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**FROM THE SECULAR TO THE  
POST-SECULAR. THE PLACE OF  
RELIGION IN THE LOCAL PUBLIC SPHERE  
IN THE CONTEXT OF MONASTERIES IN  
POLAND – A CASE STUDY**

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to think through the changing position of religion in the public sphere within the Polish context, taking as a reference point not attitudes or church attendance, but the meanings and functions of monasteries today. Monasteries in Poland are specific religious institutions, because most of them had been resolved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and just some of them were re-established in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In order to introduce and interpret one case (a Cistercian monastery in Jędrzejów, Poland), I outline contemporary discussions on the place of religion in the public sphere, referring mostly to Jurgen Habermas' opinion shift and the so-called post-secular approaches. Then, I sketch characteristics of the Polish public sphere and discuss the reasons and consequences of monasteries' dissolution in Poland. In the final part of the text, I zoom on a selected Cistercian monastery. Therefore, I do state that a monastery may be addressed as a post-secular institution having a double nature: it is both a *sacred place*, devoted to pastoral and contemplation activities, and a *source of meanings* (for local identity) and cultural activities. As a historic building embedded in the local community, it may be the focus of a tourism project. This connection characterizes its post-secular presence in the local public sphere.

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## KEYWORDS

Sociology of monasticism. Secularization. Post-secularization. Public sphere. Monastery.

# 1. “RETURNING” OF THE RELIGION INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE: FROM THE SECULAR TO THE POST-SECULAR APPROACH

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Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (2011, p. 1), in the introduction to *The Power of Religion in Public Sphere*, which results from discussion between Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Collin West, claim that

[...] many of our dominant stories about religion and public life are myths that bear little relation to either our political life or our everyday experience. Religion is neither merely private, for instance, nor purely irrational. And the public sphere is neither a realm of straightforward rational deliberation nor a smooth space of unforced assent.

Hence, the authors claim that not only the role played by religion today has changed. Shifts affect also researchers' attitude towards religion's scrutiny, which results from recognition that religion do not have to disappear as a consequence of modernity. In the field of sociology of religion such turn may be traced back to the 90s. In 1994, Jose Casanova (2012, p. 11) asked “who still believes in the *myth* of secularization?” and showed that disappearing of religion in selected, Western countries is not a case. Rather, religion in modern societies undergoes a paradox process of both privatization and deprivatization (CASANOVA, 2012, p. 41). “The modern walls of separations between church and state keep developing of kind of cracks through which both are able to penetrate each other” (CASANOVA, 2012, p. 41). Moreover, as many researchers claim, there is no structural trend in modernity determining disappearing of religion or weakening its significance in public sphere. As stated by another critical researcher, Davie Grace (2007, p. 47), unveiling sources of secularization thesis, “sociologists become therefore *part of* the secularization process” by what she means that secularization thesis emerged in a specific historical context and was promoted by European Enlightenment thinkers, and as such is a part of modernity's self-under-

standing. Problems with recognition of religion's role today are understood as being structured by the very concept of modernity with which it is strictly connected or even fastened.

Much of the work of “unfastening” the two concepts (religion and modernity) has already been done, resulting in constructing a rickety building of post-secular approaches. Post-secular approaches edify on critic of the modern division of secular and religious and self-recognition of modernity as secular (for instance, ASAD, 2003; HABERMAS, 2006, 2011; MILBANK, 2006). On the one hand, resurgence of religion is observed, leading selected authors to raise questions on whether “are we living in a post-secular society?” (TURNER, 2010, p. 649). On the other hand, as stated by Hans Joan (2004, p. 124 ff.: DE VREIS, 2006, p. 2-3),

“Post-secular” doesn't express a sudden increase in religiosity, after its epochal decrease, but rather a change in mindset of those who, previously, felt justified in considering religions to be moribund.

One of the famous mindset shifts is that of Jurgen Habermas. As Craig Calhoun (1992) pointed out in *The Structural Transformation* Habermas not only “neglect[ed] religion” but also introduced “antireligious assumptions” (CALHOUN, 1992, p. 35-36 ff.; MENDIETA; VANANTWERPEN, 2011, p. 3). His earlier understanding of public sphere, which formation he placed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was that is a “social space – distinct from the state, the economy, and the family – in which individuals could engage each other as private citizens deliberating about the common good” (MENDIETA; VANANTWERPEN, 2011, p. 2). Deliberating assumes constructing an “open space in which all reasons could be expressed and heard” (MENDIETA; VANANTWERPEN, 2011, p. 2-3). According to this view religion does not fit to this space. It has to be excluded from public sphere and placed in the private realm. However, in his famous article from 2006 *Religion in Public Sphere* Habermas changed opinion on relationship between religion and public sphere, stating that religion may contribute to deliberation processes:

[...] the insight by secular citizens that they live in a post-secular society that is *epistemically adjusted* to the continued existence

of religious communities first requires a change in mentality that is no less cognitively exacting than the adaptation of religious awareness to the challenges of an ever more secularized environment. In line with this changed yardstick, the secular citizens must grasp their conflict with religious opinions as a *reasonably expected disagreement* (HABERMAS, 2006, p. 15).

