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PRIESTS IN THE EYES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Is This Issue in Mental Health Professionals' Interest?

BANIAK, J. (2013) *The Image of the Priest in the Awareness of Polish Youth: A Sociological Study* (Münster: LIT) 168 pp., 23,5 cm, ISBN 978-3-643-90380-8, €29.90.

The international community of scientists has very few occasions indeed to get acquainted with the results of longitudinal, sociological or other studies. It is not an easy task to design and perform a longitudinal research, irrespective of the field and subject of interest. The research described and discussed in the dissertation entitled *The Image of the Priest in the Awareness of Polish Youth: A Sociological Study* requires unshakeable consistence in putting into effect the theoretical and methodological concepts, and perseverance in the effort to conduct the research study practically (TROCHIM 2006). From a strictly scientific point of view, it is a valuable work, worth showing to the wider audience. Fellow scientists can benefit from reading it, regardless of their field of specialisation within humanities. Scientific circles need this kind of methodological and practical knowledge because they need more occasions to follow the dynamics of cultural and developmental changes of their subjects. As usual, language is the problem – English-speaking natives do not use such complicated sentence structures. But is it really a serious failure? Most of the readers are professionals from the field of mental healthcare, or scientists who find no difficulty in reading more complicated content. It is a scientific dissertation, not a popular publication. Anyone who has had some contact with scientific publications in humanities is doubtless aware that sociological studies are no ‘bedside books’.

It is still a very rare and precious chance to look at political, social, and cultural changes in people’s awareness in the transition period which affected a large part of Europe. What is especially interesting is learning how young people, the so-called ‘future of mankind’ see the world nowadays. Last but not least, the issue of priesthood seems to be an intellectually appealing matter at all times. Despite the general attractiveness of the subject, one core question accompanied my reading of the dissertation and the preparation of this review: why could the image of a Catholic priest in Kalisz (a Polish city of 104 000 inhabitants) prevalent among young people be interesting for mental health professionals abroad in the times of ecumenism and progressive secularisation? Apart from the problem of cultural bias, which I will discuss later, what are the merits of this book from the point of view of psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers in the whole of Europe?

Most of the psychotherapy clients are still relatively young adults faced with the world of mature social roles and therefore having to reshape their attitude to all kinds of

authorities. The number of psychotherapists and social workers interested in working with young people and their families, for whom the problem of authority is very acute, is constantly increasing. It should be remembered that authority is a multidimensional issue, which could be seen from many points of view, including sociological and psychological aspects of this by no means culturally determined phenomenon (GELDER 2007). And from the point of view of cross-cultural psychology, one can ask whether authority really has the same meaning in all European countries. Maybe what is problematic from the point of view of European readers is the very translation of the term 'authority' from Polish to English. In many English-speaking countries, first of all, the UK, the word 'authority' is understood in the aspect of formal institutions and their actual, real possibility to influence. A parish priest is still formally a kind of civil servant. A couple of months ago I talked to Professor Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi from Haifa about religiousness in the times of extreme individualism. He observed that religion has currently lost its political and actual power in most Western countries. It is not such a serious matter to be rebellious against institutional priesthood as it was before. In his opinion, Poland is different in that aspect: because of its difficult history (partitions of Poland, communism), authority and power mean something entirely different here. Nowadays, religious authorities and actual power represented by the government seem to be closer than for many years before. At the same time, people in Poland are used to some double standards (SZTOMPKA 1993). Priesthood, even deprived of real power, is still more institutional than in most modern European countries, and arouses feelings typical for institutions as such – the tendency to create double standards here is particularly strong. In all likelihood, a similar psychological situation occurs in South America which is home to the largest Roman Catholic community in the world, and from where more and more immigrants – potentially also clients (PELLEGRINO 2004) – arrive.

The study offers answers to many different questions. What kind of authority does a Catholic priest have in a modern society? How is the social role of a priest actually perceived in a modern society? How are young people influenced by their parents' views on a priest as a figure of authority – what is the place of a Catholic priest or another spiritual and life guide in the family system of most Catholic families? Is it somehow similar to a systemic psychotherapist? How, therefore, do Polish youth, as the representatives of youth in general, perceive priests as potential figures of religious and moral authority? What it means to be a figure of authority and what kind of authority young people need today is a very urgent issue for their mental condition.

In this context, the whole book, especially the chapters concerning the social role and authority of priests as it has been seen by the Polish youth from 1983 until 2008, is extremely interesting for mental health professionals. Despite its cultural bias, and although it is specific for a certain type of settlement (a fairly small town in south-eastern Poland), which is obviously a challenge, readers can follow a cultural change in young people's needs and perception of Church authorities over 25 years (APONTE et al. 1995). They cannot derive direct conclusions, but they can try to understand the dynamics of these cultural and social changes. Especially if we take into account the fact that it is not only trendy styles of attachment or object relations

or personality as a whole that determine cross-cultural transition in particular individuals, but also broadly understood religiousness (ZAKRZEWSKA-WIRKUS 2013).

The issue which is raised in a separate chapter and which undoubtedly deserves special attention is the phenomenon of the Polish pope, John Paul II as a personal model for Polish youth. A few years ago he was so popular that Polish media even coined the term ‘JP2 generation’ to refer to people born in the 1980s. Even if this term was used mostly as a catchy slogan, the impact of his magnetic personality on the expectations and vision of an ideal parish priest and academic minister is undoubtedly powerful throughout all the described period. Probably not only in Poland.

Although this was probably not the author’s primary intention, we can also learn a lot about the reality, social functions, theological basis, and psychological conditions of this very special profession: being a Catholic priest. Most people, even mental health professionals, have poor knowledge of all the pressures, internal and external, that affect the clergy. It is useful knowledge in our field: the occupation of a priest is still one of the considered ways of life for young people, and priests can also suffer from mental problems and become patients. However, it is more frequently the case that we need additional knowledge about young people’s experience with priests as a moral authority and a ‘guide to life’. Due to these circumstances, the problem of mandatory celibacy in the opinion of young people deserves additional attention and a separate chapter.

The book is about awareness, and it provides us with knowledge of the cultural background and its changes, which is very useful in interpreting the mindset of young people and necessary to helping them. We should not try to understand and interpret individuals only in the light of our knowledge of unconscious mechanisms without taking into account cultural and generational factors. Expanding our knowledge and awareness of social changes as mental health professionals, we could limit our own projections and broaden our awareness of our clients more effectively.

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