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Old Polish and Spanish penitentials as a source of knowledge on folk-paganism in a Christian society

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Staropolskie i hiszpańskie penitencjały jako źródła wiedzy o pogańskich praktykach w chrześcijańskim społeczeństwie

Abstract

Some interesting conclusions on folk-paganism are drawn here from a comparison of 16th, 17th and 18th-century confessional handbooks (*libri poenitentiales*) originating in the Iberian Peninsula and Polish Commonwealth. Four penitentials which include large lists of sins and the penances prescribed for them are the main object of comparison: the 13th-century Latin work *Summa de confessionis discretione* by Brother Rudolf, the penitential from 1633 *Instrucción de confesores, como han de administrar el Sacramento de la Penitencia* by Spanish Jesuit Antonio Fernandez de Cordoba, *El fuero de la conciencia* by Valentín de la Madre de Dios from 1704, and the Polish penitential from 1753 entitled *Koleśda duchowna parańianom od pasterzów* [The Pastoral Visit] authored by Marcin Józef Nowakowski. It proved that the structure and contents of the analysed texts are very similar and remained practically unchanged: despite the lapse of time they continued to play the same role.

Artykuł przedstawia kilka ciekawych wniosków dotyczących pogaństwa ludowego na podstawie porównania penitencjałów (*libri poenitentiales*) pochodzących z Półwyspu Iberyjskiego i Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej datowanych na XVI, XVII i XVIII wiek. Najważniejszym obiektem porównania są cztery penitencjały, które zawierają długie listy grzechów i odpowiadające im pokuty: XIII-wieczne dzieło łacińskie *Summa de confessionis discretione* autorstwa Brata Rudolfa, penitencjał z 1633 r. *Instrucción de confesores, como han de administrar el Sacramento de la Penitencia* napisany przez hiszpańskiego jezuitę Antonio Fernandez de Cordobę, *El fuero de la conciencia* napisany przez Valentína de la Madre de Dios z 1704 roku oraz polski penitencjał z 1753 r. zatytułowany *Koleśda duchowna parańianom od pasterzów* autorstwa Marcina Józefa Nowakowskiego. Z toku analizy wynika, że struktura i treść analizowanych tekstów są bardzo podobne i pozostały praktycznie niezmienione: pomimo upływu czasu nadal odgrywały taką samą rolę.

Key words

Spanish penitentials, Old Polish penitentials, confession, folk-paganism, superstitions
hiszpańskie penitencjały, staropolskie penitencjały, spowiedź, pogaństwo ludowe, przesady

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The main purpose of this paper is to describe the struggle of the Christian church against pagan remnants in popular beliefs and practices in two distant regions of Europe – Poland and Spain – in medieval and early modern times.

A considerable number of references to these data could be obtained from sermon literature, treatises on morals, records of the Inquisition, etc., especially those published after the Council of Trent. In the paper presented here, the knowledge of various misdemeanors and errors – magical practices, pagan cults, different kinds of superstition, the presence of quacks and magicians in everyday life and other forms of folk-paganism – has been derived from the penitentials (*libri poenitentiales*).

Many confessional texts were published in Europe in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Jean Delumeau explains that popularity with the obvious fact that in a Catholic country the issue of confession concerns all (Delumeau 1990).

Guides for confessors – penitentials, “books of penance”, confessional summaries, handbooks of confessional practice – these are extremely interesting and it seems not fully explored and utilized material for a scholar studying the history of European culture. They provide knowledge of the rites and beliefs of peoples inhabiting various regions of Medieval and modern Europe, whose lives were regulated by the Church calendar and who in their daily lives still used pagan magical breeding and medical practices, predicted future from atmospheric phenomena and animal voices, had an expanded system of taboos and imperatives based on the pagan vision of the world. Those texts provide an excellent material for ethnographers, who in their descriptions of folk culture very rarely reach back farther than the 19th century (cf. Partyka 2008). It turns out, at the same time, that the catalogue arising from the continuation of pagan practices, offences against faith was practically the same all over Europe.

