

DO RELIGION AND CULTURE ACTUALLY EXIST? REFLECTIONS ON JASNA GÓRA

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Focusing on displays of Catholic religion and Polish culture at Jasna Góra, this article argues that “religion” and “culture” as analytic categories lead to an oversimplification of the complex set of phenomena visible in the monastery complex. The article then references the work of American philosopher Donald Davidson to argue that any ethnographic study necessarily requires “radical interpretation”.

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Skupiając się na przejawach religii katolickiej i kultury polskiej na Jasnej Górze, w artykule tym dowodzę, że “religia” i “kultura” jako kategorie analityczne prowadzą do nadmiernego uproszczenia złożonego zestawu zjawisk widocznych na terenie kompleksu klasztornego. W artykule odwołuję się też do prac amerykańskiego filozofa Donalda Davidsona, aby udowodnić, że każde badania etnograficzne wymagają bezwzględnie “radykalnej interpretacji”.

Key words: Jasna Góra, religion, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Otto, culture, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Donald Davidson, radical interpretation, Agnieszka Pasięka, Tomoko Masuzawa.

INTRODUCTION

Walking to Jasna Góra as an outsider – a first time visitor in fact – I was struck by how completely it conformed to my expectations of it as a monument to Polish religion and culture. There is the crest of St. John Paul II over the gate; flags commemorate the Warsaw uprising; there are the stunning Golgotha paintings by Jerzy Duda-Gracz, and the memorial that connects the 1940 massacre of Polish officers to the plane crash that killed Polish president Lech Kaczyński. And, of course, there is the image of the Black Madonna, Our Lady of Jasna Góra, presiding over it all from its baroque shrine. At Jasna Góra, I pilgrims walking on their knees; heard them sing; I rubbed shoulders with bishops and other dignitaries who were preparing for an all-night vigil in front of the icon. From an ethnographic perspective, nothing could appear more seamless: here were Polish religion and culture *in situ*, presented in a combination of celebratory and mournful monumentalism that embodied Poland’s complex history and equally

complex longings. All that remained was decoding symbols and ritual acts – something that even an undergraduate student could do.

But perhaps things weren't so simple, as I reflected afterwards. After all, I do not know Polish: I had to rely upon my research assistants and interpreters, Adrianna Bier-nacka and Przemysław Gnyszka, to make any kind of comprehensible bridge between me and the pilgrims – and even so I waded into those waters rather hesitantly since I was overwhelmed with the sheer material bulk of the shrine and surrounding monastery. But, as I thought to myself on the train ride from Częstochowa to back to Warsaw, perhaps the conceptual categories I was working with prevented me from noticing crucial aspects of the devotionism – and the politics – that were expressed before my eyes. Most specifically, my mind returned to debates I participated in as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, in which I argued with my fellow students as to whether religion and culture were adequate categories for ethnographic research and writing.

Using my experience at Jasna Góra as a general frame, I would like to initiate – or continue – a conversation about our own suppositions and understandings as ethnographers when we seek to understand religious and cultural phenomena. Of course, Jasna Góra, in particular, and Polish religiosity, in general, have been the subject of sophisticated scholarly study, and I am particularly indebted to the work of Anna Niedźwiedz (2010) in this regard. I am well aware that I approach any discussion of Jasna Góra as a scholarly neophyte and so my goal is not to critique, much less supplant, the work of Polish scholars. Instead, I would like to begin in more general terms by talking about “religion,” specifically the origin of the term and the debate over its applicability. I will highlight the work of Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) who maintains that the discourse surrounding religious pluralism in particular serves covertly to maintain Western dominance and intellectual primacy. I will then turn to the concept of culture and focus on the work of Adam Kuper (1999), who argues that the term “culture” carries with it various prejudicial notions that stand in contradistinction to the supposedly sensitive, irenic, and open aspects of “appreciating” different cultural forms and manifestations. To conclude, I will offer some general observations, which will not be directed toward reaching a conclusion about what position on religion and culture is “correct” in the conventional sense. Instead, I will suggest that even a non-Polish speaking outsider like me would be able – with help – to understand a place like Jasna Góra, which seems so self-evidently Polish, both religiously and culturally.

