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## IRRELIGION AS A CONTEMPORARY PHENOMENON

Irreligion is a term that covers a wide range of both religious and nonreligious negative attitudes towards God and religion occurring in the modern world. The fathers of this notion and its theoretical bases are Anglo-Saxon sociologists who started taking this subject into consideration and developed its theoretical base in the 1960s and 1970s. N. Jay Demerath III and Collin Campbell are generally credited with having coined this classic term. Among recent prominent sociologists of religion who have contributed to this subject are Charles Glock and Talcot Parsons<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. SOCIOLOGICAL GENESIS OF IRRELIGION

According to Collin Campbell irreligion is “a form of subculture”, originating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a reaction “against the overly structured belief system, authoritarianism and lack of humanism characterized by the dominant religion”<sup>2</sup>. So it is a reactive phenomenon – a kind of counter-ideology expressing socially present hostility towards religion (as evidenced movements, associations and organizations). At the level of dual relationships it is manifested by hostile replies to proposals of religion including her denial and rejection. Irreligion is an attitude towards religion and constitutes a “collective system of beliefs, feelings and actions that cause hostility towards religion, while irreligiousness (the state or quality of being irreligious) is an individual expression

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cz. S. Bartnik, *Irreligia, czyli nienawiść do Boga*, in: *Gromy mówiące*, Lublin 1999, p. 401; Idem, *Dogmatyka katolicka*, t. 1, Lublin 2000, p. 364

<sup>2</sup> C. Campbell, *Propozycja konceptualizacji pojęcia „irreligia” i „irreligijność”*, in: *Ateizm oraz irreligia i sekularyzacja*, ed. by F. Adamski, Kraków 2011, p. 56.

of the hostility (...), a rejection of particular religious tradition”<sup>3</sup>. In this view we can talk about irreligion in terms of a worldview, a kind of philosophy of life and individually understood approach to religion.

Campbell suggests that irreligion might be investigated at various levels: “a distinctive characteristic of irreligion is not its substance but the fact that it is a reaction to religion”<sup>4</sup>. He also attempts to systematize tendencies which are being described as irreligious. According to him they constitute two principal varieties of irreligion: reactionary and evolutionary. Reactionary irreligion is characterized as a total negation of religion and developmental irreligion is less hostile to the specific doctrines but its sting of criticism focuses on the category of faith institutions.

Campbell noticed that the trends which could be defined as irreligious in the reactionary sense bear witness to many active efforts to overpower organized religion, especially characterized the nineteenth century. Modern observations – according to English sociologist – would rather indicate the tendencies of developmental type that focuses on a radical criticism of theology, its principles and ideas<sup>5</sup>. Accepting such distinction, irreligion might have originated in the philosophical currents of the nineteenth century, hostile to Christianity and religion. The common denominator was set up by Ricoeur who introduced the term “philosophers of suspicion”, where he drew attention to three key intellectual figures: Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Freud. They sought to find or explain the true meaning of religion by stripping away the false meaning. In consequence they laid the ground for an ideological stance which characterizes modernity, where the key word became the term generation 68 which has shaped the contemporary world. The specific character of irreligion in the Euro-Atlantic culture basin – according to Campbell – is determined by its attitudes as rejection and hostility to a particular religious tradition, namely Christianity. Irreligion is not an infinite or total<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. COMPONENTS OF IRRELIGION

An irreligious attitude – according to an English sociologist – calls for continuous exemplification. It is a wrong assumption that “the religious man has a constant need to express and acknowledge his own religion through ritual participation in religious practices,” and an irreligious person manifests indifference

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> C. Campbell, *Propozycja konceptualizacji...*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Campbell, *Analyzing the rejection of irreligion*, „Social Compass” 1977, No. 24, p. 343; J. A. Allen, *Irreligion: A Mathematician Explains Why the Arguments for God Just Don't App Up*, New York 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. Campbell, *Propozycja konceptualizacji...*, op. cit., p. 64.

and takes no action towards religion. Irreligious people must still “renew” their rejection of religion in a way that is functionally analogous to the repetition of believer his acts of faith”<sup>7</sup>. Hostility to religion takes the form of a specific ritual, repetitive formula, where you can see a structure or manifestations of the stages.

