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Forms of Social Pathological Changes in New Religious Movements

Abstract

The article presents forms of social pathology that can occur in destructive cult groups belonging to the category of new religious movements – a complex and multifaceted cultural phenomenon. He discusses the problems of mass suicides in a historical context and the phenomenon of religious terrorism. These issues constitute a challenge for individual countries to take appropriate steps (legal regulations, monitoring, exchange of information at the international level), aimed at ensuring the security of citizens.

Keywords: *new religious movements, social pathology, suicides, religious terrorism*

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Introduction

Changes – which took place in the Western civilization at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries – resulted in the collapse of traditional social structures, cultural patterns and the hierarchy of values. This situation affected the lives of people, led to their loss of existential, uncertainty, helplessness. The above phenomena have become the cause of the emergence and development of new religious movements that offer a man the satisfaction of his basic needs. Among the various cult groups, there are often those that have a detrimental effect on the individual in his individual and social dimension. These communities are destructive. There are various forms of social pathology in them. Therefore, appropriate legal actions should be taken to reduce their negative impact. These are usually unregistered movements, operating under the auspices of associations, foundations, psychological and therapeutic offices, and wellness centers. Their activity is a serious challenge for the state and society (Migala 2011, p. 145). It should also be noted that some registered groups – theoretically acting in the majesty of law – can destructively affect the individual and society.

Among phenomena in the field of social pathology (Podgórecki 1969, p. 24, Kojder 1976, pp. 43-44, Albanian 2010, p. 7), including cases of death, lowering the moral level, deterioration of well-being, material losses – caused by transgression of praxeological, ethical, legal and self-destructive rules (Malec 1986, pp. 59-60; Pospiszyl 2008, p. 17) – there arises the subject of small, closed cult communities. These groups offer people a new order of things and moral order – often contrary to generally accepted principles. They offer a lifestyle that violates socio-legal norms. They have a destructive effect on the unit and society (Stankowska 2004, p. 143).

New religious movements are a cultural phenomenon involving different communities. Most of them operate in accordance with the law. However, sometimes – as history shows – groups with totalitarian, fundamentalist and extremist backgrounds appear. Their leaders often use religion for their own purposes. They are often charismatic, authoritarian, mentally disturbed, irrational, unfulfilled in life, convinced of their own historical mission, uniqueness, uniqueness, greatness, desiring recognition, power, money, profit (Abgrall 2005, pp. 56-76). They gather believers who provide them with appreciation, obedience, devotion. Such movements exert destructive influence on the life and health of individuals and human communities, and also threaten the security of

the state. They prefer attitudes leading to undermining the law, moral, moral and cultural norms. They reject commonly accepted patterns. They are dangerous to the individual and society (Migala 2011, p. 7).

Destructive Groups

Destructive groups (Latin *destructio* – “destruction”, “violation of the whole”, “ruin”), which form a broad context of the issue of new religious movements, are communities with a strongly developed structure of power. They are characterized by a divergence of declared and implemented goals. They hide the rules governing the lives of members. They do not respect the rights and freedoms of a man. They negate the existing ethical and legal order. Their influence on followers, families and society is harmful (Międzyresortowy Zespół do Spraw Nowych Ruchów Religijnych 2000, pp. 13-14, Mikrut, Wiktor 2004, pp. 27-28).

New religious movements of a destructive nature question the existing social reality. They conduct activities that are contrary to the existing system of values, which consists of individual moral attitudes of people shaped by cultural processes (Szostak 2001a, p. 261, Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 123).

The pathological dimension of some cult groups concerns not only their harmful activity, but also the ability to cause specific damage (Gaberle 1993, p. 20). The level of destruction – caused by the functioning of such communities – affects two spheres: psychophysical (psychological and sociological) – related to mental health; spiritual-religious (cultic) – concerning worldview (Posacki 1997, p. 17, Szostak 2001a, p. 73). The destructive movement – before it destroys man – diminishes its capabilities, reduces the image, closes within ideology, unilateral discipline and automatic availability (Posacki 1997, p. 22; Romańczuk-Grącka, 2008, pp. 31-32).

