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# THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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(Received 30 June 2023, revised 24 October 2023)

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we aim to show the role of religion in contemporary society. Despite strong trends towards secularisation, religion can contribute values to social life that state institutions are unable to provide. These values can offer criteria helpful in discussions of important ethical issues affecting society as a whole, and also promote the building of a civic community. There is also a positive relationship between religious commitment and civic activity. This article is interdisciplinary. We attempt to present some contemporary social and theological concepts that demonstrate the possible ways the religious dimension may exist in modern life, as well as in the intercourse between political institutions and religious communities. The values contributed by various religions in the public sphere may prove extremely useful for the preservation of social stability, especially in the context of contemporary threats to people's security (wars, migrations, climate change, etc.).

*Keywords:* Catholic Church, security, social life, collaboration, Pope

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## **1. Introduction**

In world of today, we can see a multitude of conflicts in humanity. The early 21<sup>st</sup> century is a picture of unprecedented intensity, with conflicts and fighting between nations and communities on virtually every continent. In the global, regional and local dimensions, ethnic conflicts are variously motivated, and this may lead to the conclusion that differences find a more fertile ground than similarities. Many have argued that such situations are motivated by the religions of individual communities.

At the same time, intensified terrorist or hybrid attacks have proved that the clash of civilisations, which has been mentioned by scholars for years, is now a fact. Moreover, the recently touted theory of the need to make the modern world secular demonstrates the importance of the issue at hand in the context of Christianity, which invariably exerts a considerable impact on the public, civil and political spheres of life [1-4].

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We therefore face the recurring questions: What is the place of religion and what influence does it have in modern society? These research questions are at the basis of the inquiry presented here.

The teachings of Pope John Paul II contain important thoughts on the presence of religion in the state: “The state must not extend its competence, directly or indirectly, to the sphere of people’s religious beliefs. It must not claim the right to impose or forbid a particular person or a community to profess and practice their faith publicly.” [5]

France is a country where the place of religion in the modern world has long been decided. More than a hundred years since the enactment of a law separating the Church from the State, this country is emphatically asking itself in what spheres religion is to be found today. The French are engaged in fierce debates on their worldview while seeking a satisfactory religious formula for their Islamic citizens [6].

Ukraine also provides an excellent example of the seeking of a place for religion today. This country has been plagued by war since 2014, attracting various responses from both politicians and the structures of the Catholic Church. In the face of an overt assault on the Ukrainian nation, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Православна церква України) and various religious organisations have now been undergoing changes that are now affecting the political fabric of the state itself. As a result of the Unification Council held on 15 December 2018, a new statute granted by the Ecumenical Patriarch was accepted. This event took place at Kyiv’s Saint Sophia Cathedral and was led by Metropolitan Emanuel of Gaul of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, with the participation of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. The signing of the statute was followed up on 5 January 2019 by Patriarch Bartolomew I, who signed a tomos granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This took place in Saint George’s Cathedral. The signing of the act formally ended the process of Ukrainian Orthodoxy growing independence [7-9].

We are familiar with many concepts of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the democratic state [10]. Alfred Stepan, who analyses such examples, contends that secular states can be friendly, unfriendly, or sociologically spontaneous towards religion, and that the importance of religion is not an essential aspect of political life [11]. The existence of such a distinction has prompted us to try to identify some reasons for this understanding of said relations.

In this paper, we aim to present the role of religion in contemporary society. The paper is interdisciplinary, as it addresses the issue at hand from social, philosophical and theological angles. The issues raised here pertain to contemporary threats to state security and demonstrate possible ways in which religion can exist in the life of contemporary societies. The values brought into public life, which we show in this paper, can help one find ways to assess and prevent asymmetrical threats such as war, migration or the operations of organised criminal groups.

## **2. Research**

### ***2.1. A sociological view of religion***

Over the years, the phenomenon of religion has been explored by many sociologists, philosophers and theologians. As argued by Émile Durkheim, a major classical sociologist, religion is a system of interrelated beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. This approach brings together believers and creates a single moral community called a Church [12]. In the opinion of R. Cipriani and P. Prüfer, Durkheim places emphasis on the more social role of religion, ignoring the content of those beliefs and practices. He regards religion as an essential element of social life that contributes to the integration of human communities [13].