The first component of the “irreligious response is hostility and rejection expressed in behavior”<sup>8</sup>. Depending on the emotional commitment such a reply may encompass a very wide range of intensity. It would come with varying attitudes, from indifference, through callous cynicism to more or less open forms of aggressive hostility. In this context, irreligion takes the form of areligion or antireligion<sup>9</sup>. Areligious attitude is characterized as indifference to religion, it is “as if” irreligious: “the possibility of including such a stance into the sphere of irreligion only becomes real when it will express the reaction of withdrawal or «passive hostility» toward religion”<sup>10</sup>. Antireligion may be described as an explicit rejection and hostility toward any form of belief in the supernatural or the divine (doctrine, structure, and accepted forms of worship). This is “a classic example of antireligious and irreligious reaction”<sup>11</sup>.

Attacking a specific religion is the second element. All its forms as a manifestation of religiousness are submitted to an aggressive negation. Such perception of irreligion – “as a pure type masks the intention of attack on any religious components: beliefs, practices, experiences, the organized institution, and clergy”<sup>12</sup>. In practice, the irreligious response can take a specific form, putting emphasis on some or many components of religiosity. Then it is recognized as anti-clericalism, anti-spiritualism, anti-ecclesiasticism, doctrinal revisionism, anti-dogmatism, etc. These attitudes might resemble forms of religious radicalism, typical for people who are the adherents to a specific religion, subjecting its theological doctrines to criticism, which is justified by the desire for its revitalization. Such motivation leads also to the condemnation of doctrinal improprieties or the degeneration of religion. However, all mentioned religious attitudes differ in their origin and inspiration of their activities<sup>13</sup>. In the case of religious radicalism and religious reformism, there is a concern for the purity of religion, the clarity of its irreducible beliefs or consistency of original doctrine. Hostility and even hatred lie at the origin of irreligion.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 60-61. See C. Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, London 1971, p. 17-45 (chapter *The Nature and Forms of Irreligion*).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. C. Campbell, *Propozycja konceptualizacji...*, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> See J. F. Schumaker, *Mental Health Consequences of Irreligion*, in: *Religion and Mental Health*, ed. by J. F. Schumaker, Oxford 1992, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> C. Campbell, *Propozycja konceptualizacji...*, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The extension of hostile attitudes beyond the area of any specific religion and to all religious elements constitutes the third important factor of irreligious response. It originates in the negation of specific religious belief, usually the inherited one, in which a person grew up and was formed. Such approach is represented by N. J. Demerath who defines irreligion as unbelief in elementary religious doctrine with which the individual is culturally linked<sup>14</sup>. Campbell believes that “the rejection of the professed religious tradition might be also associated with the rejection of other traditions, and eventually will lead to the rejection of any form of religion”<sup>15</sup>. However, it constitutes the fourth component of the perfect irreligious type. Theoretically, it would bear the notion of the exclusion of religion at all. The eradication of religion would be a purpose in itself. Campbell describes such a position as eliminationism. However, the core is not a practical elimination of the religion but the means to replace it with something else. Freeing people from the influence of religion is supposed to be a way to implement a new secular ideology, often connected with a specific philosophic-social doctrine, like communism, nationalism, fascism, liberalism, humanism or existentialism. This attitude (substitutionism) is spread widely in social life, and is seen as an inverse to purely classical eliminationism and at the same time, to the theoretical type of irreligion.

Finally, the last component – according to Campbell – portrays the conformity between “the belief of the acting individual and the conviction of the community as a whole”<sup>16</sup>. In effect, this factor helps to bring irreligion into the open and towards its popularization, approval and public affirmation. Campbell emphasizes the intentional factor in proclaiming irreligious ideas. He argues that the criticism of radically religious attitudes, expressed by hostility towards the status quo of religion may be erroneously interpreted as irreligious while the soft, distant, humanist-agnostic criticism is considered as a manifestation of the liberal religious radicalism. The contemporary situation of religious pluralism and tolerance to the religious unorthodoxy generate additional difficulties in irreligious identifications<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. PROFESSOR BARTNIK'S CONCEPT

Campbell spoke of a “range of irreligiousness”, thereby indicating that irreligion should be considered as a process which begins with the hostile decision of elimination from individual life all religious elements, progressively expanding its range into the broader realm of the sacred or transcendent, taking on more and more missionary features that aim to make irreligion a widely accepted ideology.

