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Between Spontaneity, Institutional Church and State Politics. Oasis Movement in Poland¹

Abstract: This paper discusses a history and macro-structural environment of "Light-Life" movement. It also presents some "external" and "internal" social aspects of Polish religious movements. This Movement emerged in the 1950s as one of the numerous manifestations of a religious revival in Poland. It was found political, oppositional and illegal by the state authorities. Since 1989, thanks to political democratisation in Poland, the Movement has undergone various important transformations. The fact that the Movement identifies itself with the Roman Catholic Church gives it a chance to take advantage of the Church's resources. The system transformation in Poland has created opportunity for emergence of new form of public activity, religious one included. The spontaneous character of the Movement gained a chance of a stronger expression and the two trends (currents) appeared, both of which differ mostly in terms of their own goals and attitudes towards social reality around them. They are strongly influenced by the differences in the socialisation processes within the trends.

The aim of this paper is to present some "external" (as opposed to spiritual, or "internal"), social aspects of a Polish religious movement. This movement, called LIGHT-LIFE (Światło-Życie) or OASES, emerged in the 1950s as one of the manifestations of religious revival in Poland. It is one of the most successful religious movements in Poland and it can be studied within the frameworks of sociological theories of New Religious Movements. I will pay special attention to the dynamics of relations between the spontaneous aspects of the Light-Life on the one hand and the institution of the Roman Catholic Church on the other. This relation will be analysed within the context of transformations of a political system in Poland.

The history of the Movement is very interesting. In the 1950s, besides the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation that nearly everywhere resulted in "decline of the sacrum," the active policy of the atheistic communist State authorities deserves mentioning (Walaszek 1986). The state aimed to reduce the religious life to the private sphere and to eliminate it from the public sphere (Michel 1990). It also aimed to totally control

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the political, cultural and religious domains. Simultaneously, and contrary to the mentioned trend, the institution of the Roman Catholic Church was growing and strengthening. As a consequence, the institutional aspect of Catholicism became its most perceptible characteristic (Johnston and Figa 1988, Walaszek 1986).

In this situation, the Light-Life Movement tended, from its inception, to fulfil the following functions:

1. to transform the individual, spiritual life of its own members;
2. to transform the members' immediate social milieu;
3. to build a "new community" of "new people" who would create and share a "new culture," centred around the ideas of Jesus Christ;
4. to "give witness" to the wider social environment through the correspondence between the actual lifestyle of its members and their own ideas and principles;
5. to transform the parishes into "communities of communes," communities of "new-born" people, both laymen and clergy, who would take full responsibility for the perfection and dissemination of religious lifestyle;
6. to transform the whole society through the dissemination of the "new culture."

It should be added that the last two of the above mentioned functions have actually been conceptualised and fulfilled only by some of the communities that have identified themselves with the Movement under discussion.

The Light-Life emerged as an informal, spontaneous social group centred around Rev. Franciszek Blachnicki. From 1950s on, the Movement has continuously stressed its strong ties with the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. I understand here the institutional church as the totality of formal relationships and authority positions within a religious community, functioning within the hierarchy of responsibility and leadership, together with formalised groups and organisations operating under the control of centralised authority.

If we look at the post-war history of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, we can observe that this institutional aspect of its activities seemed to be much stronger than its other aspects and functions, including spiritual. This situation has been particularly visible when compared with the Western organisations of the Roman Catholic Church. The reason of this situation is quite simple, though. During the times of partition of Poland (1795–1918) and later during the period of communism, the Roman Catholic Church served a political function of opposition to the state organisation. Therefore, it always tended to strengthen and develop its institutional aspect.

As I have mentioned earlier, the communist authorities aimed to eliminate the public religious activities (at the same time, they tolerated the very existence of the church institution, actually the only legal "opposition"). The church authorities have always presented the opinion that religion is a public phenomenon. The conflict between these positions grew and was becoming more and more political. This is the context in which the emergence of the Light-Life must be located.

