

CONTEMPORARY RITUAL SPECTACLES
IN THE STREETS OF POLISH CITIES

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Observation of traditional folk rites taking place in contemporary culture frequently shows that today's people are not able to break with tradition and, especially in Poland, with many rites related to the Church's liturgical year. Since the Middle Ages the feast of Corpus Christi has been celebrated in Poland with ceremonious processions in which religious solemnity mixes with folk customs (picking leafy birch twigs) and the city life (road closures, decorated streets and buildings, altars). We have recently witnessed an ever increasing number of new examples that show believers celebrating publicly in the city streets: All Saints' March with relics that is juxtaposed with Halloween, arrival of St. Martin on a horse, walking the Way of the Cross during Lent, Easter-time burning of the effigy of Judas in Skoczów and recently the Cortège of the Three Wise Men (commonly called the Cortège of the Three Kings). These processions are turning into noisy street events – as the believers are going out of the churches into the city streets, the way they participate in the religious 'mystery' is changing: it becomes a peculiar cultural event. Features of folk theatre are clearly visible in religious ceremonies (there are leading and supporting actors who are dressed up, royal crowns become mere common props, stages are erected for amateur and professional artistic groups). Many of the religious ceremonies are perceived only as a social gathering ("We all were having fun") or a "street show", which testifies to a tectonic crack between the traditional society and a modern one. Strong presence of this kind of ritual spectacle in the media and participation of teachers, students, preschoolers, scouts and a vast audience aside from priests and believers, and also politicians, devils, angels and medieval knights in the Cortège of the Three Kings, make the folkloristic analyse this phenomenon in the category of a fair or fete (festive, commemorative, educational), search for the limits of eccentric ideas that turn a ritual into a theatre, for trivialised signs of traditional folk rites and for folklorisation and hybridisation of contemporary culture, and thus the way of leaving the sphere of *sacrum* and entering the sphere of *profanum*.

Key words: religiousness and folk piety, street spectacles, Corpus Christi, All Saints' March, Cortège of the Three Kings (Three Wise Men), Poland

A feast must refer to a myth as a world-view justification of the present day. But the myth is never the literal meaning of the text nor the word expressed. So a show, performance, spectacle is the easiest way to understand it. And then the opportunity arises that the morals and the encouraging examples will be carved in the heart and engraved in the memory.

(A. Zadrożyńska, K. Braun, *Zielnik świętowań polskich*, 2003)

My initial opinion about the attitude of the Church towards annual folk rites is quite unambiguous. These relations have not always been harmonious over the centuries. The Church authorities often used to give new meanings or new functions to the original forms of cultural heritage related to the agrarian culture, seasons and the accompanying rites of transition, or explicitly denied them. Or, instead, they used to introduce their own ceremonies in line with the liturgical principles. So many pagan rites, magic and symbolic actions have been tamed by the church and gained new features. But many of them have stepped out of the liturgical framework. Stefan Czarnowski underlined that the social environment “is not passive matter, but a community that is alive and consequently active, irresistible in the pursuit of possibly full expression in every single area. It leaves its own stamp on a religion. [...] It transforms the religion for its personal use, in its own image” (Czarnowski, 1956: 89). We have to agree with Ryszard Tomicki when he states that “the participation in church rites has been mainly the proof of belonging to the divine world order, and it has been treated at the same time as one of the human duties to God and the Saints, which – if performed regularly – ensures *ex opera operato* the preservation of the natural and desired course of events” (Tomicki, 1981: 47). We have to admit that the church has been active and its superiors have accepted many of the already existing religious practices and used other ones to stimulate the believers. And yet some practices did not withstand the test of time and disappeared. New forms have appeared in this centuries-old process of change and they are still coming into sight, but they are not always Polish, European or worldwide, but very often regional or even local.

I would like to show how complex the process is, looking at the examples of selected ritual spectacles that take place in new places in Poland, namely in city streets, and in the new political, economic and social reality. I see the original street processions in the changed social, moral and religious reality as a religious phenomenon in the increasingly secular society.

1. IN THE CIRCLE OF FOLK RELIGIOUSNESS, FOLK PIETY AND LITURGY

This content, modified and overriding the theological aspects and church teachings, as well as individual visions and images supplemented with new religious practices are called folk piety. Other synonymous terms are used as well: folk religiousness/religion, folk Catholicism, folk Christianity. Priest Władysław Piwowarski, referring to interdisciplinary research, says that “the term ‘folk religiousness’ is one of the most unclear terms as regards both its content and scope” (Piwowarski, 1983: 6). He sees the reason for this ‘confusion and the lack of consistency’ in the multitude of terms used often interchangeably. And, following sociologists of religion, he looks for the characteristic features in the contrast: folk religiousness – élite

