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THE CHURCH AND FOLK CULTURE IN LATE MEDIEVAL POLAND

An extensive questionnaire made for the use of visiting bishops and drawn up in the second half of the fourteenth century in one of the Polish dioceses contained a question directed to clergymen asking whether in their parishes they had come across people who invoked demons, believed in gods other than the only Creator of all things, and worshipped them, trees, birds or other creatures. The inspecting bishop was to find out whether there were any women practicing spells and soothsayers (*incantatrices*) who dug up roots of herbs and prepared amulets to be hung around necks, told the future from melted wax, lead, fire, water and the flight of birds, or who read hands¹.

We do not know what answers were given by the representatives of the parish clergy, since no records of the inspection have survived². It is difficult, therefore, to form a clearcut opinion about the connection between the contents of those queries and beliefs, practices and attitudes of the inhabitants of the inspected lands from a period close to the origin of the text. It is also not obvious what the author of the questionnaire meant by the cult of other gods, and whether, as might be expected, he had in mind manifestations of surviving pre-Christian polytheism. Let us note that the quoted source contains an archaic assortment of terms and ideas recorded in early patristic literature, and manuals intended for confessors³. The questionnaire applied ideas belonging to a former or even an alien reality (although we encounter certain native references) and was to fulfill the task of an instrument for controlling the beliefs and practices of a living congregation.

¹ See: S. Librowski, *Wizytacje diecezji włocławskiej (Inspections of the Włocławek Diocese)*, "Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne", VII, 1964, p. 170.

² Let us note at this point that an extensive Bohemian inspection protocol from the second half of the fourteenth century contains surprisingly few remarks referring to the mentioned type of practices: *Protocollum visitationis archidiaconatus Pragensis annis 1379–1382 per Paulum de Janowicz archidiaconum Pragensem factae*, 1st ed., I. Hlaváček and Z. Hledíková, Prague 1973, p. 71, 301. It must be taken into consideration, however, that the Bohemian inspection intended primarily to control the fulfillment of the duties by the parish clergy, as well as their attitudes and conduct and therefore, was less interested in the lay community.

³ Texts intended for confessors from the Early and High Middle Ages as a source for the history of folk culture were utilized in highly inspiring fashion by A. J. Guriewicz, *Problemy srednie-vekovoy narodnoy kultury*, Moskva 1981, chapter III.

This was not, evidently, the first trace of a confrontation of the Polish Church with popular magic and beliefs which formed part of traditional folk culture. It confirmed, although we do not know how authentically—the late stage of such contacts, which existed from the very beginnings of Christianity in Poland, and manifested themselves in age-long symbiosis of two systems, “more or less antagonistic or harmonious”⁴.

It is only at the close of the fourteenth century that the picture of the confrontation between the Church in Poland and the world of local folk culture becomes more distinct thanks, i.a. to the development of the activity pursued by preachers. Two sources which are fundamental for our subject — synodal statutes and texts of sermons addressed to the clergy and laymen — highlight the new, increased efforts on the part of the Church which wished to reach society more effectively. Already earlier, more or less from the middle of the century, attempts at intensifying instruction for believers could be observed at parish level, although only the fifteenth century ensured the necessary conditions: the rebirth of the Cracow Academy gradually guaranteed a steady inflow of clergymen properly educated and ready to assume their tasks, as well as teaching aids necessary for mass-scale education. This programme, alongside rudimentary catethesis, of which the bishops kept reminding the clergy, contained a strategy for influencing people’s attitudes and conduct in daily life. Recommendations for confessors laid emphasis on everyday sins, which were to be tackled by parish preachers who should take care that their words were understood by the simple folk⁵. The general Church programme contained efforts at correcting symptoms of a contamination of the faith and cult practised by the congregations, as well as attitudes considered erroneous and contrary to Christian teachings. The confrontation of the Church and local traditional culture took place on many levels, the most visible being the struggle with phenomena described by theologians as *superstitiones and errores*. These notions, known for centuries, were still useful although their contents sometimes underwent changes. They constituted well-tried, albeit not exclusive, keys for opening a world alien to clerical culture. In the closing centuries of the Middle Ages, this world was more keenly observed, also in Poland, than prior to the application of traditional optics. Thus the several, often incohesive, fragments of a whole vast domain which contemporary historians and ethnologist call folk culture, were analysed from the point of view of Christian faith and ethics. Traditional rituals, customs, gestures, rites and formulae as well as various human attitudes connected with them, which we encounter in sources

⁴ See: J. Kłoczowski, *Europa słowiańska w XIV–XV wieku (Slav Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century)*, Warszawa 1984, p. 192–193. The same author offered important remarks in: *Du Moyen Age aux Lumières*, in: *La religion populaire*, Actes du Colloque CNRS de Paris, 17–19 Octobre 1977, Paris 1980, p. 16 sqq.

⁵ See in particular: *Statuta Alberti Jastrzębiec, episcopi Cracoviensis (1423)*, in: *Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki (further: SPPP (Monuments of Ancient Polish Law)*, vol. IV, Kraków 1875, p. 79.

of Church origin, often appear as sinful in themselves or inciting to sin, dangerous for the souls of the believers and, therefore, forbidden, reprehensible or be corrected. The verdicts passed by bishops and synodal statutes seemed to contain elements of the life of the Church and the congregations that required change, mending or extermination. In the collection of synodal decisions by Andreas Lascarii, Bishop of Poznań (after 1420) which obliged the parish clergy to take up the duty of combatting non-approved beliefs and rites⁶, the term “You will forbid” is constantly repeated alongside the sporadic “You will stop” or “warn”. In accordance with the instructions of Church superiors, this motif of a ban was employed by the authors and compilers of various other texts dealing with superstitions, who sometimes tried to resolve doubts in learned discourses on the contamination of the cult and faith, and in didactic practice — sermons and confession. They would refer to motifs known to them and concealed in certain beliefs and practices, in order to pronounce condemnation or approval⁷.

