Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica 2021, 22(2)–22(3): 91–107

Kamil M. Kaczmarek[1]

The evolution of religions. A synthetic approach

The approach to the evolution of religions proposed in this paper tries to overcome the weaknesses of socio-cultural and selectionist evolutionism. It is an attempt to synthesize the Darwinian approach with Herbert Spencer's systems theory and sociological ecology of organizations. It allows an analysis of not only the origin and evolution of particular religious organizations under the influence of social forces but also the mechanisms to resist these forces.

Keywords: sociology of religion, evolution of religions, Darwinism, system theory, Herbert Spencer

Ewolucja religii. Podejście syntetyczne

Zaproponowane w artykule podejście do ewolucji religii usiłuje przezwyciężyć słabości ewolucjonizmu zarówno socjokulturowego, jak i selekcjonistycznego. Jest to próba syntezy podejścia darwinowskiego z teorią systemów Herberta Spencera oraz socjologiczną ekologią organizacji. Pozwala nie tylko na analizę powstania i ewolucji poszczególnych organizacji religijnych uwarunkowanej siłami społecznymi, ale także umożliwia poznanie mechanizmów opierania się tym siłom.

Słowa kluczowe: socjologia religii, ewolucja religii, darwinizm, teoria systemu, Herbert Spencer

Introduction

In 1964 Robert Bellah remarked that "retreat of evolutionary thought in social science" nowhere "did go further nor the intensity of the opposition to evolution go deeper than in the field of religion" (Bellah 1964: 358). His essay did not initiate

[1] Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, camillos@amu.edu.pl.

a breakthrough in this regard, mainly for the reason that the approach proposed in it was characterized by the same properties which contributed to the failure of evolutionism in the social sciences. The main goal set by evolutionists with respect to religion was to determine the stages through which religion had gone in human history. This meant adopting the macro-sociological perspective, both in the space and time dimensions. These theories were to include religions of all the civilizations and all epochs. They usually started with a speculative attempt to explain the sources of religion and the forms it adopted in Paleolith (in his latest book Bellah begins his story of religion in human history even earlier – from the Big Bang [Bellah 2011]). In this perspective, different religions merely become representatives of particular, typologically recognized stages. The object of evolution in this approach is in fact religion perceived abstractly as a cultural phenomenon, not empirical religions.

Another weakness of traditional evolutionism lies in the treatment of the problem of evolution mechanisms. Sociologists usually represent in this regard two opposite approaches: they either ignore the problem, suggesting a far-reaching autonomy of religion, or make religion a substructure of the social system by which the evolution of religion becomes only a parallel, a reflection of social evolution. The first approach is derived from the tradition of Auguste Comte, whereas the other one from that of Edward Tylor, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx and Lewis Morgan. Moreover, the latter approach was often accompanied by a priori granting a decisive, determining role to one selected factor (like degrees of social composition, modes of production, technology, etc.).

For these two reasons, the traditional theories of the evolution of religions proved to be useless in solving specific research problems. And a theory which does not inspire empirical research is doomed to failure. Researchers are not as much interested in the place of a given religion in human history as in its own history. Empirical religions cannot often be enclosed within one society but they penetrate between the most diversified social systems with varying degrees of complexity and economic relations, and what is more, they remain in recognizable shapes for many historical eras (not to mention Christianity, which originated in antiquity, flourished in feudalism and lasts in modernity).

Realization of the weaknesses of the classical approach to the evolution of religions makes some sociologists reach for the theory of evolution whose object are empirical, not abstract entities, and which explains their transformation by referring to different mechanisms, i.e. to Darwinism. For the sociology of religion less interesting might be attempts to introduce biological factors to the sociological theory, as in Stephen Sanderson's Darwinian Conflict Theory (2001, 2008). The sociology of religion seems immune to Darwinism although there is the intensive development of the evolutionary paradigm in the field of anthropology of

religion or religion studies. The conclusions of sociobiological theories of religion (as Rossano 2010, Wilson 2003 and others), referring to the concept of multi-level selection, cognitive science or behavioral genetics (as Boyer 2001, Atran 2002) may significantly influence the basic assumptions of the sociological theory of the evolution of religions, but they do not constitute it themselves.