<sup>14</sup> N. J. Demerath, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> C. Campbell, *Propozycja konceptualizacji...*, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 66; *idem*, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion...*, p. 97-98.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, *Propozycja konceptualizacji...*, op. cit., p. 66-67.

Campbell suggests that irreligion can come in the shape of atheism and acknowledges that the latter is accepted within some religious and spiritual belief systems. Thus, atheism is part of irreligion and its theoretical foundations.

Atheism – referring to the distinction as made by professor Bartnik – is opposed to religion which is the positive attitude of a personal relationship with God manifested in our thoughts and convictions<sup>18</sup>. A clear distinction should be made between unbelief and atheism. In scholarly or ordinary thinking, the phenomenon of atheism and unbelief (being an atheist or non-believer) has been employed interchangeably. Therefore, while taking into account their precise substance, at the same time we have to pay attention to the implicativeness of those terms. It seems that atheism implies a higher level of organized philosophical beliefs than unbelief. Atheism contains complex specifically structured views. In reality, the mere fact of unbelief does not require any systematization. We would say that atheism is a form of rationalized beliefs. Unbelief alone indicates a rejection of God but atheism as a result of unbelief requires reflection over this rejection. It is very difficult to precisely determine who is an atheist<sup>19</sup>. From the human side, the talk about atheism requires denouncing God's existence on various levels: cognitive, volitional and behavioral<sup>20</sup>.

According to Polish professor of theology, Stanislaw Czeslaw Bartnik, irreligion should be understood as a constant replacement of religious elements from individual and social life by universal atheism<sup>21</sup>. It cannot be considered in opposition to atheism as a worldview attitude towards God, expressed in more or less legitimate negation, but as a kind of antireligion which ostensibly places in the center of its action the fight against God, His presence, the Church and religion in social, political or cultural life. To such conclusions came the promoter of this stance, an American sociologist, N. Jay Demerath.

Demerath draws attention to the difficulties in defining and distinguishing irreligion from other phenomena which are very often similar in appearance. Therefore, any attempt to define irreligion refers to the phenomenon of religion and its definition and it depends heavily on the understanding of religion. Here starts the problem of defying what religion is and adopting the definition by the majority of scholars. Considering the variety of given proposals, formulated by theologians and representatives of other disciplines (especially sociology), it seems to be very difficult, not to say impossible. Therefore he suggests attaching understanding of irreligion to its reference to exclusive religion, and defines it as

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Cz. S. Bartnik, *Człowiek religijny*, in: *Bóg i ateizm*, Lublin 2002, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> Idem, *Misterium człowieka*, Lublin 2004, p. 169; idem, *Zło niewiary i ateizmu*, in: *Walka o Kościół w Polsce*, Lublin 1995, p. 269-270.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, *Pojęcie ateizmu...*, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, *Eucharystia i wolność*, in: *Wprowadzenie do teologii społeczno-politycznej*, Lublin 2006, p. 370.

“unbelief in elementary religious doctrine, whereby, an individual is culturally bound”<sup>22</sup>.

Unbelief is to be understood as a lack of faith not its total rejection (disbelief). Unbelief then is an act of reference made by a person towards faith or tradition in which is immersed. Rejection of the doctrine of Islam by a Christian or Buddhism by a Muslim cannot be regarded as irreligion. Such an understanding of irreligion (with regard to a particular religious tradition) is marked as an aggressive rejection of religion which often takes a proactive stance against faith<sup>23</sup>. Campbell marks irreligion as distinct from atheism and points out, that it is a “component of a broader process of secularization which forced individual to reevaluate previous dogma, including those relating to education and politics”<sup>24</sup>. Thus, it signifies elimination of the religious element from the ideological sphere of human and social relations.

