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The general outlook on sects in Poland.

We are living in an epoch of significant transformation in the mentality of many people. It is a time of numerous worldview changes, from the transformation of hierarchy of values to the search for alternative modes of salvation. We are witnessing a serious crisis of faith and a deep spiritual thirst, which the contemporary man tries to satiate by the plethora of available means. Traditional forms of worship have lost their appeal to the contemporary audience, oriented rather towards swift results and powerful sensations. Hence the quest for new religious stimuli.

Also in Poland, starting from the political transformation by the end of 1980s, we can observe both the decline of the Catholic church's monopoly and the welcome offered to new religious movements. In a nutshell, the problem of sects in Poland can be defined as relevant and visible, yet not dramatic. It must be objectively admitted that new religious movements do not experience legal difficulties at the stage of their registration in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration. The freedom of religious denomination is guaranteed constitutionally (article 25 and 53) as well as by the bill of "warranties of the freedom of conscience and religious denomination", of May, 1989. The latter allows for registration with a minimum quota of just 15 followers.

The amendment of June, 1997 obliged new religious movements to refer in their doctrines to God. The goals of such organizations should be purely religious. At present, the right to apply for registration requires the minimum quota of 100 Polish citizens with full capacity to enter into legal transactions, while their signatures under the application have to be confirmed by a notary. In practice, only already formed religious associations with some history are registered. Impromptu founded organizations today have no chance of registration. And, last but not least, should the activity performed by a religious union be in contradiction with the law or the constitution, the above being confirmed by a valid judgment, such a group will be deleted from the register.

In the years 1990-2002 there were a total of 153 decisions concerning registering churches and other religious unions, as well as 49 refusals of the above. In legal practice, a certain change of strategy can be noticed at that point. Until 1992 all religious movements that applied for registration were automatically registered. It was only since 1993 that the applications were examined in more detail. At that time, a controversial cult founded in South Korea by Moon, called the Unification Church, was registered. Let me remind you here that in 1995, Moon was a guest in Poland, providing a speech in the Congress Hall (Sala Kongresowa). Members of the Moon sect were attempting registration before 1989 but because of their association with numerous international scams, the authorities of the People's Polish Republic refused. The regulations of the liberal act legalizing new religious groups did not require the groups to be in existence already or to have already had some tradition. Also, the authenticity of the founding list was not verified. Additionally, various privileges were guaranteed to new religious denominations, referring mainly to financial, tax and duty areas. The church as a legal entity was exempt from all income tax. What's more, it was exempted from custom's fees for gifts imported from abroad, intended for worship, charity and educational goals. The lack of clear definition of „gift” and the impossibility of

checking the authenticity of donations caused important abuse and fraud. I will quote an example of a pseudo-religious group called the Church of United Christians, founded by Zbigniew Szczesiul, a thief who aimed to set up his own church and make significant money in the process. The foundation group list was obviously forged. He promptly formulated a primitive religious doctrine and a statute whereof he guaranteed for himself the position of bishop. His activity began by constituting a fictitious seminar and order. Later on, he issued certificates of studies in such a seminar aimed to enable avoiding the army draft. He issued at the time about 60 false certificates. Next, Zbigniew Szczesiul imported goods required for alleged charity purposes; i.e. 30 tons of chocolate from Germany. He evaded paying a very high custom duty. Similarly he managed another scam, this time with a huge amount of champagne. He declared that it was, quote: “sparkling wine for worship purposes”. His activity exposed the State Treasury to serious loss. When finally arrested and sentenced to 4 years of prison, he told the press that he was proud of himself, adding that after leaving prison he intended to set up another church.

The case of the Church of United Christians was not the only one that drew public attention. At the end of 1990s, a term “car churches” emerged, meaning pseudo-religious groups set up in order to enable duty-free import of cars from Western Europe. The car churches included: the Christian Church of Advocates of the Good News and the Church of Polish Remonstrants.

Statistical data indicates, that in our country there are about 300 religious movements. They can be divided into several of the following categories:

1. Originating from one of the great world religions, often Christianity, Buddhism or Hinduism, much less often from Islam or Judaism.
2. Originating from the New Age movement, with a focus on heightening human mind potential and touch healing techniques, referring to occult cosmic powers.
3. Neo-pagan, referring to old-Slavonic traditions and forgotten pagan cults.
4. Ufological, referring to the faith in the existence of extra-terrestrial beings.
5. Satanist, focused on worshipping evil as well as developing occultist and esoteric techniques.
6. Based on private revelation, formed as an outcome of activities performed by charismatic individuals allegedly undergoing powerful mystical experiences. Economy-based, declaring help in attaining financial success.
7. Therapeutic, based on the faith that there are ways of restoring health other than medicine.