More important are attempts to build a theory of evolution of religions inspired by Darwinism an example of which can be a Darwinian approach of Ina Wunn (2002, 2003) whereas strictly sociological darwinian theory was proposed by Walter G. Runciman (1989, 2009), which was also applied by him to explain the success of early Christianity (Runciman 2004). A direct inspiration for most of these attempts were the concepts proposed by biologists. Luigi L. Cavalli-Sforza (2001) as the first tried in the '60s to use population genetics algorithms in linguistics, and his ideas were developed by Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd (2005). Independent of them, Richard Dawkins proposed in 1976 the concept of *meme* as a cultural equivalent of *gene*, which gave rise to Memetics (Blackmore 1999; Brodie 2009; Dawkins 2006a; Distin 2005; Lynch 1996).

The application of Darwinism to the study of culture met with strong criticism (Bloch 2000; Fracchia, Lewontin 1999, 2005; Kuper 2000; Sperber 2000). I think, however, that the source of far-reaching simplifications that characterize this approach lies a bit deeper than is usually assumed. The error does not consist in the fact that the above mentioned researchers went too far in their borrowings from biology, but that they relied on too simplified a vision of biology offered by neo-Darwinian evolutionism, which is strongly disputable and hardly translate into the socio-cultural world.

The basis of transfer of the mechanism of natural selection to the world of culture is interpretation of evolution in terms of variation, competition, and selection of information embodied in genes, made on the grounds of neo-Darwinism. Recognition of culture as a resource of hereditary information is not a major problem then (Lenski 2005: 42), which creates an opportunity to apply neo-Darwinian algorithms to it.

Yet, this information reduction carried out by population geneticists in order to allow mathematization of models describing inheritance, meets with serious criticism on the grounds of biology, as exemplified by the discussion in the pages of „Philosophy of Science" in 2000 (67, no. 2). Critics point out, first of all, that information does not constitute an independent entity but it is dependent on the chemical properties of its carrier (DNA). It becomes the information only while being read by independently inherited cellular machinery, and only for the use of the cell itself. Genes are therefore a component of a complex system of inheritance, but this is not the only system of inheritance and they are not the only hereditary information (Godfrey-Smith 2000; Griffiths 2001; Jablonka 2002; Sterelny 2000).

Particularly inspiring is here the developmental system theoretics approach of, among others, Susan Oyama (1985, 2000). All of them point out that genes are not just a program but a resource, and they acquire meaning in relationships with their close and distant surroundings.

Thus, the problem does not lie in this that there is no informational isomorphy between genes and culture, but what matters is that the isomorphy takes place within the framework of system-like entities. Meanwhile, the systemic dimension is precisely what is missing in the approach of Wunn or Runciman. It is worth recalling the fact that beginning with the ancient times and ending with the general theory of systems (Ludwig van Bertalanffy, Niklas Luhmann), thinkers noticed far-reaching isomorphies between organic and social phenomena resulting just from the systemic nature of both.

I think that a sociological theory of the evolution of religions can be built only on the condition of making a synthesis of the approaches based on informational and systemic isomorphies, parallel to modern evolutionary-developmental biology (Evo-Devo). I am going to present an outline of such a synthesis below. First, however, it is necessary to provide its theoretical basis.

Religious ideas

Criticism, which the gene approach of population genetics met within the field of biology, is in most dimensions consistent with the objections that a sociologist may make in relation to the Dawkins' concept of *meme*. Although cultural systems can be analyzed as composed of different ideas, these ideas are certainly not selfish, individual replicators. The meaning of particular ideas, as emphasized by Ferdinand de Sussure, can, in fact, be described only through relationships with other ideas. The concept of "God" does not have any meaning in itself when separated from the languages in which it is defined. What's more, it has a completely different meaning depending on whether it occurs in a given doctrine system in the context of the concepts of "Son of God", "original sin", "salvation" or in the context of the concepts of "covenant", "law", "prophet".

Religious ideas are transmitted depending on their attitude to the values cherished by their recipients and to their kind. The same concept with a religious content will have a different meaning when loaded with religious values, and another one when associated by the sender with utilitarian or aesthetic values.

