

Religion as a tool used in the process of radicalization: The case of controversial religious communities of the Catholic Church in Poland

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Religion as a tool used in the process of radicalization:
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Agnieszka Bukowska

Abstract

The article is a reflection on religion as a tool used in the process of radicalization on the example of controversial religious communities of the Catholic Church. It presents selected religious communities / organizations adopting military names, i.e. the so-called Fighters, Knights, Platoons, Troops or Soldiers. Members of these organizations, similarly to the army, are formed in the likeness of military units. In their activities, they refer to the rhetoric of war. They consider themselves “warriors” and their task is to defend the homeland and the nation against the “evil of the modern world.” They pray and share experiences among men. They also have a distinct patriotic, sometimes even nationalistic, trait.

Keywords

controversial religious communities, religious organizations, radicalization, nationalism, patriotism

Introduction

The growing wave of radicalization is among the significant problems of the modern world. Radicalization has many names and the related processes may occur on the political, national, ethnic, racial, religious and cultural levels. The term “radicalization” often appears in the context of issues of extremism, terrorism, sects and subcultures and also more and more often in relation to Christian religious communities. Radicalization refers to the process of changing the functioning of individuals and social groups who begin to manifest extreme views, emotions and behaviors. It is a multi-factor and dynamic process and takes on different shades and intensities. The process of radicalization may range from unproblematic to dysfunctional patterns of behavior and attitudes, including the rejection of the rules prevailing in society, basic democratic values or the tendency to use violence to achieve ideological, political, religious, and other goals.

There are many factors contributing to the process of radicalization, one of which may be religious fundamentalism. It should be emphasized that radicalization is rarely motivated solely by religion or ideology. People who are frustrated with their lives, society and government policies often succumb to it. Unsatisfied human needs may be a precursor to the radicalization process. Each person carries their baggage full of needs through life (but this fact alone does not mean that this person will “enter” the process of radicalization). These may include family problems, social exclusion, a strong sense of personal or cultural alienation, social marginalization, a sense of injustice or humiliation, limited educational and employment opportunities, stigmatization of differences, discrimination, personal injuries, various chronic diseases, conflicts and existential crises, mental problems and even belief in conspiracy theories and various false beliefs that may increase undesirable mental symptoms. Belief in conspiracy theories is often immune to logical argu-

ments. Those who believe in them tend not to select and evaluate information and do not accept reliable facts; such individuals are fertile ground for radical views and solutions.

In summary, the process of radicalization is a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by the adoption of extreme political, social or religious ideals and aspirations. It is both a mental and emotional process. The problem of radicalization also exists in Poland, where new religious communities have been created and operating for years. Their activities, including those of the faithful, clergy and hierarchs of the Catholic Church, arouse much controversy. Their essential distinguishing features are a return to the sources of faith, the politicization of religion and the turning of zeal into fanaticism. They are characterized by a sense of mission and often leadership. This kind of thinking may foster the emergence of radical attitudes.

This article analyses and identifies several factors contributing to radicalization, describes the phenomenon and presents religion as a tool in this process.

Religion in human life

When exploring issues related to the activities of religious communities, the significance of religion in human life should be considered. Religion as a social fact has accompanied man from the very beginning of their existence. Wherever human beings appeared, they revealed and left various traces of their religious activity (Adamski 2011: 5).

It can be said that religion is often the most important distinguishing feature and indicator of cultural diversity in the world and is also an identifier of national and ethnic identity (Myga-Piątek 2012: 14). One of the classic sociologists, Emile Durkheim, claims that religion “is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a

church” (Durkheim 1990: 46). The author of this definition primarily emphasizes the social significance of religion, without referring directly to the content of these beliefs and practices.

Max Weber, on the other hand, seems to avoid explicitly defining religion. Presenting his position on this subject, he focuses rather on defining what, in his opinion, religion and religious faith are not. He presents the phenomenon of religion as follows:

“(...) the nature and meaning of religious knowledge is entirely different from the accomplishments of the intellect. Religion claims to offer an ultimate stand toward the world by virtue of a direct grasp of the world’s «meaning.» It does not claim to offer intellectual knowledge concerning what is or what should be. It claims to unlock the meaning of the world not by means of the intellect but by virtue of a charisma of illumination. This charisma is said to be imparted only to those who make use of the respective technique and free themselves from the misleading and deceptive surrogates which are given out as knowledge by the confused impressions of the senses and the empty abstractions of the intellect. Religion believes that these are in truth irrelevant for salvation. By freeing himself from them, a religious man is said to make himself ready for the reception of the all-important grasp of the meaning of the world and of his own existence” (Weber 2006: 352).

