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The Postmodern Reception of Maurycy Straszewski's Religious Explorations

Contemporary developments in the area of religion and religiosity have been significantly influenced by the processes of modernisation, secularisation and universal pluralism. In the ideas of many postmodern philosophers, the concept of the “return of religion” appears. This concept was presented, among others, by Maurycy Straszewski, whose thought stems from 19th-century positivism. Many elements of Straszewski's theory are represented in contemporary philosophical statements on the transformation of religiosity. Particularly important are the postulate of the compatibility of religion with reason and science, the departure from dogma, the individualisation of spirituality, and the influence of religion on the formation of moral attitudes, social relations and interpersonal solidarity.

Keywords: contemporary culture, religion, transcendence, postmodernity, Straszewski

The civilization of the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century is often described through the lens of dynamic socio-cultural transformations. Contemporary modernization processes are characterized by much broader scope than those of the past, encompassing nearly all aspects of life and occurring on a global scale. These transformations are also characterized by significant speed and, at times, an overly rapid pace of change. The values that formed the foundation of European societies continue to play an important role in an increasingly uniform, globalized world. Changes in the realm of religion and religiosity are largely tied to processes of secularization, spiritual revival, and shifts characteristic of postmodern culture, such as pluralism, individualization, subjectivization, and the development of new technologies.

Contemporary reality, characterized by rapid changes and dynamic modernization processes, fosters the development of new paradigms and cultural models. Society is compelled to greater activity and engagement across various areas of life—social, cultural, political, and economic. In this new cultural reality,

particular emphasis is placed on human intellectual potential, creativity, and imagination. At the same time, within the context of consumer society, the phenomenon of the sacralization of the profane is evident, encompassing many aspects of consumer culture. Moving away from traditional forms of institutional religion, people begin to long for religion and holidays, but they fulfill this longing in ways aligned with new cultural patterns. Consumerism, as a new "religion", adapts elements of former spirituality, assigning them new meanings that fit into the dynamic, creative, and individualistic world of contemporary culture.

Postmodernity is often depicted as a new era breaking away from the previous cultural formation, characterized by radical changes and accelerated processes. However, equally frequent are perspectives that emphasize the continuation of Enlightenment themes, the ongoing transformations initiated in modernity, and the strong connections between these epochs. It is often emphasized that the debate over postmodernity is accompanied by a debate over modernity, and the same applies to modernism and postmodernism. The transformations currently taking place in the broadly understood realm of religion and religiosity have their roots in the previous cultural formation—modernity.

Modernity was oriented toward designing the future, emphasizing progress in almost every field of life. The idea of progress shaped the form and content of culture in both its spiritual and material dimensions. "Considering the fact that the idea of progress itself was a product of philosophical thought, philosophy must also be recognized as a force shaping contemporary European civilization. [...] This assertion primarily aims to highlight one of the key determinants of this phenomenon".¹ Nineteenth-century European progress is typically associated with the advancement of science and technology, as well as the moral and social improvement of humanity and the societies it creates. The idea of progress was also perceived as a specific concept of history. It served as a tool for both understanding cultural reality and framing it within theoretical knowledge. The aforementioned idea can thus be seen as "a category defining or determining the intentionality of human actions, and thereby the process of cultural becoming".² However, it is essential to highlight the inherent incommensurability associated with this pervasive progress, which manifested itself in the rigidity of organizational and administrative systems. This, in turn, led to the formalization of interpersonal relations within various institutions.

¹ A.L. Zachariasz, *Philosophy: Its Essence and Functions*, Lublin 1994, pp. 246–247. The idea of progress was one of the most significant aspects of the development of Western European culture, especially in modern times. It determined the cultural changes that aimed primarily at improving the existing state of culture and were directed toward surpassing previous technical or social solutions.

² *Ibid.*, p. 286.

The period of modernity was marked by profound structural changes and an intensification of economic, social, and cultural processes, which significantly accelerated the pace of historical developments. Social actions at that time began to be justified primarily by appeals to natural law, experience, and reason, rather than traditional references to metaphysics. Thus, "life, actions, and social relations began to be justified in an immanent way, that is, based on earthly foundations, invoking the power of natural law, experience, or reason".³ Modern mechanisms, assumptions, and projects, in contrast to earlier historical periods, primarily focused on the following: first, the conviction of reason's dominance over faith in organizing society; second, the assumption that progress could enhance human existence, thereby serving as a path to happiness; third, the belief that every action should prioritize the autonomous value of the individual; fourth, the premise that freedom and tolerance are absolute values, forming the foundation of social equality; and fifth, the conviction regarding secularization as an expression of the independence of human knowledge from the authority of the Church.

