REVIEW ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

HALINA MANIKOWSKA
The Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

DOES THE CONCEPT OF 'POPULAR RELIGION' IN THE MIDDLE AGES STILL MAKE SENSE? REGARDING ALICJA SZULC'S *HOMO RELIGIOSUS*

Published six years after Małgorzata Maciszewska's study *Klasztor bernardyński w społeczeństwie polskim 1453–1530* (Warsaw 2001), this book by Alicja Szulc[1] might be taken as its necessary complement.[2] Maciszewska's study mainly concerns the expansion of the monastic network of the Observant Franciscans (called Bernardines, after St Bernardino of Siena, in Poland), with the friars' settlement in cities and medieval society, and with a picture of their recruitment based on social status. Introducing some minor corrections to the picture presented by Maciszewska (Part I: Observant Franciscans of the Polish province in the Middle Ages — chapters 1–2), Szulc concentrates mainly on examining the pastoral work of the first three generations of Observant Franciscans. Her focus is on the way in which a specific type of religiosity characterizing the order was disseminated among the faithful. She starts with a discussion of the friars' education and intellectual outlook (chapter 3). In analysing the spread of the religiosity they promoted, she deals in the first place with its technical aspects and its main tools (Part II: Word-picture-sound. Observants' techniques of shaping mass religiosity, chapter 1–5): preaching, confession, stage performances, images, 'paraliturgical' services, tertiary communities and confraternities. It is worth noting here that Szulc is unfortunately much less interested in the content of this religiosity.

---

[1] Alicja Szulc, *Homo religiosus późnego średniowiecza. Bernardyński model religijności masowej / Homo religiosus of the late middle ages. The Bernardine's model of popular religion*, Poznań 2007, *Studia i Materiały*, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza. Wydział Teologiczny, 100, pp. 256.

[2] In this review article I take into consideration Polish studies of the Middle Ages, leaving out those that deal with later periods as well as those of long vintage devoted to Polish popular Catholicism of the modern era. Compare: Stefan Czarnowski, 'Kultura religijna wiejskiego ludu polskiego', in idem, *Dzieła*, 5 vols, ed. Nina Assorodobraj and Stanisław Ossowski, Warsaw, 1956, vol. 1, pp. 88–107.

Szulc's study is based as much upon primary sources — ranging from chronicles and sermons to poetry, liturgical dramas and paintings — as it is on secondary literature. The most significant part of the latter is represented mainly by Polish historiography, including the history of literature and art history as well as history in the stricter sense. Although critically used and corrected when necessary, this historiography remains the author's main guide in producing a list of research questions and in choosing the method for analysing the primary sources. While many works of western historiography are referenced in the footnotes, a significant proportion of these are absent from the bibliography and, one assumes, they have been omitted deliberately. However, in failing to rebel against methods and questions underpinning Polish works devoted to the subject, or against their parochialism, evident in the dismissal of comparative approaches, Szulc deprives herself of the chance to present a new and original picture of the problem. This is all the more regrettable given that Szulc proves herself capable of scholarly independence when stating in the preface that the term 'popular religion/piety' is no longer useful. However, she fails to go a step further, as she has not drawn conclusions either from important works that have appeared over the past four decades, such as those by Raul Manselli, and Étienne Delaruelle,[3] or from the vivid discussion that took place in the 1970s and 1980s concerning the concept of popular religion.[4] Such a step would have led her to reject the concepts on which she decided to base her analysis, such as mass piety, the piety of *illitterati*. But this charge can hardly be laid against a young scholar and a doctoral dissertation.

The topic which she has chosen to analyse, Observants' religiosity, if it is to be dealt with in a way that is both insightful and bold, and that allows one to feel confident about one's conclusions, requires testing different methods and studying a variety of issues, thus gradually increasing our knowledge of the main points of interest. It also calls for much erudition, passion and, of course, a refusal to be satisfied with the models hitherto used to study the topic at hand. Very few works of this kind, devoted to religious culture of the Middle

---

[3] Raul Manselli, *La religiosità popolare nel Medio Evo*, Turin, 1974; Étienne Delaruelle, *La piété populaire au Moyen Âge*, Turin, 1975.