Religion is a very complex phenomenon and it is difficult to give a single definition that would include all its essential elements. Definitions of religion could be multiplied and cited further here and its place and role in human life could be outlined. The concept of “religion” is extremely difficult to explain.

The researchers who try to create a conceptual framework to describe religious phenomena agree that there is no satisfactory scientific definition of religion. It is most often described as a set of tradition-based beliefs about the world (including man and humankind) and the forces that govern it. These beliefs reflect the attitude of man toward the sacrum (supernatural forces) understood in different ways, which is man-

ifested in a religious doctrine, religious worship and a religious organization. It is a form of social awareness formed by the entirety of beliefs, ideas and views, the essence of which boils down to the belief in the existence of supernatural forces, figures, phenomena and regularities (Pietrzak 1999: 11).

Movements, associations and religious communities

The emergence of an increasing number of religious movements, groups and associations is observed in the world. Many operate in ways that do not raise objections in society, have many valuable assumptions and offer a huge number of believers the opportunity for individual development and to meet God. However, as has been mentioned, there are also those whose activity raises a lot of controversy. In Poland, such organizations are particularly active. To some, they are true Catholic believers. Others describe them as fanatical defenders of Catholicism and the “armed wing” of the Church, often adopting extreme, even fundamentalist attitudes. Therefore, it is appropriate to specify the ways of defining fundamentalism, which – it seems – can be derived from one point: the experience of Protestant fundamentalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Fundamentalist tendencies in religions

Fundamentalist tendencies and how they are overcome can be observed throughout the history of the Church. However, the term itself and its referent were created late, shaping the features of the Christian form of fundamentalism: outside Europe and not in the Catholic Church. The victorious march of natural and historical sciences in the liberal world of the early twentieth century and the moral problems accompanying industrialization, as well as liberal Protestant theology, reinterpreting

even the essential truths of Christianity, worried pietistically and conservatively oriented American followers of various denominations. On the initiative of pastors, from 1910 to 1915, a series of brochures entitled “The Fundamentals” was published in the United States and distributed free of charge among the faithful. In 1919, the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association was formed. In 1920, C. L. Laws first used the name “fundamentalist” as a self-description of those who want to save the endangered foundations of Christianity, against which the post-Enlightenment, liberal modern world has conspired, threatening the faith of the fathers and contributing to the moral decline of society (Kracik 1998).

Each religious fundamentalism has its own specificity and is governed by different laws. Fundamentalist postulates sometimes take distorted forms, using fundamentalist slogans as a means to achieve, for example, political goals. “Fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state” (Armstrong 2001: ix). Religions that derive their origins from revelation are particularly susceptible to fundamentalism. It is no coincidence that manifestations of fundamentalism are found mainly in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Fundamentalism, moreover, is not confined to the great monotheisms. There are Buddhist, Hindu, and even Confucian fundamentalism, which fight and kill in the name of religion and strive to bring the sacred into the realm of politics and national struggle (*Ibidem*: xi).

Catholic fundamentalism

Catholic fundamentalism appeared as if in response to Catholic modernism, a broad intellectual movement from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, postulating the introduction of changes that would adapt the traditionalist teachings of the Catholic Church to the conditions of the present day. The modernists pointed to the need to separate faith and religion from secular science, as well as church from state.

They also strongly emphasized the issue of the internal experience of God and religious experience as a personal, individual spiritual act, without the need for the mediation of church structures. Catholic fundamentalism set itself the goal of gaining, or rather regaining, the Catholic Church's primacy in society. The immediate impetus was the separation of state and church that took place in France under the law of December 9, 1905.

The French law shocked the Vatican and Catholics across Europe, radicalizing the traditionalist community, who felt compelled to react and strengthen their position. Catholic fundamentalists, also called integrists (from the Latin *integrer* – intact, whole) pretended to be the best and only true part of the Church. In the religious dimension, they were characterized by a traditionalist attitude and rigor in maintaining the basic truth of faith and morals. A milder form of Catholic fundamentalism manifests itself as a tendency to formulate theological beliefs solely based on the literal and scholastic interpretation of the Bible. Elements of fundamentalism are present in the theological programs and activities of many radical Catholic organizations, including Opus Dei or Comunione e Liberazione and the Society of Saint Pius X, founded by Bishop Marcel Lefebvre and excommunicated by Pope John Paul II in 1988 for arbitrarily ordaining four bishops (See: Dziubka, Szlachta, Nijakowski 2008, *cited by*: Siewierska-Chmaj 2013).