The most numerous sects that are currently active in Poland include:

- Jehovah's Witnesses – about 127 thousand members
- Seventh Day Adventists – about 10 thousand members
- Buddhist Diamond Way Association – 5 thousand devotees
- Church of Free Christians – 3 thousand devotees
- God's Church in Christ – 3 thousand devotees
- Mormons – about 1.5 thousand devotees
- International Krishna Consciousness Association – about one thousand members

The cult Niebo (Heaven) has left a particularly negative reflection in Poland's cult history. Its founder, Bogdan Kacmajor, assembled a group of fifteen or so people, on his property near Lublin. He talked them into believing that he possessed a gift of healing. His followers lived

their lives sharing possessions, obliged to total subordination to Kacmajor, who decided about cult's members' marriages and sexual life. Women were to obey their husbands and give birth to children. The marriage ceremonies were performed by the followers themselves. Vegetarian diet was mandatory to all members. Refraining from sending kids to school, severing ties with society, shunning military service, avoiding registering newborn babies, ban on using medical services as well as the reports about kidnapping and holding children captive was the reason why the authorities, media and anti-cult movements became interested in the matter. It was the latter who defined the group as "destructive". The cult derived its profit mainly from the healing activities performed by its founder. Bad fame however, caused customer outflow, financial downfall and disintegration of that destructive group.

In Poland, during the last decade, the increase in popularity among the organizations based on New Age philosophy becomes noticeable. First of all, they are small groups drawn together by common interests. They do not register their activity legally. The time of their functioning is relatively short, and after their disintegration they are replaced by others. Their members focus on perfecting meditation techniques derived from Hinduism and Buddhism. Additionally, those techniques are modified and extended by other elements.

This is possible because religious views of Poles show deep inconsistency and selectivity. According to analyses conducted by the Public Opinion Polls Centre dating for the year 2005, 53% of Poles think that there is no objective dimension of good and evil, and that the norm of behaviour is defined by circumstances. The significant part of our society willingly accepts elements of New Age philosophy. According to the research, 34% of Poles believe in reincarnation, 83% view all religions as equal and are convinced that each of them leads to God, 64% allow that some people have the possibility of foreseeing future events, and 25% believe in UFO. All this draws Poles to join cults, despite the people of Poland being, theoretically, 93% Catholic.

Scientology is an example of a destructive cult, which in the recent years, attempted entering the Polish scene several times. In the 90s the cult was hardly mentioned. The topic became hot in 1999, when a German of Polish descent, Andreas Kazimierzak came to Poland, organized a scientology seminar under the guise of an engineering office and began the sale of "Dianetics". After several unfavourable reviews in the press he closed his business. This was, however, only the first uneasy attempt. At present, scientologists are trying to settle down in Poland again. In 2007, the press widely commented Hanna Grabalska, considered the major scientology representative in Poland. She was an activist of one of the main Polish political parties. She is also the leader of the Society for Supporting Women in the Grodzisk powiat, in the town of Grodzisk Mazowiecki. Before, she ran the National Centre for Humanitarian Volunteers, which held courses in Warsaw of interpersonal communication, drug addiction coping and dealing with learning difficulties. In press interviews, she admitted openly that by that activity she was purposefully propagating the philosophy of scientology. In one of such interviews in 2007 she confessed the following: "We organize courses training people how to cope in marriage, how to offer proper upbringing for kids so they could grow up to be worthwhile people, and also, how to rid oneself of compulsive behaviour. All that, is based on the mind."

The suggestions of such courses reached a group of teachers from the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodship. They were encouraged to incorporate the scientology doctrine into the process of children's education.

In 2009 the scientologists were promoting literature. Nearly 4 thousand of Hubbard's books found their way into the Polish libraries. Those books entered, among others, into the Warsaw University or the Catholic University of Lublin.

In 2007 at a press conference, the then Commander in Chief of the police, Konrad Kornatowski, pointed out the increase of cult activity in Poland. Among the initiatives undertaken in order to counteract this pathology, police started cooperating with the Dominican Centres of Information about Cults. Additionally, at the level of the Voivodship police headquarters, special officers were designated, to coordinate and supervise events connected with the activity of cults in their respective territories.

Let me now proceed and present in a bit more detail the most threatening cult active nowadays in Poland. I mean - the Monastic Brotherhood Himavanti. Without any doubt, I can define that group as destructive or even criminal. Yet, I decided to present you at that point neither with the history of the cult nor with the stages of its activity. Instead, I will tell the story of the man who, for almost 15 years, has fought an open war with the cult's leader, Ryszard Matuszewski,. This man is Dariusz Pietrek, head of the Silesian Centre of Information about Cults, from Katowice.