religiousness, religiousness experienced – religiousness postulated, spontaneous religiousness – institutionalised religiousness. Piwowarski seems to be closer to the stand of those researchers who see Polish Catholicism in the category of “faith of the nation” (“faith of the folk”, “religion of life”), who link folk religiousness with patriotism, and who recognize its values as a “reference point” for religious and national identity (*ibid.*, 5–19). Priest Janusz Mariański, another well-known theologian, agrees with the pioneer synthesis of folk religiousness by Stefan Czarnecki and emphasizes the process of constant transformations of folk religiousness in the contemporary culture (Mariański, 1983: 241–280).¹ Members of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments adopted the following definition in a Vatican document (so-called Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy. Principles and Guidelines) in 2001: “The term ‘popular piety’ designates those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from a particular nation or people or from their culture” (Directory, 2003: 18). According to the Directory “Popular religiosity refers to a universal experience ... Popular religiosity does not always necessarily refer to Christian revelation. ...” and so provides the foundation for ‘popular Catholicism’ where the elements from the religious aspect of life, individual culture of each nation or from Christian revelation co-exist more or less harmoniously (*ibid.*, 18–19). On the basis of these definitions we can see that the terminology of the terms overlaps in many aspects and the boundaries between them are not very clearly drawn. There are many similarities and shared areas of synonymous co-existence. Designing the model of folk religiousness “developed in the sphere of Catholic influence”, Michał Buchowski observes that the term folk Catholicism “should refer to the influence of folk beliefs on Catholicism, whereas folk religiousness denotes all behaviours of religious nature, taking place also out of the institution (out of the Church)” (Buchowski, 1979: 97). His conclusion, similarly to other research, is as follows: folk religiousness is a wider term than folk Catholicism.

The basic and in some cases already classical views of the specialists on religiousness and folk piety in Poland – as we can see – refer mainly to rural communities and peasant culture. While discussing the specificity of folk religiousness in the past centuries, researchers analysed the transformation process of many phenomena using the examples of local communities only. As we all know, in the contemporary culture of very diverse communities exposed to a powerful influence of pop culture, omnipresent mass media and globalisation that is “a magic formula, a password opening the door to all present and future secrets” (Bauman 2000: 5),² we can no longer limit our analysis of the manifestations of folk piety, active rites and the related ceremonies to people living in villages. That is why I am interested in the transformation process of traditional rite forms – many of which have obscure origins now – which either have been present in the streets for ages or which were ousted from the church to the town square or streets in the Middle Ages; or which nowadays, e.g. in Upper Silesia, come back to the church from the stage in a local community centre; or which have been celebrated in Poland since the Middle Ages, like the Corpus Christi procession

1 Ryszard Tomicki (1981: 63) also emphasizes folk religiousness in the category of a “dynamic system”, observing that “like the whole peasant culture, it has undergone numerous transformations in time and space”.

2 Zygmunt Bauman rightly notices that the term “globalisation” as a “trendy word” is “on everyone’s tongue” (Bauman, 2000: 5).

that despite many transformations still excites strong interest of the Catholics who take part in the religious event (the event not yet deprived of old beliefs and folk customs) to manifest their faith and unity with the Church. Hence theologians maintain that this procession is a “typical form” (Directory, 2003: 117). The most recent form of a street theatre, the Cortège of the Three Wise Men (commonly called the Cortège of the Three Kings), is of a completely different nature. This street spectacle seems to complement the liturgy spontaneously and superficially only, although – as I am going to prove – it is directed by its organizers at the national level with active support from both regional and central mass media. The elderly parishioners are not the only ones who participate in the joyful procession or the street nativity play (sic!) as the organizers call it in the mass media – the whole parish communities with their priests, and young couples with children in particular, teachers with preschoolers and pupils from Catholic schools, representatives of lay municipal authorities, members of local religious associations and lay organizations like firemen take part in it, too.

2. FROM A CEREMONIOUS RITE TO A STREET PARADE: DIVERSE FEAST THEATRE

Anthropologists point out that the unusual time of lay and religious ceremonies that compose the festive performance resembles the theatre, (e.g.: Zadrożyńska, 1985; Dąbrowska, 1989). At the same time this is a very special theatre where the play must be staged at a specific time of the day and year because then “the creation of festive space takes place” and the “real festive performance” comes in two dimensions i.e. “people showed other people a spectacle about contacts with supernatural powers ..., all participants of the event became actors in a spectacle for inhabitants of the other world and communicated their expectations to them” (Zadrożyńska, 1985: 33). In the Polish “festive theatre”³ we can distinguish many traditional behaviours and folk customs that are of different genealogical, geographical, historical and social origin.⁴ We have to mention at least the **traditional forms of lay rituals** that are cultivated nowadays in Polish villages, cities or their suburbs, e.g. Shrovetide masqueraders (so-called *bakusy*, *bachusy*, *bekusy*, beggars, *kumedyjanty*, Turkish soldiers, giants, scarecrows); walking with the bear (*bera*, little bear), goat, billy goat, horse, stork, bull; the Shrovetide spectacle “Beheading Death” on the Jedlińsk town square; Easter parades with a cock (*kur*, *kokotek*) and animal mascarons (*muradyni* or *zian-dary* with a bear, horse, or so-called grey horse); waking with the straw dummy representing winter (*marzanna*), death (*śmiercicha*, *śmierć*, *śmierztka*) and a decorated tree (*gaik*, summer, *nowe latko*) in the spring;⁵ spring (Easter) wassailing of *włóczębnicy* (*wołoczebnicy*) as well as harvest festival masqueraders.

