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**B O O K S' R E V I E W S**

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**The magical Rhodopes. Some observations on the book *Synkretyzm a podziały religijne w bułgarskich Rodopach* by Magdalena Lubańska**

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The book *Synkretyzm a podziały religijne w bułgarskich Rodopach* (WUW, Warsaw 2012) aroused my curiosity for several reasons. First of all, it is a monograph in the field of the anthropology of religion, and these are rare on the Polish market. Secondly, it is concerned with a topic that until now has not been researched, which in itself makes it a unique publication. Thirdly, it focuses on issues that are very much within the scope of my own academic interests. I wish to emphasise at the outset that I was not disappointed, quite the opposite. The book by Magdalena Lubańska is a cogent and conscientious scholarly analysis of a segment of modern religious reality. However, for my review to be an equally pertinent presentation of the content of her book, I am obliged to point out both its merits and certain debatable points which would lend themselves to alternative solutions. Consequently, this review will include some proposals of an alternative approach to the organization of the material collected by Magdalena Lubańska.

*Synkretyzm...* is a discussion of the coexistence of the Orthodox and Muslim faiths in the Western Rhodopes, a region of Bulgaria which is exceptionally diverse with respect to both religion and culture. At the very outset, Lubańska reveals the aim of her work: “the analysis of beliefs and religious practices of the Orthodox/Muslim local communities in Western Rhodopes with regard to the residents’ approach to neighbours of the other faith” (p. 11). Explaining the intentions behind her research, Lubańska obviously needs the shelter of the higher aims of world politics; yet it must be stressed that this is unnecessary: her topic is academically interesting in itself and its analysis may bring valuable reflections into the study of the coexistence of various faiths and religious systems in local communities.

The publication fulfils the stated aim, on over three hundred close-printed pages presenting the principles governing the side-by-side existence of the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims and Orthodox Christians in a number of selected villages. Lubańska focuses

<sup>1</sup> English: *Syncretism and Religious Divisions in the Bulgarian Rhodopes*. The book is not available in translation.

mainly on the current state of affairs, but situates it in the historical context of relations between Muslims and Christians in Bulgaria, which were fraught with tensions (particularly the relations of power and both physical and symbolic violence). She demonstrates how, practically in defiance of history and the aversion against people of different faiths deeply rooted in the world-view of either group, religious communities sharing one area developed strategies of good-neighbourliness that allow them to coexist in peace and to maintain some familiarity in contacts with each other. Situating this in the context of religion, Lubańska analyses syncretistic and anti-syncretistic processes and attitudes which, on the one hand, enable this peaceful coexistence and participation in the religious life of neighbours of different faith (especially in the social stratum of this life), and on the other hand make it possible to maintain separateness and religious identity. Presenting those processes and attitudes, Lubańska describes the concurrent types of religiosity found in the Rhodopes: the traditional model of Orthodoxy and Islam, and the "pure" Islam. Describing those types and their mutual relations, she analyses the strategies of good-neighbourliness. She does not see the world she is describing in an overly optimistic light, however; she also shows problems in the functioning of a mixed-religion community and their possible origins.

I hope that this brief report is in itself enough of an encouragement to get acquainted with Lubańska's book. But in addition, its undeniable merit is the ethnographic material it contains, which amply demonstrates Lubańska's great involvement in field work. She presents a multi-layered description of the Muslim-Christian relations based on a variety of sources: interviews, observations, legends, local folklore, scholarly texts, as well as holy books and theological studies. Thanks to this, the reader of *Synkretyzm...* is presented with a solid, rich and extremely varied research material. It is a pity that Lubańska failed to boast how she managed to collect such great wealth of data, what cultural competency she has for this type of research or how and on the basis of what premises she planned her inquiry. Small hints in the book, to be found in the acknowledgements or footnotes, and her exceedingly thorough knowledge of relevant literature in the Bulgarian language suggest that she has Bulgarian roots and feels very familiar with the region she selected; yet she does not reveal why she selected this particular part of the Rhodopes and those mixed-religion communities. It seems to me that had she done that, her analysis of the specificity of the communities and the ongoing inter-religious relations she describes would have been even richer. Also, Lubańska's account of the researched locality is quite dry and, in contrast to other parts of the book, devoid of ethnographic titbits.

The impression left by her brevity in explaining the methodology passes quickly with the perusal of the subsequent chapters. The book engrosses the reader in a fascinating anthropologic world. Of course, some of its elements betray the academic nature of the text, for instance the slightly too detailed arrangement of the contents (this could have been avoided, even if only visually, by giving up the complicated

system of subsections) and an overabundance of quoted interviews. Yet these small discomforts are worth overlooking, because Lubańska's book is an intellectual challenge to anthropologists of religion by making it necessary to deal with certain stereotypes concerning the method of studying this discipline.

