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## **Sacred/unsacred places in Poland**

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**Abstract.** Every religion has its sacred and unsacred places. Such places are destinations of pilgrimages. Interestingly, sacredness of a place is not permanent; it may change in the course of time. In the paper, the author describes several sacred places across Poland, which is considered a Catholic country. It has its holy places – official and unofficial, Catholic and non-Catholic Christian. There is Jasna Góra, Licheń and the Zabłudów meadow, where both Catholic and Orthodox pilgrims arrived in the 1960s. There are also the stone circles in Kaszuby. In spite of other religions related to these places, it is possible to distinguish several common characteristics.

**Keywords:** Catholicism, sacred place, unsacred place, religiousness, Poland.

As compared to the rest Europe, Poland seems to be a Catholic monolith (cf. Putnam, 2008, p. 108). The Catholic character is also revealed when the starting point for analysis are the data presented by Statistics Poland or data from the national censuses carried out by the state.<sup>1,2</sup> Furthermore, in the general discussion, Poland is considered a Catholic country and Poles are Catholics (cf. Mazurek 2019, Mazurek & Potulski, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> As of today, data pertaining to religion from years 2001 and 2012 were published; the data pertaining to religion from the 2021 census have still not been announced publicly.

<sup>2</sup> The National Census of 2011 confirmed the opinion about the dominant position of the Catholic Church in the Latin rite – the community of persons who consider themselves members of this Church has 33,729,000 people, i.e. 87.6% of the population in general and 96% of persons with defined denominational status. These data were also confirmed by the Catholic Church (cf. GUS, 2012, or Gudaszewski, 2007, pp. 16–17). Furthermore, Pew Research Center, an independent think tank in its recent studies indicated that Poland occupies the 8th place in Europe with respect to religiousness. In the Statistics Poland survey of 2018, 91.9% persons declared that they belong to the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, it should be noted that approx. 94% of Polish residents (aged 16 and older) declare that they are religious, while 81% consider themselves believers, while are 3% non-believers.

However, one has to bear in mind that all these studies were carried out before the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, which transformed the social reality around the world – not only in Poland. These changes also affected the realm related to religiousness. Nevertheless, Poland is still considered a Catholic country and this opinion may be treated as a social fact (Durkheim, 2006), which is commonplace, but does not necessarily have its confirmation in reality.<sup>3</sup> In other words, not all Polish citizens are Catholics, and even if they are formally categorised as Catholics on account of baptism, they are not necessarily practising Catholics; furthermore, also believers of other religions live in Poland (not necessarily Christian), along with atheists.

The purpose of this paper is to present the selected sacred and unsacred places in a country commonly considered – as mentioned above – Catholic, while these places are not necessarily recognized by the Catholic Church institutions or related to Catholicism.

Initially, a concept that is related to sacredness (and its absence) must be defined, namely religion which – for the purpose of this paper – is treated as a cultural fact, in line with one of the most popular definition by Clifford Geertz, according to whom:

religion (1) is a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 2005, p. 112)

If religion, treated as an element of culture, is dominant (as is the case in Poland), it is a manifestation of hegemony – at least in the public sphere (and this is the object of the discussion here). The orders of existence, referred to by Geertz, form a cultural filter explaining the social reality related to the religious foundation, whose basic element is: 'faith: "(...) he who would know must first believe" (Geertz, 2005, p. 132). Thus, a place becomes sacred or not if there is faith that it is such.

## **Sacred/ unsacred places: Definitions**

A place is a quite common concept in social sciences, especially in environmental psychology (cf. Lewicka, 2012) or in anthropology. This construct was developed very intensely by social geographers (or, more precisely, humanistic geographers) in the 1960s. A place is, next to space, one of the fundamental elements of the reality of every individual<sup>4</sup> (Tuan, 1987, p. 13).

A place is connected to the identity of an individual and a community, because the meaning which results from specific historical processes taking place at a specific

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<sup>3</sup> Before the introduction of restrictions in personal contacts and possibility of movement or even leaving the place of residence, according to the data from Statistics Poland in 2017, there were 32.91 million baptised people in the Catholic Church in Poland, 30,807 clerics in 10,263 parishes throughout the country. According to the data of the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church, in 2019, 36.9% of believers participated in masses, and 16.7% received the Holy Communion. After the restrictions related to the pandemic were lifted in 2021, it turned out that the percentage of the *comunicantes* slumped to 12.9%, while masses were attended by 28.3% of believers, which means a considerable drop as compared to the pre-pandemic period.