Traditional street spectacles that owe their origin to medieval liturgical drama form a separate group in the ritual year. Originally these were performed in the church. As we know, the first forms of medieval liturgical drama were related to the

3 The term suggested by: A. Zadrożyńska (1985: 33).

4 G. E. Karpińska (1996; 2002) got interested in the phenomenon of lay street carnival forms, happenings and techno parades organized nowadays in bigger cities.

5 This spring *gaik* “ritual” parade follows streets of villages and towns for the last few years on the 21st of March. This day is known as the hooky players’ day among teachers and students.

birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which led to the development of three thematic groups: Christmas, Passion Week and Easter. These cycles have dominated the liturgical drama over the centuries, and the props, like Jesus' baby crib and grave, remaining in churches testify to it. Researchers trace the origins of liturgical drama to theatrical pieces in Latin which were included in the Christmas or Easter liturgy as a dialogue (most often dialogical singing) and which were based on biblical epic plots. These performances in churches were accompanied by liturgical singing. Priests, seminarists and, less often, boys from *scholae cantorum* served as actors, wearing costumes "from the sacristy" (Okoń, 1989: 183). These mystery plays were transposed to Poland by Franciscan monks⁶ and they were further popularized also by Jesuits, Capuchins and Benedictine monks. City inhabitants showed great interest in the plays at that time (Jurkowski, 1978: 24, and his further publications; Lewański, 1981: 412–479; Okoń, 1970). Becoming self-independent and enriched with apocryphal stories, these forms of liturgical drama turned – via intermedia – into humorous dialogue scenes of a lay nature. They were officially banned from the liturgy as a result of the Council of Trent, and they slowly started to wane. The theatricalisation of ceremonies that led to the development of religious drama,⁷ partially due to "excess showiness of secularization, the invasion of epic quality (the monstrous size of mystery plays in the late Middle Ages), didacticism" (Sławińska 1989: 189), is the reason why these forms faced a crisis. Eventually, the originally pious mystery plays were banned from churches to the streets.

Jędrzej Kitowicz distinguishes Capuchins among the monks who used to include secular content in the nativity plays. He observes that they "excelled" at it and Reformati, Bernardine and Franciscan monks quickly followed (Kitowicz, 1970: 59). Other researchers maintain that "the process is known from the Middle Ages when mystery plays, handed over to guilds and craftsmen, became the land of literary initiatives for the city inhabitants who, seeking supernatural events, showed more interest in apocrypha than in the dry exegesis of the Gospel and dogmas as officially practiced by the Church" (Jurkowski, 1996: 285).

Those who know the old customs well point to the modification of religious mystery plays about Jesus' birth and the Three Wise Men visiting him (religious plots were enriched with new secular components, new heroes were introduced, original functions were replaced with playfulness). Henryk Jurkowski writes that "theatrical performances underlined to a greater degree the apocryphal view on events in the Gospel. This was due to the preferences of the simple and uneducated audience. Hence one can risk a statement that the farther the theatre was moving out of the church aisles, the greater the share of apocryphal and secular plots" (*ibid.*, 289).

Many regional forms of wassailing have been preserved in Poland till this today (mainly in the south, east and north-east). The wassailing groups go from house to house typically between Christmas and 6 January (Epiphany) dressed up as and called in local dialects as: shepherds, *połaźnicy / podłaźnicy (winszownicy, szczęściar-*

6 See more on the 12th century tradition of Jesus' baby crib as started by St. Francis of Assisi (Jurkowski, 1978: 24, and his further publications). Waszkiel maintains however that "the concept of tracing back the origins of the crib to the traditional church crib, which was a part of the Christmas mystery play, is purely hypothetical". See Waszkiel, 1990: 28, and others.

