

**Anna M. Królikowska**

Uniwersytet Szczeciński

## Beliefs in Manifestations of the Supernatural as an Element of Contemporary Religiosity

**SUMMARY** The article aims to show the belief in manifestation of the supernatural, i.e. miracles, visions, prophecies, and Satan's activity as a compound of the quite influential current in contemporary religiosity in Poland, also in the institutional dimension. These phenomenon oblige us to revise the earlier opinion which linked the "miraculous susceptibility" merely with the folk religiosity. In studying these phenomena a character of an approach adopted by a researcher is particularly important. The approaches which suspend judgement and hold back from immediate reduction, allow to understand the entirety of the intrinsic meanings, experiences and narratives concerning the phenomena being discussed, as well as indicate their external references. In the article, phenomenology is being identified as the theoretical and methodological orientation that can carry out these tasks.

### **KEYWORDS**

RELIGIOSITY, BELIEF  
IN MANIFESTATION  
OF THE SUPERNATURAL,  
MIRACLES, MYSTICAL  
VISIONS, SATAN,  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
APPROACH

## Introduction

If we would follow theories combining modernisation with rationalisation and disenchantment (Weber, 1971), we would not be willing to treat beliefs in miracles or in a devil as a part of contemporary religiosity, but rather expect that religious faith has undergone a kind of rationalisation either. Similarly, when we accept the concepts of modernisation as consisting in pluralisation inevitably leading to modernisation of the consciousness (Berger, 1967; Berger, Berger, Kellner, 1973), which means that an individual is sentenced to the “heretical imperative” (Berger, 1979), reflectance and keeping a distance to his/her own religiousness, as well as in growing privatisation and psychologisation of religiosity, or even “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1984) – all these theses about the directions of changes in contemporary religiosity might make us conceive that the miraculous kind of believing belongs to the past. This conviction harmonises with a long tradition of referring miracularity to the folk (peasant) piety. The aim of this article is to show this element of religious beliefs as contributing to the contemporary religiosity in Poland and as such – still worth attention. It is worth to be recognised that there are many signs pointing that such a type of religiosity which is sensitive and susceptible to miraculous or sometimes also “diabolic” elements of religious narratives should neither be associated solely to the folk culture – which indeed has been more and more a thing of the past – nor limited to the imagination of the uneducated people. Beliefs in intervention of the supernatural seem to be pretty popular, regardless a location on a rural-urban continuum (cf. Królikowska, 2014). The words of Richard Jenkins (2000, pp. 28–29): “it may be high time to think about (re)enchantment as no less diagnostic of modernity than disenchantment” suits here well. Charles Taylor (2007) stresses the increasing role of expression and experiencing. Therefore, in the first part of the article I want to show some symptoms of beliefs in manifestation of the supernatural and their presence in Catholic discourse. This miraculous discourse makes a peculiar context which may influence an individual consciousness and form one’s world-view. The other thesis propounded here says that the Catholic Church seems to be more than before willing to accept, assimilate and promulgate this current of religiosity. The *Mystery* has always been a core of the Church’s teaching, but its bigger openness to absorb the miraculous narratives, and readiness to develop the “miraculous consciousness” (Ołędzki, 1989) as a basis for the acceptance of these narrations, mean legitimisation, institutionalisation and then promulgation of the much greater number of mysteries. It is a matter of discussion how particular or common (because surely not universal) is this tendency within contemporary Catholicism. To state this, one should depict “the climate” and the extent of success of these narratives in different local sociocultural backgrounds. But the great number of new saints canonised by John Paul II implies indirectly “the miracle thinking” (if we can draw a parallel to the “mythical thinking”) among the Church elites. Secondly, many miraculous places and personages are of the worldwide renown, *a fortiori* in the global era, and are visited in pilgrimages by millions of Catholics from different countries. The paper, however, focuses on the peculiarity of Polish Catholic religiosity and on miraculous (or “diabolic”) narrations present on this ground.

When undertaking scientifically the topic of miracles and other extraordinary phenomena not having perceptible *designatum*, one undoubtedly faces the question of a researcher’s approach. Thus, another aim that the article is oriented at is to show various ways of giving an account of these phenomena on the scientific ground. Next, I try to point out the advantages of a phenomenological attitude in studying this kind of religious

consciousness. The basic standpoint held here is that we cannot bring the matter of believing in miracles, hierophanic appearances, prophecies, devil agency or expelling Satan, into the realm of humanities unless we suspend, if only temporarily, our striving to evaluate what is true and what is false, what is real and what is merely – individually or socially – imagined, that is, unless we have a patience to glance at the world as it appears to the subjects. The phenomenological approach can be, however, applied in different manners, with varying affinity and allegiance to a phenomenological theory.