The pattern according to which the attitude of the Church towards folk culture was expressed in bans, corrections or permissions is somewhat simplistic and reveals a leaning towards ready answers. The opinion that there were two types of attitudes towards this issue among the Polish theologians and clergymen of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries — “ascetic” and more tolerant⁸ — is certainly correct but does not open up any broader scientific perspectives. Finally, we should keep in mind the views of those scholars who warned against overly vivid divisions between the culture (and especially devotion) of Church milieus and folk culture⁹.

The reserve which the Church in medieval Poland showed towards local folk culture cannot be undermined. In the fifteenth century the more open attitude of the mendicant orders (the Franciscans Observants, known in Poland as Bernardines)¹⁰ meant not so much a change in the general approach as

⁶ *Statuta synodalia Andree, episcopi Posnaniensis*, in: *SPPP*, vol. V. part 1, Kraków 1877, p. XXV–XXVII, XXXII.

⁷ See i.a.: S. Bylina, *Licium–illicitum. Mikołaj z Jawora o pobożności masowej i zabobonach (Licium–illicitum. Nicolaus of Jawor on Mass Piety and Superstitions)* in *Kultura elitarna a kultura masowa w Polsce późnego średniowiecza (Elite and Mass Culture in Late Medieval Poland)*, ed. B. Geremek, Wrocław 1978, p. 137–153.

⁸ See: the important article by U. Łydowska–Sowina, *Ludowe obrzędy i zwyczaje świąteczne w świetle średniowiecznych kazani i statutów synodalnych (Folk Holiday Customs and Rites in the Light of Medieval Sermons and Synodal Statutes)*, “Etnografia Polska” XXIV, 1980, fol. 2, p. 159–172. Innovative material for the problem of attitudes of theologians folk culture and entertainment is to be found in M. Kowalczykówna, *Wróżby, czary i zabobony w średniowiecznych rękopisach Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej (Spells, Magic and Superstition in Medieval Manuscripts of the Jagiellonian Library)*, “Biuletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej”, XXIX, 1979, no 1/2, p. 5–6, and *Tańce i zabawy w świetle rękopisów średniowiecznych Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej (Dances and Games in the Light of Medieval Manuscripts of the Jagiellonian Library)*, *ibid.*, XXIV–XXV, 1985, no 1/2, p. 71–89.

⁹ See i.a.: J. Delumeau, *Leçon inaugurale faite le Jeudi 13 Février 1975*, Collège de France, Paris 1975, p. 16 sqq.; J.–C. Schmidt, “*Religion populaire*” et culture folklorique, “*Annales E.S.C.*”, XXXI, 1976, no 5, p. 941–953.

a breach, although limited, towards a bolder acceptance of the needs of folk imagination. The reservation or dislike, mentioned earlier and in varying degrees present within the entire Western Church, can be explained in the Polish case by the relative youth of our Christianity and, therefore, a livelier and more frequent and recurrent than in the West memory of the pagan origins of the country's inhabitants. This fact had evident and multiple consequences for contacts between two cultural levels in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Let us recall the inspiring reflection of Bronisław Geremek who explained the small number of preacher's fabulae of native origin by referring to the hostility of the Polish Church towards folklore which was treated as a foreign element¹¹, and thus one of doubtful usefulness for mass-scale teaching. Research into examples contained in collections of sermons destined for use in parishes seems to confirm this hypothesis¹². In addition, the introduction into edifying expositions of motifs linked with Christianized folk rituals was shunned in Poland. Local preachers, sensitive to the question of the proper use of blessed objects, did not follow the example of Konrad of Waldhausen, an Austrian predicant from the second half of the fourteenth century, who praised to his Prague listener the custom of husband and wife flogging each other with Easter palms, a procedure which was supposed to encourage to live abstemiously during the festive season¹³.

Polish late medieval sources contain evidence of the crumbling stereotype which had for centuries functioned in the Western Church, and which identified a considerable number of folk rites, practices and beliefs with surviving pagan customs. Notions such as *traditiones paganorum*, or *relictae idolatriae antiquae*¹⁴ were not entirely forgotten but lost their dominating rank and the role of a universal instrument in assessing folk culture. It was in the mid-thirteenth century that the Cistercian monk Rudolf of Rudy, the author of a confessor's *summa* rich in folklore¹⁵, examined the residue of pre-Christian cults and observed the criminal practices of his simple penitents, the German residents of Silesia. Worthy of attention is the sporadic presence of "pagan relics" in

¹⁰ J. Kłoczowski, *Bracia Mniejsi w Polsce średniowiecznej (The Minorites in Medieval Poland) in: Zakony franciszkańskie w Polsce (Franciscan Orders in Poland)*, ed. J. Kłoczowski, col. I, part 1, Lublin 1983, p. 90 sqq. J. Wiesiołowski, *Problemy społeczne klienteli bernardynów poznańskich na przełomie XV/XVI w. (Social Problems of the Clients of the Poznań Bernardines at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century)*, in: *ibid.*, p. 337 sqq.

¹¹ B. Geremek, *Exemplum i przekaz kultury (Exemplum and the Transmission of Culture)*, in: *Kultura elitarna*, p. 63 sqq.

¹² T. Szostek, *Exempla w kazaniach De tempore Jakuba z Paradyża i Mikołaja z Błonia (Exempla in Sermons De Tempore by Jacobus de Paradiso and Nicolaus de Błonie)*, Wrocław 1983 (manuscript).

¹³ *Staročeské zpracování Postily studentů svaté university pražské Konráda Walhauusera*, ed. F. Šimek, Praha 1947, p. 2.

¹⁴ They were used both by early medieval penitentiaries, see: A. J. Guriewicz, *Problemy*, chapter III, and by late medieval theologians who examined the issue of superstitions, see: S. Bylina, *Licium-illicitum*, p. 139 sqq.

¹⁵ E. Karwot, *Katalog magii Rudolfa. Źródło etnograficzne XIII w. (The Rudolf Catalogue of Magic. A Thirteenth Century Ethnographic Source)*, Wrocław 1955.