7 The term "religious drama", which many researchers use nowadays in reference to the two historical periods: Middle Ages and Baroque, was introduced as late as in the 20th century – as Sławińska writes – "because of the revival of these drama forms in Europe" (Sławińska, 1989: 188).

ze, nowoletnicy), szczodracy (szczodrocarze), wiliorze, wigiliorze, dziady żywieckie, jukace, droby, ślachcice, Three Wise Men... Researchers more and more often point to the fact that even the custom of wishing all the best by children, very popular in the Silesian Beskids, Żywiec and Nowy Sącz regions, is also fading away. There are even cases where some people (mainly the older generation) who appreciate such traditional visits invite their relatives' or neighbours' children in advance (Kwaśniewicz, 1984: 171). One can judge that the wassailers try to compete with the pop culture influence which offers the young people other types of entertainment. As recently as after the 2nd World War, wassailing in Christmas time was a long-awaited event in the rural communities, both for wassailers and the visited ones. Researchers note that "all wassailers were greeted with joy and happiness. If they had missed one of the houses, they would have caused its inhabitants a lot of hurt" (*ibid.*, 173), who in turn would have worried that a very difficult year was in front of them. It seems that only the diverse and widely organized regional festivals and contests of wassailing as the artistic activity (different ritual groups, choirs and carolling bands) have developed high aspirations among the participants and explained the importance of the phenomenon, showing that the performances bear the stamp of art and artistry (Smolińska, 1996: 358–359). The traditional wassailing forms have been moved from houses, farmyards and streets, i.e. from its natural environment, onto the stage. During the wassailing contests, actors learn how to behave on the stage, how important their costumes are for the audience, how to take care of articulation, singing, and musical setting, how to design decoration... As a result the awkward and spontaneous wassailing started to transform into theatrical performances with well thought-out artistic preparation behind them – so far from the traditional rituals fraught with magic. The contemporary Polish contests of wassailing groups allow the researcher to observe the process of folklorisation of religion as well as christianisation of folklore.

The Corpus Christi processions are unique and spectacular forms of liturgy celebration in the streets of Polish cities. This way of street celebration, popular not only in Poland since the Middle Ages, has already caught the interest of researchers (see e.g. Gawełek, 2010, 91–151; Hołda, 2013: 61–74; Zalewski, 1973: 102–107; Zaremska, 1978: 25–40). The feast of Corpus Christi, established by Pope Urban IV in 1264, definitely stands out among the other forms of celebration in the liturgical year as well as the ritual year. Theologians maintain that popular piety made it much easier to institute the feast of Corpus Christi and it still remains the main driver of Eucharistic piety (Directory, 2003: 116).⁸ Researchers agree that the procession with the consecrated Host is the most important part (ritual) of the feast. It is worth noting that as early as in the 16th century "deformation of the religious setting" started to lead towards "theatralisation of devotional demonstrations" because the participants were marching in the city streets to the "sound of horns", which did not enhance religious concentration, similarly to the omnipresent tumult (see Zaremska, 1978: 32–33). "Ludic moments" started to accompany the feast at an early stage: religious as well as secular and historical performances, contests and guild events (e.g. a special *theatrum* is reconstructed in Cracow nowadays at the end of the octave of street ceremonies: *Lajkonik – konik zwierzyniecki*). Having analysed medieval processions in Cracow, Hanna

8 Theologians admit that "in the 16th and 17th centuries, the faith, revived with the need to react against the negation of protestants, and culture, i.e. art, literature and folklore, united to revive and add meaning to various forms of folk piety aimed at the Eucharist mystery" (*ibid.*, p. 116).



Boys with bells during the Corpus Christi procession (Kluczbork, 1978). Photo by T. Smolińska

Zaremska reached a very straightforward conclusion: the religious mystery play “transformed into a party” (*ibid.*, 34, 39). And following Peter Burke we can assume that Corpus Christi became a Carnival feast (Burke, 2009: 228).

We have to add that the celebration of Corpus Christi and the octave is accompanied in Poland with numerous beliefs, customs and magic folk practices, e.g. even nowadays the procession participants pinch young birch branches, pick up sweet rush, bring flowers and herbs for consecration during the octave, parishioners in a number of parishes (mainly in the region of Opole Silesia and in Spycimierz near Uniejów in the Łódź area) use fresh flowers to form flower carpets on the streets that stretch for many miles. I have observed for many years not only how the local communities prepare locally for the street “carpets” every year (picking up flowers, splitting the carpets into family or neighbourhood stretches; making the carpets: the youth, children at the age of the first Holy Communion, the youth at the age of the confirmation or taking secondary school final

examinations etc.; designing the patterns) but also how they document it (gather photos and films, upload photos and films to the internet). A peculiar type of visitor make a subject of my research too – they come not to participate in the procession, but only to look at the wonderful carpets, which they call “a beautiful tradition” or “a sensation”. Such diverse participation in the procession makes us think about the dimensions of folk piety in Poland, about functions of the original religious ritual that transforms into a ceremony. It forces us at the same time to ask questions about the new type of “religious” tourism developed by the lovers of flower carpets,⁹ about hijacking the liturgy by the ceremony or the religious functions by the aesthetic ones...

