

Orality and freedom of choice as key determinants in Polish Evangelical culture and discourse: selected field reflections

**Oralność oraz wolność wyboru jako kluczowe
determinanty w polskiej kulturze oraz dyskursie
ewangelikalnym: wybrane wnioski z badania terenowego**

Key words: culture, discourse, evangelicalism, freedom of choice, orality, Poland

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs, kultura, ewangelikalizm, oralność, Polska, wolność wyboru

Abstract

Evangelical Christianity is a rare notion in Poland, a country where, as of 2018 over 90% of the population, (32,460,984 people) declare adherence to Roman Catholicism. In contrast, there are a mere c. 74,000 followers of the Protestant Evangelical tradition (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2021). In 2010, I joined the Baptist church and after a couple of years noticed certain communication-based mechanisms in operation. This reflection brought me to the point where I decided to proceed with research on the role of speech in Polish evangelical communities. Certain peculiarities became my focus of interest: I realized that speech is a crucial factor in sustaining each service or church activity. This statement should be understood against the background of the usual Polish religious experiences which are strongly influenced by the institutional, liturgical Roman Catholic church and in

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which a significant number of visual signs, including gestures, symbols and attire assume the burden of responsibility for sustaining believers' sense of identity. The participant observation became an opportunity to discover and understand the hallmarks of evangelical communication, which could be subsumed under such terms as: orality, freedom of choice, spontaneity, imagery, and relationality.

Streszczenie

Chrześcijaństwo ewangelikalne należy w Polsce do rzadkości. Jak podaje Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, w 2018 roku w Polsce 90% populacji (32,460,984) stanowiły osoby wyznania rzymskokatolickiego. Z kolei osób deklarujących przywiązanie do nurtu ewangelikalnego było zaledwie około 74,000 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2021). Jako członkini Kościoła Baptistycznego dostrzegłam obecność mechanizmów rządzących komunikacją w tej społeczności. Podjęłam się badania nad rolą oraz znaczeniem mowy w życiu tej społeczności. Zdałam sobie sprawę, że stanowi ona kluczowy czynnik determinujący przebieg nabożeństwa oraz inne działania o charakterze religijnym podejmowane przez członków Kościoła. Warto podkreślić jest to, że środki wizualne takie jak gesty, symbole czy ubiór stanowią istotny element nadający charakter nabożeństwom, a także podtrzymujący poczucie tożsamości uczestników życia religijnego w Kościele rzymskokatolickim. W rezultacie dociekań o charakterze etnograficznym doszłam do przekonania, że istotnymi wyznacznikami komunikacji ewangelikalnej są: oralność, wolność wyboru, spontaniczność, wyobraźnia oraz relacyjność.

1. Introduction

The present paper presents observer reflections initiated during my ethnographic research on the discourse and culture of Evangelical churches in Poland. As a member of one such community, I began to take note of its vitality of speech, realizing that a successful gathering and the sense of identity hinge upon oral schemata and formulae. Coleman (1980, 139) remarks that Evangelical speech bears some resemblance to a secret language, a rhyming slang where the phonetic connection is replaced by a logical one. "The hearer's ability to interpret an utterance

depends on their ability to reconstruct the rhyme or, in the case of Evangelical language, the sequence of logical connections” (Coleman 1980, 139).

What is more, the communicative behaviors bring to mind the idea of orality. This was the moment I started to collect data and take note of typical discourse-based characteristics. Significantly, according to Zbigniew Pasek (2004b, 20, 24) there are two major Evangelical religious traditions in Poland, i.e., the Baptist-Evangelical and the Pentecostal-charismatic. The former has roots in the 17th century Baptist movement in Britain whose expansion was also noted in the USA, whereas the latter began in the early 20th century USA. Essentially, Baptists and Pentecostals share the same basic assumptions of the Reformation movement, i.e., *sola scriptura* [only scripture], *sola fide* [only faith], *sola gratia* [only grace], *solus Christus* [only Christ], *solī Deo Gloria* [glory to God alone], however, they differ with regard to the role of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal movement underlines the experience of the presence of the Holy Ghost through so-called baptism in the Holy Spirit, the main sign of which is glossolalia.