Polish thirteenth-century synodal statutes. The collection of regulations issued by Bishop Andrew, which are essential for the problem analysed here, does not contain any concepts dealing with this domain. Earlier synodal statutes of the Cracow diocese (1408) condemned as a pagan rite only the Whitsuntide *cantus paganici* in which the *ydola* were summoned and worshipped¹⁶. Possibly the superiors of Polish dioceses only rarely felt it necessary to remind people of the pagan origin of folk rituals and justified their bans and admonitions with different arguments. Synodal statutes, in their capacity as normative texts, contained a different type of exposition and rhetorics than those found in theological treatises and sermons. References to the pagan past of various customs and rites it was wished to eliminate were applied, first and foremost, in erudite texts and polemical rhetorics.

The alien, and often incomprehensible world of folk culture compelled to interpret phenomena to which a key could be found in the old tradition of polemics with the remnants of paganism but which were no longer of use in the Late Middle Ages. Theologians, who closely watched popular rites coincidental with Whitsun, were inclined to find the names of Slavonic gods *nomina ydolorum* summoned by the worshippers in invocations, couplets and refrains¹⁷. As they condemned those *invocationes ydolorum*, the authors of sermons failed to undertake a true battle against pagan cults. A preacher, whom Aleksander Brückner called at the close of the nineteenth century a “Polish Hussite” ascribed the worship of the god *Alado gardzyna yesse* to “bad Christians”¹⁸ without, however, discovering in Poland the presence of the followers of the old, pre-Christian religion. Thus words distorted by learned authors and probably totally incomprehensible were treated as heinous magic spells. In polemics they could be identified with the name of the devil while its assumed worshippers were threatened with eternal damnation in the company of a demon called *yassa lada*¹⁹. This was a well-tested operation conducted in Christianization. In teachings directed to simple believers and aimed at the purification of the Christianity practiced by them, it could have been employed as a measure more useful than charges of pagan cults.

Long before the inventive Jan Długosz, university theologians liked to vaunt their knowledge of ancient deities and cults, whose heritage and continu-

¹⁶ *Statuty diecezjalne krakowskie z roku 1408 (Cracow Diocesan Statutes from 1408)*, publ. B. Ulanowski in: “Archiwum Komisji Historycznej”, vol. V, Kraków 1889, p. 25. See also: U. Łydowska-Sowińska, *Ludowe obrzędy*, p. 161.

¹⁷ An appropriate fragment of a sermon by Łukasz of Wielki Koźmin is quoted by M. Kowalczykówna, *Wróżby, czary*, p. 10. See also: A. Brückner, *Kazania średniowieczne (Medieval Sermons)*, in: “Rozprawy PAU — Wyd. Filol.”, vol. XXIV, Kraków 1895, p. 326. Different variants of the term *ydola* are listed by H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek (w. VI–XII) (The Religion of Slavs and its Decline (Sixth–Twelfth Centuries))*, Warszawa 1989, p. 212 sqq.

¹⁸ A. Brückner, *Kazania*, p. 326; idem, *Z rękopisów petersburskich, I: Kazania husyty polskiego (From the Petersburg Manuscripts, I: Sermons of a Polish Hussite)*, “Prace Filologiczne”, IV, 1893, p. 572.

¹⁹ Idem, *Kazania średniowieczne*, p. 327.

ation they tried to discover in traditional folk rites. Early in the fifteenth century Stanisław of Skarbimierz (Stanislaus de Scarbimiria), a Cracow theologian and preacher, saw the decline of the cult of Venus and Proserpine in the nocturnal games, singing, clapping of hands and dances practiced by women. In accordance with the old and strongly enrooted Church conviction, he underlined the pagan nature of folk rites observed during Whitsuntide²⁰. In one of his synodal sermons he also remarked that the annual springtime ritual of carrying and drowning an effigy of death took place *secundum ritum paganorum*²¹. A few years later, the Bishop of Poznań condemned the same rite as a superstition *superstitiosam consuetudinem* without reference to its pre-Christian origin²². Although in various fifteenth century postils we find such terms as *ritus paganorum* or *mos paganorum* concerning e.g. the burning of fires for the souls of the dead who descend to Earth during the Holy Week²³, or Easter folk customs²⁴, in polemics with superstitions, errors and abuses committed by laymen the pagan motif is relatively slight. This feature is especially evident in the most extensive and significant from the point of view of the authority of its compiler (Stanisław of Skarbimierz) register of superstitions, contained in a sermon²⁵. The label of pagan origin or character is not particularly important and does not seem to settle the significance of a sin connected with some condemned practice or belief. The point seems to be that now the capacious idea of superstition no longer meant an unchanging phenomenon, a petrified heritage of the pre-Christian past. The Cracow theologian was convinced that he was witnessing a dynamic and vital process: errors and superstitions were continually multiplying and ever new manifestations came into existence²⁶. With such an approach to the issue, the utility of the motif of pagan relics in teachings addressed to uneducated listeners of parish sermons was diminishing. Nonetheless, the motif did not completely disappear, due to the strenght of written or oral tradition which was widespread in the range of theological culture. In Poland the burning of fires on the eve of St. John's feast day was considered a pagan custom as late as the sixteenth century²⁷; in the following century attempts were made in Brittany to introduce fires lit according to "Church ways", with the participation of priests and care taken to put them out, so as to prevent the continuation of the custom²⁸.

²⁰ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, publ. B. Chmielowska, part II, Warszawa 1979, p. 86; idem, *Sermones super "Gloria in Excelsis"*, publ. R. M. Zawadzki, Warszawa 1978, p. 104.

²¹ *Sermones super "Gloria"*, p. 104.

²² *Statuta synodalia Andreae*, p. XXVIII.

²³ See: E. Belcarzowa, *Głosy polskie w łacińskich kazaniach średniowiecznych (Polish Glossa in Medieval Latin Sermons)*, part I, Wrocław 1981, p. 57.

²⁴ A. Brückner, *Kazania średniowieczne*, p. 341; U. Lydkowska-Sowina, *Ludowe obrzędy*, p. 166.