[4] I wish to refer here only to publications that appeared after important international conferences, the two of which were organized by the Canadian Centre d'études des religions populaires established in 1968, *Les religions populaires: Colloque international 1970*, ed. Benoît Lacroix and Pietro Boglioni, Québec, 1972; *Foi populaire, foi savante. Actes du Vᵉ Colloque du Centre d'études d'histoire des religions populaires tenu au Collège dominicain de théologie (Ottawa)*, Paris, 1977; *Le christianisme populaire. Les dossiers de l'histoire*, ed. Bernard Plongeron and Robert Pannet, Paris, 1976; and *La piété populaire au moyen âge. Actes du 99ᵉ congrès national des sociétés savantes. Besançon, 1974, Section de philologie et d'histoire jusqu'à 1610*, 2 vols, Paris, 1977, vol. 1; *La religion populaire: Colloque international du CNRS en 1977*, ed. Guy Duboscq et al., Paris, 1979. Compare also the discussion of different models of 'popular religion' in Micheline Laliberté: 'Définitions et approches divers de la religion populaire', *Rabaska: Revue d'ethnologie de l'Amérique française*, 8, 2010, pp. 7–18, which appeared after the publication of Szulc's book.

Ages, have appeared in Polish historiography and Szulc appears not to be prepared to use analytical models to their fullest potential.[5] Instead, she has opted for a model whose applicability has been questioned for at least ten years, and has decided to draw on research methods that make the most complex historical discipline, the history of culture, reduced to a simple enumeration — too often accompanied by trivial comments and empty conclusions — of authors, texts and topics.

One needs to start with the model on which Szulc relies — that of mass religiosity, *illitteratorum*. She is right to distance herself from the term popular religion, the meaning of which in Polish is even more restricted than in other languages that adopted the Latin word *populus*, for the noun *lud* (*populus*) and adjective *ludowy* denote mainly the peasant population. It is because of this linguistic ambivalence that Polish medievalists who, inspired mainly by the *Annales* school, introduced into Polish historiography *l'histoire de mentalité* or *l'imaginaire* have also tended to avoid this term. In an effort to breathe new life into studies of medieval culture, of which the evidence is so scarce for Poland, they proceeded to explore new topics such as collective behaviour, different worldviews and feelings.[6] In so doing, they have tried to replace the term popular religion with other concepts that were better suited to their historical subjects. Aleksandra Witkowska has explained in great detail the use of the term, pointing out that popular religion does not refer only 'to one social group to be regarded as corresponding to the rural or plebeian population'.[7] However, relying on another category — religiosity of *illitterati* — Szulc remains within the framework of the same dichotomical model of late medieval religion, and makes no attempt to discuss the extent of its applicability. Such a discussion, one regrets to say, has never been attempted in Polish historiography.

In 2000 there appeared the proceedings of a conference held two years earlier by the Associazione Italiana per lo Studio della Santità, dei Culti e dell'Agiografia and entitled *Il pubblico dei santi. Forme e livelli di ricezione dei messaggi agiografici*. No contributor to the volume used the term popular religion in the title of their paper, although fifteen years ago it would have been indispensable. For an even longer period it appeared on the covers of scholarly books and in tables of contents. In the work mentioned above the second word in the phrase 'popular religion' was replaced by *il sentire religioso*, to be studied from the perspective of the nave, while the word 'popular', *popolo*, transformed itself into

---

[5] Especially Wojciech Brojer's work based on *exempla* that are also used by Szulc: Wojciech Brojer, *Diabeł w wyobraźni średniowiecznej*, Wrocław, 2003; see also Stanisław Bylina on collective piety: 'Wiara i pobożność zbiorowa', published in *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej. XIV–XV w.*, ed. Bronisław Geremek, Warsaw, 1997, pp. 403–50; and of a study by Aleksandra Witkowska: *Kulty pątnicze piętnastowiecznego Krakowa. Z badań nad miejską kulturą religijną*, Lublin, 1984.

