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THE PEASANTS' RELIGIOUSNESS

Side-notes to Tomasz Wiślicz's book: *Zarobić na duszne zbawienie. Religijność chłopów małopolskich od połowy XVI do końca XVIII wieku (To Earn Spiritual Salvation. The Religiousness of Peasants in Little Poland From the Mid-16th till the End of the 18th Centuries)*, Warszawa 2001, Instytut Historii PAN — Wydawnictwo Neriton, 241 pp., bibliography, English summary.

The recent few years have seen the publication of several works which took up various problems concerning the study of the culture and structure of peasant society in the Middle Ages and early modern times. What I mean are for example the works by Krzysztof Bracha¹, Michał Kopczyński², Anna Mańko-Matysiak³, or Tomasz Wiślicz⁴.

Tomasz Wiślicz's work deserves special attention. His book is not a scholarly debut of its author, who is attached to the

¹ K. Bracha, *Teolog, diabeł i zabobony. Świadectwo traktatu Mikołaja Magni z Jawora De superstitionibus (1405 r.) (Theologian, Devil and Superstition. The Testimony of the Treatise De superstitionibus by Mikołaj Magni of Jawor, 1405)*, Warszawa 1999.

² M. Kopczyński, *Studia nad rodziną chłopską w Koronie. Rozprawa analityczna z dziedziny demografii historycznej rodziny chłopskiej w Polsce w XVII-XVIII w. (Studies of the Peasant Family in the Polish Crown. An Analytical Study on the Historical Demography of the Peasant Family in 17th-18th Centuries Poland)*, Warszawa 1998; idem, *Młodość i młodość na Kujawach w XVIII wieku (Youth and Young People in Kujawy in the 18th Century)*, "Przegląd Historyczny" 86, 1995, 2-4, pp. 329-350.

³ See E. Kizik, rev. of Anna Mańko-Matysiak, *Das Teufelsmotiv in der schlesischen Wunderzeichenliteratur der frühen Neuzeit*, Marburg (N. G. Elwert Verlag), 1999, p. 207, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 2001, 4, pp. 137-140.

⁴ T. Wiślicz, *Zarobić na duszne zbawienie. Religijność chłopów małopolskich od połowy XVI do końca XVIII wieku (To Earn Spiritual Salvation. The Religiousness of Peasants in Little Poland from the Middle of the 16th till the End of the 18th Century)*, Warszawa 2001.

Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Our attention has for example been arrested by his articles on the places famous for miracles in Little Poland, on some peregrination of beggars at the end of the 17th c., or on the peasant confessions⁵. His earlier article on witchcraft trials before rural courts in early modern Poland, together with Małgorzata Piłaszek's⁶ publication (which is an outline of a broader research programme) has aroused some hope for a verification of the findings by Bogdan Baranowski about witchcraft in old Poland, made half a century ago⁷. However, the author decided to cope with a much more difficult issue which is still ambiguous for researchers, i.e. the religiousness of peasants in Little Poland in early modern times.

The issue of religiousness in early modern times is one of the subjects which by their very nature demand a common scholarly reflection from historians conducting classical research into written documents, as well as historians of art, literature, mentality, ethnologists or sociologists. We are now in possession of a considerable secondary literature which not only describes the material symptoms of devotion, such as for example votive offerings⁸, but also applies various methods to the analysis of the intensity of devotional practices or the depth of religious experience⁹. The general review of bibliography was provided by Peter

⁵ T. Wiślicz, *Miejsca cudowne w Małopolsce w XVI–XVIII w. (Miraculous Places in Little Poland in the 16th–18th Centuries)*, "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej" 47, 1999, 3–4, pp. 335–348; *Peregrynacja dziadowska Stanisława Podleskiego i Błażeja Dziury Kościelskiego z 1698 roku (The Beggars' Peregrination of Stanisław Podleski and Błażej Dziura Kościelski of 1698)*, "Studia Historyczne" 44, 2001, pp. 141–151; *Chłop u spowiedzi w Rzeczypospolitej (druga połowa XVI–XVIII w.) (The Peasants' Confessions in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Middle of the 16th – the 18th Centuries)*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 2001, p. 4.