²⁵ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 82-94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁷ *Testimony of Marcin of Urzędów (1562)* is cited by Aleksander Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian (Slav Mythology)*, Warszawa 1982, p. 206.

²⁸ J. Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*, Paris 1971.

The introduction of problems dealing with traditional beliefs, practices and rites into sermons, was very important regardless of the way in which they were judged. It indicated the establishment of a dialogue with those attitudes of the believers which seemed to stem from native roots. This was, of course, a dialogue in which the church could employ severe reprimands and censure the sins, but, at the same time, by means of the written and spoken word of the preachers, it would resort to simple arguments — doctrinal, ethical, reasonable and practical. Thus, the dialogue was a symptom of the new attitude on the part of the Church towards the broadest masses of the faithful, whom it ceased to treat as a passive community, and the subject of commands and prohibitions. The arguments used were accessible, easily understood and taken from Christian doctrine: how unfounded was it to wait for dead relative to inform about their fate in the other world, when it was well known that both the damned and the redeemed souls are denied contact with the living without special permission granted by God²⁹.

The confessors' questionnaires listed selected popular beliefs and practices and sins, and subjected them to appropriate commandments of the Decalogue³⁰ or the scheme of seven deadly sins. The authors of synodal statutes and sermons often linked the incriminating rite with a certain type of sin, or saw in it circumstances favourable to idolatry, blasphemy, an offence to the name of God, and a misdemeanour against chastity. Moreover, such sources often used arguments which referred to the need to prevent offences that threatened the welfare of the community. According to certain synodal statutes, carol singing by laymen at Christmas time resulted in manslaughter, theft and many other wrongdoings (*homicidia, furta et alia plura crimina*)³¹. Similar misdemeanours were supposed to accompany assemblies and games at the gate of the Holy Cross Benedictine monastery during Whitsuntide, which may have been inherited from the Slavonic feast known as *stado* and described by Długosz³². The practices connected with the Easter custom of buying eggs and pouring water on people (or rather pushing them into it) were not only considered sinful and offensive to God, but parishioners were also warned that such revels often ended in drowning³³.

The confrontation of learned and folk culture expressed itself in a depreciation of the latter which was regarded as a collection of unreasonable beliefs

²⁹ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 87.

³⁰ See: e.g. "*Interrogationes de decem preceptis*" of the *Poznań Bernardines*, cited and examined by J. Wiesiołowski in: *Problemy społeczne*, p. 350.

³¹ See i.a.: *Statuta synodalia Andree*, p. XXV.

³² A ban on holding fairs on Łysa Góra in the Holy Cross Mountains, contained in a document issued by Kazimierz Jagiellończyk in 1468 — *Codex diplomaticus Poloniae*, vol. III, publ. J. Bartoszewicz, Warszawa 1858, p. 444. See: J. Długosi *Annales seu cronicae*, publ. J. Dąbrowski, Liber I-II, Varsaviae 1964, p. 107; K. Potkański, *Wiadomości Długosza o polskiej mitologii*, I. Święto wiosenne "Stado" (*Długosz's Information about Polish Mythology*, I: *The "Stado" Spring Holiday*), in: *Pisma pośmiertne (Posthumous Writings)*, vol. II, Kraków 1924, p. 3–42.

³³ A fragment of one of the Sermons rewritten by Michał of Janowiec at the end of the fifteenth century, see: E. Balcerzowa, *Głosy polskie*, part I, p. 57.

and convictions. The preacher explained that man's prosperity and the welfare of his livestock did not depend on a heap of collected branches, that the safety of his sheep would not be assured by avoiding saying the word "wolf" on Christmas Eve but by watching his flock and locking it up, or that an attempt to cure an illness called *miara* (measure) by measuring the whole body or the head of the affected person was laughable since health would not be restored by the thread used in the treatment but by tested medicines³⁴. The learned theologian would ridicule the beliefs and customs he battled against: fools saved remnants of food for the souls of the deceased or the house spirits (the *uboże*) in the belief that they would eat it, while in reality it was devoured by household animals³⁵. Such arguments were a far cry from the motif of the relics of pagan beliefs or the condemnation of actions concealing dark diabolic forces.

Sermons dealing with superstitions show that attempts were made to become acquainted with the listeners who were carriers of traditional culture. One of the sermons prepared by Stanisław of Skarbimierz constitutes a collective predication *ad varios status*, addressed to social groups singled out in Church writings: simple folk, men, women (married and maidens), mothers and fathers, the old and the young. The conviction prevailed that although certain contaminations of faith and cult were typical for particular groups, their impact was general. Both the old and the young expected to read their future from the appearance of salt left overnight on Ash Wednesday; girls, youth and adult men treated headache and eye illnesses on St. John's night³⁶. The authors of the sermons sometimes preferred to categorize people according to their status (age, sex, etc.) than to generalize the phenomena tackled by them. The role of the *iuvenes*, especially in the case of their participation in traditional annual rites and customs, is distinctive³⁷. The young people took part in the light side of the rites — they danced, put on masks, went from house dressed in animal skins³⁸, doused themselves with water. They were also familiar, probably in the context of amusements, with traditional magic rites: on St. John night they slept in the fields and wore flower wreaths on their heads³⁹. This image of the youth, especially peasants, also mentions neglect of participation in Sunday worship. This sin was committed by both sexes but it was especially the girls who did not attend church throughout the year and on Whitsun rushed to sites where idols were worshiped (*solent venire ad colendo ydola*)⁴⁰. The resultant picture

³⁴ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 84, 88–89, 92–93.

³⁵ A. Brückner, *Kazania średniowieczne*, p. 345; H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian*, p. 227.

³⁶ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 86.

³⁷ For this subject special attention is due to: J.-C. Schmidt, "Jeunes" et danse des chevaux de bois. *Le folklore méridional dans la littérature des "exempla" (XIII^e–XIV^e s.)*, in: *La religion populaire en Languedoc du XIII^e à la moitié du XIV^e s.*, Toulouse 1976, p. 127–158 ("Cahiers de Fanjeaux", no 11).