In a different text he straightforwardly states

[...] as long as religious communities play a vital role in civil society and the public sphere, deliberative politics is as much a product of the public use of reason on the part of religious citizens as on that of nonreligious citizens (HABERMAS, 2011, p. 24).

Hence, Habermas (2011, p. 25) now claims that “vital and nonfundamentalist religious communities can become a transformative force in the center of a democratic civil society”. It is worth highlighting that Habermas – by underlining *nonfundamentalist* characteristic of religious communities – assumes that religion can participate in discussing social issues in public sphere and not only impose their solutions and, even, agenda but adapt – as monasteries under scrutiny – to social and economic environment. As observed by Craig Calhoun (2011, p. 128),

Habermas’ arguments leave the worries that the translation proviso is necessarily asymmetrical and that the call to recognize explicitly religious voices in the public sphere is at least partially instrumental – a call to include ideas because they are useful while implicitly doubting that they may be true.

This critical voice, along with other that I do not discuss here, shows that the problem of presence of religion in public sphere is open to discussion.

Summing up, the so-called post-secular approaches, which do not constitute a solid line of argumentation but rather an array of voices, highlight that exclusion of religion from the public sphere is not its destiny, and modernity does not have to damage religion. “Returning” of religion, understood as both critical evaluations of its place in modernity and

recognition of contemporary social processes, affects methodology, theory and scholars' mindset.

Katarzyna Zielińska (2009, p. 250-251) observed that reducing the scope of religion's scrutiny is one of the consequences of handling with secularization theory's difficulties. Within my studies I focus on meaning and functions ascribed to monasteries in a local public sphere taking a qualitative and case study approach<sup>1</sup>. As I will try to show below monasteries are a good field of scrutiny of religions re-appearance and contemporary presence in public sphere. However, before zooming on the local I will seek to depict a broader context of transformations of the Polish public sphere in the context of religion.

## 2. TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE POLISH PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGION

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The transition of 1989 in Poland moved the country from a Communist regime to a democratic political organization. This change is closely related with reorganization of religion place and significance in the Polish public sphere. As Mirosława Marody and Sławomir Mandes (2007, p. 410-411) state, after 1989 religion forcefully entered public sphere, for instance: religion classes have been reestablished in public schools, a government signed a concordat, Catholic media actively accessed the air, and religious rituals have become omnipresent. However, before 1989, during a communist regime and earlier during partitions which took place in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for 123 years depriving Poland its sovereign, religion was situated on the margins of public sphere: in quasi-public sacral places such as churches or – accidentally publicly – during pilgrimages and other religious and national manifestations. During partitions “secular public sphere remained under total control of partitioners and indi-

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viduals entering into it were treated as an act of treason of national interests” (MARODY; MANDES, 2007, p. 413). Between 1945-1989 “churches were the only parts of quasi-public spaces where religious rituals devoted to reconstructions of a romantic and ethnic concept of the nation took place” (MARODY; MANDES, 2007, p. 414). This situation is a strong indication of uniting the Polish national identity with religiosity. Despite the fact that contemporary attitudes towards Church and religiosity are changing – a decline in religious practices and a decreased relevance of religiosity are observed in the Polish society (MARODY; MANDES, 2007, p. 411). Hence, religious renewal in this post-Communist country is complicated and, in a way, paradoxical. Not like in a liberal public sphere model, being a point of reference for Habermas’ reflections, religion is a collective matter, not only a private one.

### 3. DISSOLUTION OF MONASTERIES IN POLAND

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Dissolution of monasteries is an instance of forceful transformations of public sphere because before dissolutions monasteries were powerful institutions in both country and local context acting in cultural, education, pilgrimage, pastoral, and economic fields. As Immo Eberl (2011, p. 399-410) claims not only reasons of monasteries’ dissolutions in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries encompass intellectual and political mind-sets during Enlightenment but also they differ depending on country. According to Marek Derwich (2012, p. 363),

[...] around 1772, the date of the beginning of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth partition, on its territory were approximately 990 monasteries with 14,540 monks and 150 convents with 2,723 nuns.