Religion and violence

As mentioned earlier, religion has been one of the most powerful factors influencing individuals and groups throughout human history. Modern people, living in the twenty-first century, are no less dependent on religion and the influence it has on their image of the world and everyday life than they were in previous centuries. Events we encounter today (including terrorist attacks, prejudice and discrimination on religious grounds and collective suicides of members of religious sects) show that

religions still determine the lives of millions of people and have a significant impact on the course of history. In addition to positive influences on human life, religion also has a destructive potential, which is manifested, among other ways, in violence. This is also reflected in radical forms of faith. The radicalization of various religious organizations has been increasing in recent years and does not stereotypically concern mainly Salafi Islam. The militant movements of evangelical Christianity, presenting themselves as the true guardians of orthodoxy, are growing in strength.

Religious violence has little to do with religion itself, understood as a system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things. It cannot be inscribed in the traditional image of a merciful God who loves humanity and is common to many denominations. Violence, as shown by numerous theological, philosophical and historical studies, comes from man and if its motivator is God, it is a manifestation of the radicalization of the believer, who increasingly departs from the concept of a believer, heading towards only a faithful man. This person decides to whom and how he or she remains faithful, using the benefit of his or her free will. Therefore, religiously inspired violence results from the intentions of man, who – by imposing his or her vision of God on others and creating separate standards of conduct – wants to compete with a being higher than himself or herself.

Such behavior leads to fanaticism and hatred. Violence committed in the name of God can also be used to mask other reasons for aggression against another person or a larger human community resulting from, for example, political, economic or cultural reasons. Perpetrators of religious violence are generally those identified with or inspired by a particular belief system but not necessarily believers; in turn, the victims of this kind of abuse of religion can be any group of people or individuals (Kudła 2020).

Comparing various forms and symptoms of violence in a religious context and analysing the dynamics between religion and violence are among the important topics discussed in relation to many controversial

religious communities, including those in Poland. This concerns both psychological and physical violence. Two different forms of activities should be distinguished in this respect: those directed “outward,” whose recipient is society, and those that take place “inside” specific groups.

Religious abuse is also a form of violence but not everyone realizes it. Religious violence, also referred to as spiritual violence, is a type of abuse that occurs in religious communities and is motivated by religious commandments, texts or doctrines. It can be violence that manifests itself by condemning a church member because of his or her sexual orientation, life choices, gender or race. Religious violence is also sexual abuse of a church member by a clergyman or other person from the religious community who uses deceit or invokes religious “values,” principles of the functioning of the community or their position in the church hierarchy (Sowa 2022). Warning signs are usually signs of abuse which should alert group members.

An early sign of abuse is subtle forms of control. For example, the abuser has a strong opinion of people with whom the community members spend time, meet or make friends. This person also believes he or she has the authority to tell others how to dress, what to say and where to go. He or she uses prohibitions and orders, justifying them with “force majeure” or laws and rules related to a given religion/belief. By means of such actions, he or she makes community members or individuals dependent on him or her and his or her opinion.

Every form of violence, including religious violence, has a strong impact on the human psyche. It can result in a significant decrease in self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness, loss of passion, interests and even self-respect (*Ibidem*).

Violence can generate more violence, leading to a vicious circle. It should be stated that religious Christian communities that justify violence become their own caricatures. Religion should not justify inciting violence. Only “perverted” religion serves violence.

Communities in the hands of “warriors”

In the Catholic Church, many communities adopt military names, such as fighters, knights, platoons, troops or soldiers. Members of these organizations are like military units. They use many references to the rhetoric of war, they are “warriors” and their task is to defend the homeland and the nation against the “evil of the modern world.” “Some of them were created to pray and share experiences in a group of men. Others have a clear patriotic, sometimes even nationalistic line” (Mierzyńska 2020).

Members of these communities are obliged to obey the leader, and failure to do so and to comply with the rules established in the organization is punishable by removal. A rosary, a cross and sometimes a real sword (which, according to community members, is only a symbol of the fight against sin) are, in their opinion, the best weapons to fight against the evil of the modern world and defend religious values and the traditional family. Their activity involves not only daily prayer, internal spiritual struggle, showing the right moral attitude and defending the purity of faith, but also fighting against the unspecified “forces of evil.” They occasionally negate the activities of the Church to which they belong. They direct their activity against someone or something. Love for one’s neighbor is a rarity unless that neighbor is a member of the parent organization (community). They seem to use religion and God for their own purposes.

They often combine religion with politics. Their statements raise questions of whether they still belong to a religious community that is supposed to lead its members, who want to shape their personality through prayer and concentration, to spiritual development or perhaps to some newly revealed political party.

It is too easy to forget that the Church should not support any political party. The Church should not be in favor of one option against the other.