Penitential publications were conceived primarily as a help for the clergy in their extremely hard work with their congregations. They contained very specific

recommendations how to conduct a conversation with the penitent so as to avoid scaring him and encourage him to confess his sins. It was necessary to assume a particularly subtle and skillful approach to „rustics”, who dwelled in the sin of paganism and continuously utilized Christian *sacrum* for Pagan practices (cf. Partyka 2012).

Some guides provided merely a list of sins and suitable punishments. Others – which will be discussed here – were conceived as a catalog of frequently very elaborate questions asked at confessions, or precise descriptions of reprehensible practices and beliefs, employed in order to search sinful souls of simple people who were not able to recognize their own transgressions against faith on their own. In order to build up such a catalog one had to have a very good knowledge of those sinful souls, and thus be well versed in beliefs, magical practices treated as offences. A good confessor was to be like an inquisitor, who skillfully and cleverly extricated confessions.

Most of the authors of the texts that are of our concern here were practitioner confessors and keen observers, actively involved in the everyday life of the community under study in order to get to know the congregation and help them achieve eternal happiness. They conducted „participant observation” - to use here the terminology of anthropological research. It is hard to resist an impression that the manner of conducting a conversation between the confessor and the penitent is reminiscent of an ethnographical interview aimed at gaining specific information as to family and annual customs, magical procedures, beliefs connected with the flora and fauna as well as geological formations, taboos, imperatives, predictions.

The value of those texts for the study of folk culture was noticed by Aron Gurevich (1990). Probably nowhere else – he writes about folk superstitions – this side of the religious and cultural life of medieval man is expressed so succinctly and – what is particularly important, so credibly as in penitentials.

Characterizing the position of the Church in everyday lives of the parishioners Gurevich reminded that a church was not only a site of religious but also secular events; that it was a trading place, grain storage, as well as a venue for feasts and festivals, which frequently featured elements of former pagan beliefs. It was perhaps thanks to those occasions that the Church could have a closer look of its congregation and utilize the observations made in the confessional practice. In order to establish a dialogue with the faithful church preachers cleverly adjusted themselves to the audience by employing a simple, illustrative language and utilizing folklore – its topics and style.

The history of the *libri poenitentiales*

The first handbooks for confessors appeared already in the Middle Ages, at the beginning of the 4th century, in the British Isles. Among the first English penitentials the best known and recognized was the handbook written by a Byzantine theologian Theodore of Tarsus, who in the years 668-690 was Archbishop of Canterbury. Those books were to help eliminate the remains of folk pagan cults among the lowest strata of the society. Therefore, it was typical utility literature – its emergence as a genre of ecclesiastical writing was related with purely practical demand. The first texts of that type were, however, criticized by the Councils, which considered them dangerous in that they could be used by uneducated confessors to disseminate the teachings of the Church to the faithful. Later in the Middle Ages penitential handbooks were authored by eminent figures, such as bishop Burchard of Worms (11th c.). Book nineteen out of the twenty volumes of his extensive work *Decretum - Corrector et Medicus* – is a typical penitential of a questionnaire-like structure. German scholars perceive that book as a true mine of medieval survivals of paganism. It is extensively quoted by e.g. Jacob Grimm in *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835). Out of 194 *Corrector*'s paragraphs approximately 60 are dedicated to superstitious beliefs and practices (cf. *Medieval handbooks* 1965).