⁶ T. Wiślicz, *Czary przed sądami wiejskimi w Polsce XVI–XVIII w. (Witchcraft Trials in Rural Lawcourts in 16th–18th Centuries Poland)*, "Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne" 49, 1997, 1–2, pp. 47–63; M. Piłaszek, *Witch-Hunts in Poland, 16th–18th Centuries*, "Acta Poloniae Historica" 86, 2002, pp. 103–132.

⁷ B. Baranowski, *Procesy czarownic w Polsce w XVII i XVIII wieku (Witchcraft Trials in 17th and 18th Centuries Poland)*, Łódź 1952.

⁸ J. Ołędzki, *Wota srebrne (Silver Votive Offerings)*, "Polska Sztuka Ludowa" 21, 1967, pp. 67–92; *idem*, *Wota woskowe i srebrne w wiejskiej obrzędowości religijnej (The Wax and Silver Votive Offerings in Rural Religious Rites)*, "Roczniki Socjologii Wsi" 8, 1968, pp. 171–188. R. Kriss, *Die Volkskunde der altbayerischen Gnadenstätten*, 3 Bde, München 1953–1956.

⁹ Cf. *Wallfahrt kennt keine Grenzen*, L. Kriss–Rettenbeck (Hg.), München, Zürich 1984. *Idem*, *Bilder und Zeichen religiösen Volksglaubens*, München 1963; see *Frömmigkeit. Formen, Geschichte, Verhalten, Zeugnisse*, Lenz Kriss–Rettenbeck

Dinzelbacher¹⁰ more than ten years ago, so I will only recall that the issue of religiousness is dealt with from the historical point of view by seasoned specialists in the discipline defined as historical anthropology, such as Richard van Dülmen¹¹, while among Polish researchers it is worth pointing out the works by Andrzej Karpiński¹², Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa¹³ and Aleksandra Witkowska¹⁴.

Due to the presence of religious threads almost in all the forms of social activity, the basis of research can be extended *ad infinitum*, by invoking successive sources which speak not only of the organization of religious life and the contact with *sacrum* (for example church-going, vocations for the ministry, prayers, votive offerings, church foundations, paraliturgy, magic), but also of the vocabulary or behaviour testifying to morals, such as the expression of the sense of shame. Religiousness is reflected in ruthless postures (the ridiculing, oppressing or killing of the heretics, resulting from the conviction of the exceptionality of somebody's faith), as well as the irenic behaviour towards those who "err". The studies of religiousness can embrace witchcraft trials, the development of hospital and mendicant foundations, the number of illegitimate children or vocations for the ministry, the disciplining of believers, etc.

zum 70. Geburtstag. Forschungshefte hg. von Bayerische Nationalmuseum, München, H. 13, München 1993.

¹⁰ P. Dinzelbacher, *Zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Volksreligion. Einführung und Bibliographie*, in: *Volksreligion im hohen und späten Mittelalter*, Paderborn-München-Wien-Zürich 1990, pp. 9-27.

¹¹ R. von Dülmen, *Religion und Gesellschaft. Beiträge einer Religionsgeschichte der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt/Main 1989, idem, *Volksfrömmigkeit und konfessionelles Christentum im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert*, in: W. Schieder, *Volksfrömmigkeit in der modernen Sozialgeschichte* (GG Sonderheft 11), 1986, pp. 14-30.

¹² A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście polskim w drugiej połowie XVI i w XVII wieku* (*Woman in a Polish Town in the Second Half of the 16th and the 17th Centuries*), Warszawa 1995, especially pp. 208-285; idem, *Zapisy "pobożne" i postawy religijne mieszczanek polskich w świetle testamentów z drugiej połowy XVI i XVII w.* (*The "Devout" Legacies and Religious Postures of Polish Townswomen in the Light of Testaments of the Second Half of the 16th and the 17th Centuries*), in: *Tryumfy i porażki*, ed. M. Bogucka, Warszawa 1989, pp. 203-233.

¹³ A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Pieśni czasu śmierci. Studium z historii duchowości XVI-XVIII wieku* (*Death-time Chants. A Study in the History of 16th-18th Century Spirituality*), Lublin 1992.

¹⁴ A. Witkowska, *Kult Jasnogórski w formach pątniczych do połowy XVII wieku* (*The Cult of Our Lady of Jasna Góra in Pilgrimage Forms until the Middle of the 17th Century*), "Studia Claromontana" 5, 1984, pp. 148-222; eadem, *Kulty pątnicze piętnastowiecznego Krakowa* (*Pilgrimage Cults of 15th Century Cracow*), Lublin 1984.