A destructive group is a community of people connected by a certain worldview, permanent or periodic cult and organizational forms. Its goals and how to implement them are against the law. They strike public order through the pathological way of functioning. This type of movement is of a totalitarian character, resulting from its ideology and actions, which are based on social impact techniques and aim at subordinating members to the commands of the leader (the managerial body). In such an organization

there is a high level of totality and manipulation (Posacki 1997, p. 22; Romańczuk-Gracka, 2008, pp. 31-32).

When considering the issue of forms of social pathology – occurring in destructive religious movements – it is important to distinguish individual anomalies from communal ones. The behavior of individual units is reflected in the group. The pathological functioning of an alternative cult includes its unethical influence on individuals. It consists in exerting – through the use of different methods – psychological pressure by the group or its individual members acting by order of the community. It is impossible to show a clear border between individual and group pathology, because one is the manifestation of the other. Therefore, there is a difficulty related to the application of appropriate criminal sanctions for persons for crimes initiated by the group (Szostak 2001a, pp. 262-263).

At the level of criminal law, there is no concept of collective responsibility. Although it is known that actions violating public order may involve all members of the movement, each of them is responsible for individual decisions. The above issue forms the basis for subsequent legal qualification. It is worth adding here that in common perception the harmful activity of one person or several people influences the overall perception of the group. This state of affairs causes many misunderstandings and abuses – both on the part of certain social groups, as well as representatives of new religious movements. Only an individual approach to the presented problem makes it possible to understand this issue, as well as to protect basic human rights in its individual and social dimension (Szostak 2001a, p. 263).

In today's world, destructive worship groups represent a small percentage of new religious movements. It must be remembered, however, that these communities also come to a man with an offer to satisfy his fundamental desires. They offer him comprehensive development, meeting his needs, a vision of a better future. The condition for this is the abandonment of the material world, existing existence and joining the movement to start a new life – based on obedience of the leader and involvement in the group's activity. After a longer time of staying in such a community, psychophysical and personality changes can be observed in the members (Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, pp. 123-124).

The most characteristic of them are: sudden modification of the hierarchy of values, behavior; reduction of mental efficiency, adaptability; providing mechanical, stereotypical answers; emotional dementia; a state of apathy or morbid exaltation; conformity;

emaciation, weight loss, “dull” facial expression, a fleeing look; dissociation states, stereotypical behavior, obsessions, hallucinations; loss of the ability to conduct free conversation (dominates the subject of faith, reproduction of common mental patterns); uncritical and unreflective citation of the leader’s words; difficulties in concentration; lack of initiative, independent action; feeling of fear, danger; inability to take a life outside the group; mechanical exercise; change in nutrition – justified by the teacher’s will rather than rational reasons (Śledziński 1997, p. 35-36).

It is difficult to say how high the degree of changes in the psychophysical and personality sphere are caused by manipulative techniques in the members of the presented cult groups, because some people have different disorders before joining a specific community.

These symptoms include the external image of a member of the destructive religious movement. The presented transformation of personality – affecting the individual dimension – is the introduction to deeper transformations with a cultural, physical and emotional background. The social influence employed by some communities contributes to the alienation of the individual and the deprivation of his identity, individuality as a result of his total identification with the group. This process is aimed at gradually destroying the relationship that man has with himself and other people. In this way, he loses previous reference systems in favor of new patterns that meet the requirements of the group (Abgrall 2005, p. 124-125; Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 125).

Psychological and personality problems of members of destructive religious movements can be considered on three levels: cognitive (problems with concentration and memorization, tendency to perceive reality in black and white, magical way of thinking, dissociation disorders); emotional (sense of guilt, isolation, helplessness, discouragement, low self-esteem, lack of purpose and sense of life, depression-anxiety, phobia, psychosis); social (difficulties with making decisions, finding your own place in society, establishing interpersonal relations) (Międzyresortowy Zespół do Spraw Nowych Ruchów Religijnych 2000, pp. 44, Romańczuk-Grącka 2008, p. 140).

When discussing the issue of the harmful influence of cult groups on the psyche and personality of the followers, special care must be taken. It should be remembered that the etiology of symptoms and disorders does not have to be associated only with belonging to a specific community and the use of specific manipulation techniques. In this sensitive issue, it will be safe to say that there are a number of different causes

affecting the psychophysical condition of members of new religious movements (Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 126).