Every social group or organisation, in order to operate efficiently, must have some financial, material, social, etc. resources. The Light-Life Movement that emerged in the 1950s did not have and was unable to create its own material resources necessary for its operations. Therefore, it had to use other

existing resources. And they were, in a sense, available. The Oases were organised mostly at the parishes, mostly by local priests. The Movement's communities were allowed to use the material and financial resources of the Roman Catholic parishes. They used the church buildings in which the communities met. Church was giving them money to organise the religious retreats during the vacations. Much more important church resources available to the Movement had symbolic and organisational character, though. The first were the religious doctrine, religious cult, legacy of the Scripture, etc., the latter being the patterns of the leadership and authority structure, the theologically educated leaders, various institutions operating under the church's umbrella.

The major sources of new members' recruitment for the Light-Life are: private, informal contacts of old members with their acquaintances and friends, the propagation of religious lifestyles held during the outdoor evangelisation organised by the communities, the Church's catechisation held in schools and the occasional participation of "nonmembers" within the community activities. The main means of recruitment is of course a religious conversion but the evangelisation interpreted in one of its aspects as acquiring new members, is present only within some of the Movement's communities.

It seems to be impossible to exactly estimate the number of Light-Life's members. Table 1 indicates estimated data on the number of permanent members of the Movement (according to the Movement's official data). The practice of "counting" the members shows a tendency toward lower values and does not include some communities.²

Table 1
The number of permanent members of Oasis Movement according to years.
From 1989 on, a small drop in number is observed, but no precise data are available.

1969 – 700	persons	1976 – 20,000	persons	1984 – 64,000	persons
1970 – 1,000	"	1978 – 30,000	"	1985 – 70,000	"
1971 – 1,500	"	1979 – 30,000	"	1986 – 76,000	"
1972 – 3,500	"	1980 – 40,000	"	1987 – 77,000	"
1973 – 6,000	"	1981 – 45,000	"	1988 – 77,000	"
1974 – 9,500	"	1982 – 50,000	"		
1975 – 14,000	"	1983 – 53,000	"		

The Movement took advantage of its strong ties with the church institution but the relationship was not one-sided. There were some advantages for the church as well. First of all, thanks to the Movement, the church was able to strengthen its influence in the social domain in which it had been quite weak for long – in the sphere of religious social movements. And this domain was becoming more and more important. This increasing significance resulted from the fact that the growing number of youngsters as well as adults was not satisfied with those forms of religiosity that were promoted by the institutional

² I know about a few small communities of Light-Life that are in Slovakia, Czech and Germany. Their origins are strictly Polish.

church. Simultaneously, however, the Movement found in the church a strong supporter in the conflicts with the state authorities. These authorities were, as I have mentioned, anti-religiously oriented and, moreover, they opposed any independent of them movements and organisations (see, e.g., Mucha and Żaba 1992). During this initial stage of development of the Light-Life, only very small tensions in the relations between it and the institutional church occurred and they had a rather local character: some parish priests did not like any independent and spontaneous activity of the laymen.

The second half of the 1980s was a very important period in Polish history. This is when the systemic transformations began. The political system started to change, some old institutions withered away, new institutions, not known in the post-war history of Eastern Europe, emerged. Cultural life started to change. Socio-economic conditions for the operation of various social groups and movements changed as well. Their activities, if they were to be efficient, had to take into account the transforming "global" and "local" situation. These groups and movements had to accept new "definitions of situation" (Thomas 1927; McHugh 1968).

The systemic change in Poland had a strong impact on the redefinition of some functions of the state but also of the social role of the Roman Catholic Church (Michel 1991). This church ceased to be an anti-state opposition force. It no longer was a party defending itself and became an important and influential factor supporting the state's policy. Transformations of the socio-cultural situation resulted in the redefinition of the role of the Polish spontaneous social movements as well. With the growing opportunities for overt and public social activities, with the increasing chance to mobilise resources (Zald and McCarthy 1979; Turner), many new social movements emerged and developed. Most of them were the new religious movements (Robbins 1988).