Just as genes are not the only carriers of information in the body, so not all of the ideas circulating in the culture play a role, which would justify calling them "units of cultural inheritance" (Dawkins 2006b: 191). Contrary to the claims of memeticists, ideas which are crucial for a culture or religion do not jump "from

brain to brain" (Blackmore 1999: 6, 38), but are passed from generation to generation in the process of socialization, from a group or institution to an individual. It is not a completely spontaneous and uncontrolled process, and this also applies to religious ideas.

Therefore, it is not possible to describe adequately the isomorphy occurring between the processes of transfer of genetic and cultural information in isolation from their location in the relevant systems. Ultimately, as Leslie White aptly noted: „only systems can evolve; a mere aggregation of things without organic unity cannot undergo evolution" (White 1959: 30).

System context

The system theory in sociology, since its inception, has been closely related to the functional approach, which, as argued by Sanderson, does not work. He states that „functionalism as an explanatory theory is dead (or at least should be dead)" (Sanderson 2001: 16). He refers to the functional paradigm which derives from Durkheim and which was brought up to sociology by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, and whose most prominent representatives were Taloctt Parsons and Robert Merton, and the restorers Niklas Luhmann and Jeffrey Alexander.

It is worth noticing, however, that in the field of biology functionalism continues to be one of the tools of analysis and it has never aroused major controversy (Sober 2000: 83–84). Yet, it is an utterly different functional paradigm. Its roots lie in the economic concept of division of labor, which was later used by physiologists to explain the role of organs in the body. Although this paradigm was also present in sociology, now it is almost completely forgotten. Its most prominent representative was Herbert Spencer, from whom Durkheim adopted functionalist terminology, but (in *The Rules of Sociological Method*) with a substantial change of meaning. The main changes made by Durkheim are as follows:

1) The concept of function for Spencer means activity (work) (Spencer 1872: 153 [§ 55], 1912: 487 [§ 235]), while for Durkheim and his followers it is a result of influence (Durkheim 1982: 123; Merton 1967: 105; Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 178–179, 181; see Turner, Maryanski 1988: 113).
2) Spencer assigns functions to specific individuals, groups composed of individuals or organizations (Spencer 1912: 479–482 [§ 232]), whereas later functionalists assign them to almost any distinguished social or cultural phenomenon (Durkheim 1982: 123; Merton 1967: 104; Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 180).
3) The needs which a function is to satisfy are the direct or indirect needs of individuals (Spencer 1900: 247 [§ 441], 1912: 462 [§ 222]). Apart from that

> Spencer (1906: 17) distinguished emergent needs of structures performing particular functions. By separating sociology from biology and psychology, Durkheim rejected the roots of social entities in empirical characteristics of human beings, which forced him to seek such „needs", „objectives" or functional requirements that would be only appropriate for the detached social level of reality (cf. Corning 1982: 364).

Spencer's general system theory assumes that needs satisfied by functions are a result of interaction between the system and the environment and, as a result of this impact, are subject to gradual differentiation. They are therefore historically determined. The two most basic needs: the need to counteract the influence of the environment in order to protect one's own existence and the need to accumulate resources to sustain the existence, are the starting point of the differentiation (Spencer 1872: 154 [§ 56]). I think it is worth adding to the group of the most fundamental needs another one which Spencer did not appreciate: the need to reproduce.

Spencer's theory is therefore a completely separate systemic-functional paradigm. Since it was defined for the purposes of the evolutionary theory, with the intent to apply it both in biology and sociology, it seems much more useful for the intended task herein than mainstream functionalism.

Subject of evolution

The basic premise of the theory of evolution presented here is: subject of evolution are religions and not religion. The definition of religion for the purposes of the theory of evolution should therefore capture the particularities of religions, not just the distinct character of the cultural phenomenon that religion is as such from other cultural phenomena (e.g. science).

As noted by Ina Wunn, religions have properties isomorphic with biological species. But at the same time they have systemic properties, isomorphic with organisms. Spencer's paradigm assumes indicating first the need of a system which a given function (activity) is supposed to satisfy. Most of the functional theories of religion depend in this respect on existential philosophy (that would be the need of a meaning of life or of ultimate meanings), but personally, I prefer to rely on the evolutionary sciences of mind.