### **Miracles, Mystical Visions and Numinous Evil as a Part of Reality<sup>1</sup>**

Many facts seem to certify that in today's Polish Catholicism there is a quite strong tendency to permeate religious faith with the beliefs in the active manifestations of the supernatural. A religious individual, as a member of community of religious meanings, has quite a big number of opportunities to be under influence of wondrous stories. In these narratives, both the morally good sacrum and the negatively numinous *mysterium tremendum* (Otto, 1958) are capable of intervening into the earthly course of life, by doing or saying something, uninvitedly or in response, affecting an individual, a community or the whole world's fate. Mircea Eliade, consistently to his phenomenological approach, would call such interferences between this what is here and that what is beyond (beneath?) this world as paradoxical "breakthrough of the various levels of existence" (1996, p. 29). The "miraculous susceptibility" (Hemka, Olędzki, 1990), surprisingly, benefits from globalisation, which means, among others, the possibility of travelling, as well as from media development and visual culture proliferation.

A definition provided by *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974) states that miracle is

that which causes wonder and astonishment, being extraordinary in itself and amazing or inexplicable by normal standards. (...) The significance of a miraculous event is frequently held to reside not in the event as such, but in the reality to which it points (p. 269).

As Catholic encyclopaedia says, it is "an extraordinary phenomenon of religious character being a God's sign (transcendence) addressed to a human (immanence)" (Łukaszyc, Bieńkowski, Gryglewicz, 1979, pp. 642–643). Although Catholic theology generally pleads the materiality and objectivity of miracles, yet, the faithful are not obliged to accept miracles beyond those pertaining to Jesus, especially when they are understood as violation of the nature's rules. Admittedly, after *Vaticano Secondo* theologians tend to interpret them more under internal criteria of the invisible and intentionality than under the empirical ones<sup>2</sup>, nonetheless the vernacular discourse makes it seem otherwise.

A miracle may occur entirely unexpectedly, but may be an answer to prayers and requests, for instance, to be healed. When participating in Sunday mass, one may happen to hear about Saint Charbel, who was – and still is – dowered with unexplainable healing

<sup>1</sup> When we treat them here as a part of reality, we take the notion of reality not in its objective, ontological meaning, but referring to the subjective meaning, as constituting one of the core notions in phenomenology (like in Eliade's phenomenology of religion, e.g. 1987; 1996; or Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's phenomenological sociology, 1966). Other references may lead to William James' *Principles of Psychology* (vol. 2, 1891, p. 295), or even Hilary Putnam's (1987) internal realism.

<sup>2</sup> Many cases of phenomena taken as miracles do not go beyond naturally explicable facts. According to one of the opinions, it provides an enticement to "naturalise" miracles entirely, which is wrong (Talasiewicz, 2011). However, obviously, this is not a sociological subject matter.

powers, being able to operate an ill person when he or she is asleep. Further, one may be reported that Charbel's body for forty days after his death emanated bright light and stayed warm and flexible, and it had not degraded until his beatification (67 years later). Lastly, one may also hear that father Charbel's effigy was visible on a photography made 50 years after his death (cf. Cattaneo, 2013, pp. 11, 84). These may be as well other than in-church circumstances of becoming acquainted with his person, for one may risk to say that there is a kind of vogue for this Saint almost unknown here before. As a paintings salesman in one of the Polish leisurely resorts said, "pictures with Saint Charbel sell very well" (March 2016). The narrative of Charbel as a part of religious culture and religious communication is just an impressive example among others, like those of Father Pio or some other miracle-working saints, stories about miraculous preservations of their dead bodies or other elements from their biographies or "post-biographies".

A member of religious community has to face a challenge to believe not only in miracles related to the persons who deceased long before, but also with miracles which take place *hic et nunc*. The miracles in Sokółka (2008) and in Legnica (2013)<sup>3</sup> were the most imposing examples of such phenomena, sustaining the matter for believing, confusing, or discussions, and letting people to categorise themselves as miracle-believers, miracle-agnostics or miracle-negationists<sup>4</sup> (Sender, 2009; Niles, 2016; Racjonalista.tv., 2016; Szyszka, 2016).

In colloquial understanding the miracle means an occurrence of something univocally good, bringing deliverance, return to health, or happiness, or associated with an astonishing beauty. When it comes to stigmata, the manifestation of the holiness is related with pain, yet, the religiously meaningful pain. A conviction that bearing stigmata – i.e. wounds, bodily marks and sensations of pain in locations corresponding to the wounds of crucified Jesus – is not a counterfeit is getting to be more rife, too. In June 2016 stigmatic Fra Elia visited some Polish parishes. Although the bodily signs could not be seen, because – as it is reported and pictured on photos easily to be found in Internet – he gets them regularly only in the Holy Week, the mere meeting him induced people to come to their own assessment of his miraculous phenomenon. People sought information, watched photos and movies in Internet, commented and read posts in social media. Here is an example of a comment posted on Facebook (June 2016): "I saw closely Fra Elia's stigmata. At couple centimetres range. No words can describe this – vivid stigmata on his hands (...). I will never forget this (...). These hands blessed me, they sacrificed my pictures and the rosary". This means that the miraculous subject matter is, at least from time to time, to be found in the social discourse outside religious institution.