³⁸ U. Łydowska-Sowina, *Ludowe obrzędy*, p. 169 sqq.; E. Belcarzowa, *Głosy polskie*, part I, p. 57.

³⁹ A. Brückner, *Kazania średniowieczne*, p. 327; U. Łydowska-Sowina, *Ludowe obrzędy*, p. 164.

defined, albeit not very sharply, the contrast between young people as participants of traditional culture and the older generation, closer to the Christian attitudes propounded by the Church.

The world of traditional culture, observed closely by the Church, assigned a special place to women. Rudolf of Rudy was well aware of the reason why so many beliefs and practices, recorded by him, were connected with women: Eve was the first to hand over the poison of idolatry to *stultis mulieribus*⁴¹. I refer here to the evidence of a thirteenth century Silesian German; also later sources mention remnants of paganism and the cult of the *ydola* in connection with the *mulier*. Folk rites coinciding with the Church holiday of the coming of the Holy Ghost seemed to be dominated by women. It was they who danced, clapped hands and sung in a pagan fashion; it was the *vetulae et mulieres et puellae* who summoned the heathen devil *ysaya lado yleli ya ya*⁴². Old women did not occupy a privileged position in those rites although it is known that during the festival they encouraged the young to perform sinful dances, songs and other condemned forms of rejoicing⁴³. The *vetulae* played a leading role in other manifestations of folk culture, whenever knowledge of traditional rites and formulas used at home and on the farm was paramount. They proclaimed *vanae vetularum benedictiones*, so often criticised by theologians, which were supposed to cure people and animals. The old women knew the power of brands on animals and amulets which protected children from nocturnal fears⁴⁴. The country *vetula* functioned most frequently in the domain of phenomena described as superstition by the Church authors. On the other hand, she was rarely identified with a witch (*incantatrix*), a professional in magic and spells, although came close to her due to knowledge of formulae necessary in the treatment of diseases. We find *incantatrices* in the questionnaires used during episcopal inspections and, above all, in protocols of witchcraft trials conducted by Church courts⁴⁵; they are mentioned more rarely by authors of studies battling against popular superstitions.

The world of traditional beliefs began to be linked more specifically with the rural community with which attempts were made to become better acquainted. Synodal statutes most often used impersonal formula, convinced that the parish clergy would have no difficulty in identifying the culprits. At times, they recommended the priests to warn the "people", "laymen" "men", "women" etc. These general criteria no longer satisfied an author of sermons who, while citing successive *superstitiones*, singled out categories of people engaged in agriculture. Stanisław of Skarbimierz addressed his teachings, therefore, to

⁴⁰ A. Brückner, *Kazania średniowieczne*, p. 326.

⁴¹ E. Karwot, *Katalog magii*, p. 20.

⁴² A. Brückner, *Kazania średniowieczne*, p. 327.

⁴³ M. Kowalczykówna, *Tańce i zabawy*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 87; *Sermones super "Gloria"*, p. 104. See also: M. Kowalczykówna, *Wróżby, czary*, p. 7 sqq.

⁴⁵ See: *Acta capitulorum nec non iudiciorum ecclesiasticorum selecta*, publ. B. Ulanowski, vol. II, no 1019, 1066, 1208, 1389; vol. II, part I, no 637 et al.

communities described as *agricolae, coloni et aratores agrorum, hortulani* and *venatores et piscatores*⁴⁶. Within the vast area of superstitions and errors, there opened up the possibility of observing, in a somewhat different fashion, the traditional rural culture, its beliefs, attitudes, images, customs and rites. The preachers' admonitions, addressed to peasants ("let the farmers listen", "let the tillers of the fields listen") were a sign of the aspirations harboured by the Church to a more effective and profound Christianization of the Polish villages, a trend which is confirmed in sources of another type. The purpose was not only to assure the universal participation of the villagers in Sunday Mass and to teach them basic prayers (a task which was to be remembered also by confessors)⁴⁷, but the dissemination of Christian devotion in daily life. Attention was drawn to the beliefs, convictions and undertakings which were to assure the fertility of fields, neutralize the threat of a bad harvest, protect the crops from misfortune, and guarantee health and fertility of livestock, all of which were of prime importance in peasant culture.

In sermons, the prohibitions and criticism included first and foremost those manifestations which we are accustomed to describe as Christianized magic: thus we find reprimands addressed to farmers who sprinkled fields with blessed ash, placed Easter palms into the soil in order to exterminate vermin and used them for curing farm animals together with herbs blessed during services said on the day of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin. Stanisław of Skarbimierz condemned branding cows with the sign of the Cross by using consecrated candles, and the erection of tall wooden crosses which were supposed to protect buildings or fields from lightning (as compared to the ringing of bells and lighting of fires during storms to thin the air)⁴⁸. He condemned the improper use of *res consecratae* and symbols of Christianity, as well as the process of ascribing to them powers which man could exploit for his own coveted aims. The criticism of the magic treatments of cult objects and signs, and the suspicious attitude towards the contents of folk customs and rites were accompanied by an understanding for the concerns of daily life. According to theologians, the circling of fields with a cross on Easter morning⁴⁹ in order to obtain a good harvest, would not be sinful if the source of this rite was devotion instead of "errors of faith". Let us add that the medieval Church for a long time tried to meet the ritual needs of agrarian communities i.a. by introducing spring processions through fields led by priests⁵⁰, the blessing of fields and, in the Late Middle Ages, by linking the festival of *Corpus Christi* with prayers for good weather and crops⁵¹. It did not, however, deprive the processions of their magic power.

⁴⁶ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 85, 88, 89.

⁴⁷ See i. a.: *Statuta Alberti Jastrzębiec*, p. 71–72.