[6] Bronisław Geremek, 'Przedmowa', in *Kultura elitarna a kultura masowa w Polsce późnego średniowiecza*, ed. idem, Wrocław, 1978, p. 7.

[7] Witkowska, *Kulty pątnicze*, p. 30.

pubblico. However, to abandon inconvenient terminology is not automatically to part with old conceptualizations or indeed with the prime purpose of the research on popular religion, namely to penetrate the religiosity of ordinary people, of this silent majority.

This is no place to discuss the birth and development of studies in popular (religiosity or) religion. Nor is it one to talk about all the disappointments which, after years of triumphs (in the 1970s and 1980s), led to the rejection of a once fashionable approach. However, one needs to highlight the initial standpoints underlying its adoption, since they have affected, and in Polish historiography still affect — which is clearly seen in the work under review — the way in which medieval and early modern culture, and religion in particular, is understood.

The most important among these standpoints is one which presupposes a sharp division between the elite and the ordinary people. It relies upon the belief in the existence of two distinct, alternative cultures — one represented by the learned (clergy and elites) and another represented by those of lower social status (laymen). The first, regarded as dominant, is connected with the activity of the 'Church which, through parish and monastic clergy, dissemi-nates patterns of piety'.[8] This standpoint rose to the position of a paradigm whose applicability was assumed to go beyond the times of Christianization and the early Middle Ages.[9]

However, this dichotomy is burdened with some serious problems, some of which are inherent while others developed in the course of research, polemics, and attempts to disprove the belief in the Christian Middle Ages as adhered to by past generations of historians. The first problem involves a deeply-rooted fondness for the people thought of as representing primeval and uncorrupt values. It is connected with an anti-elitist psychological complex relating to the domination of the elite and the exploitation of those below. It is also rooted in the assumption that popular culture should be perceived as a reservoir of archetypes, myths and long-established (the lack of precision is here deliber-ate) mental schemes fostering specific behaviour. The second problem involves attempts to fit, under the influence of cultural anthropology and religious studies, Western medieval folklore into the model developed by scholars study-ing primitive societies. Within this model, the folklore in question is to be seen as resistant to change. Even if it does lend itself to change, this transformation

---

[8] Quotation from Bylina, 'Wiara', p. 418. However, in placing a greater emphasis on the deepening of the religiosity of all medieval social groups, he takes a more nuanced position ('a Christian gesture of prayer was common to all', ibid., p. 418), than Broni-sław Geremek who wrote about a domination of religion by the culture of the 'elites'.

[9] Compare especially: Jacques Le Goff, 'Culture cléricale et traditions folkloriques dans la civilisation mérovingienne', *Annales. ESC*, 22, 1967, 4, pp. 780–91; idem, 'Culture ecclésiastique et culture folklorique au Moyen Âge: Saint Marcel de Paris et le dra-gon', in *Ricerche storiche ed economiche in memoria di Corrado Barbagallo*, 3 vols, ed. Luigi de Rosa, Naples, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 53–90; and also Jean-Claude Schmitt, '"Religion popu-laire" et culture folklorique (note critique)', *Annales. ESC*, 31, 1976, 5, pp. 941–53.

is always very slow, and thus clearly falling under the category of the *longue durée*. With regard to the early Middle Ages, such an approach means treating Europe as part of Indo-European folklore marked by a great dissemination of magical thinking that is believed to have permeated religious life. A multitude of historians, such as Keith Thomas, Carlo Ginzburg, Jean Delumeau and Gerald Strauss, who specialized in the study of the early modern era, although representing different outlooks and coming from different intellectual traditions, led medievalists to cling to an almost unshakable conviction that the process of Christianization in the Middle Ages was quite superficial, and that it was not until the era of the Reformation and the resulting Catholic reform that Christianity managed to put down deeper roots.[10]

The appearance of *histoire nouvelle* in the 1970s, and the alluring confidence shown by the leaders of the *Annales* school in revolting against traditional historiography, made many feel obliged to adopt their vision of the past along with their methods of its study. In agreement with such attitudes was the conference, however insightful its results, organized by Bronisław Geremek in 1975: 'Elitist Culture versus Mass Culture in Poland in the late Middle Ages'.