The oldest known Spanish penitential, *Penitencial de Silos*, comes from the 9th century and also contains a substantial collection of pagan superstitions (López Martínez 2001). The only known Portuguese confessional handbook dating back to the Middle Ages is *Penitencial de Martim Pérez* from the 14th century (Martim Pérez [1957]). The oldest historical relic of that type originating from Poland had been written a century earlier. It is 13th-century *Summa de confessionis discretione* compiled by a Cistercian monk Rudolf from the Rude monastery in Silesia. A most interesting part of that penitential is the so-called *Catalog of magic* – a list of misdemeanors against God's law with a detailed description of criticized beliefs and practices. Since that fragment was included in a handbook for confessors it most probably served as a questionnaire of a kind to help interview rural penitents.

The largest number of penitentials was brought out in the 17th and 18th centuries. Their structure and contents remained practically unchanged – despite the lapse of time they continued to play the same role. As distinguished from medieval penitentials, they were no longer written in Latin, but in national languages. The most popular pastoral handbook in Europe of the 17th century was *Instructiones Confessorum* written by Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, who lived in the 16th century. In the 18th century a similar handbook was written by another Italian saint Alphonsus Liguori (Alfonso Maria de' Liguori) – bishop, doctor of the Church and poet. Both works were known throughout Catholic Europe and have been preserved in many European libraries until now.

Penitentials in Spain and in Poland

Interesting conclusions may be drawn from a comparison of confessional handbooks originating from two opposite ends of Europe – In the Iberian Peninsula and the area of today's Poland. I shall compare here the following texts: the already mentioned 13th-century Latin work *Summa de confessionis discretione* by Brother Rudolf (Karwot 1955), the penitential from 1633 *Instrucción de confesores, como han de administrar el Sacramento de la Penitencia* by Spanish Jesuit Antonio Fernández de Córdoba (1621; cf. Azpilcueta 1553), *El fuero de la conciencia* by Valentín de la Madre de Dios from [1704], and the Polish penitential from 1753 entitled *Kołąda duchowna parañanom od pasterzów* [The Pastoral Visit] authored by Marcin Józef Nowakowski (1753).

In the „Foreword to the readers”, staving off potential astonishment of an inexperienced confessor who starts reading the handbook, the author of the latter, Father Nowakowski writes that although it seems incredible, people, especially those living in rural areas, still believe in superstitions and practice pagan rites. (It should be noted that it was already the age of the Enlightenment).

The catalog of offences in *The Pastoral Visit* is substantial. The confessor divides it into: “*divinatio*, i.e. divination”, “*superstitio*, i.e. superstitions”, “*idolatria*, i.e. idolatry” and “*vana observatio*, i.e. vain observation”. The last group contained as many as 129. It reminds of a list of required information compiled by an ethnographer for himself before taking off into the field. Those are not ready-made questions to be later used in an interview, which should be conducted in such a manner so as to make it possible to find out whether a given custom functions in the community under study without making a direct reference to it. Using so-called suggestive questions is considered to be a serious interviewing error. It may also be conjectured that a confessor employing *The Pastoral Visit* was to use the catalog it contained to construct his own questions.

Nowakowski's confessional handbook has a fictionalized form – the author predicts some situations introducing dialogues, and it is the conversation between the priest and the penitent that the need to enumerate the sins he commits arises from. It is worth noting here that Father Nowakowski's work was held in high esteem in the latter half of the 18th century and was not treated as a piece of belles-lettres, but as a manual of great help in pastoral work. One of the major luminaries of the Polish Enlightenment, priest, politician, writer, Hugo Kołłątaj, referred to it as “a useful work” “containing practical instructions how a visiting priest was to talk to the people so as to help and enlighten them [...]” (Kołłątaj 1953: 232).

Let us have a look what sins were included in Father Nowakowski's list:

“Carrying a green leaf called clover on one’s body as a charm”, “Believing that when a crow or a raven caws somebody will die”, “Driving cattle in the nude to make it fertile”, “Overturning a harrow to reverse the clouds”, “Lifting spells”, “Believing that to meet a Jew means good luck, while to meet a priest is bad luck; throwing a pin after him”, “Fasting on Sunday or Saturday instead of on Friday”, “Saying that a picture is miraculous although it is not”, “Refraining from cutting nails on Fridays”, “Saying prayers about Jesus’ fever and cold, because Jesus was never suffering from those illnesses”, “Putting teeth into a church wall”, “Predicting future consequence, good or bad, from any event [...]”, “Explaining dreams and believing in it”, “Immersing women in water to learn whether they are witches.”