This would be a betrayal of the mission of being for all and a manifestation of a sectarian mentality.

So, why do such communities need religion and the Church?

The Church is needed by such communities. Firstly, it supports them in a ritual sense, helping to symbolize and embed their activity in the religious space. Secondly, it gives this activity a transcendental dimension. Then it becomes a kind of mission, almost a vocation, given straight from heaven. Thus, activists gain a supernatural dimension and act as if by divine command. This is an ideology tinged with religiosity, not a genuinely religious organization.

This approach to religion carries various risks.

Religion can become a justification for war, for aggression. God, on the other hand, is the flail with which those who have a different opinion are beaten. This is completely against the teaching of the Church (*Ibidem*).

Pope Francis emphasizes that religion cannot incite war because it would preach “a god of destruction, a god of hatred.” “God does not need to be defended by anyone and does not want His name to be used to terrorize people” (qm 2020).

Despite the continuously declared fidelity to the papal teaching, its reception is strangely selective in fundamentalist circles. Some fragments of this teaching are made a test of orthodoxy for everyone (for example, the inadmissibility of contraceptives), while others (for example, freedom of conscience, ecumenism) are treated as non-existent or even rejected as a false or dangerous path. These defenders of the foundations, kneeling before the Pope, keep a restrained silence at best when he prays with representatives of other religions, visits a Protestant temple or Roman synagogue, or when, while canonizing Catholic victims of infidel violence, he talks about the martyrs of other denominations brought about by Catholics. For declamations of loyalty to the hierarchy fade away where the words or actions of the Church’s superiors do not correspond to the ideas of the fundamentalist group (Kracik 1998).

Case studies

For the purposes of this article, selected controversial religious communities operating within the Catholic Church are presented.

Case study: The Soldiers of Christ

The Soldiers of Christ describe themselves as “God’s army or Mary’s slaves.” The organization was founded in 2016 to “defend Poland and Polish women against migrants.” Their official website reads as follows: The idea of establishing a community is a response to the situation that is happening in the homeland (rapidly progressing secularization) and Europe. This, a strong Catholic Poland must be reborn and set an example for Europe, which has departed from its Christian roots and has been flooded with ideology and Islam (*Wprost.pl* 2020).

The Soldiers of Christ aim to revive the spirit of the nation and the spirit of bravery among young people. “National values should be revived: God, Honor and Homeland, and show the beauty and strength of faith in the only God and King Jesus Christ, as John III Sobieski once did, saving Europe from the invasion of the followers of Islam” (*Ibidem*).

The soldiers also organize joint pilgrimages of football hooligans to the Jasna Góra Monastery and say a rosary in a group of men in Warsaw’s Old Town on the first Saturday of each month. This rosary is made of steel balls and a parachute cord and is sold on the fan page of the Soldiers of Christ movement. “The rosary is our weapon,” its members repeat, and the appearance of the rosary encourages us to read this slogan literally (*Ibidem*).

On the Soldiers of Christ fan page, you can also buy T-shirts with the slogan “The Army of God” and flyer jackets with the inscription “The Soldiers of Christ. Archangel Michael’s Special Forces.”

The Soldiers of Christ speak directly about a fight on their fan page:

- “Every Christian is summoned to fight.”

- “The life of a Christian is a constant struggle – on many fronts and with the use of all kinds of weapons.”
- “Blue Commandos.”
- “The rosary is a weapon in spiritual warfare, an instrument of God’s great love for man and the life and death war that has been going on since the creation of the world!”
- “The rosary is the most masculine weapon in the world.”
- “The rosary is a weapon to defeat demons and keep you from sin.”
- “Be brave! God sends his best warriors to the most difficult battles!” (cit. behind Mierzyńska 2020).

The language used in the messages betrays them. Everything here is directed against someone or something. It does not go towards spiritual development but informs that the goal is to fight some unspecified “evil forces.” This is often additionally dressed up in a national or even nationalist message. These people are convinced that they defend the nation against moral rot and the homeland against the enemy. For this, they need to be efficient and therefore physically strong. Hence, the incentives for physical development emerge.

Some consider it a “quasi-religious” organization, not a religious one. Of all the male Catholic groups, the Soldiers of Christ combine religion with politics probably the most (*Ibidem*).

Case study: The Warriors of Mary

The Warriors of Mary is a Marian male community. To become a Warrior of Mary, males must go through formation during cyclical meetings organized by the community, both nationwide and regional, and undergo, after prior verification, a solemn Swearing by the Sword, which takes place once a year (Wojownicy Maryi 2020).

The Warriors’ website reads, “We invite men aged 18-50 to meetings organized by the Warriors of Mary, both nationwide and regional” (*Ibidem*).