In my research I contacted representatives of both traditions, however due to my affiliation at the time, the Baptist-evangelical tradition served as a more prominent source of information. With time, I noted other peculiarities characteristic of evangelicalism, which, when set against the background of Roman Catholicism in Poland, expose its otherness.

Thanks to social integration with the group of believers, I gained the opportunity to observe the natural and spontaneous behavior of its participants. In addition, I was empowered to contemplate my own understanding of the senses transmitted by means of the social discourse. Participation in the life of a social group has not only been conducive to gaining a perspective on the broader context related to the activity of other Evangelical communities but also to familiarizing myself with the point of view of individuals who identify with Evangelical tenets. It became possible to approach evangelicalism more closely and to

acquire research data. I was greatly inspired by the remarks offered by Noemi Modnicka. Her monograph entitled “Small Worlds of Polish Evangelicalism. An Interpretative Anthropological Study”, rich in terms of theoretical content as well as research findings, has proved exceptionally valuable in my own exploration of the field of Evangelical communication and culture. The sociological conception of small worlds was useful because it highlights the essential experience people undergo in their natural microworlds. Modnicka (Modnicka 2013, 63) remarks that a small world emerges when a certain ideological standpoint permeates a group and offers a common axiological worldview. The author strongly advocates the idea that Evangelical groups are communal in character and should thus be seen through the prism of social relations, bonds, and dependence. Cohen’s (Cohen 2003, 195 in Modnicka 2013, 64) depicts community in symbolic terms, which enable individual participants to assign their own senses and interpretations to it. This stance makes it possible to see the internal complexity of a community and understand its meaning in more than one way. Cohen (Cohen 2003 in Modnicka 2013, 64, 65) rightly points out that there are two ‘faces/ images’ to a community, one of which is directed inwards, which we may call the ‘private’, and the other, the ‘public’, directed outwards. The former is more nuanced and detailed, while the latter presents a consensual, general picture of a community which its participants have decided to present to the world (Modnicka 2013, 64, 65).

We may refer here to two selected features of Evangelical culture, namely orality and the freedom of choice (others include spontaneity, imagery, and relationality), which seem to set Polish evangelicalism apart from the Roman Catholic tradition.

2. Evangelicalism

According to Mark Hutchinson (Hutchinson 2012, 5), evangelicalism as a term was first used in an 1821 issue of “Christian Remembrance” and subsequently in 1831 by William Empson in “The Edinburgh

Review". In the former, evangelicalism was likened to Calvinism, and in the latter Empson noted the exclusiveness of the movement which resulted in a narrow understanding of God and divine government. In an 1851 pamphlet evangelicalism was presented in opposition to sacramental baptism. In 1853 Conybeare wrote that the distinctive theological features of evangelicalism were the necessity of conversion, belief in justification by faith and in the sole authority of the Scripture (Hutchinson 2012, 6). Apart from characterizing evangelicalism as interdenominational and commenting on its disregard for ecclesiastical structures, R.W. Dale (Dale 1889 in Hutchinson 2012, 24) also observed a noticeable motivation to save the lost from eternal fire. Stuart Piggin (Piggin 1996) remarks that "Evangelicalism is concerned with an intimate, even intense, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The creation and development of this relationship is understood as the work of the Holy Spirit" (Piggin 1996 in Hutchinson 2012, 17).

David Bebbington (Bebbington 2005, 1) defines the Evangelical religion as a popular Protestant movement which has existed in various expressions and forms in Britain since the 18th century. Zbigniew Pasek (Pasek 1997) sees it as a wide palette of communities which share Reformation principles. The key features of the Evangelical religion are 'conversionism', the belief that the individual's life should be changed; 'biblicism', a belief in the primacy of the Bible; 'crucicentrism', where focus is put on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and 'activism', through which believers should be willing to express their faith and share it with others (Bebbington 2005, 2).