Visions of the sacred comprise another kind of dramatic religious experience. They consist in subjective impression without visible changes in one's body or in the outer world. In many cases, a message coming from the supernatural realm constitutes the essential element of a vision. The message may be addressed to the mystic himself/ herself, but in many cases, as it is believed, fortunes and misfortunes of the whole world and particular

<sup>3</sup> On October 12<sup>th</sup> 2008 in St. Anthony church in small town Sokółka (Podlaskie Voivodeship) a Host that was found on the floor was picked up and put to a vessel filled with water. A week later some strange red matter was visible in the container. It is believed to be a piece of tissue of Christ's heart. On December 25<sup>th</sup> 2013 at Legnica's (Lower Silesian Voivodeship) St. Jacek church the consecrated Host fell to the floor. That what happened next was similar to the occurrence in Sokółka (Sender, 2009; Niles, 2016; Szyszka, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Although in both cases the Church commissioned an independent medical examination of the stuff, and in conclusions the strange matter was described by teams of pathomorphologists as an occurrence of something resembling a particle of myocardial tissue (Sender, 2009; Korvemaker, 2016), the David Hume's statement, that "there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men" (1748/1966, p. 116) finds its confirmation.

countries are told or shown by a celestial being to visionaries. A prophecy, a demand, a request, an explanation, or a(n) (un)conditioned promise concerns a society, a nation, or all mankind. As it is held, sometimes one vision is at the same time shared by more than one person, like in Fatima in 1917, where Marian apparition was seen by three children, or, as visionaries maintain, in the case of Medjugorje *The Blessed Virgin* apparitions. The secrets and prophecy, believed to be told by the Mother of God to three little Portuguese shepherds, have puzzled many Catholics up to hundred years later (Faverzani, 2015). It is more than likely that the coming 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary will meet the topic of Fatima visions vivid. Similarly, relations of Bernadette Soubirous' mystic visions still supply fuel to the religious imagination and practices. The Polish case of a narrative of mystical apparition are nun Faustina Kowalska's visions of Jesus which reportedly took place in 1920s and 1930s, sustained for decades, and especially recently have contributed to the promulgation of the "Divine Mercy"<sup>5</sup>.

While some make distinctions between miracles and visions, in the Catholic world these two may be merged together in experiences of one religious "virtuoso". To show this, one can connote Syrian mystic Myrna Nazzour, gifted with ability to heal, visions, and stigmata. Her almost regular visits to Poland have been reported not only by Catholic media, but also by secular ones<sup>6</sup>.

The places of miracular occurrences and places of living of persons gifted with miracle or visionary abilities attract big numbers of people. The Padre Pio centre in San Giovanni Rotondo maintains that its shrine receives 7 million of pilgrims each year (Sacred Destinations, 2016). Lourdes with the Rosary Basilica is a site attracting about six million pilgrims a year. Although the situation in Lebanon is far from being stable and safe, pilgrims travel to the place of living and to the tomb of Saint Charbel. A large number of Polish parishes organise pilgrimages to these places.

In the imaginarium presented herein, other-worldly reality is the realm of holiness, but there is also a representation of evil. Being exposed to Satan is related by miracularly or mystically susceptible persons. Thus, the religious experience embraces not only things that are good and bright with their reference to the profane, but also the struggle between good and evil. Here is an excerpt from a diary of Szczecin's mystic Alicja Lenczewska<sup>7</sup> found posted on Facebook by a priest:

Yesterday late in the evening during a prayer I felt the presence in my house of a person emanated with a great terror. I prayed all the time till the moment I felt asleep. I got awoken with a jolt to my hand and with utter awareness that it was done by a dark entity, wanting to attract me. It was exactly midnight. I called my Lord for help and I totally entrusted myself to his safekeeping. And peace and entire sense of security came to me. I felt no presence of anybody anymore. There was just Lord and his caring goodness.

According to Rudolf Otto's (1958, p. 110) phenomenological analysis, Satan focalises the detached dark element of *numinosum tremendum*. It is an acknowledged persona in Catholic theology. "Though the teaching about Satan is not formulated in a form of a dogma,

<sup>5</sup> The period from December 2015 to November 2016 was proclaimed by pope Francis as the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. World Youth Days in 2016 were organised in Kraków under the motto "Blessed are the merciful", and the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy in Łagiewniki, with the picture of Merciful Jesus, was one of the meeting places.