Seventy monasteries were placed in Silesia (under the Kingdom of Prussia). After 1914 left only 20% of them.

To my knowledge, there is no study comprehensively and quantitatively showing the process of restitution of monasteries in Poland and its territories from before partitions after

dissolutions. However, on the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century these institutions partially commenced to be rebuilt, and their functions and meanings in local communities have changed (JEWDOKIMOW; MARKOWSKA, 2013a, 2013b).

As a result of which some of them continue to serve as spiritual and pilgrimage centres, and thus places of worship; other, in turn, are treated as an element of district<sup>2</sup> tourism strategy, or of the town's or region's image and identity (JEWDOKIMOW; MARKOWSKA, 2013a, p. 20).

Broadly speaking, post-monastic heritage is a multidimensional question (JEWDOKIMOW; MARKOWSKA, 2013a). One of these dimensions relates to questions of religion today, since returning of monks to selected monasteries embedded in local communities is the very case of revival of religious institutions in the public context.

## 4. A CISTERCIAN MONASTERY IN JĘDRZEJÓW – AN ANALYSIS

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Basing on a preliminary, qualitative study which I conducted in Jędrzejów in July 2014 I will seek to depict and interpret functions and meanings of this monastery in the local public sphere. I conducted six in-depth interviews (with relevant local actors such as a representative of a local government, representatives of local media and cultural institutions, and a monk), collected local text related to the topic of the monastery and carried out an observation. I introduce a term “local public sphere” in order to geographically delimit the scope of scrutiny and methodologically challenge problems outlined above. Differently speaking, I scrutinize the public sphere in the local context in reference to a monastery, a religious institution.

The Cistercian monastery in Jędrzejów, Poland, is the oldest Cistercian abbey in Poland funded in 1140. In 1819,

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<sup>2</sup> *District*: administrative unit to be identified with *gmina* (adj. *gminny*) [translator's note].



together with more than 40 monasteries, in Russian partition the monastery was dissolved. Before dissolution, monasteries “played relevant religious, cultural, educational, and economic roles” (ZWIERZCHOWSKI, 2006, p. 163). Monks returned to the monastery in 1945. Although suppression lasted for more than 130 years, “Cistercian spiritual traditions had not been disconnected from the local environment” (OLSZEWSKI, 1999, p. 98), mostly because of the vivid cult of blessed Wincenty Kadłubek (Master Vincentius), a chronicler, an archbishop, and a monk in a Jędrzejów’s monastery.

**Figure 1 – A monastery in Jędrzejów, Poland**



Source: Author’s collection.

The monastery’s presence in the local public sphere after 1945 encompasses of the two kinds of activities: sacral and cultural. The monastery runs one of three parishes (established in 1913, before the return of monks) in the city and organizes activities related to the cult of blessed Wincenty Kadłubek: church fairs, pilgrimages, and ceremonies within which participated even 40,000 people (like in 1948, ZWIERZCHOWSKI, 2006, p. 174) and main figures of the Polish Catholic Church like Karol Wojtyła (later John Paul II). From the perspective of cultural activities, increased since the late 90s, there is a need to enlist: International Festival of Organ and Chamber Music in

Jędrzejów (since 1994), symposiums and publication of brochures concerning the monastery. Interviewers acknowledged that since 2000 the monastery has become “more and more open and engaged within the local in the context of cultural activities” (Interviewer no. 3).

In the context of analysis of the local public sphere it is relevant to highlight that for interviewers borders of the two spheres of monastery’s activities remain blurred. For instance, the Interviewer no. 3, a head of a local cultural institution, claims that church fairs related to the cult of blessed Wincenty Kadłubek should be understood as cultural activities that transcend “a narrow definition of sacral or religious activities”. Moreover, for her “monastery’s activities overcome the field of religion. It is a place of creating culture. This creation stems from church fairs and extra-religion agency of monks”.

The Interviewer no. 1, a representative of a local government, shares the above mentioned hesitations. “Our local government participates in church fairs but we treat it not as a religious events but as a cultural ones”. He strongly admits that

[...] to my mind, within such small cities as our one cannot distinguish between religion and culture and expect a government to distance itself from a religion events and institutions. It would not be a healthy division. One may discuss on how the relationship should looks like but the symbiosis is a must.