In the destructive religious movements – in addition to individual anomalies – group pathology may also occur. Its basis is collective emotional delusions. These are the experiences of community rebound, purification (Greek *catharsis*), hysterical states, trance or collective suicide. The last problem is the most complex and difficult to interpret. However, it well shows the forms of social pathology that occur in some religious organizations. In harmful cult groups, suicide is acceptance of death, a form of sacrifice, reconciliation or confirmation of accepted doctrine. For the students of the presented communities, it is a kind of testimony to the world, a way to achieve divinity and a transition to a new (better) reality (Międzyresortowy Zespół do Spraw Nowych Ruchów Religijnych 2000, pp. 2-3; Szostak 2001a, pp. 176-179).

Groups of a totalitarian nature, isolating themselves from the environment, are dangerous. They have an authoritarian structure of dependencies. They require absolute obedience. They impose the rhythm of everyday life. They attach great importance to indoctrination. They are distinguished by doctrinal fundamentalism. These groups violate the existing public and legal order. The leaders of such communities subordinate the followers to their psychological destabilization and breaking the existing social bonds (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 1998, p. 186, Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2001, pp. 37-38).

Potentially harmful are organizations in which there is: discrepancy of declared and implemented goals; social and geographical isolation; the use of manipulation techniques; dichotomous division of the world (we–them, good–white, true–false, sacred–profane); eliarism; exclusivity (Maruchin 2002, p. 40).

Suicides

A serious threat to the individual and society at the turn of the 20th and 21st century are apocalyptic cults. Shocking public opinion about mass suicides of members of new religious movements in the United States and Western Europe is conducive to reflection on groups of this kind and the motives of their followers in making such desperate steps (Szostak 2001a, p. 175; Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 129).

Periods of various breakthroughs allow the development of prophecies and prophecies. This increases the interest of the broader circles of society in apocalyptic concepts

related to the end of the world and expectations for a new, better epoch. In moments of turning history, catastrophic and pessimistic tendencies predominate. Through their prism, man perceives his own life, placing hope in the reality that is to come. He becomes sensitive to the signs of the times, ready to follow the charismatic leader who can not only show him the way of life, but also confirm his inner fears and desires (Szostak 2001a, p. 176; Rakovský 2004, p. 33).

Apocalyptic groups belong to phenomena that occur in all epochs and civilizations. Human life – full of anguish, suffering, dramatic events - is a period of trial. Soon this evil world will come to an end, and only a few will see a new (good, just) reality. This motif – the annihilation of the “old” world and the hope for better times – is chosen and used by the leaders of apocalyptic cults. The basis of their doctrine are paintings taken from the Apocalypse of Saint. John, who are trying to give a concrete dimension. Cataclysms, wars and diseases perceive signs of the coming Apocalypse. These leaders see themselves as the Son of God – the Savior of humanity (Mikolejko 1996, p. 165). They consider suicide the “highest honor”, redemption before destruction and achieving eternal happiness (Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 129).

The science of apocalyptic “prophets” is based not only on biblical sources. It is a conglomeration of different ideas. You can find there components taken from the Gospel, spirituality of the Far East and India, magical, esoteric, occult, psychic and even elements of modern academic knowledge (Mikolejko 1996, p. 167).

The image of the Apocalypse strongly bonds the religious movement and subordinates the followers to the will of the leader. Suggestive visions of danger paralyze members. At the same time, they mobilize them to make an effort for the promised reward – a world purified of all evil. The consequence of this is greater integration of the group (*Ibidem*, p. 167).

There are many contradictions in the assertions of apocalyptic leaders. It strengthens their monopoly on the truth, which they become the ultimate exponents. The knowledge of adepts is fragmented. The whole gives way to detail with a strong emotional color. The attempt to understand is replaced by the desire to achieve the goal. The means – which lead to this – are accepted uncritically, because the cognitive powers have been suppressed due to the fragmentation of thinking and the awakening of the emotional sphere. Fear becomes a factor integrating the community. Fear and fear are

to arouse only the reality outside the group. Nothing is terrible within it – even death (*Ibidem*, p. 168).