<sup>6</sup> Kruszyk (2012), Świąchowicz (2012), Fakt24 (2014), TVN (2014).

<sup>7</sup> The diary of this mystic who died in 2012 was published in 2016 (Lenczewska, 2016). Many excerpts from her diary have been posted regularly on Facebook.

because dogma is a positive doctrine about salvation, still it belongs to the sound theological claims based on the Revelation” (Wojtkiewicz, 2008, p. 149). Although the presence of the personified evil “gives definition to the transcendent” (Beyer, 1994, p. 91), for a long time a trend to remove the “devil topic” from the religious discourse used to be observed. In last years we have been able to see the reverse tendency.

Satan makes the sphere of religious discourse and experience dynamic and dramatic, and accentuates the need for constant alertness and sticking to the “light side powers”. It is supposed that Satan can seduce and overrun not only individuals, but even all societies (cf. Onet.pl, 2015; Tekieli, 2016). In more radical interpretations, space without God is under a threat of being taken into possession by the personified evil. “Who does not pray to God, prays to Satan” – such a saying can be heard sometimes in a sermon. A prayer to Archangel Michael, deemed as attributed with exorcist power, which mostly disappeared from churches after Vatican II, has become to be said again in churches at the end of the mass (Sanctus.pl, 2016). Emile Durkheim wrote:

[T]hings are arbitrarily simplified when religion is seen only on its idealistic side (...). Satan is an essential piece of the Christian system; even if he is an impure being, he is not a profane one. The antigod, is a god, inferior and subordinated, it is true, but nevertheless endowed with extended powers; he is even an object of rites, at least of negative ones (Bellah, 1973, p. 193).

While, as it is reported, in 1970s there was just one exorcist in Poland, up to 2012 the number of institutional exorcists had increased to a hundred and twenty (Gość.pl., 2012), and in 2015 there were a hundred and thirty of them (Onet.pl, 2015). In 2012 a monthly *Egzorcysta* started to be edited, in the year 2015 gaining 40 000 copies. A famous exorcist Father Gabriele Amorth, being of the opinion that contemporary times brought new challenges to exorcists (1998; 2015; Faverzani, 2015), said about it:

Poland brought into the world John Paul II, who performed exorcisms many times during his pontificate (...). John Paul II appreciated us, the exorcists, and he was a great pope and a great saint. Therefore, this magazine had to be brought into existence (Miesięcznik Egzorcysta, 2015).

## **A Trend of Institutionalisation**

The Roman Catholic Church has always agnised a set of miracles, first of all and undisputedly those related to Jesus. An ascertainment of a miracle is an indispensable condition for counting somebody amongst the rank of saints. What is variable, it is the alacrity to deem the alleged epiphanies true.

In a generic sense all miracles are embedded in categories and notions peculiar to a historic-religious and cultural context. In the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1974) one finds a remark: “However inexplicable, all miracles have an explanation in the sense that they are accounted for in terms of the religious and cultural system that supports them and that, in turn, they are meant to support” (p. 260). The miracle in Lourdes grotto serves as a perfect example of being tightly coupled with institutional religiousness. After three years since Mary’s immaculate conception dogma had been proclaimed *ex cathedra* in 1854, as it is related, a peasant, indigent girl saw a Lady who told her words that uneducated Bernadette could not know: “*Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou*” (cf. Davies, 1996, pp. 798–799).

However, miracular phenomena quite often pose big problems to the institutional Church as being related to the socio-cultural, popular version of religiosity (cf. Krzywosz, 2008; Rojek, 2014). Many times priest and hierarchs negated the alleged miracles, and not only those “pagan-like” found in a context of nature (like Mary at a tree seen by folk), but also in more complex cases. However, considering the *Padre* Pio or Rozalia Celakówna’s cases, we can back the thesis about the shift in the Church’s attitude, seen as greater inclusiveness to miracles, stigmata or visions phenomena. Even though one has to bear in mind the time factor, the change of the religious institution’s attitude towards father Pio is noticeable. Since 1920s until 1960s the future Saint from Pietrelcina encountered suspicion and blames. As it is reported, pope John XXIII (1958–1963) considered him with his stigmata and wondermaking as an “immense deception” (Fisher, 2008). The process of Father Pio’s canonisation was held under the Pope John Paul II (which is another, important *Polonicum* in the context of miracular consciousness). It would not be too far from the truth to say that today the cult of Saint of Pietrelcina is preached by the institutional Church enthusiastically. As far as Polish domain is concerned, mystical visions of not widely known nurse Rozalia Celakówna (1901–1944) for many decades met with the Polish Church hierarchs’ mistrust and rebuff. Quite recently, her visions has began to be treated seriously in the local Church milieu. It was brought to realisation of what was assigned by her to a Christ’s will. The solemn proclamation of Jesus as a king of Poland took place in 2016<sup>8</sup>.