RELIGION

One of the most heated areas in the academic study of religion is how precisely religion should be defined. Classical – and some might say conventional – definitions of religion usually are derivatives from the work of Rudolf Otto ([1917] 1923) or Paul

Tillich (1957). Otto, in his *Das Heilige*, speaks of the experience of the “holy” or “the numinous” (5–8) as being the irreducible aspect of religion. He unpacks this general observation by speaking of the numinous as the “mysterium tremendum et fascinans” (Otto 1923, 12–41) Paul Tillich, like Otto a Protestant theologian, presented a simpler view of religion as “ultimate concern” (Tillich 1957, 1; see also Brown 1965). This definition opened up conventional understandings of religion by linking them to other forms of human agency and inspiration in a period when religious denominations were losing their preeminence in Western culture.

Yet each approach has its difficulties. As far as Otto’s views are concerned, the difficulties arise because most fundamental definitions are meant to exclude not include. That is, a definition should focus attention on a specific, identifiable, phenomenon, rather than including a wide range of possible subjects for phenomenological study. So, the idea of the numinous is overly inclusive since it could potentially encompass anything from eating a good meal to the experience of a rock concert in addition to other more conventionally religious actions like worship or meditation. Moreover, by positing that religion’s irreducible core is experiential, Otto effectively empties cognitive or intellectual content out of religious phenomenon since doctrinal formulations – among other intellectual constructs – function only to schematize the experience of the numinous. Tillich’s definition of religion is similarly inclusive and, if applied in its broadest sense, would easily lead to movements like Nazism or Communism being considered religious. Of course, it could be argued that seeing Catholicism in practice at Jasna Góra elides these difficulties because we’re talking about a well-defined tradition that is commonly accepted as religious: after all, what else could Catholicism be if not a religion?

The Difficulties with “Religion”

I primarily teach courses on Comparative Religion, and during the very first class, I ask students to define religion. It’s at this point, that they all begin to take notes conscientiously because they expect the discussion to conclude with me providing “the correct definition” of religion. Students are inevitably disappointed that I do not end in that way – and maybe that’s the reason why their note taking becomes less careful as the class progresses. In that first session of the Comparative Religions class, usually a student, hesitantly but bravely, raises her or his hand and says: “religion is belief in God.” When I get this answer, I smile because it does reflect conventional wisdom about what religion is – at least in the Anglophone world, as far as I’ve observed. Obviously, that conventional definition of religion begs certain questions: for example, is belief a crucial category when it comes to thinking about human behavior? I know many Catholics – myself included, I must admit – who do many things either in the context of the mass or during a festival or procession, for which they don’t have an explanation. Is it appropriate to talk about “belief” in such contexts, when people can’t explain why they’re doing what they’re doing? Obviously too, the concept of God requires some

unpacking: is God a higher power? Is God a super or supra natural entity? What about religions, like Hinduism, that believe in multiple gods? What about classical Buddhism, which is certainly considered to be a “religion,” but does not believe in God at all?

A similar exercise that produces similar results can be performed for just about any definition of religion. And the reason for that is that “religion” as a concept is deeply embedded in Western, and Christian, ways of thinking and looking at the world. The term “religion” in English derives from the Latin word *religio* (Philologos 2007; Pals 2006). If one looks at how Roman intellectuals understood the origins of *religio* you have a variety of hypotheses: some thought that *religio* came from the word *religere*, which refers to reading and rereading a text; others attributed the origin of *religio* to the word *relegare*, which means to “bind.” In this sense, *religio* described “binding” or “obligatory” performances that were understood to be part of being a full-fledged Roman citizen. As the Christian tradition developed, Lactantius, writing in the 4th century C.E., spoke of *religio* “as that which binds us to God”, clearly echoing the connection with the verb *religare* (Philologos 2007). For his part, St. Augustine of Hippo related *religio* to the Latin word *re-eligare*, meaning “to choose again” – *religio* was something that brought with it new life, a new freedom “to choose again” in favor of God and against sin (Philologos 2007).