Max Weber, on the contrary, avoids proposing a precise definition of religion. What he believes religion and religious faith are not be can be inferred from his writings. He says thus: “What religion offers is not an ultimate intellectual or scientific knowledge about the existing or the normatively valid, but an ultimate stance taken towards the world by virtue of the grasping of its ‘meaning’. And it discloses this meaning not by the means of understanding but through the charisma of illumination, to which it alone is party. The charisma of illumination frees itself through the techniques that lie to hand from the misleading and deceptive surrogates that offer, as knowledge, the erroneous impression of the sensate world and the abstractions of understanding, which are in truth vacuous and of no consequence for salvation. Religion instead knows in itself how to be ready for the reception of grasping the meaning of the world, which is alone of practical importance, and one’s own place in the world.” [14]

According to Mirosława Grabowska, Weber’s concept posits that religion gives man the opportunity to comprehend the meaning of reality. This cognition influences the way people organise their communities. However, in order to decipher the meaning of reality, one needs to free oneself from rational and sensory cognition. This kind of perception is only possible through a religious experience that has the nature of illumination [15]. Weber defines the Church as a hierocratic institution operating on an ongoing basis. Grabowska elucidates the adjective ‘hierocratic’ as used by Weber [15]. Władysław Piwowarski, a Polish sociologist of religion, views religion from its sociocultural aspect. He defines it as a system of beliefs, values and related activities. In order to define it, characteristically, its non-empirical religious component must also be taken into account, as well as the cultic activities and cultural values that are associated with it [16].

### ***2.2. The place of religion in the public space***

Many contemporary sociologists, such as Jose Casanova, note the positive aspects of the presence of religious inspiration in the public space [2]. Even the adoption of the liberal concept that situates religion in the private sphere need

not imply denying it the right to address problems inherent in public life, or excluding it from the functioning of civil society. It follows that religious communities can find there a place for themselves. While discussing Casanova's views, Janusz Mariański notes that he perceives religion as a vital factor that has a bearing on the functioning of the community of citizens. A religion that endorses the modern rules of religious freedom and Church-state separation can contribute to the process of the moral renewal of society. The separation between the Church and the state, as well as that between religion and politics, need no longer imply the strict privatisation of religion. The role that religion can play in public life is slowly being redefined [17].

Casanova also uses the term 'deprivatisation', meaning a process "whereby religion leaves the place it has been relegated to in the private sphere and enters the non-differentiated public sphere of civil society to participate in the continuous process of contesting, discursive legitimising and redrawing of boundaries" [2]. He believes that this is the case when religion in the public sphere defends not only its own freedom of action, but also fundamental human rights (which happened, for example, in communist Poland). At times, in the public forum, religion is a voice opposing various secular matters and tendencies and their organisation in a way that, admittedly, is in keeping with formal rules but disregards the ethical aspect (e.g. against those elements of the capitalist system that target the weakest). Moreover, religion defends the traditional world order in the public sphere against administrative interference from state authority. It also inspires collective reflection on the ethical foundations of modern attitudes towards life (e.g. anti-abortion protests in defence of the right to life) [2, p. 111-112].

Mariański notes that many sociologists and philosophers today are asserting less emphatically that the modern world is moving towards secularism and the disappearance of religion, as was the case even thirty years ago. Some scholars, including Casanova, who advance the thesis that religion is being deprivatised, challenge modern states' tendency to avoid taking a stand on values upon which social life is founded, and try to redefine the boundary between the public and private spheres. Religion is, again, acknowledged as part of the public sphere. Some predict that, after a period of secularisation and the privatisation of religion, we will see a stronger presence of religion in the public sphere [17]. People see religion as a source of values favouring the building of a moral order in society and the reduction of social divisions. EU official documents include religious communities among the institutions of a civil society. They also acknowledge the important role religious communities play in stimulating civic activity, especially locally [18].

Various authors dealing with the issues in question, however, present various opinions on the relationship between religious institutions and civil society. Some of them see religion as a threat to civil society and consider it a force hostile to democracy. They refuse to call religiously-inspired initiatives civic. According to Mariański, Robert Putnam says is one of these: he sees organised religion in Italy as an alternative sphere to the civic community there,

and does not consider religion a part of it. Putnam accuses the most regularly practising Catholics in Italy of not being sufficiently involved in political life. He considers such elements of Catholicism as a reliance on hierarchy, obedience and the humble acceptance of one's social position as being irreconcilable with the idea of a civil society [17].