The Light-Life which never was a strictly political movement (Mucha 1993), could not be radically transformed only by deep changes in the political domain in Poland. Indeed, its spiritual, self-educational and evangelising character was influenced by the transformations in social milieu. However, these exogenous changes accompanied the endogenous changes that had started a little earlier. The Movement ceased to be relatively coherent and was becoming more and more amorphous. Two currents emerged. The first can be called the "liturgical-biblical" current and the second – the "charismatic-evangelising-ecumenical" (later referred to as charismatic) one. The latter current can be located within the frameworks of the neo-pentecostal Roman Catholic religious revival. Both currents differed mostly in terms of their own goals and their attitudes toward the social reality around them.

The "liturgical-biblical" current can be roughly described as "traditional" and "dominating" within the Light-Life Movement. The communities subscribing to it tend to totally fulfil the first four of the functions presented at the beginning of this paper. These communities and their functions can also be described as "pro-members" oriented. When they engage in any activities aimed at the outside world, they pay particular attention to avoid any social conflicts.

Many significant activities of Light-Life's communities are common for both of its currents. We can distinguish internal and external types of such operations. I understand here the internal activities as any kind of group's

organised actions which work for the fulfilment of the needs of community's members. The main types of the Movement's internal activities are meeting groups, diaconate groups, summer spiritual camps, spiritual teaching, education and religious rituals.

The largest meeting group is called Great Prayer Meeting, Prayer Gathering or General Meeting. The partakers of General Meeting are all members of the community and very often – because of its open status – people from outside (nonmembers). It is usually organised once a week. The main actions of the General Meeting's participants are: the singing of religious songs; various, more or less public prayers; spiritual teaching and giving witness to the personal faith. The social functions of that meeting are the concentration of attention and meanings on "supernatural reality" and they bound it with "everyday reality" and reinforcement of religious definition of existence – both individual and group.

The second kind of meeting group is the Small Group. It consists of 3–9 persons, often of the same sex, with the same prescribed level of religious initiation. The leader of every Group is called the "animator." The leader of the whole community is the "moderator" and the formal leader of a whole Movement is the "national moderator." The Small Group has a very informal, interpersonal, face-to-face character. It is to secure stability and development of each individual's personality. It is also one of the most important means of social control within the community, being at the same time the social environment of socialisation processes. Main activities of such a group are closely related to the activities held in the General Meeting. Because of the small number of participants in such a group, it becomes a place of not only common prayer but also of personal, mutual sharing of the individuals' own experiences, problems, enjoyments, successes, etc. The situation of the high level of mutual trust and defining others as brothers and sisters results in the feeling of a high level of security in interpersonal contacts.

Within the Light-Life's communities, we can have to do with the Animators' Meeting – the gathering of leaders. The Animators' Meeting – apart from its religious activities – considers the members' efforts to recognise the community's needs, prepares the spiritual teachings and solves other community's problems (including financial ones).

The diaconate groups are the task-oriented small groupings. They cope with technical, financial, music (instruments), vocal and other functions.

The major role of the summer spiritual camps is reinforcing a deeper involvement with a strong orientation on the community's lifestyle. It also becomes the important symbolic focus centre of the communities' activity. The religious rituals held within the Light-Life can be divided into two sorts. The first kind of rituals consists of formal rituals that are universal within Roman Catholic Church. The second is more specific. They are, for example, the religious conversion held within the community's activities (i.e. General Meeting) and Baptism in the Holy Spirit (they are specific mainly for a charismatic current).

The most significant external activities of the Light-Life Movement cover such actions as contacts with other religious groups (mostly Catholic ones), missions and evangelisations, Christian conferences, charity actions and work for the well-being of local parishes.

Communities subscribing rather to the charismatic current willingly engage in the activities aimed at the outside world, even if they may result in conflicts. The specificity of this current lies in the charismatic and ecumenical dimension, nearly totally absent in the first one.

Many external practices of this current differ from the actions of the traditional one. They are "different" when we compare them with the universal religious practices held within the Catholic Church. Many of them (e.g., glosolalia, prophecy, Baptism in the Holy Spirit) can be found within everyday practices of many other religious Christian groups and movements. I am referring to the external outputs of so called "charismas" (charisma in Greek – *charisma humin pneumatikon – spiritual gift of grace*). Charismatic dimension of this current has mostly a religious character. But it can be viewed in the same time as a source of maintenance of the group's enthusiasm (Harrison 1975).