Where *religio* or what we would call “religion” becomes particularly important for scholars is during the historical period popularly called “The Reformation”, which saw Christianity split into competing factions, Protestant and Catholic. Protestants and Catholics argued, debated, and warred with each other over – in part – who had the true form or understanding of *religio* (Pals 2006, 3). What is clear even in this superficial, thumbnail etymological and historical sketch is that *religio* and “religion” are inextricably linked to the Christian intellectual and theological tradition. While there is obviously nothing wrong with that in and of itself, it does cause problems when applied to different contexts not shaped by the Christian tradition.

For the sake of example, I would like to refer to an Indian context shaped by Hinduism – it’s what I’m most familiar with having lived in India for four years and researched Christianity and Christian communities in India. During my time in India, I was often asked what *dharma* I belonged to. *Dharma*, within a Hindu context, means “duty” and to that extent recalls the meaning of “binding” associated with *religio*, which is one reason, perhaps, that *dharma* is often translated as “religion”. So, in response, I would usually say that I belong to Isai or Christian *dharma*. For their part, many of my Hindu friends and colleagues say they belong to “Hindu *dharma*”. But if you look at how *dharma* is understood and deployed in an Indian context, it’s clear that it doesn’t have a clear association with “belief” in “God,” but refers to a series of obligatory practices. And so, within Indian contexts, you have a *dharma* with regard to your job, a *dharma* with regard to your family responsibilities, and you have a *dharma* by virtue of your birth and your status. The problem with seeing *dharma* as “religion” is first and fore-

most that such a view overly circumscribes the term's use and blinds us to its contextual variation. If Hindus describe "Hinduism" as *dharma* it thus means something different than what most people in the Western world would conventionally call religion precisely because *dharma* as a concept is far less compartmentalized than religion, which is often understood to be its own separate sphere of behavior and practice that is distinguished from other things like status, class, professional obligation and the like.

Difficulties Compounded

In response to the obvious problems with conventional understandings of religion, many scholars have attempted to develop a definition of religion that is more nuanced and more applicable to contexts in which Christianity is not the chief intellectual or symbolic force. Of course, there is Emile Durkheim's classic definition of religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Durkheim 1954, 47); also quite well known is American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (2000, 90) windy and intricate definition of religion as

"a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

I personally am inclined to a more compact definition of religion as "a patterned set of verbal and non-verbal interactions with superhuman agents", which was suggested by historian of religion Hans Penner (Penner and Edward 1972). But in all these cases, it certainly could be argued, that something is missing from these formulations: while Durkheim, Geertz, or Penner's ways of looking at religion might have greater scholarly usefulness in non-Western contexts, one might also argue that the spirit and magic of religion is also missing in their intellectual constructions.

The difficulty brought about by using "religion" as a category is perhaps best exemplified by the category of World Religions that has produced much scholarship and shapes courses such as the ones I teach. For example Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), a literary theorist teaching at the University of Michigan, argues in her *Invention of World Religions* that basically the West has seen, or constructed, an image of itself in defining the world's religions into discrete traditions or communities. Thus we have Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and then everything else. Buddhism becomes seen as a "Protestant movement" within Hinduism, and ritualism is deprivileged to reflect an anti-Catholic bias while "belief" and "textuality," primarily associated with Protestantism, are valorized.