<sup>4</sup> It is related to a safe haven, according to Tuan, because: "(...) place is security (...)" (Tuan, 1987, p. 16).

time has been incorporated into it (Augé, 2010). Hence, to understand how a place is perceived, it is necessary to learn the context and the mode of thinking of persons who provide such meaning (cf. Augé, 2010, pp. 53–56). Marc Augé defines a place (in particular archaeological) as a locality that is filled with meaning, which is symbolised through it. The meaning may differ, depending on the context and the mode of interpretation: it may be sacred or unsacred. The latter may be ordinary or cursed.

Sacred places are precisely defined by the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church (CCL 1205), according to which:

Sacred places are those which are designated for divine worship or for the burial of the faithful by a dedication or a blessing which the liturgical books prescribe for this purpose (CCL 1205),

i.e. churches, chapels, sanctuaries, altars and cemeteries. According to the New Testament, also people are holy. In the Letter of St. Peter, we read:

5. Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 P 2, 4)

Generally speaking, sacred places are an outcome of a specific narrative pertaining to places and they are built with the use of mythopoetic, historical accounts that are important for constructing the identity of a given community. Events related to a specific location endow it with a specific sacred dimension.<sup>5</sup> Creating narratives about the past events in a given location is, by itself, a ritual that forms a link between the present and the past, between what was in the past and between what is now. Oftentimes, a sacred place is also related to instilling meaning to landscapes, in particular when this legitimises the right to reside in a given area (López & Austin, 1973, p. 98). Hence, a place is connected to a space – in the narrative, a sacred place is related to the sacred landscape (cf. Reese-Taylor, 2012).

Obviously, a question may be asked about what makes a specific place sacred, why a place is not sacred, or why a place becomes cursed and what makes a sacred place forgotten. The unsacred seems to be the opposite of the sacred,<sup>6</sup> even though a sacred place may also be cursed (cf. Pawluczuk, 2012, pp. 415–421).

## Landscape of sacred/unsacred places in Poland

Hence, who has the authority to legitimise specific locations as sacred/ unsacred is of fundamental significance. On the one hand, Jasna Góra is an official sacred place, a place where pilgrims from all over Poland travel every year; the stone circles in

<sup>5</sup> Otto and Eliade conceptualised and popularised the category of the sacred, while in the realm of sociology, Emily Durkheim dealt with it (cf. Walendowska, 1987, p. 322; Eliade, 2008; Otto, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Even though social sciences and humanities have been avoiding binary oppositions since the so-called post-structuralist breakthrough, one has to concede that the human mind manifests such inclination.

Kaszuby<sup>7</sup> are also such a place for some; on the other hand, Małachowo-Złych Miejsc<sup>8</sup> or Babia Góra<sup>9</sup> are cursed places.<sup>10</sup> Thus, sacred places may be formally sacred on account of assumptions adopted by a formally existing institution (for example, the Catholic Church) and on the other, places are sacred because a specific community considers them such.

Without doubt, the aforementioned Marian shrine at Jasna Góra is one of the most sacred places for Catholics in Poland. It is the destination of multiple pilgrimages, in spite of the fact that no revelations, which often 'sanctify' specific locations, took place there. The element that attracts the pilgrims is the Miraculous Painting of Our Lady;<sup>11</sup> since the 15th century, the place has been one of the largest (but not the only one) Marian shrines. Similarly to other places of miraculous healing,<sup>12</sup> Jasna Góra has its Book of Glories where information about miracles can be found. The earliest miracle happened in 1392, when the painter Jakub Wężyk from Lithuania regained his lost sight. Also Michał Bartosiak, affected by paralysis, was miraculously healed in 1929.<sup>13</sup>

The best known, 'official' sacred places for the Catholics, apart from Jasna Góra, are: Sanctuary of Divine Mercy in Łagiewniki, Sanctuary of the Relics of the Holy Cross at Łysa Góra (vicinity of Kielce) Marian Sanctuary in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska (40 km from Kraków), Marian Sanctuary in Święta Lipka, Marian Sanctuary in Licheń and the Sanctuary in Gietrzwałd. There are springs in the last two locations; it is said that the water has miraculous properties.