In a Polish context, evangelicalism is still a novelty even though its origins date back to the 19th century and the establishment of the first Baptist community in the town of Elbląg in 1844. From that date until after World War II, many independent communities existed (Modnicka 2013, 105). However, as Zieliński remarks, in the post-war world the necessity arose for the formation of rather unified presbyterial organizations which halted the development of independent churches. One such

organization was the Unified Evangelical Church [*Zjednoczony Kościół Ewangeliczny*] established in the year 1947. Only after 1989, i.e., the year which marked the end of the communist regime in Poland, can we note an undeniable and more significant growth of Evangelical churches. Later, in May 1989, the Polish parliament passed a law guaranteeing freedom of religion under which Protestant Evangelical churches gained the status of independent religious organizations. Post-communist Eastern Europe also witnessed a noticeable expansion of Evangelical ideas which led to the emergence of new groups but also penetrated existing, institutional churches, including not only the Pentecostal but also the Roman Catholic Church (Modnicka 2013, 116, 118).

3. Orality

As this notion pertains to language and communication, it should be approached from the linguistic standpoint. For Ferdinand de Saussure, language is primarily oral and underpins all verbal communication (1959 in Ong 2012, 5). Indeed, language is so overwhelmingly oral that of all the many thousands of languages – possibly tens of thousands – spoken in the course of human history only around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced literature, and most have never been written down at all. Of some 3000 languages spoken today only some 78 have literature (Edmonson 1971, 323, 332 in Ong 2012, 7).

Milman Parry's (1928 in Ong 2012, 21) doctoral research on features of Homeric poetry shows that its distinctive qualities result from the principle of economy imposed by its oral methods of composition. Parry has also observed that Homeric poetry relies on formulaic repetition and the use of so-called prefabricated parts which the poet stitched together (Ong 2012, 21).

Ong's (2012) attention focuses on the psychodynamics of primarily oral cultures. His chief concern is the functioning of words as power and action, and as occurrences and events. This view results from the

property of the sound wave which flows but also fades. Before the technological revolution, sound could only be memorized, whereas now we possess the technological means to record it.

A primarily oral culture does not rely on written texts, so to retain a thought for later recall, people need formulae, sayings, proverbs, patterns shaped for easy recurrence, alliterative verses, assonance, or epithetic formulaic expressions. Here it is breathing and gesture that matter (Ong 2012, 34).

Ong develops the idea of orality and pinpoints its impact on style of expression. He lists nine characteristics:

1. Additive rather than subordinative
2. Aggregative rather than analytic
3. Redundant
4. Conservative or traditionalist
5. Close to the human lifeworld
6. Agonistically toned
7. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
8. Homeostatic
9. Situational rather than abstract

In short, the style of expression but also the shape of thought typical of oral culture is more additive than subordinative, which means that utterances are built of simple or coordinate sentences. There is also a tendency to quote rather than report. This is best illustrated in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis (1:1-5), e.g., “And God said: ‘Let there be light’, and there was light” (Ong 2012, 37).

The second characteristic stresses the reliance on memory stimulating formulae replete with epithets, e.g., “the Glorious Revolution of October 26”, “wise Nestor”, “clever Odysseus” (Ong 2012, 38).

Oral expressions, unlike their written equivalents, allow, and in fact require, immediate repetition and clarification. Oral cultures encourage the very fluency, fulsomeness, volubility which rhetoricians understand as *copia* (Ong 2012, 40).

Knowledge transmitted orally does not recur but vanishes and fades, thus oral societies invest energy in constant repetition. This leads to the establishment of a traditional or conservative mindset which excludes experimentation. “Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it [...]” (Ong 2012, 41).

The introduction of writing systems brought with it a distance from lived experience. Oral culture verbalizes and visualizes knowledge in connection with the human world, and immediate, familiar interactions. Ong correctly indicates that writing introduced abstraction which detaches knowledge from human experiences and “separates the knower from the known”, in contrast to orality, which firmly situates knowledge at the heart of any struggle for participation and engagement (Ong 2012, 43-44).

It is also interesting to note that traditional oral societies value the present moment, the situation, which permits a certain detachment from irrelevant memories. Print cultures have dictionaries to record the meanings of those words whose relevance to human experience is slight. They “advertise semantic discrepancies”, while the meaning of words in oral cultures is governed by the real-life situations in which they function (Good, Watt 1968 in Ong 2012, 46).

Conceptual thinking is abstract because it is detached from sensory experience, while in oral cultures concepts are understood within a situational and operational framework. Luria in “Cognitive Developments: Its Cultural and Social Foundations”, drawing on Kirghizia’s research into orality (1931-2), states that it takes only a moderate degree of literacy to exert a tremendous influence on the thought process (Ong 2012, 50).