It can be seen that religiousness is an area of research whose boundaries are difficult to delineate precisely, while the very act of religious experience cannot be easily sized up by any measure. Especially in the case of the largely illiterate community, such as that of peasants studied by Tomasz Wiślicz. There can be no doubt that the results depend primarily on the scholarly attitude of historians and the method they use for the adequate assessment of the documentation they manage to collect.

Fortunately, the author did not fail to clearly present the scope of his interests, at the same time calling into question, in concert with Stanisław Litak, the pertinence of talking about "folk culture"; he replaced this term with "religiousness of lower social strata" (*Introduction*, p. 10). He accepted the working principle that the notion of "religiousness defines the type of man's attitude to religion and the way he experiences it intellectually and spiritually; it also encompasses directly the consequences of this attitude for the social, cultural and personal life of individuals and social groups" (p. 11).

The basis for the study of religiousness among the peasants in Little Poland (the region in question is the Cracow diocese and the Western decanates of the Przemyśl diocese) in the period under analysis (roughly speaking from the middle of the 16th till the end of the 18th century) consisted primarily of legal sources, i.e. rural court records as well as the records of church visitations produced by the ecclesiastical administration. These were both published materials long used in secondary literature, and abundant archival materials (see pp. 213-236). The richest manuscript materials were used as a result of research carried out in the State Archives of Cracow, the State Central Historical Archives of Ukraine in Lviv, the Jagiellonian Library, the Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Czartoryski Library in Cracow, as well as the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw. Additionally, the author sought evidence from public collections in Kielce, Lublin, Poznań, Przemyśl, Rzeszów, Toruń, as well as private collections (the copies made by Józef Półciwiartek in Rzeszów). Other big complexes of sources, e.g. those of the Archives of the Metropolitan Curia in Cracow and Przemyśl, were analysed by the author on the basis of the microfilms held in library collections. This material basis fully substantiates the general conclusions of his research and his attempt to construct

a model of the situation of a rural community (see *Introduction*, p. 16).

Although the author carries his analysis from the end of the 16th century till the beginning of the 19th century, he is very cautious in his use of the observations published by folklorists in the second half of the 19th century (*Introduction*, p. 17). The fact that he omits this extensive source material may arouse controversy with other scholars, since the temptation to use the suggestive records of folklorists is very strong. Moreover, we cannot possibly overestimate the role of the Cracow milieu in the development of Polish folklorist studies¹⁵. On the other hand a historian must show a lot of reserve in considering the usefulness of these sources for applying a retrogressive method.

The village emerging from this ethnographic story is peculiar — almost without a lord and parish priest, the manor and church, and at the same time it is culturally familiar, homogeneous and as if full of survivals from paganism. The theory of folklorists and many historians that by depriving the peasants of some modern attributes, removing the crucifix and the chromograph of Our Lady from the wall, we shall get a person with medieval, if not ancient pagan mentality, must be dismissed as part of outdated historical science.

I think that Tomasz Wiślicz was right in omitting the ethnographic materials, since the illusory obviousness and apparent persistence of peasant behaviour contained in the statements of ethnographic sources frequently leads the interpreter of these facts astray¹⁵.

Apart from the written sources the author has not forgotten the material traces of peasant religiousness and in concert with the secondary literature he refers to the votive relics. It seems that in face of the lack of the Polish counterpart of the German synthesis of *ex voto* relics¹⁶ it would be worth while using the already published Catalogue of Relics in Poland¹⁷. To learn the

¹⁵ Cf. E. Jaworska, *Działalność folklorystyczna Komisji Antropologicznej Akademii Umiejętności w Krakowie* (*The Folklorist Studies of the Anthropological Commission of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cracow*), in: *Dzieje folklorystyki polskiej 1864–1918*, ed. H. Kapeluś, J. Krzyżanowski, Warszawa 1982, pp. 140–226; H. Kapeluś, "Wista" (1887–1905) (*"The Vistula"*, 1887–1905), in: *ibid.*, pp. 264–337.

¹⁶ See the beautifully illustrated book by L. Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Ex Voto*, Zürich-Freiburg 1972.

development of the reflection of the cult of Our Lady of Częstochowa in folk art, it would be interesting to reach for the work of Anna Kunczyńska-Iracka on this subject¹⁸. Naturally, it should first be established indisputably what we understand by the term of folk art.