⁴⁸ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 93.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁰ See i. a.: S. Piekarczyk, *Barbarzyńcy i chrześcijaństwo. Konfrontacje społecznych postaw i wzorców u Germanów (Barbarians and Christianity. Confrontations of Social Attitudes and Patterns among the Germans)*, Warszawa 1968, p. 328 sqq.

deeply enrooted in the consciousness and imagination of the faithful, who would pick herbs growing on the spot where the procession stopped, and break off twigs with which they had decorated altars on *Corpus Christi*⁵². At the close of the Middle Ages, the Church in Poland did not object to the lighting of a “new” spring fire at the walls of churches, a procedure which was supposed to stimulate vegetation and fertility⁵³.

Those who prepared patterns for sermons or taught themselves, knew that the various rites and practices cited and criticised by them functioned not only alongside those pursued within the framework of the Church cult, but also more distantly, through the underlying traditional mentality and imagination as well as through the “self-sufficiency” of folk ritual in which *res consecratae* were used, and the *sacrum* was addressed without the intermediary of priests. The inhabitant of a late medieval Polish village knew the ancient, often only superficially Christianized rites and formulae, with whose aid he tried to directly contact supernatural powers: the Christian God and His holy intermediaries, and probably that power which Francis Rapp, a French historian of religious life, described as *un sacré sans nom ni visage*⁵⁴.

It seems that the theologians’ efforts directed towards the uprooting of Christianized superstitions or cleansing certain practices of their magic content were sometimes coupled with a gentler, more understanding attitude, towards customs impervious to Christianization or outside that process. Although Stanisław of Skarbimierz was convinced that the practice of binding the horns of oxen with hop on the first day of ploughing was a superstition⁵⁵, he did not comment on it and included it among transgressions unworthy of closer attention. Popular divinations and the observance of signs of Nature, which were essential in the life of farming communities, were condemned but the severity of the Church was directed rather against specialists in this domain than against diviners within family circles. Also condemned as superstitious were traditional medical practices; nevertheless, they were treated in an ambivalent fashion and the criteria of specific estimations are hard to define. Cures for various diseases given folk names were scorned and ridiculed⁵⁶. Magic means of treating animals were also criticised but rather as manifestations of foolishness than as serious sins.

⁵¹ Z. Zalewski, *Święto Bożego Ciała w Polsce do wydania Rytuau Piotrkowskiego (Corpus Christi in Poland up to the Piotrków Ritual (1631))*, in: *Studia z dziejów liturgii w Polsce (Studies in History of Liturgy in Poland)*, ed. M. Rechowicz and W. Schenk, vol. I, Lublin 1973, p. 133.

⁵² H. Zaremska, *Procesja Bożego Ciała w Krakowie w XIV–XVI w. (Corpus Christi Processions in Cracow in the Fourteenth–Sixteenth Centuries)*, in: *Kultura elitarna*, p. 39.

⁵³ J. Tyszkiewicz, “Nowy ogień” na wiosnę (“New Fire” in the Spring) in: *Cultus et cognitio. Studia z dziejów średniowiecznej kultury (Cultus and Cognition Studies in the History of Medieval Culture)*, Warszawa 1976, p. 591–597.

⁵⁴ F. Rapp, *La vie religieuse des masses à la fin du Moyen Age*, in: *Materiały Kolokwium Międzynarodowej Komisji Historii Porównawczej Kościołów*, Warszawa 1978, in print.

⁵⁵ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 85.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93. See also: M. Kowalczykówna, *Wróżby, czary*, p. 7 sqq.

The area in which the Church confronted traditional cyclic rites and customs is worthy of closer examination. Historians of culture and ethnologists appreciate the great wealth of beliefs contained therein, which usually boasted of ancient origin⁵⁷. At the close of the Middle Ages the cohesion of their system was greatly weakened and the content behind the rites and gestures repeated yearly was probably often unclear to the very participants. The learned representatives of the Church too did not always know how to decipher the meaning of the cyclic rites, nor even attempted to do so. They did not, however, doubt the pre-Christian lineage, and emphasized charge of pagan sources more often and with greater conviction than in other cases. On the other hand, the meaning of the criticised rites and customs was not, it seemed, of prime importance. Among the main categories of confrontation one should single out the time of the folk rites which coincided predominantly with Church festivities and ceremonies⁵⁸. The general attitude of the Church towards the annual folk rites opposed the outcome of folklore Christianized in the past. Attempts to coordinate the rhythm of feasts in Christian liturgy with that of traditional rituals, based on annually recurring natural phenomena proved ineffective in weakening the old traditions. A member of an agrarian community did not lose his sensitivity towards the crucial cyclic moments in Nature and its other signs which had been observed for generations⁵⁹. At times, reaction to the latter could be linked with forms of behaviour taught in the Church e.g. people knelt before a new moon and prayed⁶⁰.

Folk rites did not always adhere to the time of the given phenomenon with which their origins could be connected. They showed a tendency to take place during Church festivals or other important days or periods in the liturgical calendar. Days when the Church celebrated the coming of the Holy Ghost accumulated folk rites which once took up a longer part of the Slav ritual year⁶¹. Spring rites were adapted to the liturgical rhythm of Lent and took place on certain days of Holy Week and Easter. When celebrated on days or eves of holidays devoted to general worship, the rites imposed on the Church an unwanted confrontation with the traditional non-Christian ritual, and offended the ecclesiastical milieu with their alien nature. The Church expressed its resistance in condemnations of the improper use of holy time in which the

⁵⁷ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian (Slav Mythology)*, Warszawa 1982; ethnological research includes: W. Klinger, *Doroczne święta ludowe a tradycja grecko-rzymska (Annual Folk Holidays and the Greek-Roman Tradition)*, Kraków 1931; J. and R. Tomicczy, *Drzewo życia. Ludowa wizja świata i człowieka (The Tree of life. The Folk Vision of World and Man)*, Warszawa 1977, p. 157 sqq.; *Etnografia Polski. Przemiany kultury ludowej (Polish Ethnography. Transformations of Folk Culture)*, vol. II, ed. M. Biernacka, M. Frankowska, W. Paprocka, Wrocław 1981, p. 132 sqq.