Requests of the sacred not only put some issues under the spotlight, induce to celebrate certain symbolic, but non-recurring acts, but also introduce into the Church life certain shifts in religious practices and bring an expectation of mobilisation of the faithful’s piety. Virgin Mary’s request entrusted to Bernadette left Catholics with the commitment or, at least, obligation to pray the Rosary. Acknowledgement of Saint Faustina’s visions equipped the Church with another prayer believed to be able to relieve the sufferings of the world and souls<sup>9</sup>.

Social scientists have most often attributed belief in occurring miracles to the folk religiosity (Olędzki, 1989; Hemka, Olędzki, 1990; Tokarska-Bakir, 2000; Dziurok, 2007; Krzywosz, 2014, 2016). The contexts of the great deal of “miracular apparitions” validated such interpretations. Bringing a miracular phenomenon into a church (and into the Church) is a special kind of institutionalisation. These were the cases of the alleged Eucharistic miracles in Sokółka and in Legnica.

Institutionalisation means objectivisation, justification and legitimisation of reported someone’s extraordinary religious experience. These experiences are being developed into narratives which can be then provided *ex cathedra* to the faithful. Here we find Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s (1966; Berger, 1967) three moments of constructing reality: externalisation, objectivisation, and internalisation. People are told of and exposed to the decision of their own attitude toward not only miracle and visions, but also to “the diabolic” stories. The greater readiness for including the last type of narratives into official Church discourse may lead us to Peter Beyer’s (1994) considerations that the difference between “the reassertion of the reality of the devil” and “acquiescence in his dissolution” (p. 86) is

<sup>8</sup> As it can be tentatively stated basing on commentaries in social media and in press, the enthronement met with differentiated reactions, taken by some Poles very seriously as an elevated moment, while by other members of the society either viewed with a consternation, sometimes an irony, or virtually unnoticed.

<sup>9</sup> If saint Faustina’s assertion is to be believed, the Chaplet of the Divine Mercy was dictated to her by Jesus on September 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> 1935. As it is held, the more people say this prayer, the safer and more peaceful world will be.

the main factor differentiating religious responses to the contemporary, globalising world, and his acknowledgement of the connexion between the Satan “dissolution” and secularisation. Keeping Satan alive, as well keeping holiness apparently alive and operational, may be read as a strategy aimed at the preservation of religion. Referring to Charles Taylor (2007), this strategy can be interpreted in terms of demonstrating the “autonomy of the supernatural” (p. 542) and enhancing the experiential and emotional element of religious piety in the situation when the position of religion and religious institution in society is endangered by secularisation.

### **Intervention of the Supernatural under Examination – the Question of Approach**

When it comes to the subject of reported manifestation of “the other” reality, different attitudes may occur. On the one hand, one may ask doubtfully whether science, also in its broad sense, can undertake such a topic and say anything reasonable about miracles, devils or narrating epiphanies. On the other hand, some humanists take the beliefs in things like this as so deplorable that not worth serious attention (e.g. Karl Jaspers, 1995). For others, (a question of) scientific exploration of these phenomena is appealing and challenging. The question of the “nature” of miracles has not petered away from philosophy, and it has its niche in philosophy of religion (among others: Purtil, 1976, 1997; Geivett, Habermas, 1997; Nichols, 2002). It is important to state, that motivation to tackle this topic within social science is more pragmatic, being just a response to social phenomena.

The attitude of natural sciences can be circumscribed quite unambiguously. If they decide to undertake a research of such peculiar objects, their task is to examine the precise object matter within the clearly defined scope of their scientific competences – and nothing more and nothing less. Such instances of an examination are often undertaken as responses to the Church’s initiatives and requests<sup>10</sup>.

When it comes to humanities and social science, the problem is more equivocal. The main dividing line goes between the “positivistic” and “understanding” approaches, although some sociological research try to interweave these two attitudes (like Stolz, 2011). Within a scope of positivistic approach these kind, alike other kinds of religious consciousness, is unambiguously treated as epiphenomenon of more basic forms of social and psychic, or sometimes psychotic, life. For Emile Durkheim as for a naturalist, each social fact, including any form of religious life is an epiphenomenon having, on a final note, its natural basis (1995, p. 17). Therefore, the explaining genetically and functionally all figments of people’s consciousness in the context of the society is rightful and ultimately explanatory. Though he admits that scientific trails to pervade the religious sphere can be perceived as a kind of blasphemy, Durkheim resolutely endorses to debunk this last barrier (p. 431–433). Stefan Czarnowski’s (1946) approach is located within this attitude, too. He recognises such elements like sensualism, concreteness, and emotionalism (resulting, among others, in the faith in miracles or in a devil) as belong to the genre of phenomena peculiar to the popular, mostly peasant, uneducated collective consciousness.