The difficulty with the World Religions program, I would argue, is not just about projecting Western categories onto "religions" that are defined as Eastern or Other. Instead, the difficulty also lies in understanding Abrahamic traditions as monolithic wholes. For example, when we look at the Catholic charismatic movement it is easy

enough to see it in a conventional Weberian sense as a reaction against, or subversion of, the hierocratic structures of the Catholicism. If one makes that argument against the background of the World Religion program that Masuzawa (2005) criticizes, charismatic Catholicism becomes a kind of inauthentic presence within Catholicism. But it is also possible to argue that charismatic religious carries within it, and extends, the sacramental or interactive dynamics in Catholicism to other areas of religious expression. As Antonio Gramsci (1994) argued within the context of early 20th century Italy, there are different forms of Catholicism that reflect the differing attitudes, experiences, and longings of differing social strata. Seeing religion, or religions as unified wholes occludes diversity within religious traditions not to mention the diverse expressions outside the Western world, which are similarly homogenized as “religious”.

Catholicism at Jasna Góra

Catholicism at Jasna Góra is rich and lush. At one of the entrance portals, there was a mosaic of St. Michael the archangel, with offerings and candles set before it. In the large baroque church, there is a monstrance displaying a consecrated Eucharistic host. There are side altars and shrines. The image of Our Lady of Czestochowa is in an elevated position and cannot be closely approached, except by priests or other dignitaries. Lay people, for the most part, are required to circumambulate the image on their knees. Of course, as in any Catholic shrines, petitions and thanksgiving for healings or favors received are important parts of the dynamic of the shrine – the material evidence of which, in the forms of rosaries and medallions, covers the walls of the surprisingly cramped, and always crowded space.

Certainly, at Jasna Góra much evidence could be adduced to confirm any number of definitions of religion. For his part, Rudolf Otto would clearly understand the whole Jasna Góra complex, not to mention the image of the Black Madonna, as related to the numinous given the strong evocation of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, particularly when gazing upon the image of the Black Madonna. Yet problems arise when we try to locate the source of this feeling, which Otto steadfastly maintains is non-rational, though not irrational. With regard to the Black Madonna, is it her crown, her eyes, the color of her skin, or the scars on her cheek – what is it that evokes the numinous? Presumably, Otto would say it’s all the features of the image – its composition in other words – combined with the weight of memory and custom. But I think Otto would reverse the relationship – that is, it’s not as though the image is evoking such experiences in a primarily subjective way. Instead, the image is like a prism that refracts the experience of the Holy. In making such an argument, Otto would necessarily be making a metaphysical claim since the numinous has an objective status in his view. Indeed, if we understand the numinous, the Holy, or the Sacred as objective entities then cross-cultural comparison would certainly be possible, though that effort would then be subject to the criticisms of scholars like Tomoko Masuzawa who view the World Religions paradigm with suspicion and disdain.

Paul Tillich's (1957) definition of religion as "ultimate concern" gives us even less purchase when considering how Catholicism is expressed, practiced, and articulated as a "religion". Even if we accept that Catholicism concerns Catholics "ultimately" there are a number of possible ways to understand this, from the abstract or seemingly distant concern like entering heaven to a more pragmatic desire for intercession in the midst of a specific difficulty. But perhaps the real issue with Tillich's definition is not that it is overly broad but that it is overly limited. It is undeniably tempting to see religion as the most important aspect of human life, but it is not as though all religious practitioners understand their commitments in the same way or attribute the same significance to them. Indeed, it might be interesting to look at the devotional dynamics Jasna Góra not as a Catholic expression of "ultimate concern" but as subordinated to other more worldly interests.