A different view is presented by the Italian sociologist Stefano Martelli [19]. He claims that there is a positive relationship between the profession of the Catholic religion and being an active citizen. Religious commitment is a great inspiration for the growth of civic attitudes in Italian society. Based on sociological research carried out among Italian university students, he formulated the conclusion that Church-based religion increases young Italians' participation in public life, as well as their civic virtues. He also believes that it favours loyalty and trust in public institutions, as well as concern for the common good. He sees the Church and Church-based religion as the privileged depositories of humanistic values, indispensable for social and political intercourse.

Authors examining the issues of social capital emphasise the important role that religious groups play in many countries in the process of building and developing civil society. These groups are considered to be some of the most important sources of social and moral capital. In the USA, religious communities contribute to the value-based renewal of local communities. They are also recognised as an important partner for local authorities in their efforts to benefit those same communities. Moreover, they help to articulate the position of various ethnic groups in the public space. In comparison with non-religious people, believers get involved in civic life more easily and are more likely to take part in elections. Furthermore, they are more trustful of others. For example, they make up a larger percentage of blood donors. They are also more likely to socialise with their friends and neighbours. Religious institutions are an important environment where informal social capital is formed [20].

### ***2.3. Religion in modern society***

Zdzisław Krasnodębski, a Polish sociologist, engages in polemics against theories assuming an inevitable link between modernity and secularisation [16, p. 11], which he understands as the disappearance of religion. He points out the increased interest in religion and its political role that is to be seen in the modern world, especially after September 11, 2001. He also argues that the Christian religion has played a role in the shaping of the world of today. Challenging Weber [21], he argues that not only should the cultural role of Protestantism be appreciated in the process of shaping modernity, but also that of Catholicism [22]. However, Krasnodębski seems to recognise the fact that secularisation has, in fact, occurred in one domain - that is, religion has lost its political role, which is to say that religious content has been excluded from all structures of state authority. As so defined, in a completely secular public sphere religion is totally

separate from politics, and religious arguments cannot be deployed in public debate [22, p. 163].

Nevertheless, Krasnodębski concludes that the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism has provoked a new reflection on the Christian foundations of liberal democracy and secularised Western civilization. In this reflection, however, we often perceive a fear of violence and religiously motivated intolerance. Every religion that is lived 'too' profoundly is thought to be a potential source of conflict. Islam is a problematic issue because its followers are believers. In this view, the Western conflict with the Arab world is presented as a conflict between a world undergoing secularisation and a world with strong links between religion and politics [23]. Secularisation - but also a concentration on business and getting rich - is presented as a condition for peace and prosperity [24].

In reality, however, as Krasnodębski claims, it is impossible to avoid various connections between religion and politics. For him, the secular and pluralistic nature of modern liberal societies is possible precisely due to the religious and cultural substrate of modern Western civilisation provided by Christianity [22, p. 163-164]. To exemplify the unique model of relationship between religion and politics, Krasnodębski refers to the situation in the USA [25, 26]. Here, religion has long been a part of politics, although the US nation is a liberal society. It could even be said that liberalism is a kind of American national ideology. The presence of religion in American politics is not only a feature of Catholicism, he notes. Other Protestant denominations are strongly present in this domain as well, which often interprets the Bible literally and espouses strict morals [22, p. 164]. Incidentally, it is worth noting that observers of the US political scene attribute Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election to, among other things, the support he received from voters associated with evangelical Protestant denominations. One notes a similarity between the decisions made by the Trump administration and the views of this group of voters concerning issues such as the treatment of immigrants or the friendly policy towards Israel (e.g. Trump's decision to transfer the US embassy to Jerusalem) [K. Winkler, *Ewangelikalni chrześcijanie a prezydentura Donalda Trumpa*, <https://www.teologiapolityczna.pl>, accessed 20.05.2023].