A researcher studying miracular or similar phenomena in a scope of sociology can refer to the sociology of knowledge, which accentuates the role of meanings shared and differentiated amongst members of a society or – in culturally complex societies – to particular communities of meanings. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1963) put all shapes of

<sup>10</sup> It can be also exemplified by the research of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, believed in the Church to be an *acheiropoietos* – an outcome of the supernatural (Łaszewski, 2011, pp. 203–219).

religious contents within the scope of social knowledge and encourage to trace social constructions and modes leading to internalisation of this kind of meanings (Berger, 1967). Attention paid to the social constructing may lead to the focus on depicting a broader cognitive context of belief in the supernatural activity (like in Th. Luckmann's presentation of Dobu's belief in the yam tubers walking at nights; 1970), or may be shifted to the efforts focused on explaining genesis of one's beliefs and experiences, as it is seen in Jörg Stolz's work (2011), where he explicates critically the "producing" of healing miracles in Pentecostal communities by referring to the social context facilitation, ambience of enchantment *etc.* The former attitude is more phenomenological, while the latter is much more deconstructive, and thus fulfilling the positivistic ideal.

Of course, there are more additional reasons for a sociologist to tackle some miraculous phenomenon when it has a markedly social background, causes conflicts or divisions, is incorporated into a social discourse or entangled with political threads. Maciej Krzywosz' (2016) studious analysis of a miracle in Zabłudów (small locality near Białystok) in 1960s is an example of placing the religious phenomenon on a wide, historical and political background.

The anti-positivist approach to all cultural or, in general, human, phenomena, takes as its aim to present, understand, and carefully interpret them showing their internal complexity of interrelated elements as well as external references and entanglements, sometimes together with their history. Although Weberian *Verstehen* (Tucker, 1965; Mandes, 2012) or Znaniecki's "humanistic coefficient" (1927) have had a long tradition in sociology, the understanding approach is much more characteristic for anthropological studies (Nowicka, 2006). This is a reason why humanistically oriented sociology may grab somewhat for the rich and in-depth anthropological reflexion<sup>11</sup>. And it is rather anthropology, where the criticism of the naturalistically biased approach to the contents of people's consciousness is loudest heard. For instance, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (2000) argues that reductionist interpretations destroy their objects of analyses from the very beginning and therefore are unable to explain them genuinely. "A thing which was demystified is explained utterly and, due to this explanation, destroyed (p. 330). It is needful (...) to avoid a fideism–demystification (credulity–suspiciousness) dilemma, thus saving a phenomenological gist of a myth" (p. 333). She analyses various phenomena of folk religiosity – including belief in miracles – in hermeneutical perspective, using a Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) concept of non-differentiation. Another researcher, Hubert Czachowski (2005), refers miraculous phenomena (loosely) to Paul Ricoeur hermeneutic, treating them as peculiar texts waiting to be read with cultural competences.

## **Beliefs in Manifestation of the Supernatural and Phenomenology**

The aptness of phenomenological attitude in studying beliefs in manifestation of the supernatural should be especially accentuated. The definition of the miracle mentioned above (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1974, p. 269) points to five aspects of a miracle, four of them having phenomenological connotations: breaking ordinary routine, meaningfulness, referring to the other reality, inexplicability, and being a phenomenon in the phenomenological

<sup>11</sup> Especially, inasmuch as contemporary anthropology quite often seeks for its topics within the researcher's own society. As Clifford Geertz (1983) puts it, "We are all natives now, and everybody else not immediately one of us is an exotic. What looked once to be matter of finding out whether savages could distinguish facts from fancy now looks to be a matter of finding out how others, across the world or down the corridor, organize their significative world" (p. 151).

sense (cf. Leeuw, 1986). Bracketing (*epoché*), consisting in suspension of judgement and immediate, reducing interpretation, enables also to reveal the religious meaning of vision, see it as an epiphany, which often goes beyond dimension of what is seen, consisting also in a message coming from the sacred. Taking the phenomenological account we can see that the career of certain mystic visions from the past have much in common with the situation in contemporary times, today's fears, ideological, political, or civilisation tenses, potential and real political conflicts. Rozalia Celakówna's message case probably can serve as an example of hope to surmount contemporary anxieties (cf. Duch Prawdy, 2007). Further, if we approach the question from the phenomenological point of view, we are able to see that the figure of Satan enhances the strength of clinging to holiness. The phenomenological approach enables to report the "things as they are"<sup>12</sup> from a subjective perspective. Such categories like reality, world, or life-world, taken subjectively in accordance with phenomenological principles, allow to show the perspective of an individual or of any community sharing religious meanings and interpretations.