The most significant external activities of charismatic current, nearly totally absent in the traditional current, are the outdoor, street evangelisation, permanent and temporary missions outside the country.

In the years 1975–1995, the Movement organised nineteen National Congregations (meetings) of Directors of Light-Life Movement.

The charismatic current has organised also many outdoor ecumenical evangelisations both in Poland and abroad (mostly in the post-Soviet republics). It was participating in the International March for Jesus (in Poland organised in 1992 in Warsaw, Wrocław, Gdańsk; 1993 – Wrocław, Toruń; 1994 – Wrocław, Toruń, Cracow) and co-organised such events as Oasis of Animators of Great Evangelisation held in Warsaw in 1989, International Forum "New Evangelisation" held in Częstochowa in 1991 and many Christian, ecumenical conferences.

The two latest examples of such conferences are: – "Forum *Evangelisation 2000*," held in Cracow between 29 September and 1 October 1994, that gathered more than 800 people from various Christian Churches (also from abroad). The representatives of the Light-Life's charismatic current were in fact the organisers of this event, – "Ecumenical Conference: The Gospel for East Nations" organised in Toruń between 2 and 4 December 1994, which gathered people from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches (both the laymen and the clergy).

Between 4 July and 25 August 1994 several people, associated with a charismatic current of the Light-Life, organised the first meeting of the "School of Evangelisation and the Christian Life" in Lanckorona. Between 26 August and 15 September 1994, the "School" arranged international, ecumenical missions in Poland, Czech, Slovakia, Ukraine, Latvia. It co-operates with international Association of Co-ordinators of Catholic Schools of Evangelisation (ACCESE/2000). Several months later the buildings and School site were purchased by a few leaders of School. Although the "School of Evangelisation and the Christian Life" is not an agenda of the Light-Life Movement, its leaders' statements are often manifestations of Light-Life's ideology and its charismatic renewal roots.

Another factor that helps distinguish between these two currents is their attitude to "self-sufficiency." The charismatic current engages in various activities driving it to a kind of independence from the institutional church, at least on the ground of some resources. I mean here particularly the material and financial

base of the communities' operations. This current becomes autonomous in the field of its "economic capital" but not in the field of "symbolic capital."

This symbolic and ideological dependency strengthens the definition and self-definition of the Oases or Light-Life as a Roman Catholic social movement, despite the fact that one of its currents has a very ecumenical approach. Sometimes the Movement is even accused of being a schismatic organisation. These accusations result in quite frequent declarations on the part of the members that they are true children of the Roman Catholic Church.

Among the representatives of the institutional church, the Movement has both adherents and opponents. According to my own observations, however, another distinction seems to be more accurate. The traditional, liturgical current is approved by most of the clergy while the other current which is more difficult to control and subordinate and which is relatively independent in terms of material and organisational resources, is disapproved of. The attitude of the whole Light-Life Movement to the institutional church seems to be much more simple and homogeneous. Actually, its authority has never been challenged.

Relationships within the Oases, between their two currents, also deserve mentioning. Amorphous character of the Movement results in the situation in which most of the traditional communities do not realise at all that the other current exists. In these traditional communities which realise that there is another current, there seems to be a relatively high level of ambiguity in the attitude to it. The charismatic current defines its attitude to the traditional, liturgical current in a twofold way. On the one hand, it approves the traditional current as a part of the same church and of the same Movement. It views it as an indispensable and positive stage in the Movement's development. On the other hand, however, this stage should be overcome now; there is a functional imperative to help in its further evolution.

Taking a closer look at these two currents, one can observe that differences between them also concern personality features of their members. The explanation of these differences which focuses on the main characteristics of the socialisation processes seems to be accurate.

At the present time, in the liturgical-biblical current, we can observe a small increase of the number of new members. Many members are leaving this current. This is due mainly to the highly defined personality standards within that current and, at the same time, by the absence of psychological and social mechanisms reducing the negative effects of failures living up to these standards.