Krasnodębski concludes that religious elements are clearly present in US public and political life. The 'Nation' and 'God' go hand-in-hand within the so-called American civil religion, which presupposes the belief that American democracy - along with its characteristic texts (the Constitution), symbols (the flag) and 'prophets' (Abraham Lincoln, among others) - is something good and equitable, or even a sort of 'sacrament' received by divine grace. American sovereignty itself is understood as having been given by God. The patriotism and religiousness of Americans are united by the conviction of the historical mission of both a national and religious nature. The secularisation of the American state is not contrary to the clearly noticeable sacralisation of the public sphere. As Krasnodębski notes, the US religion-state separation exists chiefly between the legislature and the judiciary, while it is irrelevant for the presidential office. It is

the US president who represents this civil religion. American presidents, even in contemporary times, invoke God in their addresses, and the public expects them to organise or call for national prayer, especially in times of crisis [27].

Nevertheless, as Krasnodębski believes, American civil religion is not a political religion. This is because it does not sacralise the American nation, but, essentially, it interprets the American experience in the light of ultimate truths. While the object of worship in political religion is politics, civic religion follows from seeing in social and political events a transcendent sense and from expressing this link symbolically. Krasnodębski also recognises the existence of a Polish civic religion (believing it started during the era of Polish Romanticism and lasting until the first Solidarity Movement in the early 1980s). It, too, does not entail worshipping the nation, but is an attempt at understanding the Polish experience in the light of faith. This experience is seen as encompassing all the harm and good that Poles have both suffered and caused [22, p. 165].

He sees the need for the presence of religion in the public sphere, as well as in politics [2, 28], taking the view that a total separation between these two spheres is difficult. It turns out that no state can function without a certain spiritual base and at least a minimal sense of community. Krasnodębski quotes the words of the legal theorist and former judge of the German Constitutional Court, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde: “a free, secular state is alive thanks to the assumptions that it cannot guarantee. This is a huge risk that the state has taken for the sake of freedom.” [27] The state can therefore function only when it is grounded in principles the creation of which lies beyond its competence. This is where religion plays a part.

Krasnodębski observes that it is part of the Polish tradition to allow the clergy to intervene in political life, especially in momentous situations which are of profound relevance for community life. Similarly, in dramatic circumstances, of which there have been many in Polish history, a reference was usually made to faith. Krasnodębski lists the following clerics as being or having been important for Polish public life: Pope John Paul II, Primate Stefan Wyszyński, Józef Tischner, Adam Boniecki OP, Maciej Zięba MIC and Tadeusz Rydzyk CSsR. At the same time, Krasnodębski takes the view that there will always exist tensions between the state and religious communities. Their trouble-free coexistence is illusory [27, p. 202-204].

He also warns against a complete removal of religion from the public forum and restricting its impact to the private sphere. This might lead to a situation where state authority would not be accountable for its actions to anyone else but itself. Societies could no longer interpret their own experiences, including collective ones, in relation to transcendence. He believes this would mean the end of politics as it is known in Western civilization. Its place would be taken by ordinary management, a game of interests or even the use of violence [22, p. 169].

## 2.4. Tensions between religion and the state

Interestingly, Dariusz Gawin points out a fundamental contradiction between the anthropological premises upon which Christianity and democracy are founded [29]. In reference to Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, he draws our attention to the belief that is proper to democracy, namely, that man is inherently good. When individuals pursue their own interests, we see internal harmony arising in society. In this case, a democratic state does not claim the right to determine the cultural content (in which beliefs and customs are included) that permeates the formal state structures. Contemporary democracy assumes that, since citizens are good and rational by nature, they make responsible choices in respect of this content [23, p. 139-140].

Human nature is perceived differently in Christian anthropology. It sees man as a creature prone to sin, which must be condemned. Human beings are called to salvation, but this goal can be attained only when they make an effort to rise after they fall. In the Christian concept, a crucial role is played not so much by the formal character of state institutions, but by the content they are filled with that harmonises with the concept of human life as proclaimed by the Church. This typically triggers conflicts with liberal democracy, which is inclined to tolerate a Church that limits its influence to the private sphere of citizens' lives. For Christians, faith lived out in a mature way impacts on social life, too. Today, in contrast, the phenomena that the Church deems evil and sinful are considered such only from one perspective. This is because liberal democracy adopts the principle of pluralism and tolerance with respect to all views that accept the formal rules of the game followed in a democratic state. The Church, for its part, as has already been mentioned, by its very nature cannot tolerate what it considers evil and sinful [30].