The most important goal of the movement is “the formation of young men” and one of the elements of the formation path is the aforementioned annual Swearing by the Sword ceremony. The participants of the ceremony arrange real swords for themselves which, according to the rules, they keep in a visible, representative place in their homes. This is to “constantly remind [them of] the words spoken during the ceremony – to fight to the death for the most important values: love for God and faithfulness to one’s wife and children” (Mierzyńska 2020).

There are many references to war rhetoric. An invitation to one of the formation meetings contained the following words: “Take part in hardships and adversities as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” Not so long ago, there was a “prayerful storm into heaven” (*Ibidem*).



Figure 1. A night of fighting for a blessing for Poland

Source: OstrowMaz24.pl (2022).

It is necessary to fight for a blessing for Poland. It is not enough to pray. The founder of the movement also has controversial views about other issues, such as the coronavirus pandemic. He claims that “the pandemic is a pandemic of fear, not a real pandemic,” “the more courageous doctors say that they get huge money for entering COVID-19 on the death certificate” and the whole situation is “a tool of Satan to destroy the Eucharist in the Catholic Church” (Mierzyńska 2020).



Figure 2. Poster on FB page Warriors of Mary – an invitation to a nationwide open formation meeting for men only

Source: (Illustration from: *Ibidem*).

Jesuit Dariusz Piórkowski says, “When I look at men who call themselves Warriors of Mary and hold swords in their hands with a militant attitude, I ask again, what church do I live in?”. Later he notes:

“I have doubts about whether combining a sword with Mary and Saint Michael the Archangel and then styling themselves as medieval crusade knights is a good idea for today. The Warriors claim that the sword is a symbol of the fight against sin and evil in them. Unfortunately, the sword is not only associated with this. It is an instrument of war, death and violence. Not only in the secular world. In the Church, the sword was also used to kill infidels and heretics. Such an idea is grounded in the collective consciousness. This is how wraiths are resurrected” (Piórkowski 2019).

Conclusions

The question arises whether people who join such or similar organizations look for an opportunity to explain their radical attitudes towards other people, phenomena and the surrounding reality under the guise of prayer and the rosary, and then take hostile actions towards other environments.

This kind of activity, which at first sight seems to be socially harmless, affects public life, leading to social conflicts. Polish society is currently deeply divided in its attitude to religion and activities undertaken in this area. Personal, group and national phobias are easily combined with religious ones, particularly in Poland. A community of fear fosters shared destruction. This state of affairs makes it impossible to reach a rational compromise on many sensitive issues, such as abortion, in vitro fertilization and homosexual rights.

Religion can be a tool in such communities, used on many levels, including when leading to radicalization. In a sense, it is a veil behind which the above-mentioned groups can hide and explain to society that they act in the name of the “true faith.”

The knights of truth care little about what opinion about the Church they contribute to by their warfare, or how many wiser, better and more honest people in that Church they will alienate or destroy by publicly judging and slandering them in the pages of the arch-Catholic press or on such radio. The defense of the inviolable treasury of truths and norms, including their existing shape, color, location, packaging, and so on, justifies ascribing even the worst intentions to those who question any of the properties of this treasury. Its guardians are vigilant but not in the evangelical sense of readiness for the unexpected coming of the Lord, whose presence must be recognized in every truth and goodness, and always in another man, but are vigilant with suspicion and sniffing out conspiracies.

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Agnieszka Bukowska, sociologist, educator, works as an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology at Collegium Civitas and is the director of the Center for Research on Social and Economic Risk at Collegium Civitas. Scientifically, she deals with the issues of three disciplines – sociology, psychology and pedagogy. She analyzes techniques of social influence, mechanisms of succumbing to external pressure and social manipulation, as well as processes leading to radicalization and extremism. She specializes in pathology related to the activities of destructive sects, controversial religious movements, dysfunctional subcultures and various extremist environments.

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About the book "The Virus of Radicalization":

"I regard this monograph as an example of high-quality academic craftsmanship. It is an important supplement to the literature on the phenomena and processes of radicalization and extremism (primarily those taking place in the Polish socio-political system, but not only). It will be interesting both for scientists, students and a wider audience interested in socio-political issues."

Associate Professor Mikołaj Cześnik, Ph.D., SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

"The volume is a collection of chapters on the topic of mostly right-wing political radicalization in Poland, Europe, and the world. (...) Excellent empirical case studies of particular cases of political radicalization in Poland and Europe are the bulk and the highlight of the volume. (...) Overall, the volume is a useful, well-written and well-conceived contribution to literature on political radicalism and crisis of liberal democracy."

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