The processes of increasing rationalization of the world are also regarded as a source of more or less radical transformations and changes in the form of religion and religiosity itself. One consequence of this is the blurring of boundaries between religion and other spheres of life. This does not merely refer to "the functions or replacement of traditional religions by forms of recreation, education, politics, or fashion, often perceived as their degradation or infantilization, but rather to the very interpenetration of the sacred and the secular".⁴ Scepticism toward metaphysics, present in postmodernity, often leads to the discovery of its new interpretative applications. Maurycy Straszewski,⁵ drew attention to this issue, emphasizing that culture, scientific progress, and the history of philosophy are inextricably linked with the history of religion and theology. He expressed this, among other things, in the following words: "Historical research also reveals to us an increasingly precise understanding of the vast and ancient past of human culture; wherever the researcher looks, they encounter religion and religious feeling as the most important factor in all intellectual progress".

„The further we advance in recognizing the primitive states of culture, the more we are convinced that religion is not some late or artificial creation but

³ T. Buksiński, *Modernity*, Scientific Publishing House of the Institute of Philosophy, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań 2001, p. 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, s. 166.

⁵ Maurycy Straszewski – He lived from 1848 to 1921. He was a professor of philosophy at the Jagiellonian University and the Catholic University of Lublin. He founded the Philosophical Society in Krakow and was a representative of philosophical positivism as well as a religious thinker. His interests included, among other things, issues concerning the history of Polish philosophical thought and the history of philosophy. Among his many works addressing religious themes, particular attention should be given to *Religion of the Future* (Warsaw 1904).

something most fundamentally implanted in the human soul".⁶ Straszewski believed that philosophy had a crucial role in establishing the theoretical and methodological foundations of the sciences, as well as integrating their findings to shape a coherent picture of reality.⁷ The philosophical worldview was intended to unite the truths of science and the truths of faith through the concept of inductive metaphysics. However, the attempt to create an inductive metaphysics that would reconcile the truths of science with those of religion proved unsuccessful.

Straszewski addressed problematic issues primarily based on Catholic dogma, while simultaneously emphasizing the religious roots of philosophy. He noted that in all cultures, "there comes a moment when a religious worldview is no longer sufficient and must be organized, deepened, and philosophically expanded. On the other hand, he observed that philosophy sometimes plays an auxiliary role in the creation of religion (he highlighted in this regard the influence of the philosophy of Descartes, Buddha, and ancient Greek inspirations on Eastern religions and Christianity, respectively)".⁸

According to Straszewski, the application of the principles of inductive metaphysics was intended to provide a means of resolving questions concerning humanity and its place in the world. Straszewski emphasized not only the crucial influence of religion on philosophy but also on other aspects of reality, such as the socio-economic sphere. He believed that the development of culture, science, society, and philosophy is closely tied to the nature of religious transformations. When analyzing the impact of religion on the worldview and philosophy, he referred to specific cultures, such as those of China, India, and Egypt. In the case of Greek culture, there was a search for a faith deeper than folk beliefs, which formed the foundation for both cosmogony and theogony, as well as philosophy.

Maurycy Straszewski, in analyzing the development of European civilization, emphasized the pivotal role of Christianity and the Catholic Church in shaping culture and establishing democratic principles. He asserted that European civilization and the Church mutually supported each other in their pursuit of universality and universalization. In his book *The Religion of the Future*, he wrote: "If the entirety of today's European civilization cannot be conceived without a democratic foundation and political freedom, then I ask, what religion

⁶ M. Straszewski, *Religion of the Future*, M. Szczepkowski Publishing House, Warsaw 1904, p. 18. Original spelling. Zob. M. Straszewski, *In the Pursuit of Synthesis: Ideas and Sketches from the Years 1877 to 1907*, Warsaw 1908, p. 23.

⁷ Por. K. Bochenek, L. Gawor, M. Michalik-Jeżowska, R. Wójtowicz, *Outline of the History of Polish Philosophy*, University of Rzeszów Publishing House, Rzeszów 2013, p. 195.