Similar contents could be found in the Latin sermon *De diversis superstitionibus hominum, quae sunt contra fidem* [On various human superstitions, which are against faith] by Stanisław of Skarbimierz – an eminent medieval lawyer and preacher, the first rector of the Cracow Academy renovated in 1400 (Olszewski 2002: 185). The 13th-century *Catalog of magic* compiled by a Cistercian monk Rudolf, in many aspects corresponding with Burchard of Worms’ *Corrector*, lists many practices fought by the Church, in particular those connected with divination, cult of demons, belief in dreams and love magic.

Thus, we have sources dating back to the 13th and the 18th century, which refer to similar, if not the same, magical practices and beliefs unsavory for the Church. It might be added here that some of those superstitions were until recently well known to the inhabitants of certain regions in Poland, especially in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the country. Ethnographers carrying out field interviews met with such phenomena eye to eye.

Let us now compare Spanish confession handbooks. The penitential compiled by Jesuit Antonio Fernández de Córdoba in 1633 has the following, extremely long title: *Instrucción de confesores, como han de administrar el Sacramento de la Penitencia y de los penitentes, como se han de examinar segun su estado y oficio. Y ultimamente, como se hará bien una confession general*. Padre Fernández was born in Lisbon and dedicated the major part of his life to missionary work, first in Goa, and then in Abyssinia, where he ardently fought against heresies. He left behind many ascetical and polemical writings.

Chapter LX: *Para Labradores* of the work discussed here is dedicated to grave and light sins committed by peasants. A considerable portion of those transgressions is related to what is of our interest here: remnants of pagan beliefs and practices. Mortal offences listed by Polish preachers are repeated here. Helping an uneducated penitent, the confessor asks him about the following sins:

- did he call for demons – openly or secretly,
- did he attribute divine traits to animals,
- did he insult sacraments and holy objects (if he did it out of ignorance, the catalog classifies it as blasphemy; otherwise it was treated as a mortal sin),
- did he adore other beings or objects claiming it was God,

- did he participate in rites that were out of compliance with the Christian faith (here he goes on to list ceremonies held by Jews, Moors and heretics) not to ridicule them, but in earnest,
- did he practice witchcraft and magic tricks,
- did he predict future from the stars, dreams, animal voices and palm reading and did he consult on these matters people who strive to uncover God's secrets,
- did he believe in dreams,
- did he cure himself or others with magic or objects instead of applying recognized medications,
- did he carry on himself any pieces of paper with letters or figures or a decapitated man's prayer claiming that it protected him against hell and sudden death,
- did he consider any events as omens of bad luck for the future, e.g. when salt is spilled on the table,
- did he believe in unlucky days,
- did he profane the Holy Bible by using it for purposed other than religious.

Slightly different in character is the work of Carmelite Valentín de La Madre de Dios. The title of his extensive handbook is: *Fuero de la conciencia : obra utilísima para los Ministros y ministerio del Santo Sacramento de la Penitencia donde hallarán quanto necesitan para hacerse suficientes en la ciencia Moral y aplicarla con acierto y fruto a la práctica*. The second out of six treatises making up the penitential provides very detailed instructions of how the dialogue “between the confessor as a judge and the penitent as a witness and a defendant” (“entre el Confesor como Juez y el Penitente como testigo y reo”) should be conducted. As compared with the previous ones, this work features an extensive theoretical introduction, where the author discusses theological aspects of offences against individual commandments, preparing the confessor to work with better educated and more demanding penitents. This is probably the reasons why there are fewer queries about sins relating to remnants of pagan beliefs and magic. The largest number of such misdemeanors is connected with the first commandment. Thus, the confessor asks whether the penitent believes in dreams, superstitions, divination, whether he practiced magic, whether he had contact with the devil, whether he cast spells, or he committed the sin of idolatry, whether he used holy water and the Eucharist with bad intentions.