More importantly: nowadays in many places in Poland priests define new areas for the street feast (e.g. the “traditional” routes of many processions were extended after 1989) and by encouraging believers to participate they remind Catholics of the necessity to manifest faith in public. It proves the researchers’ assessment that the Corpus Christi ceremony has changed: from the original form of adoration and penance, via propitiatory, via the manifest of faith and the triumph of Christ over death (Zalewski, 1973: 134) to the development of the new form of religious tourism in some regions in Poland.

⁹ See e.g. selected internet forums in the Opole diocese (deaneries of Ujazd, St. Anna Mountain region, Racibórz, Głubczyce) and Spycimierz (province of Łódź).



Children from Jelowa (Opole Silesia) with a marzanna (2004). Arch. T. Smolińska

While analysing the Corpus Christi processions, Renata Hołda refers to Victor Turner's concept of "social drama" and perceives the feast in the category of a street interventional performance. We have yet to see if her assessment of the contemporary Polish reality is correct when she maintains that the feast of Corpus Christi "is already for some [believers] a conventionalised empty ritual form lacking justification" (Hołda, 2013: 61).

The traditional forms of regional nature¹⁰ clearly deserve special attention in the group of street spectacles linked to the Church. These forms can be related to the Holy Week, e.g. the procession with Judas that is still a very popular parade in Skoczów in Cieszyn Silesia, the "Passion play" in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska; or to Easter: horseback processions in the Racibórz area, processions on foot in central Poland; or to Pentecost: processions around the fields; or be of propitiatory nature: e.g. processions on St. Urban's Day, St. Stanislaus processions in Cracow (organized since 1253, except for the WW2), processions with the relics of St. Wojciech in Gniezno and Cracow. However, all these original street processions require a separate article.

10 Highlighting the growing vitality of street spectacles in Poland, I would like to mention that many of the old street celebrations have died out, e.g. "leading the oak Christ to the city" – a custom in the Polish and German Church (as it was very common in Germany) that was still observed at the beginning of the 17th century and which, as researchers recorded, was a "procession-like walking with an oak sculpture of Christ on a donkey put on the cart" (Bystroń, 1994: 52). Even at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a "procession with a princess" on the Pentecost day in Podlasie. As Barbara Ogradowska describes: "the prettiest girl in the village got beautifully dressed, a crown made of flowers on her head, and she was guided along the field borders together with other girls" (2005: 185). The processions of pitch burners (*smolarze*), which used to take place on the second day of Pentecost in the region of Greater Poland, disappeared after the WW2.

Writing about the contemporary spectacles in the city streets, I include **St. Martin** in this catalogue, too. **He arrives on a white horse on 11 November** and invites parishioners / inhabitants not only for a special croissant, but also for a grilled sausage and – sometimes – adults get mulled red wine, too. The worship of St. Martin, who is one of the patron saints of France, was popular even before WW2 mainly in Pomerania and Greater Poland, particularly in the cities of Poznań and Bydgoszcz. In the last years (more specifically since the beginning of the 21st century) the cult has been developed in many Silesian parishes, particularly in the Opole diocese (see Smolińska, 2011: 196, and her further publications for more information). The organizers assess that St. Martin's Day “has a long tradition in our land” which “vanished after WW2”. They also call the “feast” with its German name: Martinfest. It seems that the origin of this type of celebration may be traced back to the search for German cultural heritage, which has been recently very popular in this region of Poland. My informants have mentioned it repeatedly. Apart from priests, local clubs of the German Social and Cultural Society in Opole Silesia are the main organizers of the feast, and local bakers, butchers, members of voluntary fire brigades, teachers, pupils, and employees of local community centres join in. The priests indirectly confirm the preference for the German heritage, referring to oral tradition (they have heard more often from other priests about such processions held in Germany rather than in Poznań), and so do the secular informants, considering St. Martin to be a patron saint of Germany – their common knowledge does not include the French biography of this saint. Therefore not only the name of the feast is German in some parishes, but also the pupils prepare the staging and songs in the German language. Hence it seems that the revival of St. Martin's worship in Opole Silesia is not purely of a religious nature.

Trivialisation of this ceremony – not only in Upper Silesia where the saint arrives on a white horse, dressed up as a Roman legionary, and brings croissants for children (local bakers are the sponsors) – confirms what the researchers claim: the contemporary St. Martin's worship is “a mere shadow of his adoration in the old days” (Zaleski, 1996: 710).

There are always certain fixed points in the cultural offer for inhabitants on St. Martin's day: a street procession with lanterns, candles and torches goes to the church square (or town square). St. Martin leads the procession and usually rides a white horse (or the animal is covered with a white cloth). Then the spectacle “How St. Martin helped a beggar” follows (the saint offers him his overcoat or tears it in half) and later a short service in the church and croissants for children or all the participants (the croissants “represent” a horseshoe lost by St. Martin's horse). This agenda grows year by year: children present different scenes from St. Martin's life in the church (also in the German language), sing German songs and pray to St. Martin, there are concerts of religious music, offerings are collected for orphanages (toys, books, crayons), a local brass band participates in the procession, a disco for children and a dance party for adults are organized in the local community centre – people are treated with croissants, grilled sausages and mulled red wine in a big tent next to the church.

