy of culture' – saints, hermits, mystics, ascetic monks, *tsadiks* and dervishes – and

⁴⁰ Ibidem, pp. 293–294.

⁴¹ Ibidem, pp. 307–308. Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 313.

coming either as an unsolicited miracle, in no obvious fashion related to what the receiver of grace has done to earn it, or as an act of grace rewarding the life of self-immolation and denial – has been put by the postmodern culture in every individual's reach, recast as a realistic target and plausible prospect of each individual self-training, and relocated at the product of life devoted to the art of consumer self-indulgence. What distinguishes the postmodern strategy of peak experience from one promoted by religion is that, far from celebrating the assumed human insufficiency and weakness, it appeals to the full development of human inner psychological and bodily resources and presumes infinite human potency.⁴³

Contemporary religion – between fundamentalism and agnosticism

Bauman completes the landscape of postmodern forms of religion with a specific shape, 'in which appears today a human lack of self-reliance and the futility of dreams about submitting destiny to man's control.'⁴⁴ This form is fundamentalism or integralism. This is an essentially contemporary and postmodern phenomenon. Religious fundamentalism

fully absorbed, assimilated and drew into its service 'rationalising' reforms and technical inventions of modernity; it did not reject them *en bloc*, but tries instead to find delight in them without paying the high price that others seem to have agreed to, considering it to be inevitable or not unreasonable. This price that fundamentalism promises to remit is the agony of choice and its consequences on an individual, the dread of perpetual uncertainty as to the correctness of the choice or the possibility of the omittance of a better one...⁴⁵

Thus, the reality of religion, towards which the sociologist remains agnostic,⁴⁶ is constantly intriguing.⁴⁷ Bauman avoids, however, making clear, personal

⁴³ Ibidem, pp. 310–311.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, pp. 314–315. Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 315. Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

⁴⁶ 'Is it true, Bauman confesses in his dialogue with Obirek, that our paths to agnosticism are different? They probably are, as the religions and Churches, whose "discomforts we felt," but about whom we however thought "that we could change them from the inside" were also different'; Z. Bauman, S. Obirek, *O Bogu i człowieku rozmowy*, op. cit., pp. 5–6.

⁴⁷ As testified by the dialogue with S. Obirek evoked earlier.

confessions⁴⁸ and he evaluates this dimension of human activity with the eye of a scientist, demanding that confessional communities and Churches adopt pluralism, according to the spirit of his own philosophy, to abandon their attachment to the truth and quit their monotheism, as a result then, to deny their confessional identity in the name of undefined religious *polis*, which leads to weakening and finally to the disappearance of institutional structures of individual communities.⁴⁹

J. Tokarska-Bakir considers that 'Bauman practised theological reflection, but one where God had no right to appear.'⁵⁰ In the translator's opinion, it's clearly noticeable in his *Postmodern Ethics*. Even though the sociologist gives no univocal ethical prescription in this work, nor has he some 'other patented mean for moral security and clear conscious,'⁵¹ he undertakes reflection on ethics. In his opinion, 'the great issues of ethics – such as human rights, social justice, balance between peaceful cooperation and personal self-assertion, synchronisation of individual conduct and collective welfare – have lost nothing of their topicality.'⁵² We only need to, argues Bauman, deal with them in a new way. As everything

⁴⁸ A perfect example is Bauman's text *W co wierzą niewierzący (a są tacy?)*, published in the volume of *Co nas łączy? Dialog z niewierzącymi*, S. Obirek (ed.), Krakow 2002, pp. 102–109. 'Interrogated, the sociologist is not saying whether he believes/doesn't believe or what is his personal relation to God, he only states that, escaping into own analysis and referring to elaborated notions and schemes, "liquid modernity" isn't an era of unbelievers. The only thing is, that instead of one and immutable faith, people immersed in "liquid modernity" believe in many things at once. At the same time, they don't expect others to believe in what they do, once and for good, nor do they see a reason to swear lifelong faithfulness to one of the beliefs... It's hard for them to give uncritical trust to their own faith, as it played tricks on them many times before; why would they think that it would behave better from now on?'; *ibidem*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ Z. Bauman, S. Obirek, *O Bogu i człowieku rozmowy*, op. cit., pp. 6–10; "God of the times of liquid modernity, stresses Bauman, is composed and promoted not by institutions, but 'from below' (...)" ; *idem*, *This is Not a Diary*, Cambridge 2012 (*To nie jest dziennik*, transl. M. Zawadzka, Krakow 2012, pp. 110–111); see: Z. Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*, Cambridge 2016 (*Obcy u naszych bram*, transl. W. Mincer, Warsaw 2016); *idem*, *Retrotopia*, Cambridge 2017 (*Retrotopia. Jak rządzi nami przeszłość*, transl. K. Lebek, Warsaw 2018).