Noteworthy is another presupposition underlying studies of popular culture (and religion). Although treated as an autonomous system, popular culture is seen to remain subject to influence or even pressure from the dominant elite culture — there is a specific time shift between the two, meaning that popular culture absorbs in a simplified way and with some delay elements of the elite worldview. This absorption notwithstanding, it is still affected by the previous, pagan system of culture. However, of key importance were the attempts to provide a definition of the 'people'. In terms of socio-economic divisions, it is a concept whose applicability is both chronologically and geographically very limited, and it needs to be precisely defined according to the region and period to which it is supposed to refer. When applied to medieval culture, it is blurred and imprecise: does it refer to the peasantry, to lower social groups in general, or to all lay people? Attempts were made to cope with this ambiguity by using other dichotomies: high culture (religion) — low culture (*illitterati* in Szulc's work); official — unofficial; the culture of the clergy and that of the laity; a decreed (*prescrite*) culture and that actually existing (*vécue*).[11] These dichotomies introduced a differentiation of cultural standards into socio-economic stratification. The standards, however, were drawn in so thick a line as to fail to grasp cultural differences between various estates and

---

[10] For the discussion of this research and of different positions see John van Engen, 'The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem', *AHR*, 91, 1986, 3, pp. 519–52.

[11] For comparison see: Bernard Plongeron, 'La religion populaire: nouveau mythe de notre temps?', *Études*, 1978, pp. 535–48; Gabriele de Rosa, who also used this term and this opposition, stressed that popular religion, which he confined to forms of Catholic devotion, to the exclusion of its magical-pagan aspects, is not an autonomous concept which could be considered to indicate a religion distinctly different from an official one, see: Gabirele de Rosa, *Chiesa e religione popolare nel Mezzogiorno*, Bari, 1978.

milieus. What is more, the adoption of such an approach resulted in *a priori* definitions of the 'people' (laymen, *illitterati*) and its religion in opposition to the religion/piety of the clergy, or at best in considering the former as situated in the margins of the latter. This raised another problem — does one, in applying the concept of popular religion or religiosity to the system of beliefs and rituals typical of the laity and adopted by them from 'official' religion, actually refer it to their syncretic faith or to pastoral models intended for them?

This is an essential question which Szulc should have considered before she decided to define *a priori* the model of Observants' piety as one of mass religiosity (the religiosity of the unlearned). In the discussion of popular religion, which is to be understood here as both a concept and as an autonomous category, charges were raised that it became a hypostasis or that its use meant an ahistorical approach to the past. It also became clear that ideological preferences influenced the positions taken by those participating in the discussion.[12] Critiques of popular religion refused to accept the existence of a timeless religious system. Some regarded the concept as unclear, ahistorical, unsustainable, and called for it to be replaced with the concept of the struggle between the religion of the elite on one hand and that of the other social groups on the other.[13] A sociological interpretation of the history of religion (in this case, Christianity in the Middle Ages and in the early modern era), triumphant in the early 1960s, came to be increasingly criticized by scholars. This criticism was directed mainly against historians using language filled with the 'obsession of social determinants' and relying on anachronistic class divisions.[14]

In using the term mass religiosity or the narrower religiosity of *illitterati*, Szulc should offer a detailed characterization of the subject matter. With the mass religiosity model created and disseminated by *litterati* Observant Franciscans, coupled with a lack of significant evidence allowing us to reconstruct the way in which it was received and functioned from 'the nave's side', the very nature of the subject matter seems far from obvious. Szulc's introductory remarks, as well as the body of sources to which she turns, favour the conclusion that she is convinced of a dichotomy of the cultures and at least some autonomy of mass religiosity which — when one, like the proponents of the concept, takes this di-