However, those cultures evolving in the contemporary post-typographic era should be classified as secondarily oral, since for Ong, the “electronic transformation of verbal expression has both deepened the commitment of the word to space initiated by writing and intensified by print and has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality”

(Ong 2012, 133). According to Wójcicka (2013, 8), in such cultures the very act of writing changes the cognitive status of a word from an abstract entity to a visualized and objectified phenomenon.

4. Orality in the Evangelical church

In the light of the aforesaid, let us now refer to the Evangelical Christian culture where the presence of an oral component is no surprise. Walter Ong (Ong 2012, 74) notes that the spoken word in Christianity is an integral part of ceremonial and devotional life, so Christians read the Bible aloud during liturgy to bestow a presence on the speaking God. “The orality of the mindset in the Biblical text, even in its epistolary sections, is overwhelming” (Ong 1967 in Ong 2012, 74). The Hebrew *dabar* means, among others, to speak, declare, converse, or sing but also to lead away or put to flight (Bible Study Tool). Moreover, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, is likened to the spoken Word, and the Bible presents God the Father as he who speaks to his son. The Son does likewise because he also speaks to the people and leaves no written records to his disciples. In Luke (4:16) we read that faith comes through hearing, and in the Letter to the Romans (10:17) that the letter kills and the spirit, who is likened to God’s breath, brings the spoken word which gives life (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:6; Ong 2012, 74). It would appear then that the Bible presents Christianity as a vivid religion with the spoken word as its foundation stone. However, in the strongly institutionalized circumstances of Polish Catholicism this factor has seemingly lost its impact.

In contrast, as Modnicka (Modnicka 2009) remarks, Evangelical speech is profuse in specific, often ritualistic formulae, colloquial in style. This peculiarity is reflected in utterances such as ‘A desire came to me’ [‘Przyszło do mnie pragnienie’], ‘God put in my heart’ [‘Bóg położył mi na serce’] in the sense of ‘I felt God wants me to do something’/‘I felt I should act’, or ‘this world’ [‘ten świat’], i.e., a system of values which contradicts God (Modnicka 2009, 220-224). Coleman (Coleman 1980)

in turn notes that evangelicalism exhibits a tendency towards forms more typical of written speech, a phenomenon she even terms “an oral reflex of a basically written dialect” (Coleman 1980,137) and alludes to the church fathers of Protestantism imitating the written English style of the King James Bible, a style which carries associations with authoritative religious utterances, and which is also mirrored in Evangelical speech. She (Coleman 1980) also remarks that Evangelical grammar is designed to promote God’s agency over human agency. Sentences like: “I was enabled to minister to him in some small way” or “God enabled me to minister to them” imply that their author avoids self-praise and chooses to show respect to others (Coleman 1980, 134).

Formulae which reveal the features of oral thought and expression proposed by Ong surface in the speech genres characteristic of Evangelical ritual, i.e., in prayers and sermons but also in informal conversations. They also come to the fore when a believer shares his or her conversion testimony. A case in point are performative formulae, which dominate the Pentecostal-charismatic discourse. Examples of statements recorded during my own research include: “I heal you in the name of Jesus Christ” [‘Uzdrawiam cię w imieniu Jezusa Chrystusa’], “We release the word of healing to her life” [‘Uwalniamy słowo uzdrowienia do jej życia’], “May any oppression leave” [‘Niech wszelkie uciśnienie wynosi się precz’] are performative and show features of so-called magical speech. Pasek (2004a, 136) remarks that the phenomenon of magical language and thought illustrated in the use of the name ‘Jesus Christ’ reminds us of the magical phase in the evolution of language where the use of an object name became metonymically associated with the object itself. His analysis of Evangelical songs in which the name Jesus occurs as the one who acts is unsurprising because the Bible presents the name of God as exceptional and a source of unusual power and potential. Thus, people worship the name of Jesus but also use it in the performative function to combat the negative in life. In evangelical churches influenced by the prosperity movement, people believe that diseases or misfortune

are fiercely unwelcome in life and come from evil spirits. In Chudzik's (Chudzik 2002, 59-60) typology of magical speech acts there are three cases which seem to comply with the instances of magical speech acts noted in Evangelical communication – creative acts which find embodiment, for instance, in healing formulae, destroying acts which become active at times when believers cast out demons, and protective acts, meant to guard a person against disease and negative influences emanating from the surrounding world, visible in prayer formulae which allude to the blood of Christ.