Apocalyptic literature contains the thesis that the group of the chosen must complete itself before the end of the world. It is difficult to say whether such a thought should be understood as the conviction that every martyr's death speeds up the arrival of the end times and the advent of a new, just order (Widla 1996, pp. 67-69). In apocalyptic communities, this idea is the foundation of doctrine, the source of inspiration for self-proclaimed leaders, who seemingly a minor event can transform into a sign of the end of time – completing human destiny. For the followers of apocalyptic worship, suicide means "salvation", fulfillment of God's plan, historical mission. It brings purification, becoming the basis of a new life in a better world (Mikolejko 1996, p. 169).

Analyzing the attitudes of the leaders of the discussed communities, one can get the impression that their behavior is paranoid or psychopathic. By pulling believers to self-destruction, they want to implement their morbid plan – end their lives with a martyr's scenario (*Ibidem*, p. 170).

The pursuit of group self-destruction is linked to the inability of the leaders of apocalyptic cults to realize predetermined goals. They are also characterized by aversion or inability to accept a different point of view than their own. This fosters an obsessive belief in the existence of a conspiracy against them and the community they lead. Therefore, they recognize that the only way out the situation is a collective suicide – an act of opposition to the world (Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 137).

Religious violence – pushed to the limits of suicide – can only exist in small groups isolated from the outside world. It is then easy to control human behavior, suppress symptoms of criticism, rebellion, and resistance. Isolation gives the leader total power, which allows him to realize the true apocalypse (Mikolejko 1996, s. 172).

Apocalyptic cult cultures strive for self-destruction. They are a dangerous form of escape for people who are overwhelmed by the hardships of everyday life. They are often a "dead end", an expression of human helplessness in the face of socio-cultural changes (*Ibidem*, p. 181; Szostak 2001a, p. 190).

Among the most well-known and most frequently described apocalyptic cult groups in the literature are: The Temple of the People of Jim Jones (18 November 1978 [Guyana] killed over 900 people, most of whom committed collective suicide, drinking potassium cyanide during a macabre ceremony); Datu Mangayanona (on September 19,

1985 [the Philippines] 80 members were poisoned by the priest's order, "to see the image of God"); The Church of the Friends of Truth Kiyoharu Miyamoto (November 1, 1986 [Japan] was burned dead seven women after the death of the leader); Szczep Dawidowy / Dawid branch of David Koresh (19 April 1993 [USA], death was suffered by over 80 people after burning and planting the Waco farm); The Order of the Temple of the Sun Luca Joutet and Joseph di Mambro (4-5 October 1994 [Canada, Switzerland] lost their lives from a firearm, knife and poison 53 members, December 24, 1995 [France] found 16 bodies in the shape of a star, March 23, 1997 [Canada] burned out five worshippers); Gate (Gate) Sky Marshall Applewhite (on March 26, 1997 [USA] took the lives of 39 faithful, taking sleeping pills and putting on the head of plastic bags); Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God Joseph Kibwetere, Credonia Mwerinde, Angelina Mugisha, Franz Joseph Kasapurari and Dominica Kataribabo (21 March 2000 [Uganda] found the bodies of 500 followers, most of whom committed suicide, singing and praying setting fire to the church building) (Międzyresortowy Zespół do Spraw Nowych Ruchów Religijnych 2000, pp. 2-3, Mikrut, Wiktor 2004, pp. 224-226).

Religious terrorism

When presenting various forms of pathology – related to the activities of destructive cult groups – the issue of religious terrorism can not be omitted. This is one of the most important problems today, causing concern to the global public. Increasingly, various religious communities are trying to expand their own influence, strengthen their position, and increase the number of believers. Some of them undertake terrorist activities to popularize the movement, religion, worldview or the leader (Szostak 2001a, p. 218; Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 144).

The concept of terrorism – including its religious form – should be understood as planned, organized, ideologically and politically motivated individual or group activity, the aim of which is to force the authorities, society or individuals to perform specific services, behaviors, attitudes. It is carried out in criminal forms. It involves the use of physical means that violate the good of individuals who have expressed their disapproval of a terrorist act – especially its purpose and legitimacy. Terrorism arouses fear and anxiety. Its essence is expressed by two types of attitudes. The first includes feelings

of fear, terror, fear, as well as anger caused by the image of the current evil or a vision of future danger. On the other hand, the second type of attitudes concerns the external behavior of the person and is the consequence of the feeling of fear (Hanausek 1980, p. 43-44; Szostak 2001a, pp. 220-221; Szostak 2001b, p. 69).