⁵⁸ See: reflections presented by B. Gerebek in the synthetic study: *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej X–XIII w. (The Culture of Medieval Poland, Tenth–Thirteenth Century)*, ed. J. Dowiat, Warszawa 1985, p. 461 sqq.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

⁶⁰ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 87; M. Kowalczykówna, *Wróżby, czary*, p. 8.

⁶¹ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 206; *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej*, p. 462.

believers should participate in religious worship or, in the case of eves of certain holidays, properly prepare for the ceremonies⁶². In their sermons preachers counterposed, more or less openly, two communities: the good Christians who spent their time in prayer and pious vigils, and the bad Christians who sung, danced and invoked the names of demons⁶³.

The Church reservations towards traditional annual rites and customs were reinforced by the nocturnal character of some of them, contrary to the daytime Christian rituals⁶⁴. Synodal statutes and sermons stressed that aspect when speaking of nightly dances and accompanying sinful frolics on the eve of the feast days of St. John the Baptist, the apostles Peter and Paul and the nocturnal visits to various houses during Christmas⁶⁵. These and other rites were linked with that time of day when demons, evil forces, wizards and criminals were particularly active (cf. the *furta et homicida* mentioned earlier). The Church treated with suspicion and dislike any nocturnal activities of the laymen and even those connected with the participation of priests in divine worship (let us recall bishops' prohibitions of nightly Mass)⁶⁶; it regarded as correct only the night prayers and vigils of those who had devoted themselves to a monastic or eremetical life.

The traditional annual rites and customs were considered even more alien because they were linked with the open spaces of Nature, as contrasted to Christian sacred space. The springtime and St. John gatherings of villagers took place in fields, meadows, groves, hillsides, and on the banks of rivers and lakes. On Good Thursday fires were lit, most often probably at crossroads⁶⁷. All these were sites which despite attempts at Christianization (e.g. the blessing of fields, processions, and the erection of wayside crosses) did not cease being part of a space alien to Christianity which, moreover, was inhabited or visited by half-Christian/half-pagan demons and a host of lesser creatures from folk beliefs. In previous decades, the Church in Western Europe agreed to the location of certain rites of pre-Christian origin on sacred land, under the eye of the clergy who would sometimes even take part in them. Subsequently, the Church began removing dances, masquerades and other rites of that type from churches and cemeteries⁶⁸, and considered them as a profanation of holy places as well as the cause of outrage to the congregation. Traces of such bans may be also found in Polish historical sources.

⁶² A fragment of sermon by Jan of Michorzyn (1423) for Whitsun is quoted by J. Bystroń in: *Kultura Ludowa (Folk Culture)*, Warszawa 1936, p. 159.

⁶³ See: M. Kowalczykówna, *Tańce i zabawy*, p. 85.

⁶⁴ J.-C. Schmitt, "*Jeunes*" et danse, p. 150.

⁶⁵ *Statuta synodalia Andreae*, p. XXV. See also: U. Łydowska-Sowina, *Ludowe obrzędy*, p. 160.

⁶⁶ *Statuta Petri Vissi de Radolin episcopi Cracoviensis (1396)*, in: *SPPP*, vol. IV, p. 157.

⁶⁷ E. Belcarzowa, *Głosy polskie*, part I, p. 57. See also: W. Klinger, *Doroczne święto ludowe*, p. 58.

⁶⁸ S. Piekarczyk, *Barbarzyńcy i chrześcijaństwo*, p. 329 sqq.; N. Z. Davis, *Les cultures du peuple. Rituels, savoir et résistance au XVI^es.*, Paris 1979, p. 160. As regards Polish lands: U. Łydowska-Sowina, *Ludowe obrzędy*, p. 169.

The confrontation of the Church with the contents concealed in traditional rites and customs, which we have not examined up to now, contains many complex problems. One of the levels of this encounter concerns contacts between Christian eschatology and folk beliefs as regards the fate of the dead, which constituted certain remnants of the old Slavonic eschatological system. The presence of the dead in folk rites and customs, and the remembrance of their needs (and duties to assist the living) was extremely strong⁶⁹, and manifested itself not only on days and during periods particularly auspicious for their contacts with the community of the living. The dead did not always request the living to be sad and mournful but their cult also involved elements of play. On the other hand, their remembrance and stay on Earth clashed with the religious content and liturgy of Christmas or the Holy Week. The attitude of the Church towards non-Christian manifestations of links between the world of the dead and that of the living, was sometimes ambivalent to the point being difficult to recognise. Alongside prohibitions issued when the contents of popular practices were considered overtly contrary to Christian truths, and when a certain custom had been long labeled pagan or superstitious, we find tolerance as regards some traditional customs and rites. Thus, while fifteenth-century preachers regarded the warming of the souls of visitors from the other, obviously cold, world by a fire as *ritus paganorum*, and the placing of food for them as *erroneum*, they described wakes and laments during “the empty evening” as a *consuetudo* known in Poland and several other countries⁷⁰. The Church also accepted, albeit reluctantly, funeral feasts which, after all, expressed an awareness of the presence of the dead while, as confirmed by ethnological research, the food was intended also for the dead⁷¹. Practices for protecting the household from the return of the deceased⁷² after a funeral and other undertakings which synodal statutes called “superstitious customs” were banned⁷³. Apparently, cyclical practices (such as the feeding and warming of visitors from the other world during the Holy Week) were treated with greater severity than the occasional customs connected with death and burial. The fact that the traditional legacy of the Slav springtime All Souls’ Day was transferred to Holy Week (traces can be also found on other spring dates)⁷⁴, was not the only reason for the ban. The contents of those practices was contrary to the teachings of the Church, which emphasized the immaterial nature of the human soul devoid of earthly needs and which sought to limit communication between the nether world and Earth

⁶⁹ *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej*, p. 462; A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 212.

⁷⁰ E. Belcarzowa, *Głosy polskie*, part I, p. 74.