According to Tambiah (Tambiah 1968, 193), ritualistic formulae enable imperative transference of effects, which implies a performative and illocutionary nature. In addition, as Ollivier (Ollivier 2010, 139) remarks, rituals generate a sense of identity by the recognition of otherness. They guarantee the emotional and symbolic unity of the group and introduce order through the organization of social structures.

Evangelical speech is formulaic and ritualistic in the sense of orality, i.e., it serves the purpose of sustaining an ordinary individual's thought. It is devoid of the characteristics that mark the official, liturgical speech found, for instance, in Catholicism where the impact of the written word is visible. As Tambiah (Tambiah 1968, 181-182) notes, the sacred words of Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity were revolutionized by this innovation. Writing enables religious dogmas to be fixed and frozen in a way which differs from what we find in oral traditions where dogmas are more flexible and adaptive. In turn, we may find both oral and written traditions which demonstrate the working of formalized texts, special style, symbolic devices, or newly coined words. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that writing through alphabet endowed words with a more physical form and added veneration to sacred texts. Interestingly, the formulae we find in the Evangelical tradition are colloquial and often violate the rules of Polish grammar. Despite their recurrence, they are flexible and adaptive because they undergo frequent modification through use. Furthermore, many of these formulae are calques of

English, Pentecostal-charismatic Christians frequently say that someone has a manifestation of something or that something manifests, e.g., a bad spirit manifests itself. These forms may sound fine in English but in Polish the apparent cognate ‘manifestować’ is used solely to designate mass demonstrations against the authorities and/or their rulings. On the other hand, relics of archaic language forms are often visible in more conservative communities. In the Baptist church, for instance, we can come across the term ‘zborownicy’ for members of the congregation, a meaning whose last officially recorded use dates back to the 1920 dictionary of old Polish (Grabowska 2017, 174).

It should be noted that there is a tacit expectation in Evangelical Christianity that the way we address and contact God should show signs of genuine faith, naturalness, and spontaneity. This is where we are witnessing the working of the inevitable, i.e., the process of institutionalization. On the one hand, we observe numerous fixed phrases and expressions which encapsulate knowledge for later recall but also enable identification and the feeling of unity, while on the other, there is a clear call to be authentic and to take responsibility for seeking one’s own relationship with God. Thus, Evangelical speech, although revealing recurring schemata, is open to variation and the formulae, noticeably, do not resist modification (Grabowska 2017, 200).

Let us now apply Ong’s characteristics of oral thought and style to the context of Evangelical Christianity. Based on my own participant observations, it is clear that almost all the features, except the last, can be substantiated with examples of orality noted in the studied groups.

The working of the first three characteristics, i.e. additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic and redundant can be observed in prayers, for instance, when believers addressing God explain in detail the reasons behind their prayers. In addition, they usually worship God or Jesus Christ using many descriptive words intended to highlight his greatness and exceptionality. To exemplify this, we can

turn to an opening fragment of a group prayer from a very charismatic Polish Pentecostal community.

God, we come and put down our crowns, we come before you, we give you our life, we give you place and beg, bring back the fullness of salvation, bring back the fullness of revelation, the fullness of destiny, the fullness of anointment.

[“Boże my przychodzimy i składamy nasze korony, przychodzimy przed Tobą, dajemy Ci nasze życie, dajemy Ci miejsce i błagamy Ciebie, przywróć nam pełnię zbawienia, przywróć nam pełnię objawienia, przełnię przeznaczenia, pełnię namaszczenia”] (Grabowska 2017,155).

The speaker starts by enumerating the motivation behind the prayer. The utterance has structure and organization. Its building blocks are simple, coordinate clauses which metaphorically introduce the image of the person humbling (in this case) herself before God. The speaker explains why she is addressing God and later begins to supplicate for spiritual gifts. While listening to the prayer, one can note a considerable dose of emotionality and a strong urge to experience something exceptional. It should be added that the whole prayer lasted about one hour, during which time the listener develops a sensation of being engulfed by the profusion of words uttered and by their emotional tone. Such behavior introduces a specific atmosphere which could be likened to a trance. In the prayer quoted, access to which was enabled via YouTube, we observe that the other participants gradually join the main speaker, repeating her words, and making moves and gestures as if attempting to connect with the supernatural.