Terrorist groups that hide behind the screen of religion and show anti-state and anti-social character, have evolved a dangerous form of struggle – religious terrorism (Kruszewska 2009, p. 278).

The issue of religious terrorism is associated with a special type of motives, strategies and activities of organizations that conduct such activities. His most famous varieties include: millenarian (apocalyptic) – acts of terror undertaken by religious fanatics in the name of lofty and unrealistic goals, using means condemned to defeat, often destroying its creators; fundamentalist (ethnoreligious) – terrorist actions are incomprehensible and irrational, and result from the conviction that they are guided by God who wants to introduce good on earth using all possible methods; “A specific matter” – terror hits one person or institution that threatens the good image of a religious community (Szostak 2001a, pp. 222-223; Szostak 2001b, pp. 66-67).

Religious terrorism is a new type of crime, and scientific and technical development favors this type of activity. Attacks on people or objects are carried out using means that lead to catastrophic results (Szostak 2001a, p. 223; Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 147).

The phenomenon of religious terrorism – considered in the context of destructive worship groups - includes two types of activities: directed “outside”, the recipient of which is the whole society and returned “inward” to their own community. Although they are separate, they complement each other and penetrate each other. Religious terrorism of an “external” nature refers to undertakings aimed at damaging or destabilizing state structures, local government, private, political, religious institutions or the destruction of a specific person or own group.

This last aspect is very dangerous. Occurs in apocalyptic communities (catastrophic) and is not subject to any control. The functioning of such organizations threatens public order and the security of the state. The “internal” dimension of terrorism includes the actions of the leaders of toxic religious movements who order their devotees through their psychological and physical dependence. This is about dealing with people who intend to leave or leave the community, revealing to the public the laws governing the group. Such acts of repression or revenge usually affect uncomfortable witnesses –

people who have given the public knowledge about the functioning of a given community, its ideology, activities, and sometimes crimes committed by its members (killings, suicide, body injuries, arms trafficking, frauds, forgery, extortion, beatings, thefts, sexual abuse, blackmail, physical and psychological compulsion) (Szostak 2001a, pp. 225-226, Szostak 2001b, p. 68, Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, pp. 147-148).

Religious terrorism is both external action – directly affecting the life and health of citizens of the state and violating existing social norms – as well as internal ones, based on exerting the group's pressure on a given individual. This type of activity is a threat and a challenge for the modern world. Each democratic state – due to the security of its citizens – should have a legal system that protects residents against the harmful effects of such communities (Szostak 2001a, p. 226).

With regard to destructive cult movements, the problem seems to be deeper than the phenomenon of religious terrorism itself. The basic difficulty is to classify specific activities of these types of groups. Only some are terrorist, aimed directly at state and social structures. Most of them have internal violence aimed at individual or community self-destruction. However, taking into account the fanaticism of members of destructive religious organizations, it should be remembered that the whole society can be the victim of their activity (Szostak 2001a, pp. 226-227; Szostak 2001b, pp. 71-72; Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, pp. 148-149).

The analysis of the issue of religious terrorism leads to reflection on the issue of taking appropriate undertakings on the internal and international level from appropriate institutions, organizations or law enforcement bodies. It is about creating specialized cells that will monitor the activities of dangerous cult groups and protect citizens from their negative influence (Szostak 2001a, pp. 226-227; Szostak 2001b, pp. 71-72; Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, pp. 148-149).

Organizations practicing religious terrorism include the following communities in the literature on the subject: Ananda Marga Prabhat Ranjan Sarkara (accusing him of persuading to murder his opponents); Aum Shinrikyo Shoko Asahara (20-22 March 1995 [Japan] died due to poisoning by sarin in Tokyo subway 13 people, and over 5,000 were injured, accusations of willingness to commit with mass destruction means); Convent Brotherhood of Himawanti of Ryszard Matuszewski (threats concerning the blowing up of the Jasna Góra monastery, anonymous “death sentences” on persons dealing

with the problems of new religious movements and sects) (Interministerial Team for New Religious Movements 2000, pp. 3-4, Szuppe 2007, pp. 51-52).

Ending

The forms of social pathology (suicides, religious terrorism) occurring in new religious movements show how much evil can be done by a man who uses religion to achieve non-religious goals (Bukowska-Pastwa 2011, p. 150).

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