---

[12] Antonio Gramsci's conceptualizations — those of popular Catholicism, religious folklore, and official religion represented by the Church — have had a great impact on Italian historiography. For more on the problem see: Vittorio Lanternari, 'La religion populaire. Prospective historique et anthropologique', *Archives de sciences sociales de religions*, 51, 1982, 1, pp. 121–43. In many studies that discuss the use of the concept of popular religion attention is paid to either the confessional (Catholic) or ideological (leftist) orientation of scholars.

[13] Compare: Carlo Ginzburg, 'Premessa giustificativa', *Religioni delle classe popolari, Quaderni storici*, 14, 1979, 41, pp. 393–397.

[14] See Danilo Zardin, 'La "religione popolare": interpretazioni storiografiche e ipotesi di ricerca', in *Arte, religione, comunità nell'Italia rinascimentale e barocca. Atti del convegno di studi sul Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno*, ed. Lucia Saccardo and Danilo Zardin, Milan, 2000, pp. 3–23.

chotomy as a point of departure — is easier to define negatively. It is the religiosity which involves beliefs and practices that remain on the fringes of elite culture, or even beyond its boundaries. According to Alphonse Dupront, these practices do not assume the form of a specific doctrine, they do not depend for their existence on the Church, and they do not translate into a specific ethics. They involve magical thinking, superstitions, and demonology. In the first place, however, it is the cult of saints and relics, as well as pilgrimages and the belief in miracles that are regarded as constitutive elements of popular religiosity. Thus, the distinction between a popular and official religion pushes outside the framework of the latter many forms of piety which historians, often deluded by medieval zealots, regard as inconsistent with various dogmas and as falling outside a system of the 'learned' religion that can never be clearly defined.

This approach has proved a complete failure at every level of the opposition between the religion of the 'learned' and the faith of the 'idiots'. Treatises on superstitions, when examined by positivistically-minded historians relying on traditional methods and sceptical about methodological novelties, or by scholars representing different schools and capable of tracing intellectual origins, proved entirely the product of the 'learned'. Accounts of magical practices or a lingering faith in pagan gods found in these treatises, which allegedly originated in the observation of local customs or in the knowledge obtained by confessors, were quite often derived either from other treatises or from old penitentials that were never in use in a given area. A good example is the famous catalogue of magic ascribed to the Cistercian monk Rudolf. The belief in miracles, the zeal for pilgrimages, and the passion for the collecting of relics and indulgences were as common among Dominican theologians, bishops, and princes as they were among plebs to whom the learned directed their sermons. After all, prayers including spells were found in canonical hours prepared by educated clergymen for dukes and aristocrats living on top of the social ladder.

The problem of primary sources appears to be crucial in this model. If the research is from the very beginning based on the assumption that there is a clear opposition between the religion/religiosity of the clergy and elites and that of the masses, then one cannot leave unresolved the issue of their mutual relations, their interaction, or the processes of osmosis, friction or rejection occurring between the two systems. These relations are extremely difficult to grasp in the face of so depressing and inauspicious an asymmetry of primary sources typifying older periods. The history of failure that taints research into religious syncretism clearly urges caution here. An approach once adopted in folklore studies suggested that there was a top-down transfer between the two systems, from written to oral modes of communication. A fierce debate occurred on whether it could take place in the opposite direction. Advocates of interaction between the two systems were even able to indicate some specific examples and places of such a two-way movement — for instance, a monastery between a refectory and a kitchen. Opponents argued that written primary sources do not allow one to

prove that there existed a single belief or practice autonomously engendered within folk tradition. What was regarded as 'popular' or 'folk' as a rule turned out to be 'learned' and drawn from some text or other. A way out of the impasse may lie in the adoption of a new approach, one of reconstructing given systems in their entirety. Alphonse Dupront in an essay devoted to popular religion, suggested in presenting its phenomenological characterization, that it was fully integrated with the whole socio-economic existence of humanity.[15] Wojciech Brojer, who does not endorse the conception of popular religion, was more radical in formulating his own position. He has simply recognized all the beliefs and practices associated with popular religion as constituting part of a coherent worldview characterizing all members of a given cultural group.