Conservative or traditionalist feature refers to the effort to preserve and pass on knowledge and experience acquired. For instance, preachers often repeat known truths and dogmas to instill them into the memories of the believers. They recall fundamental beliefs such as: ‘God is faithful’ [‘Bóg jest wierny’], ‘God acts’ [‘Bóg działa’], ‘God’s will’ [‘Wola Boża’], ‘Jesus lives’ [‘Jezus żyje’], or ‘Man has been saved by grace’ [‘Człowiek jest zbawiony z łaski’] (Grabowska 2017, 124, 126, 129, 141).

Moreover, evangelical narration is defined by human matters and it is close to the human lifeworld because it is founded on the quest for the salvation of souls. The topics selected by preachers should thus be close to people's life, with believers constantly reminded of their weakness and encouraged to depend on God and his grace in every aspect of their life.

Furthermore, in oral cultures, a person is encouraged to situate him or herself in the center of the problem in order to experience and solve it. The same can be observed in evangelicalism. In Pentecostal charismatic churches people feel invited to seek the reasons for their weaknesses, ailments, or other problems because, as Ong (2012, 44), writes, ignorance of the physical causes may lead to personal tensions. To combat such problems, people employ magical speech formulae in their prayers such as 'I heal you in the name of Jesus Christ' ['Uzdrawiam Cię w imieniu Jezusa Chrystusa'] or 'I cover you with the blood of Christ' ['Okrywam Cię krwią Chrystusa'] (Grabowska 2017, 135). In more conservative denominations, believers raise their prayers to seek God's support.

In addition, reacting to problems with the soul, being close to and sympathizing with the afflicted is how believers are called upon to act, in imitation of Jesus. While addressing an audience, a speaker often refers to personal experience to illustrate a problem (while giving testimony, see Grabowska 2017, 146-149). Some also apply the imperative mood and direct their message to the audience by means of orders and commands (when preaching, see Grabowska 2017, 140-141). What is more, as Ong adds, learning or knowing in an oral culture means familiarity and identification with what is known, which, in the case of Evangelical communities, is God and his greatness. One of the fundamental goals of Evangelical life is to attain better knowledge and understanding of the nature of God.

The aspect of homeostasis is illustrated by Ong (2012, 46-47) with reference to the idea of semantics. Words in oral cultures lack dictionary representation because the oral mind does not require them. However, the meaning of words can be recalled in natural circumstances, i.e., in

the context of specific life situations. To illustrate, let us once more refer to charismatic Christianity, where reliance on performativity can be seen to reveal itself in the act of uttering words with specific intention and in an appropriate situational context. Believers assume that God in the person of Holy Spirit is active in people's lives and offers spiritual gifts. Thus, each person who has experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit should strive to seek contact with this person of the Holy Trinity. An illustrative example of this conviction is healing worship, i.e., a gathering during which believers supplicate God for healing. They do so by uttering declarative speech acts, such as the healing formulae quoted above (e.g., a charismatic prayer, see Grabowska 2017, 154-156).

Eventually, orally based thinking relies on the belief system and uses concepts in situational, operational frames rather than abstract (Ong 2012, 49). This mode of thinking is typical of illiterate people whose cognitive mechanisms are firmly rooted in the realm of concrete thinking. Ong posits that in oral cultures concepts tend to be used in situational frames of reference, i.e., they remain close to the living world (Ong 2012, 49).