⁵⁰ *Anioł historii boi się o przyszłość. Dyskusja z udziałem: Dariusza Brzezińskiego, Macieja Gduli, Tomasza Majewskiego, Joanny Tokarskiej-Bakir*, "Znak" 752 (2018), p. 34.

⁵¹ Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Cambridge 1993 (*Etyka ponowoczesna*, transl. J. Bauman, J. Tokarska-Bakir, Warsaw 2012, p. 345). Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

changed, however, with the gradual loosening of the grip of tradition (...) and the growing plurality of mutually autonomous contexts in which the life of the rising number of men and women came to be conducted; in other words, with the casting of these men and women in the position of *individuals*, endowed with identities not-yet-given, or given but sketchy – and, thus, facing the need for “constructing” them, and *making choices in the process*.⁵³

While taking up reflection on ethical issues, Bauman solely describes the transformation of morality from modern and postmodern perspectives. He makes, however, the reservation that

no code of ethics will be revealed in the end (...) of the reflection, nor hope preserved either that a code like that will ever exist. The kind of understanding of the moral condition that the postmodern perspective allows for will not make the life of a moral man *easier*. One can at most dream that it will make it *more moral*.⁵⁴

What kind of morality, however, is in question? What appears in Bauman’s analysis?

First, the sociologist states that moral questions cannot be solved today with reasoning.

Morality is not safe in the hands of reason, though this is exactly what spokesmen of reason promise. (...) Reason is about making correct decisions, while moral responsibility precedes all thinking about decisions as it does not, and cannot care about the logic that would allow approval of an action as correct.⁵⁵

Second, the moral conscience in the postmodern world is feeble. According to Bauman, it ‘commands obedience without proof that the command should be obeyed; conscience can neither convince nor coerce. Conscience wields no weapons recognised by the modern world as an insignia of authority.’⁵⁶

Third, the only thing remaining and simply ‘existing’ is moral responsibility. Bauman calls it the most personal, inalienable of human freedoms, and the most precious of human rights. What is its essence, though? The sociologist

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 26. Translated from Polish by S. Barnett.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 384.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 386.

describes it in a poetic manner, without, however, pointing at the fundament of responsibility nor, even less so, at its source.

Moral responsibility is the most personal and inalienable of human possessions, and the most precious of human rights. It cannot be taken away, shared, ceded, pawned, or deposited for safe-keeping. Moral responsibility is unconditional and infinite, and it manifests itself in the constant anguish of not manifesting itself enough. Moral responsibility does not look for reassurance for its rights to be or for excuses for its rights not to be. It is there before any reassurance or proof and after any excuse or absolution.⁵⁷

Criticism

Bauman regards religion, Christianity in particular, with a visible distance. His analyses are impregnated with criticism. The sociologist reveals, however, that his agnosticism impacts his perception of religion. He assesses Christianity with a chilled sociologist's eye, avoiding personal confessions. He looks down on it, valuing his own agnosticism. Without doubt, what influenced this perception of religion was his life experience, particularly his fascination and involvement in communism, followed by his turn towards postmodernism, as well as his academic masters.

Bauman's approach to religion and faith is conditioned both by Enlightenment clichés and postmodern rhetoric. The philosopher believes that a man is able to manage on his own, living alone, without God. The Polish sociologist rejects the conviction of human self-deficiency, present in the thought of Kola-kowski. He entirely disagrees with his concept of religion while being unable to present his own. He flees definitions and covers up in the descriptions of manifestations of religion.

At analysing contemporary Christianity, Bauman postulates for its greater openness to the world and adopting a pluralistic paradigm. He considers the present form of religion to be overly closed and characterised by a strong potential of fanaticism. In the sociologist's opinion, this also concerns Christianity. Bauman identifies fidelity to religious principles and care for commandments with fanaticism. In his view, evangelical fanaticism indicates fundamentalism that ought to be fought. Absolute truth, postmodernists claim, doesn't exist. That's why Christians shouldn't insist on their convictions. People of the Church

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 388.

should be permeated with cultural identity and diversity. In the name of pluralism, Christians are to get rid of their own identity, which is confessional and restrictive. Their communities, if oriented towards the other, must abandon attachment to monotheism and turn rather towards the Antiquity model of religious *polis*, decisively more corresponding to the modern structure of societies.

Bauman's outlook on Christianity is very simplified. While analysing his statements, one can have the impression that the sociologist proclaims its dusk, indicates it as ill-fitting for today's world. He postulates that evangelical radicalism be rejected, but he mistakes it for fanaticism. He wishes for the dilution of religion, spilling it over into our pluralistic world. He attempts to convince that the era of monotheism is long gone; that today, polytheism is much more attractive, especially the one from the times of ancient Greece. Bauman, keeping his distance towards Christianity, promotes an agnostic attitude towards religion. Chilled and distanced.

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