When we compare the collections of votive paintings of Wambierzyce (Albendorf) with the capital collection of Piotrawin¹⁹, it seems obvious that the method of comparison, for example with the neighbouring Silesia²⁰, is essential for the studies of folk religiousness. This is, however, no objection to the author of the work under review, but rather a proposal to create an interdisciplinary project of research. I will return to this matter in the conclusion of my remarks.

The composition of Tomasz Wiślicz's book is very clear. The author presents the results of his research in five thematic chapters. The first is a historical introduction and is devoted to the factors that shaped early-modern peasant religiousness, such as the heritage of medieval times and the institutional and legal factors that bore upon the history of the 16th c. (the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Little Poland).

In the next chapters Wiślicz analyses various dimensions of religiousness: the social — i.e. the mutual relations between the community, the village, the manor and the church (chapt. II); the economic — i.e. the costs of participation — compulsory and

¹⁷ The majority of votive relics were of gentry origin, however those representing a cow, or a horse should be attributed to peasant founders, see *Leżajsk, Sokółów Małopolski i okolice (Leżajsk, Sokółów Małopolski and Their Vicinity)*, "Katalog Zabytków Sztuki w Polsce. Seria Nowa", vol. III, fasc. 4, text, comp. E. Śnieżyńska-Stolot, F. Stolot, Warszawa 1989, p. 75.

¹⁸ A. Kunczyńska-Iracka, *Malarstwo ludowe kręgu częstochowskiego (Folk Paintings of the Częstochowa Region)*, Wrocław 1978. See J. Grabowski, *Ludowe obrazy drzeworytnicze (Folk Woodcuts)*, Warszawa 1970.

¹⁹ R. Brykowski, *Obrazki wotywne z Piotrawina (Votive Pictures of Piotrawin)*, in: *Granice sztuki*, pp. 175–190. See also the collection of votive pictures of Leżajsk: *Leżajsk, Sokółów Małopolski i okolice*, "Katalog Zabytków Sztuki w Polsce. Seria Nowa", vol. III, fasc. 4, illustrations, comp. E. Śnieżyńska-Stolot, F. Stolot, Warszawa 1989, ill. 205–210, 261.

²⁰ J. M. Baumgarten, *Die Gegenreformation in Schlesien und die Kunst der Jesuiten. Das Transitorische und das Performative als Grundlegung für die Disziplinierung der Gläubigen*, "Jahrbuch für die schlesische Kirchengeschichte" 76/77, 1997/1998, pp. 127–163; U. M. Govil, *Landbevölkerung und Gegereformation in den schlesischen Fürstenthümern Neisse, Breslau und Burg*, "Jahrbuch für die schlesische Kirchengeschichte" 76/77, 1997/1998, pp. 63–97; cf. B. Hubensteiner, *Vom Geist des Barock. Kultur und Frömmigkeit im alten Bayern*, München 1967.

voluntary — in the community of believers (chapt. III); then the matter of religiousness versus other, extra-denominational postures that shaped the peasant model of moral behaviour (chapt. IV); and finally the questions of religiousness versus superstition (paraliturgy, magic, witchcraft).

The author, who in the course of his analysis quotes extensively examples taken from his sources, proves definitely that the peasants under his examination were a thoroughly Christian collectivity. This is a very important statement. The influence of elements connected with the Church is visible in all aspects of their everyday life, as well as in their existential and eschatological desires. The world of their ideas — let us call them primeval, pagan — had been Christianized to such an extent that it is impossible to treat them as a relic of earlier, pre-Christian cults. One rather comes to think that under the influence of the practices of everyday life, the mutual overlapping of various experiences, the liturgical rites underwent such a simplification and vulgar modification that it is hard to find in them a Christian core. Yet these peasants do not represent a pre-Christian religious formation. The very advanced ritualization of religious behaviour (an enormous, almost eschatological weight was attached to the faithful copying of some gestures), combined with a very weak knowledge of the actual basis of faith, cannot be treated as a proof undermining the depth of their spiritual experience.

The processes of refeudalization, which linked the peasants closely to their landlords' economy, were additional factors that strengthened the influence of gentry models on folk religiousness. This is especially visible in the popularization of the modern forms of piety, among others the anti-Protestant cult of the Virgin Mary, the devotion of pilgrims, the organization of populous ceremonies (for example Confirmation, mass Calvary processions, see pp. 38, 40 ff.), and as far as organization is concerned, in the creation of brotherhoods connected to churches and other forms of participation in public religious life. Participation in the liturgy was connected with a strict observance of social hierarchy.