Pilgrimages to these locations take place annually, which is important for the faithful and may be treated as an act of religious worship (cf. Turner, 2005, p. 145). Pilgrimages to sacred places are present in multiple religions, not only Christianity: Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. In early Christianity, pilgrimages were voluntary

(...) sacred travels to Palestine or Rome were considered acts of supererogatory devotion, a sort of frosting on the cake of piety. But the strong element of obligation came in with the organisation of penitential systems in the church. (Turner, 2005, p. 147)

<sup>7</sup> Stone Circles were selected for the presented analysis for several reasons. Firstly, they are the reserve of the "Stone Circles", and secondly, they constitute an unexplained mystery to this day: We do not know what they were, whether they were a cemetery, a place of worship, or a calendar, and they were appropriated by people who had been re-appropriated.

<sup>8</sup> A village in the Wielkopolskie Province, Gniezno Powiat, Witkowo County. It is interesting to note that in the early Middle Ages, a stronghold existed here. In 1855, a bronze figure of Isis feeding Horus was found here by accident; it is the only such find in this part of Europe (Archeologia Polska, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Babia Góra (1,723 meters above sea level) is the peak of the Babia Góra massif in the Babia Góra Range (Beskid Żywiecki) with a height of 1,723 meters.

<sup>10</sup> Some of the most famous cursed places in the world include Aokigahara (the Sea of Trees) in Japan and the Mexican Isla de las Munecas.

<sup>11</sup> Interested readers can read more about the history of the painting on the website of Jasna Góra Sanktuarium Matki Bożej Częstochowskiej na Jasnej Górze | Historia Cudownego Obrazu (jasnagora.pl) – access of 01.02.2023.

<sup>12</sup> It must be indicated here that if miracles or other types of glorious events are described in this paper, they are treated as a social fact, i.e. defined in this way by the persons who participated in these events; the theme of miracles is not tackled in the theological sense here, because this is a realm reserved for religious institutions. In the case of the Catholic Church, the basis is the work from the 18th century by Cardinal Lambertini 'On the Beatification of the Servants of God and Canonisation of the Blessed.'

<sup>13</sup> Information about the miraculous healing derives from the Catholic website niedziela.pl (Te cudowne uzdrowienia z Jasnej Góry powinien znać każdy! | Niedziela.pl – access of 01.02.2023).

In the course of time, voluntariness gave way to obligation,<sup>14</sup> and in effect liminality of the act of pilgrimage, which may be treated as a social process. According to Turner:

(...) pilgrimages are liminal phenomena (...) they also exhibit in their social relations the quality of *communitas*; and this quality of *communitas* in long-established pilgrimages becomes articulated in some measure with the environing social structure through their social organisation. (2005, p. 139)

The *communitas*<sup>15</sup> instils meaning in pilgrimages to both sacred and unsacred places.

One of such examples is the aforementioned Zabłudów meadow<sup>16</sup> and the Stone Circles in Węsiory in Kaszuby, not related to Christianity. The Zabłudów meadow is an interesting example also due to the fact that it has been almost completely forgotten now, which shows how the official discourse indicates what should be remembered and what can be forgotten (Foucault, 2022, 1977). In May 1965, Virgin Mary appeared to the fourteen year old Jadwiga Jakubowska; the event was dubbed the 'Zabłudów miracle' and triggered a wave of various consequences, from religious to political. When a crowd of several thousand people was waiting for another miracle announced by the aforementioned Jakubowska, skirmishes with police units erupted.

(...) in the afternoon, the ZOMO [communist riot police] started to use batons, bangers and tear gas to disperse people at the miraculous meadow and in its vicinity. Shots were also fired. People retaliated; they destroyed the police cars with stones and threw bangers. (Krzywosz, 2012, p. 136)

The result of the riots was victory over the ZOMO units – it cannot be forgotten that it happened in the communist times. This victory, combined with the miracles (even though experienced exclusively by Jakubowska), had symbolic meaning: Virgin Mary protected people from communism. Pilgrims started to arrive at the place, which became sacred. A ditch was dug out and filled with water – the water had healing properties.

The sacred place took over the profane zone – the meadow became a sacred place, a location of miracles:

The stones that were put in the place of the miracle turned white, as if by miracle and one of the pilgrims saw how the flowers dispersed on the meadow became arranged into the shape of a crown. The constant amount of water – in spite of being used by pilgrims all the time – in the spring was also considered a miracle. (Krzywosz, 2012, p. 155)

<sup>14</sup> Rev. Jan Perszon says straightforwardly: 'The Christian doctrine about a pilgrimage as a religious act derives from Patriarch Abraham, who – obedient to God's calling – became the archetypal model of a pilgrim (Perszon, 2015, p. 96).