His first contact with the Himavanti cult took place in 1997. A letter reached him, signed by the International Order of Knights of Holy War, stating that he would be, in no simpler terms, murdered. After some months Pietrek learned from the media who was the author of the letter; the leader of the Monastic Brotherhood Himavanti, Ryszard Matuszewski. For that letter, as well as for the threats of bomb attacks at the Catholic Church worship centres, Ryszard Matuszewski was sentenced to a suspended six months' sentence.

A that time, Dariusz Pietrek becomes one of leading anti-cult activists in Poland. Suffice it to say, that since March 1999 he cooperated with Central Investigation Office, in reference to a brutal murder performed on the grounds of Satanism in Ruda Slaska. The crime, performed by two men, less than 20 years of age, shocked public opinion not only in the area of Silesian voivodship. They organized a satanistic ritual in a bunker on the territory of Ruda Slaska where they murdered their friends: Kamil and Karina, stabbing them fifteen or so times with a knife. In such a way they were supposed to make an offering to Satan. A year later the Court sentenced one of the culprits to life sentence and the other to 25 years prison.

In June 2002 the members of the Himavanti cult started a pre-planned campaign against Dariusz Pietrek. Posters appeared on the streets of Gliwice, defaming his good name and suggesting that he was a paedophile. Later on, it turned out that Himavanti fights in that manner with anybody who has courage to oppose them. Including him, there was a total of 15 wronged persons, both ex-members of the cult and ones dealing with cults professionally. One of the cult ex-members' flat was set on fire three times. The case arrived before the courts, it was however soon redeemed because of the sickness of the accused.

In November 2005, Pietrek again finds on his front door a poster stating that he is a dangerous pedophile. On the poster there are addresses – the home address, the work address and the address to KANA (the Catholic Centre of Youth Education) on the grounds of which Pietrek was running the Silesian Centre of Information about Sects. In his home city about 15 such insulting posters were hung.

Simultaneously, postcards with obscene content would arrive by mail as well as mail parcels containing excrements.

At that time Dariusz Pietrek with a journalist who wrote for a newspaper, were accused by Matuszewski of assailing him and attempting murder. The accusation was obviously false. It was just one more step in the process of attacking the head of Silesian Centre of Information about Cults. After a short investigation the Police and the Public Prosecution Office, dismissed the charge.

In 2005 on the territory of Katowice, the next insulting posters appeared, now stating, that Pietrek was a member of the fascist organization, called *Blood and Honour*.

At the same time, a leaflet by one of the female members of the sect was published stating that the police, the Prosecution Office and, of course, Dariusz Pietrek himself, raided the seat of Himavanti Brotherhood. As the addresses and names of police officers and other people were provided, the Public Prosecution Office in Zabrze instituted an investigation. The court decided that Ryszard Matuszewski is insane, sending him for compulsory psychiatric treatment, which he left after some months.

Before the court case, leaflets slandering Pietrek appeared behind car wipers one more time. They stated that he was a paedophile and a Nazi.

In the years 2007-2008, abstract legal actions were instituted against Dariusz, needless to say – all false. They were directed to Public Prosecution Offices all around Poland. Himavanti members didn't expect to win those cases, the idea was only to slander Pietrek.

At that time Dariusz was receiving threats proposing to kill him and his family. What's more, on the walls of his home city, insulting murals appeared on which his good name was defamed, and he himself was accused of the worst of crimes, among others of being a fascist and a paedophile.

The latest information of just couple of weeks ago has it, that Himavanti members are preparing another campaign against Pietrek. Namely, the Public Prosecution Office in Torun, and also in Warsaw, were contacted by fabricated reports about a crime being committed by Radio Mary (Radio Maryja). The crimes are supposedly connected with insulting the Jewish nation and spreading racial hatred. These report which were blatantly false accused Dariusz Pietrek of being the author of these reports. Pietrek pleaded that he knew nothing of such reports, that he was not a listener of RM and that his signature was a fake.

The problems described above with the Himavanti cult, even though they most painfully touched Dariusz Pietrek, extend also to other centres. Let it be enough to mention that in Lublin, the city I come from, insulting murals addressed to me and to the former coordinator of the Centre for Counteracting Psycho manipulation, Pawel Krolak, also appeared several years ago.

It is clear then, that the issue of cults in Poland, is visible. We need not worry however, as there are also effective counter-balances to destructive groups: the cult information centres acting on the territory of the whole country.