There are primary sources clearly favoured by scholars involved in the study of popular or mass religion: sermons, *exempla*, devotional literature, confession books, inquisition and canonization records, *miracula*, and iconography. Such sources are also to be found in Szulc's book, although exceptions are materials relating to the inquisition, canonization and *miracula*. Most of the sources used in studies of popular religiosity and in Szulc's work had been known and available well before scholars began to examine this topic. However, since this material was produced by the clergy, who represented high culture, it presents historians with some specific methodological requirements, which make it necessary to define methodological problems likely to be encountered during the research. If the problems are not clearly expounded, they have to be at least easily identifiable in the analysis presented.

This pertains especially to presuppositions underlying the analysis, as well as to the methods used to penetrate beneath the learned text into the realm of a popular culture. The historian obtains the access to the first — the learned — text by decoding intellectual categories; while the second is grasped through questions and conceptualizations provided by cultural anthropology, comparative religious studies, structural analysis or perhaps through some vague notion of collective mentality. Szulc has refused to provide us with a discussion of the methodological problems which are of key importance for her studies. Undoubtedly, it is clear that Aron Gurevich's concepts had an impact on the structure of her work and the general subject of her research. Given the prestige enjoyed by the Russian scholar, such an impact can hardly come as a surprise. Szulc actually accepts his point of view: to get through to their audience, and it is to be regretted that we are not told anything about the audience, the texts to which she refers had to make use of a symbolic system the recipients would be familiar with. However, if this is the case then we are not confronting a clear or at least an essential (that is, accepted by the priesthood) distinction between the religiosity of the learned, the clergy, and that of *illitterati*, the laity; for both not only shared the same faith but also held the same worldview. This leads one

---

[15] It was published later along with other texts in a large volume entitled *Du sacré. Croisades et pèlerinages. Images et langages*, Paris, 1987.

to ask about the sources of this close relationship. For Gurevich this was the result of the 'folklorization' of the official religion, on one hand, and of the 'theologization' of a popular religion, on the other. One might say that the latter was becoming increasingly suffused with doctrinal thinking. Most scholars (Delaruelle, Dupront, Delumeau), even in the early stages of the field's development took a balanced position regarding these contradictions: distinctions were not clear-cut, both cultures (religions) permeated each other, and their interaction was characterized by specific dynamics.

Ambiguous concepts, often used with quotation marks (to which we can add *culture folklorique*), unclear conceptions, and doubt-provoking conceptualization led to popular religion becoming — especially in the 1970s — more the subject of an interesting discussion than a distinct field of study. For the studies that had actually been carried out, although representing high scholarly standards, opening up new fields of historical inquiry and extending the knowledge of medieval religious beliefs and rituals, did not produce a clear picture of the system of practices that could without doubt be termed popular or mass, as distinct from official and learned.

The interdisciplinary character of this field of research — the historiography began to draw on methods and approaches elaborated within ethnography, anthropology, sociology and comparative religious studies — led to a conceptual impasse once attempts to offer a phenomenological description of a socially imprecise popular piety were abandoned in favour of a systemic approach. Popular religion, it was realized, was extremely complex. Attempts to isolate it and grant it an autonomous status failed.