Dispensing with the category religion with regard to Catholicism in general or Jasna Góra in particular might seem to be unnecessary. But it would – at least theoretically – allow scholarship and ethnographic observation to understand how what goes on at Jasna Góra is serially related to other aspects of life. Here Ludwig Wittgenstein's understanding of religion as a "form of life" – a kind of rule-based behavior – might be useful or instructive (see Phillips 1993). Of course, Wittgenstein's position has its own difficulties. In his emphasize upon practice, he undervalues or fails to account for doctrinal development and other expressions (see Sherry 1972). Also, by focusing so rigorously on rule-based expression, and extending his understanding of language games to religion, he often fails to recognize that human behavior often circumvents rules. At Jasna Góra, there is clearly much evidence that people follow the rules of Catholic devotionalism, from standard forms of genuflection to the numerous circumscriptions surrounding reception of the Eucharist. But it would be interesting to probe how pilgrims to Jasna Góra use the "rules" as a kind of cloak for other forms of behavior that do not follow conventional Catholic precepts – although it would take a keen and penetrating ethnographic eye to see such maneuvers.

CULTURE

Religion and culture have always been analytically linked for anthropologists. Depending on the theory deployed, a "cultural system" is what defines religion or religion defines cultural system. In any case, it's a rather uncontroversial point that culture is the primary subject of anthropological study. But difficulties come when culture is understood as a bounded, self-existing whole – even at a place like Jasna Góra.

The Politics of "Culture"

In an interesting and suggestive discussion in a book simply entitled *Culture: The Anthropologists Account* (1999), South African scholar Adam Kuper surveys the

Anglo-American fascination with culture, from Talcott Parson to Clifford Geertz. Kuper argues, quite rightly in my view, that Anglo-American anthropology has privileged a kind of cultural determinism in which human behavior is decisively shaped by the symbols and meanings within a particular “cultural” context. Such formulations tend to subordinate the significance of other aspects of human social organization such as economics, agriculture, and political institutions – just to mention a few. But what is especially noxious and damaging, according to Kuper, is how culture is associated with race. That is to say, when it comes to defining the locus or essential aspects of culture, theorists and politicians both have tended to see race as the crucial marker – all the while celebrating diversity. As a white South African, Kuper has seen the result of this: apartheid.

Simply put, when culture and race are seen as synonymous, or inextricably linked, there are a number of unintended consequences that militate against the very openness that cultural theorists have encouraged. For example, in the wake of Donald Trump’s victory in the most recent US Presidential election, there has been a great deal of discussion about his supporters espousing various conceptions of “white culture” and “white supremacy.” While I certainly would not subscribe to, or accept any of those formulations, there is an inevitable and pernicious logic to the category of “white culture” if one accepts the connection between culture and race. For Kuper (1999), culture is not to be thought of as a separate or autonomous sphere. Instead, culture is produced, reproduced and challenged in multiple ways, from ritual to economics. And so, there is a significant and important space for the ethnographer who seeks the specific, the local, rather than the global.

Radical Interpretation

One of the most striking aspects of Jasna Góra was its positive celebration of Polish culture. I was there on Polish Independence Day, 11 November, which celebrates the founding of the Second Polish Republic. It was not surprising, therefore, to see numerous Polish flags and to hear both “Bogurodzica” and “Maryjo, Królowo Polski” being sung by pilgrims in front of the Black Madonna. To any outside observer, there was an evident fusion of Polish and Catholic identity. Mary, as the mother who suffers, understands and nurtures Poland, the nation that suffers. But it clearly was not an isolated occurrence that same day in Warsaw, over 60,000 people marched in a nationalist demonstration (see Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2017). As Kuper argues (1999), the anthropological cultural program has an unintended dark side that can reinforce or legitimate notions of exclusive ethnic or racial identities.

As cultural studies have progressed, there has been more focus on evolutionary models that seek to account for how people share certain beliefs and practices that constitute a “culture”. For example, French cultural theorist Dan Sperber (1996) has spoken of an epidemiology of culture that opens the way for a cognitive scientific