<sup>15</sup> The aforementioned Turner distinguished three types of *communitas*. The first is the existential, spontaneous *communitas* which is a result of a confrontation with others, which makes the individuals experiencing such state: "(...) perceive the human kind as a homogeneous and free community, devoid of structure". The second is normative *communitas*. A social structure emerges in the course of time the purpose of which is to mobilise the group resources to keep the groups in a relative affluence, and – most importantly – to exercise social control over the group members. Turner stresses that the third type of *communitas* is the ideological *communitas*, which may be determined as utopia or a vision of a society where the existence of existential *communitas* is possible.

<sup>16</sup> An in-depth description of the Marian revelations at the Zabłudów meadow was presented by Maciej Krzywosz (2013, pp. 133–157); it should be stressed that the author visited the place and described the events not only on the basis of accounts in the contemporary media, but also based on the documents compiled in the Institute of National Remembrance. As may be guessed, the events were closely monitored and described by the contemporary security services.

A flower, planted by Jadwiga in the place of the revelation, which the authorities ordered to be torn out, grew back overnight and this was also treated as a miracle (Krzywosz, 2012, p. 155). It should also be emphasised that the meadow became a sacred place for the Orthodox believers.

It is particularly interesting that the place became the destination of pilgrims in a spontaneous way – the Church did not set up a shrine here<sup>17</sup> and the propaganda of the contemporary authorities contributed to the fact that the place became forgotten (or, as Maciej Krzywosz claims, ridiculed). The pilgrims set crosses on the meadow, on which numerous votive offerings were placed (candles, rosaries, coins, prayer books), while those who were healed left their bandages.

On the one hand, the events at the Zabłudów meadow are an example of a hierophany, as described by Eliade (1974, p. 53), which is a manifestation of the sacred taking over the profane (cf. Krzywosz, 2012, p. 139), while on the other hand, they also represent folk Catholicism in Poland.

Folk religiousness in Poland (or, more broadly, in Central Europe) has not been discussed in detail so far (Bukraba-Rylska, 2013, pp. 509–510). In general, it is a model where the ‘superficial nature of faith’ is stressed, co-existing with ‘pagan relics’, observance of rituals is highlighted along with its primarily community-based character, which is particularly visible with respect to pilgrimages. Religiousness of this type is also characterised by sensualism, direct contact with the object of worship (in the discussed case, the specific location – a meadow) and failure to distinguish ‘the existence of what is presented from what it presents’ (Tokarska-Bakir, 2000, p. 48). Pilgrims came to the place where Our Lady has revealed herself and performed miracles (their arrival was conducive to it).

The second example of a sacred, yet at the same time unsacred place, not related to Catholicism, is the stone circle in the Kaszuby region. This is a completely different place (as compared to Licheń, Jasna Góra or the Zabłudów meadow), yet in reference to it, the same mechanisms may be indicated as in the case of pilgrimages to the Catholic sacred places.

The stone circles are, on the one hand, remnants of the presence of the Goths and the Gepids from Scandinavia, who wandered south from Scandinavia to the Black Sea around the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE; on the other hand, this site is called the ‘place of power.’ In 1956, archaeologists (Kmieciński, 1958) dug out and reconstructed sixteen burial mounds here (in total, there were twenty of them) and examined three stone circles; 110 graves were also located here (cremation and skeletal (pit) graves of Goths and Gepids from the 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century<sup>18</sup> (cf. Breske et al., 2015; Kokowski, 1987). The Stone Circles are located approx. 1.5 km south of the village of Węsiory, at the northern side of Lake Długie. Today, it is a place where people meet, e.g. on Kupała’s Day, to celebrate the summer solstice together (cf. Słomczyński, 2021, pp. 301–322). This event is interesting from the sociological and archaeological point of view, as

<sup>17</sup> Today, a shrine is located in the place of the revelations.

<sup>18</sup> All the archaeological finds from Węsiory are nowadays kept at the Archaeological Museum in Gdańsk.

it refers to the Slavic origin of the residents of Poland and to the religion practised back then (or our beliefs about it).<sup>19</sup>

References to Slavic beliefs may be treated as way to satisfy the need of faith in the situation when Christianity (or Catholicism for that matter) fails to do it. One cannot refute the fact that the present-day faith of Poles can be described as privatised (cf. Mazurek, 2019). According to Janusz Mariański, modern people 'believe that the path to God (understood in diverse ways) is found not by following the socially acknowledged forms of religion, but thanks to personal faith. They have their own God, their own heaven, their own salvation and their little credo' (Mariański, 2008, p. 102). In other words, people can believe in what they want to believe, because religious affiliation and faith are a question of choice and individual preference (Mariański, 2010, p. 147).