This attitude may be confronted with the generally recognised and widely promoted methodological atheism, introduced to sociology of religion by Peter Berger (1967). However, Douglas Porpora's (2006) proposition meets phenomenological assumptions. An aim to give account of the inner meanings and report the content of religious experience can be supported methodologically by his idea to replace the methodological atheism with methodological agnosticism. Porpora states that "When it comes to the sociological study of religious experience, methodological atheism prescribes an inappropriate form of bracketing" (p. 57). We can agree with him that, in fact, Peter Berger's works, presenting not far reaching constructionism (cf. Hacking, 1999) with phenomenological concentration on subjectivity, actually seem to be underlain by the methodologically agnostic approach.

Surely, it must be remembered that a researcher who decides to adopt the phenomenological attitude, especially while dealing with such phenomena as miracles, visions or possessions, should not afford to stay too close to the object of their interest, in order not to be totally swallowed up by a realm of religious meanings (cf. De Martino, 1995). Too "sentimental" phenomenology excessively adhering to any system of meanings would make us lost in that world (Jackson, 2008), without ability to any further analysis. The advised attitude is to move between the natural mindset of subjects (to which the religious attitude is a correspondent here) and the scientific standpoint (Hastrup, 1995; Jackson, 2008).

It should be highlighted that there is not one way of using this theoretical-methodological orientation. Couple different ways of using the phenomenological approach can be pointed. Some of them should be treated as propositions for grasping phenomena of beliefs in manifestation of the supernatural within or with a considerable participation of the phenomenological approach.

First, the phenomenological theory can be used fully deliberately and consistently, which means adoption of its entire conceptual apparatus, the set of terms, as well as all its statements about structure of the world. Inasmuch as we deal with socially and culturally shaped phenomena, the "sociologised" version of phenomenology should be taken into consideration, and not the one in terms of Husserlian transcendental reduction. The most prominent phenomenological theory of that kind is the theory of Alfred Schütz (Schütz, Luckmann, 1973; Schütz, Natanson, van Breda, 1982; Schütz, Wagner, 1999; Mandes, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> It refers to the title of a book edited by Michael Jackson *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* (2006).

Nonetheless, the consequence of this strategy is that not only way of presentation and description, but also all further interpretations are entrapped into phenomenological frames, which may prove too rigid or cramped (cf. Endress, 2005). The other problem consists in the orientation of Schützian phenomenology on every-day life, which is understood by him strictly in pragmatic terms (Schütz, Luckmann, 1973, pp. 28–29), far from the wider Jamesean (1902/2002) pragmatism. This manner of encompassing subjective reality marginalises the religious experience and religious meanings, and separate them from the “paramount” (called even the “ultimate”) practical and task-oriented every-day reality. For these reasons, more flexible attitude to Schützian theory may be more promising and enabling to use just chosen ideas and categories, considered as appropriate for the peculiar subject matter<sup>13</sup>. Such a category, able to pin together and frame religious, every-day, or other experience, can be the category of life-world (Mandes, 2012, pp. 18, 80), understood as a meaningful world of living through, experiencing and narrating<sup>14</sup>.

A researcher may find it productive to tie phenomenological reposition to the subjective experience with some other approach, like hermeneutic, constructionist, or existentialistic<sup>15</sup> one – respectively when highlighting a submergence of a miraculous belief in the system of cultural symbols and meanings, showing the social processes of building the intersubjective agreement on the meanings of any extraordinary occurrence and making them influential to a subject’s consciousness, or concentrating on deep meanings and crucial, life-affecting experiences.

The need for joining phenomenology with other perspectives may arise from the theoretical reasons or be rooted in the complex character of a studied topic. In many cases miraculous ways of perceiving reality do not cross the boundaries of religious realm of meaning, but sometimes messages or interpretations go beyond symbolic sphere of religion, finding their references in the other dimensions of social life. Then, one can ask about social, cultural, and historical contexts of these phenomena. It can be queried which elements of these contexts foster them and generate occasions for deity to “give a sign” (e.g. Huculak, 2016). Since this relation is bi-directional, it is interesting to trace also an impact the miraculous consciousness have on the other spheres of social reality.