Representatives of the Cognitive Science of Religion suggest that people have innate predispositions to create images of supernatural beings (Bering 2002, 2003, 2006; Pyysiäinen 2003). Some kind of experiences are interpreted as forms of activity of this sort of beings. These beings create a distinct type of environment as opposed to the natural and social environments, which I call a supernatural

environment. Since it is composed of beings of human-like nature, people refer to it, more by analogy, as to the social rather than the natural environment (Rossano 2010). From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, people tend to enter into the relations of exchange, partnership, coalition or superiority-subordination with others (Buss 2008: 263–321, 355–382). Similarly, there is a variety of relationships with supernatural beings.

As noted by Pacal Boyer:

> what is a constant object of intuitions and reasoning are actual situations of interaction with these agents. People do not just stipulate that there is a supernatural being somewhere who creates thunder, or that there are souls wandering about in the night. People actually interact with these beings in the very concrete sense of doing things to them, experiencing them doing things, giving and receiving, paying, promising, threatening, protecting, placating and so on (Boyer 2001: 138).

A condition for coping efficiently in social relationships is to gather knowledge about fellow men: whether they are reliable partners in exchange or maintain fidelity in sexual relationships, whether they provide care for offspring, whether they are valuable partners in coalition, whether they are more powerful or weaker than us, etc. Similarly, to maintain good relations with the supernatural beings, it is thus necessary to gather knowledge about them. Its primary sources are different kinds of experiences interpreted as religious (dreams, visions, trances, hallucinations) or events interpreted as miracles. They are unusual so a community gets access to them by means of special stories telling about them, which I following Malinowski's notion will call myths. Myths are usually ambiguous and therefore require interpretation before they become useful intellectual tools for religious activities. Thus, religion as a socially inherited source of information about the supernatural environment acquires in time a hierarchical structure whose mythic stratum and a set of the most fundamental interpretations become the supreme authority. As a result of resolving or suppressing internal contradictions, it obtains systemic properties. In this respect, systems of religious ideas are characterized by a far-reaching isomorphy with genotypes, also forming highly complex systems. However, in order to remain relevant and useful, information systems (both genetic and cultural) must be protected. Uninhibited mixing of religious ideas (which is implied by memetics) would lead to a loss of coherence of the system and, consequently, to the loss of its credibility, just as the free movement of genes would lead to averaging all the favourable features. Thus, as noted by Ernst Mayr, in nature dominates the arrangement of living forms in „discrete packages, so called species". Species are a way of „protection of a harmonious gene pool". They

are defined as "groups of interbreeding natural populations that are reproductively isolated from other such groups" (Mayr 1996: 264).

In the case of most of the historical religions, these are not the entire communities (populations) that carry this store of information. The task of protecting, storing, and adapting it to the current needs is given to a separate religious organization, or rather a group of such organizations maintaining communication with each other. To perform this function the organization must recruit members and raise some material resources which (at least to some extent) will exempt them from the necessity to carry out economic activity. Thus, a religious organization enters into a three-fold relationship – informational, populational and economic, with its social environment: The persons whom the organization serves providing supernatural interpretations, and from among whom it recruits its members and gets resources, are a niche of a given organization (or a religious community).

A look at religions as species draws attention of a sociologist to the specific mechanisms by means of which religions isolate themselves from one another with respect to communication, in the form of e.g. natural or ritual isolation, suppression of commensalism, interdiction of conubium (intermarriage), Index Librorum Prohibitorum, development of apologetics, control of religious education etc. To some extent, these mechanisms refer also to members of a community, but they become particularly important with regard to members of an ecclesiastical organization.

From this perspective, religion can be defined as a communicatively isolated collection of organizations formed to protect a given system of ideas providing, through its interpretation, practically relevant information about the supernatural environment to certain groups of people.