It seems that the desire to belong to a specific community is of major importance here – to meet with other people in a Catholic or Protestant church or around stone circles. In the last case, there is also the sense of being chosen to learn the truths that are not available to others. Thus, during the aforementioned ceremony: 'the initiated welcome one another; they stand in groups; it seems that they know one another or at least they have common subjects to discuss' (Słomczyński 2021, p. 306). They gather in order to – using Eliade's theory (1989, p. 85 et seq.) – participate in a ritual or restore the original myth, to update the past. The summer solstice ceremony is an example of a calendar ritual that commemorates the past (Bell 1997, p. 94) and aims at identifying the nature of reality (Bell, 1997, p. 89). Putting on tunics and decorating heads with wreaths<sup>20</sup> is nothing else but a moment of passage indicating laminarity of the situation (cf. Turner, 2005); it is also a recurring ritual that is related to an event that is exceptional, while the participants are aware of its extraordinariness (cf. Rothenbuhler, 2003, p. 26).

## Final conclusions

Summing up, a question may be asked: who, what and how decides that a given location becomes sacred or cursed? The latter category definitely encompasses places of torment from the times of WWII; given that these are also burial places of people who tragically died there, they sometimes function as sacred places, places where the offspring of the victims pilgrimage in order to pay homage to the murdered people.

Sacred places are places where the sacred engulfs the profane space; these are the places that have gained a symbolic meaning that require special, often ritualised behaviour, different than in the profane zone. Interestingly, such places are not related to a specific religion and they may be set up in locations that belong to the distant

<sup>19</sup> The summer solstice ceremony, on account of absence of direct evidence providing facts as to its form in the Slavic times, is more of our notion of it and the result of impact of popular culture.

<sup>20</sup> The aforementioned Tomasz Słomczyński describes the outfits of the participants as follows: "Sometimes, the initiated wear specific outfits, but not always. As far as women are concerned, they may wear flowery dresses with simple cut or linen 'Slavic' dresses in light-brown, grey or beige colours. Some men wear stylised folk shirts without collars or tunics (...)" (Słomczyński, 2021, p. 305).

history. The events described above, which happened in the area of the Stone Circles, are also an example of a myth as: '(...) machines for overcoming time' (Lévi-Strauss, 1964, p. 24). During the ritual, the participants go back in time, recreating events from the past compliant with their beliefs.

We never know whether a given location is not going to become sacred on account of the events related to it, for example like the miraculous Zabłudów meadow, which is also an example of oblivion. The communist authorities, using all measures available to them, erased it from memory, returning it to the profane sphere.

Furthermore, it needs to be remembered that:

Narrative frameworks give meaning to discrete human acts in various locales and embed a sacred landscape within the social memory of people. People culturally construct sacred locales by means of mytho-historical accounts that encompass neither an isolated report of a single event nor a chronological sequence of events. (Reese-Taylor, 2012, p. 755)

In other words, the discussion about specific locations which often become sacred is important; thanks to the narratives about miraculous events which happened there, e.g. revelations and healing, they become sacred. Van der Leeuw says directly that the essence of sacredness is the power that emanates from a given place; hence, the springs and reservoirs from which water can be taken and carried away (van der Leeuw, 1997) are quite frequent there. Miraculous water in a sacred place generates the power of a location, which often becomes a shrine; the space becomes ritual, capable of absorbing different discourses; everyone may experience whatever they want to in a given place. It may be said that: '(...) a sacred place seems to be a vessel to which the pilgrims piously put their hopes, prayers and aspirations' (Eade & Sallnow, 1991, p. 16).

A place becomes sacred/ unsacred thanks to the belief that it is such. It is an example of consensual validation described by Leon Festinger (1954). If something cannot be directly confirmed, it may be verified by confirming it with the beliefs of others, which forms the above-mentioned consensual validation – in the environment, everybody believes the same thing. Furthermore, another mode of confirming the truth is to recreate the rituals and ceremonies related to a specific system of beliefs (collective system of meanings).

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