Despite the many similarities existing between the two currents, the special, strong pressure on self-improvement can be observed within the traditional one. The situation of strong feelings of the members' own sinfulness and imperfection and the lack of possibility of total realisation of accepted values and ideas, leads many people to frustration. Many of them abandon the Movement. Many people older than 25 also leave the Movement (because of a strong attachment to job activities, family duties). It is also the result of another problem. Within the formal structure of the Light-Life, we can distinguish three main age groupings. There are the Oasis of God's Children (children 7-14 years old), the Youth Oasis (15-25) - alternatively Oasis of the University Students - and the Family Oasis (parents and their young children). We have here the organisational gap that causes structural problems to place people over the age of 25 who are neither university students nor spouses.

The inflow of new members of the charismatic current is both permanent and significant. The socialisation processes held within that current create the feeling of freedom, security, self-assertion and joy. The guarantee of the fulfilment of the defined and shared tasks and ideas is placed and assigned not to self-improvement but to a personal relationship with God. The charismatic current is not only the youth movement but it also covers at the same time the children, parents, university students, single adults and whole families. The withdrawals of the regular members are rare. An interesting regularity is perceived – some members of the traditional current move their “significant participation” to the second one. Reverse mobility is not observed.

The main differences between the socialisation processes within both currents, in spite of their only aspectual character, create important outcomes. Within the liturgical-biblical current, the socialisation processes reduce themselves to the socialisation to the religious group (religious community) and to the religious sector of social reality. They very rarely take into account the socialisation processes that prepare individuals for functioning in everyday situations, problems, family life and work (Nosowski 1989). Such functions are fulfilled by other than traditional religious communities of the Light-Life social groups.

The socialisational processes (including religious ones) present in the charismatic current, differ in shapes and patterns. We can observe there a “total definition” of reality – which overcomes the reality of the religious community. Such a vision – when internalised by the individual – works as a set of most significant definitions that cover the total reality. The internalisation of the cultural system that occurs within the charismatic current also creates important changes in the individual’s everyday language, which acquires characteristics of the religious language (Grabowska 1989).

The reaction to the existence and functioning of the Light-Life Movement is not only observed on the level of local parishes. Several publications came out in Polish magazines with the acceptance spectrum of various Light-Life’s activities, from positive (Kot 1993, Nosowski 1989) to radically negative (Łopatyński 1994). According to my information, the “problematic questions” of several charismatic communities of the Light-Life Movement were discussed during several National Conferences of the Polish Episcopate (especially in 1994). I also know of the situation of exclusion (in the beginning of 1995) of the three charismatic Light-Life’s communities from the Movement by a local bishop, who defined them as autonomous (from the Movement) Catholic religious communities.

The Light-Life has developed within the framework of the Roman Catholic Church, being one of its parts. From its very beginning, in its ideals and in its social practice, it drove into the overt spontaneity, and the manifestation of this is the emergence of new ways of religious expression. Out of necessity, it had to function, during the first three decades of its existence, within the unfriendly, anti-religious political system. From the point of view of this system, Movement’s activities were not authorised, were illegal. The Movement was able to operate only thanks to the resources supplied by the institutional church. This situation gave to the church a chance to control the Movement. The systemic transformation in Poland created the opportunities for the emergence of new forms of public, including religious, activities. The spontaneous aspect of the movement gained a chance of stronger expression.

For one of the Movement's currents, this situation of growing "external," political freedom has not been particularly important. It has remained within its own, traditional frameworks. The second current, however, began to take advantage of this new situation, paying particular attention to the development and autonomy of its own resources. As I already mentioned, this "autonomisation" has not affected its symbolic resources. Activities connected with this partial autonomy of the Movement's resources are not uniformly valued by the church's hierarchy. Neither is the Movement itself. Moreover, there are easily noticeable symptoms that some leaders of the charismatic current consider the possibility of an official withdrawal from the Movement and creation of independent structures. In the 1990s an economic and structural autonomisation of charismatic current became significant for many of its communities. The gradual withdrawal of many charismatic communities from the Light-Life is ongoing. Possibility of the withdrawal from the Roman Catholic Church is not being considered.

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