5. Freedom of choice

Evangelicalism in Poland presents itself as a religious movement at clear divergence from the Catholic faith with which the majority identify. Its bottom-up character and noticeable breach from fossilized, liturgical traditions are its most prominent features. What is more, the two forms of religious practice also differ in terms of the initiation point. In Catholicism, which in Polish circumstances should be characterized as the inherited religious tradition passed on from generation to generation, people become believers by the power of tradition and young age baptism. This tradition, according to Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, is referred to as the 'people's church' [*Volkskirche*] and can be contrasted here with a notion which Norbert Greinacher (1966) calls *Wahlkirche*, i.e., 'optional church' or 'responsible spirituality' (Piwowarski 1996,

11, 14). Greinacher (1966) enumerates features which characterize the tradition of a people's church – a close relationship with the church and fuzzy boundaries between church and state, church involvement in various spheres of social and political life, recognizing the national identity as being on a par with a particular denomination, and hierarchical organization (Greinacher 1966 in Piwowarski 1996, 12). The Polish church has many features of the people's church, since, among others, it integrates and penetrates social groups and environments, being massive, institutional, expanding, and caring (Piwowarski 1996,13).

However, as Piwowarski remarks, we are witnessing a change in the traditional context of how the church functions in Poland, visible in the way socio-cultural pluralism is articulated. Whereas in the past it was a rather hidden plurality, it has now become more conspicuous (Piwowarski 1996, 15).

Evangelical Christianity situates itself in the realm of choice and can be characterized as optional spirituality, requiring a conscious, adult decision but also conversion. Religious conversion takes place within dynamic force fields consisting of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations. It is a process which lasts over time and is contextual (Rambo 1993, 32). In conservative Christian traditions, it requires a confession of sins, submission to the will of God, affirmation of the belief in Christ as the Son of God and Savior, and the invitation of Christ to one's heart. There is an additional criterion required by many churches, namely baptism (Rambo 1993, 6). The act of conversion in evangelicalism can be likened to a moment of deep reflection during which one realizes one's imperfections but also acknowledges that the only solution in this situation is to believe in the redeeming sacrifice of Christ. For believers, conversion entails a caesura in biography and a breakthrough. Life thereafter is perceived as bisected by a clear dividing line, i.e., before and after the moment of conversion. Modnicka (2009, 220, 221) remarks that from this moment the world is seen as the arena of God's activity. It should be noted, however, that

religious conversion requires the rejection of past affiliations and ways of life (Rambo 1993, 53).

Interestingly, freedom of choice seems to be important for yet another reason. Following Zieliński (2014, 177-178), we may conclude that a distinctive feature of evangelicalism is the freedom of religious search, provided it remains anchored in the Bible. According to this conception, believers should be encouraged to verify with the Bible any teaching, rulings or laws passed because they are always affected by human error.

6. Institutionalization

Polish evangelicalism has gained a more institutional character over time. Noticeable organizational practices enable the transmission of the social experience of religion, religious beliefs, and types of behavior. As a result, there is observable group integration, but an individual can also locate him or herself in relation to the system of ultimate reality. In the process of institutionalization, religious movements control, routinize, and depersonalize their procedures until a point at which the behavior of an individual complies with the structured system (Borowik 1996, 19). The Baptist Church community I had a chance to observe and participate in personally developed a system of integration and initiation (Grabowska 2017, 186). There are procedures in place to which a newcomer is subject before being admitted as a member. The individual's system of beliefs is shaped in various situations, but primarily during the sermon. Attendance is encouraged at other meetings during which the transmission of the system of beliefs also occurs. Situating oneself in relation to the system of ultimate reality means that believers learn that only through God's grace can they be saved. Stress is also put on humble subordination to God and to his will. Much like in other conservative denominations, here too the culminative point in the life of a convert is baptism. Institutionalization in denominations with a longer tradition in Poland, namely the Baptist and the Pentecostal, should primarily be

viewed from the point of view of their nation-wide organization system which sets the rules of conduct and determines the fundamental beliefs. In the case of the Baptist church, the basic unit of organization is congregation [z**ó**rb] headed by a group of male adult members called the Council [Rada Zboru]. There is a higher, legislative body, i.e., the State Church Conference [Krajowa Konferencja Kościola] which nominates the members to the State Church Council [Rada Kościola].

Still, due to its small number of adherents but also, and more importantly, to cultural and historical conditioning, the impact of evangelicism in Poland is insignificant and its principles do not penetrate the spheres traditionally associated with power, i.e., politics administration, or education. On the contrary, these seem to recognize only the Roman Catholic tradition.