It is now time to summarize the observations made here.

The sins arising from cultivations of pagan practices, outlined by the authors of confessional books, should have been still quite common in 17th-century Europe,

since, by assumption, listed were only those offences against faith which happened most frequently. In *Manual de confesores y penitentes* of 1553, which was very popular in Europe, Martín de Azpilcueta made it absolutely clear that the confessor should not shower the penitent with a catalogue of all possible offences, but ask only about those that are most common in a given community.

The catalogues of sins discussed above had their regional characteristics – in the question concerning participation in heretic practices Antonio Fernandez de Cordoba mentions ceremonies of “Jews and Moors” – though to a large extent were based on the common source. It seems to have been *Summa theologiae* by Saint Thomas Aquinas, which notes down many pagan relics. Antonio Fernandez de Cordoba refers to Thomas in case of many specific offences, while Valentín de La Madre de Dios clearly draws from him in his theological discussions, and both Spaniards at the same time also refer to the decisions of the Council of Trent. However, both authors had to validate St. Thomas’ catalog.

The Polish author of the 18th-century confessional handbook, Father Nowakowski, was rather an “ethnographer”, well prepared to work in the field, than a learned theologian. Anyway, that are a lot of indications that he himself was of peasant stock. His small – as compared with length treatises written by the Spaniards - booklet was addressed primarily to uneducated rural people. Nonetheless, as we have seen, many of the pagan transgressions against faith are present in all four penitentials.

The authors of manuals for confessors and penitentials supplemented with confessional guidance – educated and authoritative people, often bishops and other important church dignitaries – make use of an array of rhetorical strategies. They also teach their readers, that is other priests, how to apply the appropriate techniques in dealing with the faithful. These rhetorical strategies occur at two levels: the introductions, prefaces addressed to the recipients of these works - confessors and pastors engaging in difficult conversations with the faithful about morality, behavior, worldview, is the most common type of advisory genre, *genus deliberativum*, encouraging the practice of the virtues of the perfect priest, and therefore with a focus on advising (*suasio*). The second level of rhetorical persuasion in penitentials and guides for the preachers is connected with the other party in the sacrament of confession - the penitent. The authors of the guides prepare the confessors for the hard work by equipping them with the adequate rhetorical tools. The tools are located in all the three types of speech: judicial (*genus iudiciale*), epideictic (*genus demonstrativum*), where the strategy is not based on praise, but the reprimand; and advisory (*genus deliberativum*) with a focus on dissuasion (*dissuasio*). Lausberg draws attention to the fact that in *genus demonstrativum* “listeners choose a procedure recommended by the speaker [in this case the confessor], and

the confessor only consolidates their choice” [Lausberg 2002: 27]. This strategy requires a lot of skill, knowledge of psychology, but also considerable knowledge of pre-Christian spiritual culture with the whole repertoire of beliefs, procedures and behaviours connected with magic and husbandry practices.

I shall conclude with a statement made by John T. McNeill (1933: 465), who dealt with the relics of pagan beliefs and practices in the oldest medieval penitentials:

We must justly suppose that innumerable individuals in the sacrament of penance turned from the abominations of the heathen. But in the masses of the population the ancestral habits were not to be overcome. Folk-paganism was a hydra which no weapons of ecclesiasticism could slay. [...] Countless superstitious practices penalized in the Penitentials have survived the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

A word of comment here: McNeill wrote those words more than 80 years ago. And still in the 21st century people become overcome with anxiety when salt is spilled on the table or a black cat crosses the road, and in many hotels room number 13 does not exist.

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