The worldview attitude of irreligion appears particularly in association with contemporary threats to the life of faith (secularism, anti-christianism and christianophobia) and the expulsion of transcendental elements from human activities. It becomes the subject of philosophical and theological research. Therefore, is defined as an “absolute contradiction of religion where there has been no worship, law, veneration, universal value. (...) This is an individual and collective hostility towards religion, an attack on the whole religious phenomenon (...). It manifests itself in outright hostility of the evil towards everything divine, religious, ethical, spiritual, noble, just, and valuable. (...) God is the greatest «threat» to man”<sup>25</sup>.

#### 4. IRRELIGION AS A PROFILE OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

As has already been said, irreligion is not a concise trend but is the sum of trends that manifest themselves in the most diverse way, identifiable in contemporary culture. Undoubtedly, the emergence of the “New Atheism”, the ideological form of promoting atheism, gave further impetus to the development of irreligion. The works of the top four most prominent atheist authors: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, have gained an immense popularity through numerous media campaigns. They seek to disprove the existence of God

<sup>22</sup> N. J. Demerath, *Program i prolegomena...*, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Irreligion, a-religion, and the rise of the religion-less church: Two case studies in organized convergency*, „Sociological Analysis” 1969, No. 30, p. 191-203.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, *Program i prolegomena...*, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> Cz. S. Bartnik, *Irreligia...*, op. cit., p. 146.

through their instrumental approach to the natural sciences while at the same time they undermine the reasonableness of professing any religion<sup>26</sup>.

The interpretation of this movement would be rather ideological than philosophical. Because atheism is considered here as a predetermined and reasonable postulate, not, as a consequence of promoted philosophical views as in the case of the earlier preachers of atheism. Therefore, the priority here is not seeking the truth, but deliberate fight against theism based on a subjective conviction of the rightness of their beliefs. "New Atheism" represents the specific features of the doctrines which are defined as fundamentalist<sup>27</sup>.

Also atheism and secularization are having an impact on the socio-political life. Currently, we are witnessing, among others, through the conception of the so-called political correctness, the tendency to arbitrarily depriving believers of the right to political involvement which might be expressed in the perspective of assessing the religious axiology of current events. The Enlightenment postulate of a radical development of the public and religious sphere is a specific narrative feature of the media, present also in the main actors' statements of the political scene. Here we also note the tendency towards the creation of political discourse whose participants do not display their religion, at least are not guided by its requirements in political activities. They are able to "suspend" their religious beliefs or confessional statements to achieve party political purposes<sup>28</sup>. This leads to the instrumentalisation of religion, then its privatization and marginalization.

Culture, beside atheistically inclined science, has become a particular area of giving a man compensation for spiritual needs and reference point for existential questions about the meaning and value of human life. The turn towards fascination with culture is largely due to her cleansing "characteristics", idealization of human thinking and functioning, and understanding the mission and tasks of man in the world and to the world. In consequence, absolute and soteriological prerogatives were assigned to the culture. Culture has not only become a substitute for religion, but more valuable reality than the latter: clean, uncontaminated by fanaticism and dogmatism, and without burdens of the past. Unfortunately, the demand for irreligious way of culture leads to her primitivisation and simplification. Culture, considered as a tool of winning people's "hearts and minds", takes the attitude of contestation and even primitive ridiculing everything what is associated with the religious sacred realm.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. R. Dawkins, *Bóg urojony*, Warszawa 2012; Ch. Hitchens, *Bóg nie jest wielki. Jak religia wszystko zatruwa*, Katowice 2011; D. Dennett, *Odczarowanie. Religia jako zjawisko naturalne*, Warszawa 2008; S. Harris, *Koniec wiary. Religia, terror i przyszłość rozumu*, Nysa 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. P. Gutowski, *Czym jest „nowy ateizm”?*, in: *Nauki przyrodnicze a nowy ateizm*, ed. by M. Słomka, Lublin 2012, p. 7-20; S. Zatwardnicki, *Ateizm urojony*, Kraków 2013, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Por. E. Sienkiewicz, *Wiara a polityka*, in: *Wiara wobec współczesności*, ed. by I. Bokwa, M. Jagodziński, Warszawa 2014, p. 47.