This is because *Synkretyzm...* is not a book that uncritically refers to the latest, hottest and most fashionable anthropological conceptions, as it so frequently happens nowadays, but quite the opposite: it boldly revitalises ideas often stigmatised as outdated and irrelevant to those much touted trends. Two of Lubańska's ideas deserve special attention. The first is the deliberate and, most importantly, methodologically justified separation between the sphere of practice and the sphere of belief in the described religiosity. The second is the successful attempt at extracting as much as possible from the concept of folk religiosity, although reformulated by Lubańska into the *adat* Islam and *adat* Orthodoxy (this is how the residents of the Rhodopes describe what is traditional, local). The *adat* religiosity as an anthropologic concept shares very many principles (at least those noteworthy) with folk religiosity. Lubańska's idea proved sound. In my opinion, she could have taken the risk and availed herself of one more classic concept: she could have returned to the separation, at least functional, of religion from magic, because I think it, too, would have found justification in her book. *Ad rem*, however.

Introducing her reader to the topic of the coexistence of Christians and Muslims, Lubańska emphasises that in this case the phenomenon she presents, syncretism, occurs chiefly in the sphere of religious practice; with one exception, which I shall mention further on, it is not transferred onto the sphere of belief, i.e. the sphere of strictly religious convictions understood as pertaining to the religious creed (hence, perhaps, to preclude potential criticism from those who define belief broadly, it may have been useful to introduce the concept of magic; see below). This sphere remains "pure" and actually requires anti-syncretistic tactics to retain its purity, which Lubańska discusses. In the context of good-neighbourliness, the stance proposed by Lubańska – to analyse the sphere of religious practice separately from the sphere of religious belief – is the correct research approach. Although this separation may meet with resistance as a *sui generis* theoretical anachronism, she demonstrates its usefulness in interpreting phenomena which are decidedly contemporary. Here, good-neighbourliness is realised in gestures towards the people of other faith, in the practice of coexistence, not in an unification of beliefs; those remain separate. In spite of this separateness, however, in order for the relations not to mutate into conflict, the policy of coexistence requires some syncretism of practices. Hence, although from the point of view of the orthodoxy of either religion (especially Islam) the practices described in the book may appear reprehensible, they are not so from the point of view of either the tactics of good-neighbourliness or of *adat* religiosity.

Application of this conception is the logical continuation of the line of interpretation adopted by Lubańska. Since the sphere of religious practice permits the adoption

of elements deriving from other religious systems, the need arises for tools that make it possible to describe this type of religiosity, which is after all different – in some aspects only, of course – from the orthodoxy. To this end, Lubańska uses the concepts of *adat* Islam and *adat* Orthodoxy. Selecting this type of terminology to describe the phenomenon, she also rejects the label “folk religiosity” which, as it is generally known, has gained ill fame, mainly due to being compared with the religiosity of the upper social strata and by being burdened with various low, pejorative qualities. Lubańska is perfectly aware of this; but concurrently she sees the need of discriminating between some of the practices she describes and other forms of religiosity. *Adat* Islam and *adat* Orthodoxy appear in her book for this very reason; because good-neighbourly actions of a religious nature, which appear therein, constitute an element of a different but coherent system of local religious practices.

Magdalena Lubańska notes level-headedly that syncretistic gestures of a religious character arising from the fact that an area is settled jointly by Muslims and Orthodox Christians do not cause transformations in beliefs themselves, and even less do they cause some “third quality”, a separate syncretistic religion, to evolve. What is syncretised are neighbourly customs; and this is the proper point to speculate that perhaps the term ‘good-neighbourliness’ has a greater explanatory power than the much more broadly described, but in my opinion not fully utilised concept of syncretism. While Lubańska allocates relatively little space to the former, assuming that it is intelligible as a policy of cohabitation in a given area (although, importantly, she locates good-neighbourliness in the religious order, pointing out to the obligations towards one’s neighbours found in Islam), she gives considerably more space to the latter as her main interpretative category.

The chapter presenting the concept of syncretism, although short, is an undisputed tour de force of Lubańska’s erudition. She outlines the history of the concept, its evolution, studies devoted to it, and various relevant research approaches and scholars’ methods of defining syncretism. As I have already stated, all of Lubańska’s book is an intellectual challenge; it is particularly true of this chapter. She presents the potential of this concept so forcefully that it is all the more regrettable that she does not utilise this potential to the full in the following parts of her study. Having decided to use the definition of syncretism by Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart as the main base for her analyses (pp. 12–13, 39–47), she relinquished an opportunity to make use of a variety of nuances that seem significant to the interpretation of the analysed phenomenon. For this reason, her book does not exhaust the interpretative power of syncretism; syncretism, in contrast to the already-mentioned good-neighbourliness, does not explain the principles of the emergence of *adat* religiosities, but only reveals the presence of certain transpositions of religious elements on the level of practice and their absence on the level of belief, without delving into the issues of the coexistence of Christians and Muslims.