Such an approach allows to put the issue of origin of a new religion in a new light. Biological models of speciation (allopatric, peripatric, parapatric, sympatric, via hybridisation) can only be a starting point because they take no account of the systemic nature of religion. In their view, a new species arises as a result of occurrence of an external isolation barrier (as in the allopatric mode, combined with the effects of drift in the case of the peripatric one), the selection of subpopulations (in the parapatric mode), especially the disruptive selection (in the case of the sympatric mode) or of mixing of the genetic pools. When we take into account the systemic nature of religion, we obtain the following models:

1. By a symmetric division – when communication between two ecclesiastical organizations or groups of organizations, which so far have kept communicating with each other, is broken or limited by external factors (non-religious), such as political, cultural or language barriers. As a result, each of them begins to develop independently and theological differences between

them begin to grow preventing communication even when the isolating factor disappears.
2. By an asymmetric division – when a communication barrier separates a part of the community initially devoid of its own self-sufficient ecclesiastical organization. Such a sub-community will be forced to create their own organization, but the stock of religious ideas is likely to be significantly reduced, and its coherence will have to be created almost from the beginning.
3. By separation – when particular organizations that compose a given religion are subject to the pressure of diverse religious preferences of their own communities. Thus, primary are the theological differences resulting from succumbing to these pressures, which ultimately lead to the development of isolating mechanisms.
4. By heresy – when the afore-mentioned pressure is ignored by an organization, it creates an opportunity for charismatic authorities emerging in a given community to initiate an independent ecclesiastical organization within the parent community. When the organization fails to assimilate the newly formed movement, it can initiate an entirely new religion.
5. Through innovation – when charismatic authorities appear outside of a religious community and recruit individuals not involved in any tradition.
6. By syncretism – when charismatic authorities refer directly to more then one of religious traditions and recruit followers from among members of their religious communities. A new religion may arise as a result of syncretism but also as a result of blending of whole communities (e.g. the invading and the conquered ones).

Mechanisms of evolution

The core of Darwinism is the mechanism of natural selection. It is therefore necessary to answer the question whether religions are entities that may be subject to a homologous mechanism. Useful seems to be a list of criteria proposed by Stephen Jay Gould. He assumes that for some entity to undergo Darwinian evolution, it should have (1) a definite beginning and (2) as well determined end. (3) It should have sufficient stability, defined as coherence of substance and stability of form, making it recognizable during its lifetime (thanks to having clear boundaries that prevent the passage of items between entities, functional cohesion, material continuity, etc.) (Gould 2002: 598). To be subject to Darwinian evolution it must also (4) be able to reproduce, to give offspring which (5) must have more features of the parent than of other individuals. Moreover, such inheritance must be accompanied by (6) variation for the selection to occur (Gould 2002: 608–609).

There is no doubt that historical religions have a specific moment of birth, and that religions die. As Daniell Dennett says, „Two or three religions come into existence every day, and their typical lifespan is less than a decade" (Dennett 2006: 101). Between these historical moments of birth and death some of them retain their identity throughout the ages. Reproduction of religious organizations would consist in creation of new organizations (by division of the existing ones or through mission) which inherit a given system of religious ideas. The very fact of emergence of new religions as a result of division is a proof that inheritance is not always accurate.

Religions therefore meet all the criteria to be considered Darwinian units. But this alone does not prove yet that selection actually occurs in their case. To prove it, it is necessary to determine what exactly is subject to selection, and which selection forces are at work here.

Sociological Darwinists answer the first of these questions in two ways: subject to selection are (1) religious systems or (2) religious ideas. The first response is supported by a quasi-systemic nature of religious doctrines. A religious innovator or a missionary presents a potential convert with a well-defined system or its outline (such as Christian *Kerygma* or Buddhist *Four Noble Truths*). It is the system the audience is confronted with rather than with some abstract concepts (such as God or Original Sin). The various religious ideas gain meaning through other ideas included in the system.