Dealing with so complex issue, linked with certain other than religious elements of culture, a researcher can treat the subjective, phenomenological perspective as an initiatory, though indispensable phase of the analysis. The role of an exhaustive insight into phenomenon at the beginning of the study is essential for orientating further discussion, and for eliminating these theoretical interpretations which might prove to be irrelevant or misleading to the narrated reality. The outcome of proceeding these steps would be a lingering element of understanding, affecting even the next, more “positivist” phases of the study, aimed, for example, at showing functions fulfilled by the miraculous world-view.

It can be noticed at the end, that exploratory attitude may be not explicitly called “phenomenological”, but still the very elaboration of a topic may stay concordant to this methodological standpoint. The aforementioned Maciej Krzywosz’ work (2016) does not contain

<sup>13</sup> We can even argue that too scrupulous following any precisely finished theoretical structuralisation may be criticised in terms of an inner contradiction consisting in that the well-developed phenomenological postulate of withholding from interpositions is abrogated or undermined by theoretical instructions.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A.M. Królikowska, *Codziennosc i świat przeżywany: gdzie jest miejsce dla znaczeń religijnych?*, *Kultura i Edukacja*, in press.

<sup>15</sup> The coupling of phenomenology and existentialism can be found in Włodzimierz Pawluczuk’s works on religiosity and faith (1988, 1991).

references to phenomenological theory, but observes the general rule of the non-evaluative and non-conclusive – as far as social echo is concerned – attitude. This shows, that the phenomenological approach can be taken as a general methodological rule to refrain from a prior or immediate theorising in favour of genuine presentation of a given phenomenon.

## Conclusions

Sociology of religion should pay attention to different modes of religiosity. This article has tried to show that recently, such extraordinary elements like prophecies, visions, warnings, wonderful occurrence, and fights against Satan have made up the considerable part of Catholic narration. This current is at least observable in Polish religious life, amongst a part of religiously active Catholics and a part of the clergy. While reports of display of miraculous susceptibilities from the past decades show them as occurring outside the Church and rising out of the soil of folk Catholicism, tinged with a fair dose of agrarian culture (Olędzki, 1989; Hemka, Olędzki, 1990; Dziurok, 2007; Krzywosz, 2014, 2016), the trend observed today inserts much more miraculous or other extraordinary events within the Church, thereby certifying institutionalisation of these forms of world-view. Therefore, Church themselves frequently disseminate such a mode of perceiving reality.

Today social sciences disregard rather the question of the “real nature” of miracles, mystical visions or possessions. This opens the possibilities to understand these religious but at the same time social and cultural phenomena more thoroughly, with humanistic perspicacity. The phenomenological point of view suggests to suspend judgement and immediate offish interpretation, which – in respect of this peculiar subject matter – could lead to reduction and miscomprehensions. The phenomenological approach enables to cognise the beliefs and narratives related to them in their intrinsic perspective, as well as indicate their outer references.

Beliefs and narratives on miracles and other forms of intervention of the supernatural into the terrestrial realm can be analysed on the micro level, in respect of various foci, like relations with other contents of individual consciousness (or world), or communication within communities of meanings creating opportunities of intersubjective confirmation, upholding and protecting of these beliefs. Some patterns of miraculous narratives show references that can be analysed on the macro level, as located in such dimensions like culture and politics. It is especially in Poland, where Catholicism is one of the components of the national identity (Tazbir, 1987; Koseła, 2003) and where, therefore, some members of the society are peculiarly ready to “read signs” or defend the homeland against the archfiend.

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## **WIARA W NADPRZYRODZONE INTERWENCJE JAKO ELEMENT WSPÓŁCZESNEJ RELIGIJNOŚCI**

**STRESZCZENIE** Artykuł ma na celu ukazanie wiary w przejawy nadprzyrodzoności, tj. cuda, wizje, przepowiednie czy działania Szatana jako składowych nurtu stosunkowo wyraźnie zaznaczającego się we współczesnej religijności w Polsce, także w wymiarze instytucjonalnym. Występowanie tego zjawiska każe zrewidować wcześniejsze wiązanie „wrażliwości mirakularnej” jedynie z religijnością ludową. W badaniu zjawisk o tym charakterze szczególnie ważny jest rodzaj podejścia przyjęty przez badacza. Podejścia zawierające osąd i powstrzymujące się od natychmiastowej redukcji pozwalają zrozumieć całość wewnętrznych znaczeń, doświadczeń i narracji odnoszących się do omawianych zjawisk oraz wskazać ich zewnętrzne odniesienia. W artykule jako orientację teoretyczno-metodologiczną, która może wywiązać się z tego zadania, wskazuje się fenomenologię.

### **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE**

RELIGIJNOŚĆ,  
WIARA W PRZEJAWY  
NADPRZYRODZONOŚCI,  
CUDA, WIZJE MISTYCZNE,  
SZATAN, PODEJŚCIE  
FENOMENOLOGICZNE