He states that the vagueness of the division results from history of Jędrzejów which is monastic. The Cistercians established the city and ran it for centuries, hence, according to him monastery’s influence is not simply religious but operates also on a collective identity level. The best example of this is the fact that in 2013 the city council passed a resolution designating blessed Kadłubek on the city patron. The resolution was preceded by a local poll survey according to which 10,000 or 13,000 citizens eligible to vote backed the initiative (for 16,000 of total citizens).

The monastery is also perceived locally as a monument. The local government partially finances its renovation. According to the interviewers, it is clear that, by doing so, its

cultural heritage is cultivated. In official, promotional documents the monastery is described as a local “pearl”<sup>3</sup> and “the most magnificent monument in the city”.

The monastery presence in the local public sphere relates also to plans that secular actors formulate towards it. The local government understands the monastery as a vehicle of the city’s promotion. The Interviewer no. 1 grizzles that “the monastery is a huge touristic asset of which we should take advantage”.

Monks accept this local understanding of the monastery and vividly participate in local plans of its modernization. The Interviewer no. 2, a monk, highlights that the monastery opens up for the outside world: “we have gained access to the oldest parts of the monastery and we plan to reorganize our place for sightseeing”. Cooperation between the local government and the monastery is close. The mayor and the abbot scheduled a joint travel to a French monastery aiming at establishing partnership between both cities and monasteries.

Within the local public sphere the monastery is not only a source of meanings but also a source of motivation to act. Monks cooperate with local citizens in establishing a local non-governmental organization. This is exactly the situation which Habermas refers to as post-secular. What can be observed here is not a situation in which the secularization transforms “monastic tradition [into] a consumer product for publics, which are no longer interested in the religious dimension of monasteries”<sup>4</sup>. Here, rather, Habermas (2006, p. 11) may be trusted when he claims that

[...] for the liberal state has an interest in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, and in the political participation of religious organizations as well [...] for it cannot know whether secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity.

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<sup>3</sup> A leaflet: „Jędrzejów zaprasza” [Jędrzejów welcomes] [no date of publishing and information on publishing house].

<sup>4</sup> Available from: <<http://religionswissenschaft.uni-graz.at/de/aktuelles/>> Accessed on: Oct. 10 2014.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research conducted, it is concluded that further studies are needed. A monastery under scrutiny constitutes a significant example of post-secular institution, since it undermines the division between *secular* and *religious* in the context of its local activities. There is a double nature in this case: a monastery is both a *sacred place*, devoted to pastoral and contemplation activities, and a *source of meanings* (for local identity) and cultural activities. As a historic building embedded in the local community, it may be the focus of a tourism project. This connection between the sacred and the secular stands for its post-secular features, which are recognized by the interviewers. Within the local public sphere, the monastery plays some roles in secular and religious contexts. This post-secular situation of a monastery in a local community puts into question a modern scheme where religion is excluded from the public sphere, showing an intrinsic relationship between cultural and religious activities.

### DO SECULAR AO PÓS-SECULAR. O LUGAR DA RELIGIÃO NA ESFERA PÚBLICA LOCAL NO CONTEXTO DOS MONASTÉRIOS NA POLÔNIA – UM ESTUDO DE CASO

#### RESUMO

O objetivo do artigo é refletir sobre a mudança de posição da religião na esfera pública no contexto polonês, tomando como ponto de referência não atitudes ou frequência com relação à igreja, mas os significados e funções dos mosteiros hoje. Monastérios na Polônia são as instituições religiosas específicas, pois a maioria deles tinha sido dissolvida no século XIX, e apenas alguns deles foram restabelecidas no século XIX e XX. A fim de apresentar e interpretar um caso (um mosteiro cisterciense em Jędrzejów, Polônia), foram esboçadas discussões contemporâneas sobre o lugar da

religião na esfera pública, referentes principalmente à mudança de opinião de Jurgen Habermas e as chamadas abordagens pós-seculares. Então, eu esbocei características da esfera pública polonesa e aponte brevemente razões e consequências da dissolução dos mosteiros na Polónia. Na parte final do texto, eu discuto uma aproximação a um determinado mosteiro cisterciense. Na conclusão, afirmo que se pode entender o mosteiro analisado como uma instituição pós-secular que tem dupla natureza: é tanto um lugar sagrado dedicado à pastoral e funções de contemplação, e uma fonte de significados (para a identidade local) e atividades culturais. Percebido como um prédio histórico, está inserido nos planos de desenvolvimento da comunidade local como um objeto turístico. Essa junção caracteriza sua presença pós-secular na esfera pública local.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

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Sociologia do monaquismo. Secularização. Pós-secularização. Esfera pública. Monastério.

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