Inhabitants (not only the believers) do not always treat the celebration of St. Martin's name day as a religious event, but more as a party of ludic nature. The integrative function of this specific cultural offer is very clear.

In recent years we have been recording more and more new examples of believers going out into the city streets. **The Stations of the Cross during Lent and marches of the Saints** are good cases in point here. The Stations of the Cross are organized by



Children from Jelowa (Opole Silesia) with a marzanna (2004). Arch. T. Smolińska

priests and parish communities in many cities (and districts) as almost compulsory church street ceremonies on Good Friday as well as on other days. The suffering of Christ is presented in the street where relevant religious songs are sung. The exit of believers from the church building and the procession with a cross in the streets explicitly testifies to a different way of participation in the passion play. The procession transforms into another noisy street event where it is difficult to maintain the original frame of mind and concentration and to identify with the suffering of Christ. Probably the oldest procession in Poland is worth mentioning in this context: **Ecumenical Stations of the Cross** organized in the city of Łódź since 1994. Believers and clergy of different faiths participated in the passion liturgy (Catholics, Evangelics, Calvinists, Mariavites and others). There was a well-thought out scenario: representatives of different social and professional groups carried the cross (students, officials, firemen, policemen) and the clergy of different faiths led the reflections. This ecumenical “tradition” continued for 12 years but in 2013 it was significantly modified by Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski. He replaced the word “ecumenical” in the name of the procession with the name of the city. Catholic priests took over the organisation. The ecumenical symbols were removed and professional actors (sic!) led the reflections at each station. Even the route of the procession was modified as well as the date (it was held one week earlier).

Marches of the Saints held on the 31st of October enjoy growing popularity in Poland and they deserve special attention in the group of city street spectacles related to the Church. Generally, we can say that the marches have become an alternative for Halloween. For example, the March of the Saints in 2012 in Opole took place under the catchy banner of “HolyWins”. The activists of the international Catholic community “Emmanuel” are said to be the originators of this peculiar event, and the parish communities, i.e. priests and believers, execute the plan in Poland. Organizers invite “whole families, especially children and the youth” to participate in the procession so as to celebrate

together “life and the way to sainthood of the individuals raised by the Church to the glory of altars”. Priests appeal to Catholics, like during the Corpus Christi procession, to take part in the procession and thereby manifest their faith. The March of the Saints should “be a symbol of joy, harmony and unity for families”. Children, dressed up as saints and little angels “sing happy songs, it is so joyfully”. The script of the noisy procession differs among cities, e.g. the following masqueraders participated in the Warsaw procession in Krakowskie Przedmieście street accompanied with the images of saints and the blessed: monks, nuns, hermits, St. Casimir, St. Juan Diego; participants of the 2013 “dancing” parade in Poznań, dressed up as the city’s patron saint, “were supposed to make a little noise” so they brought drums, guitars, glockenspiels and rattles; the participants in Katowice-Panewki dressed up as angels and saints and they carried images of saints and the blessed “promoting in this way the Feast of All Saints”. The organizers provided “additional entertainment” and they were treating people with candies wrapped in paper with saints’ quotes. The Litany of the Saints was recited at the end of the event at All Saints’ Night. Both the march and the night event “were – according to priests – a response to the culture of evil which is spread in the contemporary world by advertising and the mass media”. Participants carried relics of 20 saints in Opole whose profiles were presented during the march in the city streets. The religious street spectacle was held under the auspices of the president of the city. The integrative and ludic functions of this peculiar spectacle seem to co-exist with its religious function. Time will show whether this joyful All Saints’ procession will counterbalance the non-Slavic Halloween, which is becoming increasingly popular in Poland.

Because of the limited volume of this article, I will confine myself to some introductory remarks on the most recent street spectacle commonly called the Cortège of the Three Kings that has accompanied the liturgical celebrations of the Epiphany day (6 January) for 6 years. This peculiar street performance will be analysed by me in more detail in another publication. It should be added that the examination of the “old Polish tradition” – as its organisers call it – must include the prior festive initiative of the Church, systematically developed by priests nowadays, i.e. missionary wassailers.¹¹

PHENOMENON OF THE CORTEGE OF THE THREE WISE MEN IN POLAND

I will say straight away that the noisy procession promoted by its organisers (Cortège of the Three Kings Foundation – a public benefit organisation) as “the largest