Against this background, an interesting example that fully illustrates the syncretistic process (Chapter 4) is the *kurban* – an animal sacrifice, canonical in Islam and practiced, albeit in a different ritual setting, also by the Orthodox Christians. Lubańska uses the example of this rite to demonstrate deep syncretism, the infiltration (or perhaps strengthening due to the proximity of Islam) of religious elements, in this case from Islam to Christianity. Yet the *kurban* is so deeply rooted in *adat* Orthodoxy that its syncretistic character is intelligible to an anthropologist, who is provided with appropriate tools to examine it, but not to the believers who practice it. Hence the animal sacrifice and other syncretistic phenomena described in the book (which, in turn, are from the category of shallow syncretism) do not threaten Lubańska's interlocutors with an exclusion from the community of believers or undermine the authority of their religion, but – which observation has gained the Author my greatest respect – they actually strengthen it (p. 239ff).

Yet, as Lubańska herself points out in her reflections on the consequence of this term, the concept of syncretism has the potential to yield much more. To use this potential, I think, would be beneficial to the interpretation of other aspects of the exceptionally good material she has collected. For instance, if she made the connection between the definition by Shaw and Stewart, which she has accepted, and the issues of unequal relations between the syncretised religions, the domination of one of them (at the given point in history) in the syncretistic process, and the syncretistic approach as a reaction to uncertainty (and such concepts of syncretism, too, Lubańska does present: pp. 39, 44, 46), then her description of the history of both researched groups, their uneasy relations and difficulties that depended on which authorities were currently in power, would have illuminated her interpretation of the material; as things are, this history remains no more than an introduction.

To continue this reviewer's monologue on how else Magdalena Lubańska could additionally interpret her research material, I would like to return to the already-mentioned issue of employing the concept of magic; magic differentiated from, but not juxtaposed to, religion. Chapter 8.1, one of the more interesting sections and a testimony to the depth of Lubańska's reflection on the phenomenon she describes, demonstrates how a seemingly syncretistic practice: availing oneself of the services of other-faith healers or healing rites, contributes to the preservation of the given person's own religious identity. If, therefore, Lubańska – who, as I have already written, has shown much courage in going against anthropological fashions – had gone still further down this path and employed the concept of magic in her reflection (whereas currently it emerges only marginally), her book would have aroused an even hotter debate, due not only to the fascinating material, but also to the audacity in selecting the interpretative stance: a seemingly outdated, but in reality still vigorously valid one.

The above observations, as I have already stated, constitute a *sui generis* debate with the text, and in my opinion it is Lubańska's great success that her book deserves

and encourages such debate. There are, however, certain elements that would merit reconsideration with a view to next editions or translations (and the originality of book makes it well deserving of international recognition). Interviews are quoted perhaps too often, with the author later providing a summary of those quotations as if in doubt whether the readers would understand their message without her guidance. In addition, she should share with her readers the reasoning behind the inequality in describing the two groups and their religiosity, with far more attention devoted to Islam in the Rhodopes, the history of the local Muslims and their perceptions of Christians. If not for the fact that she is very aware as a scholar, as her book amply demonstrates, one might think Lubańska succumbed to a fascination with the “spirit of the Orient” and the exoticism of her topic, and so disregarded the proportions of the description. A brief explanatory note on the construction of the book would solve this problem.

Similarly, I think that in the book's current format, the inclusion of the solitary Protestant, to whom Lubańska devotes an entire chapter, is not entirely justified. Although the book's title does not betray this, its contents leaves no doubt that which the exception of this one chapter, it is devoted exclusively to the relations between Islam and Christianity; hence the Protestant appears there somewhat unexpectedly, without the necessary well-grounded explanation as to what light the presence of this one person might shed on the processes of syncretism in Western Rhodopes. Again, I am sure that his inclusion is a conscious and well thought out manoeuvre, but the author forgot to share her reasoning with the readers, and without it one gets an impression that the reason for the Protestant's presence in the book is his theological knowledge, which made him an interesting partner for conversation. However, his “syncretistic” approach (involving a thorough investigation of other faiths, not acceptance of their tenets), which is exceptional in the region under research but not at all unusual to Protestant converts, contributes little to the analysis of the main topic of the book.

As I have already stated, my remarks on these small shortcomings are no more than a debate with Lubańska's book. The book constitutes a value in itself and demonstrates high quality of both the ethnographic workshop and interpretation. *Synkretyzm...* is a publication that contributes much to the current anthropology of religion – not only in Poland, because both the presented material and the author's courage in using the “anathematised” (or, worse still, often heedlessly applied) interpretative tools are worthy of international recognition and wider discussion. Hence it is a regrettable fact that the book is published in Polish, with only a summary in English. Despite not revealing some of her methodological decisions, Magdalena Lubańska has managed to present an incisive analysis of a particularly crucial problem: in the face of bloody religious conflicts known to history, she describes a situation where the primacy of good-neighbourliness that is both grass-roots and entrenched in culture makes it possible for neighbours of different faiths to maintain a peaceful day-to-day coexistence.

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