And yet in certain circumstances selection also occurs at the level of religious ideas. Most of all, it occurs in the conditions when an ecclesiastical organization and binding interpretations have not crystallized enough to take on their protective function effectively. This occurs at the very beginning of a new religion. During this period, any intentional or unintended changes, innovations, but also the equivalent of drift, can play a key role. An analysis of errors occurring during the process of copying of texts of the New Testament carried out by Bart Ehrman (2005; Ehrman, Metzger 2005) gives some idea of these processes. Although it relates to the period of early Christianity when the corpus of writings containing a mythical stratum and binding interpretations was already pre-determined, we can assume that the same processes on a larger scale occurred earlier, when transfer was made orally and even to a greater extent depended on individual carriers. Ehrman distinguishes unintended modifications resulting from errors in reading, memorizing or understanding the texts, as well as intentional ones, which are a result of theological or social views of the copyists. In this dimension, isomorphy with genetic transmission, namely with the phenomenon of mutation, comes to the fore. It is not undermined by an apparent difference consisting in the absence of intentional changes in biological inheritance, because for the Darwinian

mechanism to apply, it is only important that the source of changes is independent of selection factors.

The selection to which ideas and religious systems are subject may be either negative (consisting in rejection) or positive (consisting in affirmation). The latter is reminiscent of Darwinian sexual selection.

An interesting outline of the theory of negative selection factors was presented by Max Scheler in his sociology of knowledge (Scheler 1980: 33–38). He made a synthesis of the Marxist approach and that of Ludwig Gumplowicz and Johann Bachofen. According to him, economic, political and procreative interests are such factors. Those interests, however, are diversified and structuralized in form in the society and depend on interests of the main social classes, political parties, as well as sexes. One and the same religious idea could violate interests of one social group while being neutral for another one. For example, the recommendation of Jesus „go and sell That thou hast, and give to the poor" was not difficult to complete for those who did possess nothing, but „when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:21–22). Ban on divorce stirred resentment among the disciples (Matthew 19:10), but it was beneficial for economically dependent female followers. Its importance, however, changed with the increasing independence of women, as noted by Durkheim in his study of suicide (Durkheim 2005: 233–237, 351).

It is the single ideas that face resistance of concrete interests, but as they are always part of a system, their effect may be suppressed by other ideas that relate positively to interests of another kind. Although Jesus imposed significant limitations on reproductive interests of his disciples, he also promised them that they would inherit the earth, and „Ye Shall sit also upon twelve thrones, twelve tribes of the Judging of Israel" (Matthew 19:28). As shown by this example, interests can become a factor of positive selection but, in my opinion, they are as such of secondary importance.

The most important strength of positive selection are religious preferences of man (Wunn 2002: 508). They represent a configuration of religious needs conditioned partly by a social position, but also, to some extent, by factors of personal character. Religious needs arise from the need to respond to the supernatural beings in an appropriate manner, typical for social relations. However, particular individuals may prefer to enter into some kind of relationships while others may seem unattractive to them. I think that these needs can be divided into three categories:

- The need for knowledge, which is the most fundamental of religious needs, as it allows any adequate reference to the supernatural environment. It is necessary to know which being one can and should interact with in a particular way, what kind of practices enable the relationship, and what actions may cause his/her anger.

- The need for ties, which comprises two modi of fulfillment: a modus of the relationship of exchange (*do ut des*), and a modus of personal relationships modeled on the relationship of friendship or love (as in the Hindu *bhakti* devotion).
- The need for power, which is also expressed in two modi: a modus modeled on the relationship of coalition, in which the supernatural being is treated as an ally in a fight or as a source of personal power, and a modus modeled on the relationship of subordination to more powerful beings.

Just as people differ in their religious preferences, so do religions in their ability to respond to them. This is most evident in the case of religious pluralism where particular faiths differ significantly in terms of social characteristics of their members. But a discrepancy between religious preferences and the offer of an organization does not necessarily mean abandonment of the members. They may be kept in the niche of an organization because of their interests, by the power of conformity or by inertia. It can be suspected that only for relatively few people religion is so important in their life that they are willing to risk for it breaking social ties, conflicts at work, exclusion from political activity or reducing the number of possible partners for marriage. For this reason, a niche of any religion can be divided into the center, including people whose religious needs are actually satisfied by a given ecclesiastical organization, and the periphery, including people supporting its activity for non-religious reasons. A niche periphery is more susceptible to erosion and invasion of other religions, and it is also a natural field in which heterodox charismatic authorities can appear.