¹¹ The wassailing group of the Three Kings is well known in the folk culture. Nowadays, inspired by priests, they go as missionary wassailers from a church to parish households right after the mass on the Feast of Revelation with a special socio-religious mission. As I have established, special instructions and scripts for wassailers have been circulated internally in the Opole diocese since the 1970s. Since 1993 the missionary wassailers have been operating under the auspices of the Pontifical Mission Society for Children (based in Warsaw). Apart from the pursuit of their goal: “to preserve the dying wassailing tradition”, it is worth emphasizing that the patronage adds another target to their social work: to collect money for missionary purposes. “Children who participate in wassailing evangelize themselves at the same time. Because they prepare for this missionary event, they learn traditional carols and they gain deeper insight in the Biblical events. They also attend catechesis where the purpose of the wassailing is shared. Thanks to this, they become real Gospel preachers from their earliest years” (Lendzion, 2004: 17). The anthology of missionary wassailing scripts was published in the Opole diocese, including editions in the Silesian dialect and in the German language (see Globisch, 2000).



The 'African King' in the Cortege of Three Wise Men (Opole, 6 January 2015). Photo by T. Smolińska

street nativity play in Poland” (that according to them brings back the tradition of “a street theatre, public carol singing and animals in the city centre”) is for me the most trivialised form amongst contemporary ritual spectacles of religious nature.¹² The fight for the reinstatement of Epiphany as a public holiday was started by a right-wing politician Jerzy Kropiwnicki, the then President of the city of Łódź. With this end in view he set up the Return of Three Kings Association and carried out numerous community actions (e.g. street happenings in Łódź, canvassing and gathering signatures all over Poland), and as a result in 2010 the President of the Republic of Poland signed the Law (amending the Polish Labour Code) that officially restored the 6th of January, which was banned in 1960, as a public holiday. The Cortege of the Three Kings Foundation together with Catholic kindergartens and schools and parish communities followed suit. Doing it instantly and with a flourish they started to organise street parades on that day in the form of a “large nationwide family outdoor event” (characterised by “colourful costumes, banners, and firework shows”), beginning

¹² In many cities the organisers overused the phrase “Let’s make a mess” to encourage the participants to sing carols and cheer. This vernacular word for commotion and noise is a direct reference to the words of Pope Francis directed to the youth gathered in Rio de Janeiro in August 2013.



Front of the Cortege of Three Wise Men at Opole (6 January 2015). Photo by T. Smolińska

from the biggest Polish cities.¹³ It has all led to the creation of a logo and a street parade scenario (binding nationwide), preparation of “royal gifts for the cortege participants”: three types of royal crowns made of coloured paper and special songbooks; as well as posters, badges for the participants, billboards and city lights, solicitation of sponsorship, advertisements in national and regional mass media, etc. It should be added that Michał Lorenc, famous Polish film music composer, has composed a special fanfare for the cortege. It is also worth mentioning that the nationwide scenario played out in successive scenes in all cities and towns in Poland recommends that the main characters of the “street nativity play”, i.e. the Three Wise Men: European, Asian and African, should ride horses or even camels (or travel in carriages) and they should be accompanied by an “entourage”, namely children suitably dressed up: in red, green or blue. The cortege stops several times to watch the enactment of four

¹³ Its dynamic development can be seen in the following figures: in 2011 in Warsaw teachers and students from 11 schools took part in the event, in 2012 the cortege was held in 21 cities, in 2013 – in over 90 locations, and in 2014 as many as 187 towns and cities in Poland organised the cortege (organisers handed out 500.000 paper crowns and songbooks, and 1 million stickers with the cortege logo), which was acclaimed by the organisers as ‘the biggest street nativity play in the world’. Another 34 locations have already signed up and they will take part in the cortege in 2015.

street scenes, called “gospel scenes”: staging of fight for wooden sabres and pitchforks by the children dressed up as angels and devils commanded by two generals; staging of the “Herod’s court” visit; a scene showing an inhospitable Jewish inn and finally – in the main city square – staging of a visit and bow to the Holy Family (at which time bishops and presidents of the cities take the floor). Then the performances of professional and amateur music bands follow (e.g. Luxtorpeda band led by Robert “Litza” Friedrich, Trzecia Godzina Dnia – an ecumenical band, or folk ensembles). People participating in the parade are usually dressed up as knights, kings, queens, angels, members of highlander bands in Bielsko-Biała and animals: not only horses and camels but also sheep and donkeys. In 2013 in Opole there was a firework show and “2500 fireworks were shot in the sky”. The organisers mention the following ‘attractions’ of the cortege: the bow of the Three Kings, Herod, a chariot, camels, a Chinese dragon and battle between devils and angels. They assess that the cortege is certain to ‘delight’ any participant as it offers “joy, great fun and sense of belonging to the community”. In each and every city the individuals responsible for the cortege encourage its participants to sing carols, they commentate on successive superficial and trivialised theatrical scenes and the gaudy and loud (because of microphones) call for “making a mess” seems to be ubiquitous. The boisterous performances in Bielsko-Biała give the impression of improvisation as they are fraught with the elements of pantomime, dances, whip cracking and forms of theatre deriving from *commedia dell’arte* (just to mention only the New Year ritual group *Dziady żywieckie* marching in the religious cortege).