approach to understanding the spread of certain beliefs within and among discrete groups of people. While such approaches have an appeal, they also come perhaps too close to understanding culture as much like a language. Recent scholarship in religious studies (see Davis and Davidson 2007) has turned to the seminal work of American analytic philosopher Donald Davidson (2009), who argues strongly against notions of “conceptual schemes”. For Davidson, the idea of incommensurable conceptual schemes its itself nonsensical since all our interpretations – even those of supposedly “alien” cultural systems – are based upon a kind of radical epistemological charity. That is, we have to assume that those who inhabit different cultures or speak different languages refer essentially to the same world that we live in. Davidson argues that we are always in a position of “radical interpretation.” Hence, constructs like “meaning,” or even language itself, are provisional. We learn through mimicry, through triangulation between ourselves and other interlocutors. And, I would argue, if we look at culture in the same way, it becomes something less bounded and more porous. If everyone is in a position of radical interpretation, even in the same “cultural field,” it is also much easier to create solidarity over and across perceived differences.

While I have doubtless radically oversimplified Davidson’s view of “radical interpretation,” I do think it at least provides a ray of hope for someone like me – a non-Polish speaker who found himself forced to triangulate with his interpreters and interlocutors to even begin to approach the complex dynamics at Jasna Góra. Surely my efforts at interpretation and understanding were radically different in degree from the Polish-speaking pilgrims gathered on Polish Independence Day, but perhaps they were not different in kind. As the all-night vigil was beginning I found myself in the sacristy, just adjacent to the shrine. I saw the shrine door open and I entered – and found myself for several minutes alone, gazing at the icon. At that moment, I was not just an ethnographer but also a Catholic, and a pilgrim. As I quickly departed when the assembled bishops entered the shrine, I thought to myself whether my experience was different or similar to the other pilgrims who had come to the shrine that evening. I suppose someone influenced by the notion of Davidson’s radical interpretation would say that everyone’s experience at Jasna Góra is distinctive but in the process of dialogue, and discussion – triangulation if you will – a particular language or dialect would emerge that necessarily would emphasize underlying commonalities in order to be comprehensible at all.

CONCLUSION

The seemingly homogenous character of Polish Catholicism is on vibrant display at Jasna Góra. But focusing on that homogeneity – even if it is not seen as some kind of metaphysical essence – can blind outsiders like me to the diversity and discontinuities

in a devotionism that seems so monolithic. In a penetrating and insightful discussion of hierarchy and pluralism in Polish society, Agnieszka Pasięka (2015) draws attention to non-Catholics who seemingly lie on the margins of Polish society. What is particularly intriguing about Pasięka's study of the village of Rozstaje is how it recognizes contextually shifting configurations of power and affinity. While Pasięka does understand religion as the generative aspect of culture (Pasięka 2015, 4), her discussion nonetheless has a nuanced appreciation of how normativity is constructed in different ways and can have different resonances, often in spite of Polish Catholic dominance.

Recent studies in pilgrimage also interrogate conceptions of religion and culture as monolithic wholes. For example, in her survey of the Polish ethnological tradition from Władysław Reymont (1895/1988) onward, Anna Niedźwiedź (2015) charts the progressive reexamination of the phenomenological tradition and the decline of "folk or folk-type religiosity" and "peasant culture" as analytic concepts. In her own work on the dynamics surrounding Our Lady of Częstochowa, Niedźwiedź (2010) focuses on the "anthropology of experience", especially biography, and also cites studies by Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska (2013) and Inga Kuźma (2008) as examples of the new Polish ethnology that foregrounds performativity and the "inner worlds" of informants. For Niedźwiedź, it is the category of "lived religion" that is most promising precisely because it focuses on what people say and do, as opposed to rigidly applying abstract and essentialized categories to human experience.

As for myself, in thinking about religion and culture at Jasna Góra, I suppose it would be fair to say that religion and culture exist to the extent that people self-consciously construct them. As analytic categories, however, they perhaps lead to an oversimplification of the complex set of phenomena visible in the monastery complex. But for ethnographers, it is not only the pilgrims at the shrine who have interest and relevance; it is also those who do not find meaning in the practices there or are excluded by its discourse experiences are central to understanding whether and how the categories "religion" and "culture" are descriptively helpful in Poland – or anywhere else.

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