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Such an approach defines irreligion in completely different way placing it in the dimension of attitudes rather than theoretical projects. It would appear more accurate than that of American sociologists because it implies the cause-effect category and encompasses a much wider research area. Moreover, it reveals a transformation of the form of modern societies which has its roots in the structural and cultural transformations underlined by sociological theory in the 1960s and 1970s. The term irreligion becomes a kind of key-word organizing events present in the modern world, characterized by a degree of hostility towards religion and everything that is associated with it.

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### Streszczenie

#### Irreligia jako fenomen współczesności

Irreligia jest zjawiskiem nowym we współczesności. Według ks. prof. Bartnika (znanego polskiego teologa) jest jakby antyreligią – odwrotnością religii. Źródło zjawiska odnajdujemy w przemianach społeczno-gospodarczych w latach sześćdziesiątych i siedemdziesiątych XX wieku. Szczególnie jest ono widoczne w etyce biznesu, która funkcjonuje na dwóch poziomach: inna dla życia prywatnego, a inna dla systemu pracy człowieka.

Idee irreligii obecne są dzisiaj w praktycznie wszystkich obszarach ludzkiej działalności. Postawę wrogości wobec pierwiastków religijnych, zwłaszcza chrześcijaństwa, można zauważyć w filozofii, sztuce, naukach szczegółowych, życiu społeczno-politycznym czy mediach.

Irreligia stwarza wielkie zagrożenie dla tradycyjnego systemu wartości. Jest także przyczyną relatywizacji prawdy. Kwestionuje znaczenie chrześcijańsko-kulturowego dziedzictwa cywilizacji europejskiej. Zacierza granice między dobrem i złem, głosząc – w imię wolności bez ograniczeń – konieczność kierowania się kategorią pragmatycznej użyteczności i zysku.

Tendencje irreligijne stanowią więc wielkie wyzwanie dla współczesnego człowieka wiary, który powinien dostrzegać zagrożenia i przeciwstawiać się temu wszystkiemu, co może spowodować utratę duchowo-religijnej tożsamości. Oznacza to konieczność twórczego czytania znaków czasu i aktywność we wszystkich przestrzeniach ludzkiej egzystencji. Niewiara w swe możliwości oraz brak zaufania w skuteczność funkcjonowania struktur demokratycznego państwa, społeczno-polityczna apatia, kwietyzm w myśleniu o funkcjonowaniu na płaszczyźnie społeczno-politycznej są wielkimi wyrzutami dla współczesnych dzieci Kościoła, gdyż stwarzają warunki do wprowadzania idei religii i ich prawnej legitymizacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *irreligia, wiara, etyka biznesu*

### Summary

Irreligion is a new phenomenon in the modern world. According to Prof. Bartnik (famous Polish theologian) it may be understood as referring to anti-religion – in opposition to religion. The socio-economic changes during the 1960s and 1970s are the main sources of irreligion, especially in business ethics, which spill over into our personal life and workplace: a difference between personal life and for the world of work.

Nowadays irreligious ideas exist in almost all areas of human activity. Negative attitudes to religious elements, particularly to Christianity, are present in philosophy, art, exact science, socio-political life and the media.

Irreligion constitutes a very serious threat to traditional value systems and has a great impact on the relativization of truth. It calls into question the Christian-cultural meaning of the heritage of European civilization and destroys the boundary between good and evil. In the name of unlimited freedom irreligion insists on the necessity of making use of the pragmatic category of usefulness and profit.

Irreligious trends bring a great challenge to many modern people and their faith. They should be aware of the dangers and stand up to everything that would cause the loss of spiritual religious identity. Such a situation determines all the efforts in the reading of the signs of the times as well as activity in all dimensions of human existence. The lack of faith in our own capabilities and in the effectiveness of the activity of state democratic institutions, socio-political apathy, and quietist thinking in socio-political spheres are a great reproach to the faithful of the modern era because they create conditions for the introduction of religious ideas and their legalization.

**Keywords:** *irreligion, faith, ethic of business*