St. Matthew’s testimony to the bow of the Three Wise Men in the Gospel (Mt 2, 1–12) has turned from a minor event into a national public holiday in Poland when “everyone is having great fun” according to the journalist from the national public broadcaster TVP1 – “the cortege ambassador” (sic!) (a live coverage from Warsaw, Lublin and the village of Dziemiany in Kashubia that started at 11.55 a.m. on 6 January 2014).¹⁴ Thus the journalist calls the Warsaw cortege – in which “there is beauty, love and joy” – “a tremendous evangelisation movement” and “a grand spectacle”, and announcing the enactment of the bow of the Three Kings the journalist states that “something far from banality is going to happen here”. Archbishop Józef Michalik, dressed up as a shepherd, agrees with this statement and concludes that “there is a need for joint experiencing of religious feasts”. And when the journalists announce successive groups parading in the cortege: “and now famous sportsmen are parading”, “and now the scouts”, “and now the ladies from the Country Women Club” etc., the older generation will certainly recall that the same style of reporting was used during the live coverage of the former May Day parades.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUDING

It is worth noticing that some characteristic trends are emerging in the contemporary Polish culture: not only new forms of celebrating religious feasts in the streets have arisen, which are developing very rapidly, but also – more importantly – they are ori-

¹⁴ The cortege of the Three Kings has gained the status of a very important cultural event and it is very much in the foreground not only in the regional but also in the national mass media (extensive coverage in the news in all television channels).

ginally initiated in the biggest cities in Poland. Then they are spreading quickly and spontaneously among smaller urban locations. It should be underlined that social groups interested in traditional forms of wassailing are also changing: the rural audience is being replaced by city inhabitants. Social acceptance of such peculiar street processions is so fascinating for the researcher because the parades attract not only the elderly but also young adults together with the youth and children. At the same time the process of secularisation of the society is also highly visible in Poland, there are noticeable discrepancies and inconsistencies in the outlook of many individuals and the relativisation of the Poles' attitudes towards experiencing the *sacrum* is progressing.

We can state that the wassailing groups of the Three Kings – so popular in traditional culture – who visit households practically in the whole territory of Poland on the Epiphany Day, singing carols and pastorals, have been appropriated by popular culture with all its trendy theatrical preferences. The traditional wassailing of the Three Kings has become a city street spectacle nowadays, a conventionalized performance with predefined tricks, theatrical gestures and costumes. The arrangement of these respective components leads to the disappearance of symbolic meanings and functions (dese-miotisation) of traditional ritual structures. The original magical wassailing with its symbolic function is transforming before our eyes into a superficial street spectacle with the structure of conventionalised signs. Phenomena of this type cannot be overlooked by a researcher into traditional and contemporary culture.

I believe that the “religious community – identification with a religious group”, which was enumerated among the parameters of religiousness by Priest Władysław Piwowarski many years ago (see Piwowarski, 1971, 34, pp. 19-21; 1977, 41, pp. 33-41),¹⁵ has become one of the dominant features in the street landscape of the Cortege of the Three Kings. This form of wassailing has left the parish courtyards and marched into the streets of the largest cities in Poland. Communities of city parishioners create new wassailing quality in the reality of pop culture, which is only a poor substitute of nativity plays. They play the amateur street theatre and manifest their membership and identification with the Catholic Church.

Therefore we cannot skip the superficial nature of folk religiousness while assessing the religious value of the Cortege of the Three Kings. We have to agree here with those researchers who, referring to “the ritualism of rural religiousness”, highlighted the commitment to external manifestations and the fact that the external manifestations become the most important factor in assessing the religious affiliation. Their conclusion was unambiguous: “Catholicism is deep in rites, customs, gestures, and this makes it superficial” (Buchowski, 1979: 109; also: Czarnowski, 1956: 105). I would like to remind of another hypothesis formulated in the eighties of the 20th century. It says that “folk religiousness in Poland maintains continuity and remains at a high level; it even grows in some circumstances” and “it is the religion of life” in the “festive life” dimension for a massive majority of the Poles (Piwowarski, 1983: 16). The Cortege of the Three Kings fully supports this hypothesis at the beginning of the 21st century. My objective is to capture the studied phenomena “from the inside”, i.e. from the side of the participants. The etic view of the ritual spectacles is just a starting point for the emic analysis based on the qualitative method (here: participant observation, different interview types).

¹⁵ Czarnowski, writing earlier about distinctive features of folk religiousness, highlighted its social, collective and parochial nature just behind religious nationalism. He concluded that religion is firstly the matter of collective life, and only secondly the matter of individual life. See Czarnowski, 1956: 88-107.

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