Of great interest are the author's deliberations on the influence of Church teachings on illegitimate sexual contacts.

Tomasz Wiślicz observes that from the middle of the 18th c. there are more and more symptoms of the growing rigorousness

concerning sexual behaviour (p. 135 ff). This means that after several decades the Church scored a success also in this field; this success, however, was rendered ineffectual in the period of conflicts between manor, church and village (during enfranchisement) and the social decomposition of the period of industrialization.

It is hard to compare Tomasz Wiślicz's study with an analogous work concerning a different Polish province. Such a work does not exist. Endeavours should certainly be made to create larger syntheses that would juxtapose the dimensions of peasant religiousness in the pre-partition (or perhaps pre-enfranchisement) period in various regions of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its close neighbours: in Royal Prussia, in the Catholic communities of Kashuby, Marienburg Żuławy and Protestant rural territories of Gdańsk and Elbląg (which is possible, since there exist large collections at the Diocesan Archives of Pelplin and the State Archives of Gdańsk); with the religiousness in Warmia (magnificent churches — objects of pilgrimages in Stoczek [Springborn] and Krosno [Krossen]), since there are collections of the Diocesan Archives in Olsztyn; as well as in Ducal Prussia (let me mention the recent edition of the visitations of the Sambian Bishopric in 1569²¹), or in Courland (we may invoke the visitation of the Piltyn diocese in 1761²², published by Stanisław Litak). Nor should we forget the Uniate, Orthodox communities, or the completely forgotten religiousness in the communities of Polish rural Jews. This task, however, would surpass the powers of one researcher.

²¹ *Wizytacja biskupstwa sambijskiego z 1569 roku (Visitatio Episcopatus Sambien-sis 1569)*, ed. J. Wijaczka, Toruń 2001.

²² *Akta wizytacji generalnej diecezji inflanckiej i kurlandzkiej czyli piltyńskiej z 1761 roku (Acta visitationis generalis dioecesis Livoniae et Curlandiae seu Piltensis Anno 1761 peractae)*, ed. S. Litak, Toruń 1998; see idem, *Die kirchlichen Visitationsberichte in Polen vom Ende des 16. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, in: *Kirche und Visitation. Beiträge zur Erforschung des frühneuzeitlichen Visitationswesens in Europa*, hg. von E. W. Zeeden, P. T. Lang, Stuttgart 1984, pp. 119–130; P. T. Lang, *Reform im Wandel. Die katholischen Visitationsinterrogatorien des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, *ibid.*, pp. 131–190; R. Pohl, *Religiöse Lebensformen im Herzogtum Jülich. Zur Interpretationen landesherrlicher "Visitationsberichte" 1530–1560*, Jülich 1989. See materials of the conference devoted to the question of source editions: *Stan i potrzeby edycji źródłowych dla historii Pomorza i innych krajów południowej strefy bałtyckiej (The State and Needs for the Edition of the Sources for the History of Pomerania and Other Countries of the Southern Baltic Region)*, ed. M. Biskup, Toruń 1995.

In order to create such a synthesis, these questions should be discussed by a larger group of scholars focussed round an international, interdisciplinary project of research²³. A review of Tomasz Wiślicz's book, a work which is an important stage in research into the religiousness of the inhabitants of modern Poland, seems a good occasion for putting forward such a postulate.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

²³ For example the Leipzig Learned Centre (Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Ostmitteleuropas) is currently carrying out the programme of research entitled: *Konfessionalisierung in Ostmitteleuropa 1550–1700: Identitätsbildung und kulturelle Modernisierung in multikonfessionellen Regionen*. The project is headed by Prof. Winfried Eberhard, and some titles of projects are very interesting: Dr. Jörg Deventer, *Adelskonfessionalisierung in protestantischen und katholischen Herrschaften Großpolens und Schlesiens im 17. Jahrhundert*; Dr. Stefan Samerski, *Intensivierung und Funktionalisierung katholischer Frömmigkeitsformen in Mähren und Kleinpolen; Die Bischofsherrschaften und Städte Olmütz und Krakau im Vegleich (1570–1640)*.