Under such circumstances, as Gawin notes, the Church becomes a participant in democratic politics, wishing to defend its notion of man and society in the public forum [29]. In so doing, it ceases to be, as it were, an 'authority figure' standing above current politics. But, as Gawin maintains, the Church cannot take up this challenge, for it results from the Church's identity entailing the need to proclaim its own concept of 'the good life'. Liberal democracy, however, does not embrace man in his sacred dimension. The question of the salvation of the human soul eludes the language used by the modern democratic state. Therefore, says Gawin, advocates of the Church's presence in public life must articulate the benefits of that presence using the language that is *de facto* used by their opponents. They argue that religion contributes to the tightening of social ties and active citizenship, while Christian heritage is an integral element of national culture. Nevertheless, such a justification must not refer directly to what is the essence of the Church's mission, that is, its vocation as a depositary of Revelations. Rather, it should point to the functional benefits that a religious community brings to the democratic state where it operates [29, p. 144-146].



Krasnodębski thinks that after 1989 at least some of the church hierarchs in Poland found it hard to find their way in the new situation of having to function in a liberal democracy. He considers it wrong for some Church representatives to expect that, in a democratic legal order, the rules of Catholic moral teaching would be preserved, and for them to see Poland as a state that might want to pursue a policy of European re-Christianisation [24, p. 35].

Krasnodębski sees in the attitudes of Church people a triumphalism after the defeat of Communism and the influence they exert directly on politics. Furthermore, he notes a sense of insecurity vis-a-vis the new situation and a fear of being free, which he somehow understands. It follows that the Church, as argued by Krasnodębski, has found itself in a culturally defensive position, as it now faces more hostile and attractive adversaries than Communism in its period of decline, namely, mass culture and consumerism [24, p. 35-36]. He is aware of the problems resulting from the coexistence of the Church with liberal democracy, for the Church and liberalism are built on different premises. "There is no going back to the era of the restricted rights of Catholics; likewise, one cannot accept the fact that the rules of Catholicism have been extended to the entire society" [24, p. 36-37].

### **3. Conclusions**

The issues raised in the paper show the need for assessing the place of religion in the modern world. As can be seen from the processes and research we have presented, the current cultural polarisation is generating further threats to which the civilised world should respond. More wars, mass migration, the operation of organised crime, which profit at the expense of individual states, and the inclusion of religion in the assessment of the above phenomena all engender moral confusion among the faithful. The foundation for understanding the role and significance of religion in the state is to identify its diversity and the basis for its creation. The impact of religion on society means that cultural diversity leads to the establishment of certain rules. Examples of the building of relationships are the various forms of cooperation between representatives of specific states and those of the Catholic Church.

Bearing in mind the fundamentals of Emile Durkheim's and Max Weber's teaching, we can discern the need to define the place of religion in society. The assumptions made by contemporary scholars are reactivated by authors like Mirosława Grabowska, who sees in religion the possibility of finding the meaning of reality.

Other scholars, such as Jose Casanova, Władysław Piwowarski and Janusz Mariański, have determined the place of religion in social life, which, for example, "defends in the public sphere the traditional world order against the administrative interference of state power" [2, p. 111-112]. In Italian scholarship, Stefano Martelli, among others, on the basis of his sociological research carried out among university students, notes that "Church religion strengthens the public commitment of young Italians" [20]. Similar assessments

are also enshrined in EU treaty documents. Obviously, dissenting opinions can be heard, for example, according to J. Marianski, the American political scientist Robert Putnam, claims that religion is not an alternative to public life [17, p. 96].

The unavoidable presence of religion in a pluralistic world is noted by such authors as Zdzisław Krasnodębski, who, based on his observations of the many events which impair the security of citizens today, sees the increased interest in the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church. He also recognises differences in the perception of the Christian foundations of liberal democracy and secularised Western civilization. In this paper, we have shown examples of the links between religion and politics, for example, in the USA and Poland. Particular emphasis has been placed on the essential role of spiritual guides, for example that of John Paul II for world history or that of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński for Poland.

To sum up, it can be said that the presence of religion in public life has its underpinnings in anthropology. Admittedly, this issue also elicits diverse interpretations and concepts, but according to Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde and Dariusz Gawin they are forcing the principle of pluralism and tolerance towards all kinds of views. For all that, however, Christian anthropology posits that the Christian nature of state institutions presupposes their respect for the concept of human life as proclaimed by the Church. This can be illustrated by, among others, the idea of combatting communism in post-1989 Europe - so-called mass culture and consumerism - that affects contemporary social pluralism.

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