Mechanisms of stasis

After formation of a religious organization and fundamental strata of a theological system, the fate of religion is more adequately described by the evolutionary theory of punctuated equilibrium rather than by phyletic gradualism. Religions can in fact in many different ways resist changes under the influence of external factors and persist in the state of stasis. The problem of stasis or inertia is one of the most important issues for sociologists representing the ecology of an organization (Hannan, Freeman 1977; Hannan, Pólos, Carroll 2004), but inspiring are also theories put forward to explain the stasis of biological species (Gould 2002: 877–883).

The first of the mechanisms that can be distinguished is the ecclesiastical selection. Any new religious ideas born in a community or religious organization are subject to selection because of the requirement to maintain coherence of the theological system and because of interests of the ecclesiastical organization itself. An idea which is gaining popularity in the community but which violates the

integrity of doctrine or the organization's ability to accumulate resources or recruit members will be fought with all means available to the organization.

Another mechanism which allows to keep the organizational structure and the fundamental strata intact is accommodation which consists in taking advantage of the existing structures and reinterpretation of the teaching. Sometimes it is enough to change the emphases in the offered doctrinal system, to silence certain ideas and emphasize others. Accommodation can be made, however, on the basis of the organization's inherited resource, hence it is not always possible. As long as the religious doctrine is a coherent system, reinterpretations cannot affect its balance since this will result in the loss of credibility. Similarly, a change in the structure of an organization with fixed routines usually entails more costs than benefits which are most often only hypothetical (Hannan, Pólos, Carroll 2004).

Having exhausted the possibilities to adapt to a particular niche in the way of accommodation, religion can still change the niche, it can promote expansion in these regions where the greatest compatibility between its offer and the dominant religious preferences occurs. That would be a mechanism analogous to habitat tracking (Golud 2002: 880–881).

Another mechanism enabling religion to neutralize the impact of significant changes in preferences of the niche is assimilation of spontaneously arising religious movements. When an ecclesiastical organization succeeds in subduing them, they take upon themselves the full force of change, allowing the superior organization to survive in an intact form. It is a mechanism widely used by the Catholic Church in the form of various types of orders and lay movements.

Death of religions

The evolutionary perspective transforms the question about secularization or disappearance of religiosity into a question of death of particular religions and the conditions under which it occurs.

The actual death of a given religion occurs at the moment of breakdown of a religious organization, as described by a Polish scholar, creator of thanatology of religion, Tadeusz Margul (1983: 18). A religious organization may also die as a result of extermination of its members by political institutions. Most frequently, however, the death of an organization is a result of the loss of ability to perform its basic functions. Erosion of the niche is usually an indirect cause because it implies a reduction of resources to maintain the organization. Another cause is the inability to recruit new members to the organization. All this, however, results from the growing divergence between the doctrine of a given religion and preferences of its community in the absence of non-religious factors that would keep people in the niche.

This inadequacy may have both internal and external causes. A lack of proven isolation mechanisms can lead to uncontrolled implantation of exogenous religious ideas, and, as a result, the doctrinal system can loose its coherence. Although not undertaking the effort of accommodation and assimilation allows to preserve the centre of a niche, it may cause a loss of its periphery and thus create a field for activity of competitors. However, possible is also a situation when a religion loses its niche despite the existence of effective isolation mechanisms and accommodative action, when religious preferences of the population undergo such far-reaching changes that it is simply impossible to meet them within the framework of a given doctrinal system.

Conclusions

In comparison to the classic sociological theories of evolution of religions, the approach presented in this article is fundamentally different in several respects. Firstly, it makes a particular religious organization, not religion as such, the object of evolution, which distinguishes it from the vast majority of socio-cultural theories. At the same time I consider particular religions taking into account their systemic, not only populational characteristics, which distinguishes my approach from the current Darwinian sociology. However, I do not treat them as a dependent social subsystem only, as in mainstream functionalism, but as a relatively autonomous system capable of coming into various interactions with other social organizations. At the same time this approach does not aspire to historical universalism but focuses on the phenomena occurring in the historical religions, i.e. religions operating in the environment where religious pluralism (and therefore also competition) is at least theoretically possible. Due to the problem of evolution mechanisms, this approach is not as much alternative as synthesizing in relation to other sociological approaches. I think that many of the mechanisms by which sociologists explained the transformation of religions are part of a wider frame, which is the synthetic theory of evolution of religions.

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