⁸ *Ibid.* Zob. M. Straszewski, *The History of Philosophy in Outline*, vol. 1: *General Introduction to the History of Philosophy and the History of Philosophy in the East*, Kraków 1894, p. 9.

could better align with the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity”.⁹ „Let every economic organization and work also be based on Christian principles, and then the much-needed regulator in the struggle of all against all will be found”.¹⁰

Straszewski connected the future of European culture with the future of Christian religion. He assigned Catholics the tasks of renewing their own spirituality, rejecting fanaticism, and maintaining independence from political parties, doctrines, or state authorities. He strongly emphasized that religious beliefs should be an expression of goodwill and must not be influenced by any form of authority. The philosophical and religious reflections of Maurycy Straszewski pertain to broadly understood principles of social development. He believed that “good” and harmonious social life should be based on community, interpersonal solidarity, democratic principles, balance, and material achievements stemming from scientific and technological progress.

Individualism, which leads to egoism and the weakening of interpersonal relationships, was subject to thorough criticism in Straszewski’s thought. His philosophy contributed to shaping higher forms of religious life, ultimately leading to the creation of dogmatic systems. According to the author of *Religion of the Future*, contemporary philosophy will not lead to the development of a new form of religion because the rapid pace of civilizational processes prevents its universal acceptance. Additionally, Straszewski observes that humanity currently does not feel the need to create a new, global religion. The category of religion, which was a subject of Straszewski’s philosophical inquiries, continues to hold an important place in contemporary philosophical, theological, and anthropological discourse. Questions about a new form of religion arise from the transformations occurring in the realm of religion and religiosity.

At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, an increasing number of people distance themselves from institutional religions, seeking alternative ways to fulfill their spiritual needs. The current resurgence of religiosity is, on the one hand, associated with the popularity of new forms of religiosity and spirituality, and on the other, with the rejection of grand systems that have accompanied the development of science and technology. Contemporary forms of religiosity are characterized not only by dynamism but also by the variability of individual choices, the search for new religious experiences, and the fluidity of established beliefs.

Decisions regarding religious engagement are increasingly less influenced by tradition, especially in matters of eschatology, and are more aligned with an individualized, modern culture while simultaneously subject to market mechanisms.

⁹ M. Straszewski, *The Religion of the Future*, cited edition, p. 31. Original spelling.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39. Original spelling.

As J. Mariański emphasizes, the laws of the market mean that “one no longer grows up within a specific tradition that holds inherent validity and obligation, but must constantly choose from among many options and preferences. Everyone can find something on the worldview market that suits their wishes and needs”.¹¹

According to Ulrich Beck, distancing oneself from institutionalized religions often leads to the search for new forms of religiosity. These include belief in a “personal God” and the pursuit of direct contact with Him without the mediation of the Church. Such new religiosity draws content from diverse sources, relying on individual experiences and personal initiative. The contemporary religious situation in Europe is characterized not so much by the weakening or decline of religion but by the transformation of its forms. This leads to an expansion of the religious sphere as well as its pluralization and individualization. In postmodern societies, new forms of religiosity dominate, which are more individual and communal in nature rather than institutional. The above issues concerning contemporary transformations in the sphere of religion and their resulting consequences are also addressed in philosophical reflection.

Some representatives of postmodernism argue that modernity signifies the end not only of metaphysics but also of religion as such. Others, however, see in it a revival and a return to a significant role. An example of the first perspective is Richard Rorty, who views religion as a form of cultural mutation whose time has come to an end. At the same time, Rorty directs proposals to religious individuals aimed at avoiding situations where certain beliefs are dismissed outright as unacceptable within liberal societies.¹² Rorty advocates for a clear separation of ideological beliefs from the sphere of politics. He justifies this with the conviction that the theoretical pursuit of private perfection cannot be reconciled with the obligations we have toward other people. Rorty's understanding of religion as an inspiration for a grand adventure or as a foundation for seeking certainty and security may serve as an effective backdrop for shaping religion, though it does not necessarily align with a general, pragmatic approach to life.

Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Derrida present a different approach to religion, highlighting two potential directions for cultural development in the face of the “spirit of modernity” crisis. On one hand, they observe the return of religion in the form of fundamentalisms, integrisms, and religious conflicts, which characterize contemporary reality. On the other hand, they advocate subjecting traditional religiosity, filled with myths and metaphysical issues, to radical critique. This process, beginning with deconstruction, is envisioned to lead to

¹¹ J. Mariański, *New Religiosity in the Contemporary World – Megatrend or Megaflop?*, “Przegląd Religioznawczy” 2003, no. 3, p. 127.

¹² Zob. R. Rorty, *Religion as the End of Conversation*, “Znak” 2001, no. 1, p. 68 and following.

the emergence of a new type of religiosity, potentially incorporating a certain form of transcendence. Nevertheless, as Vattimo writes, “*We cannot not call ourselves Christians* because in a world where God is dead, where metanarratives have disintegrated, and all authorities, including ‘objective’ knowledge, have fortunately been demythologized, the only chance for humanity’s survival lies in remaining faithful to the Christian commandment of mercy”.¹³

Jacques Derrida, on the other hand, points out that the contemporary revitalization of religion represents another stage in the cycle of constant returns of religiosity. However, it is distinguished by its global reach and unique forms, such as tele-techno-media-scientific, politico-economic, or capitalist expressions. It is also linked to a peculiar kind of “suspension” of traditional religious markers, such as dogma, authority, worship, and orthodoxy.

In the postmodern debate on religion, it is also important to highlight an option that draws inspiration from Buddhism, as well as the views espoused by representatives of New Spirituality, the New Age movement, or Rudolf Steiner. This perspective assumes the necessity of changing humanity’s approach to nature—from an “object-oriented, instrumental-exploitative” stance to a “subject-oriented, empathetic, and dialogical” one. Equally crucial is the search for a primordial, pre-rational structure that would enable the unification of humanity with nature, the cosmos, as well as the past and future of the world”.¹⁴

I. Hassan refers to this tendency as *immanences*, meaning the human mind’s ability to “spread into the world, harmonize the self with the world into a new unity; it is a process of spiritualizing the world...” The source of this new religion/spirituality is the human being, understood as a *language animal*, capable of self-creation and self-realization. J. Gebser refers to this described tendency as “the birth of integral consciousness”, which he equates with cosmic consciousness – a consciousness empathetically attuned to the universe.¹⁵

Analyzing the multidirectional nature of postmodern transformations in the realm of religiosity, the search for new forms of spirituality and religion, and referencing the works of Maurycy Straszewski from the modern era, it is important to emphasize the innovative approach to understanding religion and its impact on socio-cultural reality. Straszewski, like many postmodern philosophers, sees religion as a cultural construct with its own social, historical and symbolic value. He also repeatedly pointed to the need to supplement the religious worldview with philosophical theories, which in many cases have played a supporting

¹³ G. Vattimo, *The Age of Interpretation* [in:] R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. S. Zabala, translated by S. Królak, eidos, Jagiellonian University Press, Kraków 2010, p. 66.

¹⁴ Zob. G. Dziamski, *What Comes After Modernity?* [in:] *Postmodernism: Texts by Polish Authors*, ed. M.A. Potocka, Inter Esse Publishing House, Kraków 2003, p. 28.

¹⁵ Zob. *Ibid.*, s. 28–29.

role in the formation of religion. What Straszewski's religious conception and some postmodernists have in common is the 'postulate' of developing a model that will allow the need for transcendence and religious experience in the broadest sense to be realised.

In the context of these transformations, we can speak of "projects" that, on one hand, draw from contemporary scientific assumptions, while on the other hand, transcend the prevailing scientific paradigm.

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Streszczenie

Współczesne przemiany w obszarze religii i religijności zostały znacząco ukształtowane przez procesy modernizacji, sekularyzacji i powszechnego pluralizmu. W koncepcjach wielu filozofów postmodernistycznych pojawia się idea „powrotu religii”. Koncepcję tę przedstawił m.in. Maurycy Straszewski, którego myśl wywodzi się z XIX-wiecznego pozytywizmu. Wiele elementów jego teorii znajduje swoje odzwierciedlenie we współczesnych wypowiedziach filozoficznych na temat przemian religijności. Szczególnie istotne są postulat zgodności religii z rozumem i nauką, odejście od dogmatów, indywidualizacja duchowości oraz wpływ religii na kształtowanie postaw moralnych, relacji społecznych i solidarności międzyludzkiej.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura współczesna, religia, transcendencja, ponowoczesność, Straszewski