One reason for this failure was that scholars who dealt with popular religion as it existed in the Middle Ages remained for a long time indifferent to other medieval distinctions fundamental to this issue. Medieval writings are full of oppositions that set the clergy against the laity, the educated against the uneducated: *litterati — illitterati*, *docti — simplices*, *clerici — laici*, *spiritualia — temporalia*, *sacerdotium — regnum*. The definition and etymology of the word 'layman' found in *Catholikon* by Giovanni Balbi (Johannes Balbus) of Genoa is couched in brutal terms. The layman is *extraneus a scientia litterarum* and is also *laos* which is derived from *lapis* because, just like a stone, he is *durus*.[16] Earlier, Gratian's *Decretum* defined quite precisely the division of the Church. It consists of *duo genera Christianorum*. The first includes those who serve God (they are among the group of *regentes*). The second are *populus*, *laici*.[17] These distinctions, which are not tantamount to a dichotomous vision of the alternative cultures, collapse only in the later Middle Ages. However, two German authors, almost peers, adopted in the latter half of the fourteenth century different positions. For Konrad of Megenberg — *genus*

---

[16] Du Cange et al., *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, Niort, 1886, entry 'Laicus': 'Et dicitur a Laos, (λαός) Populus; vel potius a Laos (λᾶς, λᾶος) Lapis. Inde Laicus i. Lapideus; quia durus et extraneus a scientia litterarum'.

[17] *Decretum Gratiani*, c. XII, q. 1, c. 7.

laicorum, is *populus ignarus*.[18] Henry of Suso includes under the term *devotae personae* both those who are *doctae* as well as those who are *indoctae*.[19]

From the very beginning, the people of the Church realized that they had to fit their language to the audience they addressed. In the later Middle Ages they attempted to bridge the gap separating them from the 'plebs' by using a very effective tool — a vernacular language. They also took advantage of an increasing, especially in cities, level of literacy. Some failed. Meister Eckhart was charged with using too convoluted a language, while as Nicolas of Cusa wrote, people *intelligentes* could find in his writings *multa subtilia et utilia*.[20]

An awareness of the disconnection between faith and knowledge is to be found in the work of a variety of thinkers beginning with Saint Augustine through to Peter Lombard and to William of Ockham. Observant Franciscans worked and acted in a world which was familiar with the notion of unconscious faith, which may well have characterized pagans: *et fides implicita sufficit ad hoc quod aliquis sit catholicus et fidelis*.[21]

Szulc has managed to steer clear of many of these traps. She has simply failed to ask questions that need to be asked when one uses the category of 'mass religiosity'. She would have avoided further problems had she decided to follow the path taken in the 1980s by André Vauchez or by some English historians who distanced themselves from various works, often representing high scholarly standards, written by authors connected with the *Annales* school.[22] In recent years research has become increasingly focused on religious life. A way out of the problems of socio-cultural distinctions has been to make them more complex and better adjusted to some local cultural conditions — urban piety, rural piety, royal piety, and so on. British historians have set themselves the goal of presenting a coherent and comprehensive picture of spiritual life during the Middle Ages. In pursuit of this, they have concentrated either on the analysis of pilgrimages, viewed as an important and representative part of the life in question, or on the reconstruction of the religious outlook of the laity and its participation in liturgy in the period preceding the Reformation.[23] The concept of popular religion was no longer useful. It was replaced with the term 'traditional religion' which does not imply some artificial separateness from 'official

---

[18] Quotation from Klaus Schreiner, 'Laienfrömmigkeit — Frömmigkeit von Eliten oder Frömmigkeit des Volkes? Zur sozialen Verfaßtheit laikaler Frömmigkeitspraxis im späten Mittelalter', in *Laienfrömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter: Formen, Funktionen politisch-soziale Zusammenhänge*, ed. idem, Munich, 1992, p. 27.

[19] Cited after Georg Steer, 'Die deutsche "Rechtssumme" des Dominikaners Berthold — ein Dokument der spätmittelalterlichen Laienchristlichkeit', in *Laienfrömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter*, p. 235.

[20] Nicolai de Cusa, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, ed. Raymundus Klibansky, Hamburg, 2007, II, no. 36.

[21] William of Ockham, *Dialogus*, part 1, 4–3, ⟨http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/dialogus/w1d4acl.html⟩ [accessed 9 May 2013].

[22] See also Schreiner, 'Laienfrömmigkeit', pp. 1–78.