⁷¹ A. Labuda, *Liturgia pogrzebu w Polsce do wydania Rytułu Piotrkowskiego (1631)*, *The Funeral Liturgy in Poland up to the Piotrków Ritual (1631)*, Warszawa 1983, p. 218; A. Fischer, *Zwyczaj pogrzebowe ludu polskiego (Funeral Customs of the Polish People)*, Lwów 1921, p. 393; Z. Szromba-Rysowa, *Uczta pogrzebowa w zwyczajach i wierzeniach ludowych (The Funeral Feast in Folk Customs and Beliefs)*, “Polska Sztuka Ludowa” XL, 1986, nos 1–2, p. 37–38.

⁷² Stanisław of Skarbimierz, *Sermones sapientiales*, part II, p. 87.

⁷³ A. Labuda, *Liturgia pogrzebu*, p. 68 sqq.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

to edifying examples of ghosts warning a family or monastic brothers about the different dimension of time of atonement. The Church prohibited human interference in matters of death such as predictions, and prophecies about the approaching death of certain persons; it also considered as superstitious certain practices aimed at avoiding death (e.g. the wearing of suitable amulets). This was probably the reason for the ban of the rite of drowning the figure of personified death on the fourth "White Sunday" of Lent⁷⁵. Długosz tried to Christianize this rite which in the imagination of the village community was connected with the passage from winter lifelessness to spring vegetation, and ascribed the drowning of the figure called *Marzanna* or *Dziewanna* to the commemoration of the destruction of pagan idols at the time of Mieszko I⁷⁶. As a matter of fact, in some regions, this particular rite was finally Christianized as late as modern times, when death or winter took on the form of Judas⁷⁷.

The multi-strata encounter of late medieval Church with folk culture may be perceived as the overcoming of the resistance of the latter, just as strong when it would not yield to the pressure of Christianization as when it adapted Christian meanings in a manner which aroused the opposition of those who guarded the purity of worship and beliefs of the faithful. But attempts at breaking down oppositions by means of prohibitions and by undermining it through reprimands and persuasion were accompanied by a more or less open acceptance of certain folk customs, replaced by others proposed by the Church. The previously mentioned springtime procession which the parish priest led through the fields was, for instance, to satisfy the ritual needs of the villagers and simultaneously, to absorb an uncontrolled rite which followed an ancient tradition. The blessing of herbs on the day of the Assumption was to replace the magic formulas and signs used by village women who picked them, while the blessing of Easter food in churches⁷⁸ can be perceived, i.a. as an attempt at eliminating the traditional magic rituals which accompanied the process of eating. Finally, let us not forget the well known phenomenon of the development, mainly upon the initiative of the mendicant orders, of attractive Church ceremonies which stimulated emotions and collective imagination, that accompanied great Christian holidays and, to some extent, could challenge traditional ritual.

The introduction by the Church of its own attitudes, rites and beliefs stemming from the innermost layers of traditional culture was an outcome of its approval for various forms of folk piety. The latter benefitted from the protection which was due to all devotional trends guided by the Church; they

⁷⁵ See notes 21 and 22, as well as: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 204 sqq.; J. and R. Tomićy, *Drzewo życia*, p. 179 sqq.

⁷⁶ See: K. Potkański, *Wiadomości Długosza*, II: *Topienie śmierci-zimy* (*The News by Długosz, The Drowning of Death-Winter*), in: *Pisma pośmierne*, vol. II, p. 42–62.

⁷⁷ *Etnografia Polski*, vol. II, p. 138.

⁷⁸ See M. Pisarzyk, *Błogosławienie pokarmów wielkanocnych w Kościele zachodnim do wydania Rytułu Rzymskiego w 1614 r.* (*The Blessing of Easter Food in the Western Church up to the Roman Ritual of 1614*), in: *Studia z dziejów liturgii*, vol. II, p. 187–240.

survived and took root in the fifteenth-century pilgrimage movement, and in the cult of the saints, their relics and images.

Folk culture penetrated everywhere where access was not deliberately and effectively blocked. In protecting itself from the adoption and use of local, folk contents, the sermon, a fundamental instrument of mass-scale teaching, often yielded to the temptation of employing notions and turns of phrases taken from the realities of village everyday life and speech. Aleksander Brückner noted carefully and with certain satisfaction all the mentions of pigs crowding at the trough, oxen beaten with sticks, mud-covered drunkards returning from the inn, etc.⁷⁹ which he discovered in various sermons. He underlined the drastic forms of words and contents used in a religious and moralizing context and indicated another domain and further signs of the confrontation of clerical and folk culture. Finally, this outstanding scholar drew attention to the presence of Polish proverbs translated in Latin *sermones*⁸⁰.

Prohibitions and permissions, hermetic and open attitudes — these were constant elements of contacts between the Church and traditional folk culture. Tensions could arise when tradition put up a particularly strong resistance and whenever the new Christianization of the population, especially of Polish peasants, did not result in the assimilation of religious contents. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the inhabitants of settlements around the Holy Cross mountains worshipped a self-styled Jesus who had settled on top of the highest hill together with the Apostles and Mary Magdalene, forecast the weather and made signs similar to those performed by ancient local soothsayers⁸¹. His followers, under the influence of the Gospels, simply wished to take part in a repetition of sacred history. Their specifically experienced Christian faith was unable to crumble the archaic layer of their imagination.

(Translated by Aleksandra Rodzińska-Chojnowska)

⁷⁹ A. Brückner, *Literatura religijna w Polsce średniowiecznej (Religious Literature in Medieval Poland)*, vol. I, Warszawa 1902, p. 106 sqq. See also: M. Kowalczykówna, *Tańce i zabawy*, p. 78.

⁸⁰ A. Brückner, *Literatura religijna*, vol. I, p. 85 sqq., 100. on the interest in folk proverbs in the West from the end of the Middle Ages see: N. Z. Davis, *Les cultures du peuple*, p. 366–425.

⁸¹ *Joannes de Komorowo, Memoriale Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, publ. X. Liske and A. Lorkiewicz, in: *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, vol. V, Lwów 1888, p. 220–221. See also: S. Bylina, *Mesjasz z Gór Świętokrzyskich (The Messiah from the Holy Cross Mountains)*, “Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce”, XXXIII, 1988, p. 5–26.