[23] Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion*, London, 1975.

religion'.[24] It was concluded that a distinction between elitist and popular religions amounts to creating divisions that did not exist.[25]

In the 1980s the focus shifted elsewhere: to the religious message and its reception. The term popular religion came to be increasingly replaced with the concept of the religion of laymen, which highlights a more tangible distinction. It is a distinction between the Church that teaches and that which is taught. A vast area of the Church teaching was placed at the centre of interest. With the emphasis put on the teachings of the Church, on the ideas disseminated by religious culture, on the formation of the piety of the masses, and on religious acculturation, such an approach can clearly be seen in the work by Aleksandra Witkowska. In my opinion, she unnecessarily uses the term popular or mass religiosity, which is out of line with the reservations she herself makes. However, she does not rely on a dichotomy: the religiosity of the 'learned' (the clergy) and the piety of the 'masses'. This allows her to avoid many of the pitfalls of basing her research on the sources produced by the clergy. First, the sources were addressed to various groups. Second, and more important in this context, the religious attitudes of those who produced the sources were perhaps 'more conscious and more dependent on theological thought, but it is they who formed a popular religiosity'.[26]

Alicja Szulc seems to follow this path, dealing with the dissemination of a form of religiosity, which is unnecessarily called 'mass', by the intellectual elite of the clergy. However, she stops halfway, thus failing to give an account of the content of the form of religiosity and, first of all, to provide a collective portrait of its recipients. By cutting Polish Observant Franciscans off from the spirituality of the whole order (it is not to be forgotten that although Kapistran was the founder of the observant movement in Poland it was St Bernardino of Siena who remained its spiritual leader), she deprives us of the possibility of linking their teachings to processes with a broad geographical significance. In confining her account to the order's ministry, she fails to show the specificity of the

---

[24] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England*, New Haven, CT, 1992.

[25] Robert N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215–1515*, Cambridge, 1995; see also Carl Watkins, '"Folklore" and "Popular Religion" in Britain during the Middle Ages', *Folklore*, 115, 2004, 2, pp. 140–50, where a demand for studying 'local religious culture' in which the whole community — both elites and common people — participated is formulated.

[26] Witkowska, *Kulty pątnicze*, p. 172. It should also be noted that Witkowska, recognizing — like Delaruelle — the enormous significance of the ongoing late medieval process of Christianization, the increasingly religious character of private and social life, the interiorization of religious content and models, does not — unlike the French historian — accentuate the opposition between the piety of the clergy and that of the 'people'. At the same time Delaruelle regarded *la piété populaire*, the collective forms and bases of piety, deriving, for example from the particular mental structures and psychological characteristics (emotionality) ascribed to the 'people' as the essence of medieval religious life. Naturally enough, he cast St Francis of Assisi in the role of mediator between these two types of piety.

'Bernardine' model of religiosity and to place it in a wider local religious culture. She also does not take into account the obvious conclusion, which is also supported by her own study, namely that the liturgy served as the basis of this teaching. It was the elementary school in which a Christian was to be formed. The school, it needs to be emphasized, was the same for everyone regardless of one's social background and cultural standards. Some made greater and some lesser use of it, but it was attended by everyone at the same time. I would like to know what the Polish Observants' version of this school was.

(Translated by Artur Mękarski)

Summary

This paper discusses the use of the concept and model of 'popular religion' in the Polish studies on religious life in the late Middle Ages. Reviewing the book on pastoral work of the first generations of Observant Franciscans in Poland on the one hand (Alicja Szulc, *Homo religiosus późnego średniowiecza. Bernardyński model religijności masowej / Homo religiosus of the late middle ages. The Bernardine's model of popular religion*, Poznań 2007, pp. 256), and summarizing debates related to this concept on the other, it stresses the need to work out a new research approach to analysing late medieval religious phenomena and practices. Polish studies in the regard should focus more on the concept of 'the religion of laymen', and emphasize a distinction between the Church that teaches and that which is taught.

Halina Manikowska