7. Community

On the other hand, the private face of community requires an inward perspective. Cohen (2003) proposes a symbolic conception of culture, in which we look inside the community to observe the inner complexity and variety hidden underneath its mask. Weber and Mead changed sociology and social psychology completely by breaking the dominance of structural determinism. Thus, a more accurate description of a community should not rely only upon its institutional and structural dimension but should rather consider its symbolic character with the various interpretations possible (Cohen 2003 in Modnicka 2013, 64).

Symbols, then, do not merely stand for or represent something else. Indeed, if that was all they did, they would be redundant. They also allow those who employ them to supply part of their meaning. [...] age, life, father, purity, gender, death, doctor, are all symbols shared by those who use the same language or participate in the same symbolic behavior through which these categories are expressed and marked. But their meanings are *not* shared in the same way. Each is mediated by the idiosyncratic experience of the individual (Cohen 2001, 14).

Community in this symbolic account is where one belongs, learns and practices how to be social. “[...] it is where one acquires ‘culture’” (Cohen 2001, 15). Culture with its symbols offers participants the capacity to make sense, not, however, in a deterministic way. Each adherent makes unique use of the same set of symbols, yet in the mind of the quintessential member, each adherent makes a similar sense of things, at variance from the sense made elsewhere (Cohen 2001, 15).

Seen from inside, the community I participated in is diverse and to some extent divided. Such divisions are natural because internal differences exist in every group. There are people who share common interests, but there are also those with whom we do not find common ground (Grabowska 2017, 186-194). This internal diversification may result from various factors such as age, sex, social status, or roles (Modnicka 2013, 75). For instance, it can be noted that sex determines the roles and positions participants can have in the congregation. It is ascribed traditional gender roles, for instance, only male, heterosexual representatives are entitled to be ministers. Both men and women, in turn, are called to become involved in running the so-called Sunday school for children or participating in the musical accompaniment. Men gather and organize meetings during which they integrate, form closer relationships, and contemplate how to fulfil manly roles in the church, family, and society. Women also tend to socialize and integrate to recognize and develop their potential as women. They do so to learn how to better serve the community, family and whichever environment they happen to be in. Other internal divisions are based on status in the congregation. For example, there are people with membership status and others classed as sympathizers with the church. Membership gives the privilege of full participation in the church’s gatherings with the right to vote. Additionally, there are fresh converts versus long-time members, and leaders versus ordinary members. Those with membership status undergo obligatory baptism, a ritual which sympathizers may forgo.

There are adults and children, young and elderly, married and unmarried, wives, and husbands (Grabowska 2017 186-194).

8. Concluding remarks

We have shown how two, selected aspects Evangelical discourse and culture in Poland seem to encapsulate its specific nature, i.e., orality and freedom of choice. Surprisingly, orality, a characteristic traditionally associated with Christianity, is not a hallmark of modern-day Catholicism, the leading religious tradition. This highly institutionalized organization, although sharing the same Biblical roots as evangelicalism, has evolved to develop conventionalized paths. In evangelicalism, there is an observable reliance on individual and spontaneous expression of religious feelings. Nevertheless, the tendency towards specific formulae and expressions used to address God or interact with co-religionists cannot be ignored. One intriguing category which is conspicuously realized is that of magical speech acts which are predominant in charismatic discourse. Evangelical orality also comes to the fore in the style of expression whose essence is best depicted in Ong's characteristics.

Freedom of choice should be understood here in the context of an independent decision to identify with evangelicalism after having experienced a moment of transformation in life, i.e., a conversion. In Polish religious circumstances, in which, due to cultural and historical conditioning, the majority identifies with the Roman Catholic tradition, evangelicalism should be viewed as an optional religion. It is considered so because it requires a conscious decision which in turn involves the necessity to experience conversion and give testimony of it before a community of co-religionists. What is more, to gain membership, a convert learns and internalizes the doctrine. This situation differs from what we find in the Roman Catholic tradition, where new members of the church are initiated on the instigation of parents, although it is obviously possible to join the Catholic community in adult life and of one's own volition.

In fact, Evangelical identity is difficult to characterize on the spectrum between optional and inherited. The distinction seems to be more profound. On the one hand, the community seeks an individual and authentic relationship with God, which finds justification in the noticeable spontaneity of expression, clearly different from the clergy-mediated, liturgy-based, and more official form of interaction between believers and God in the Roman Catholic Church. On the other, however, Evangelical discourse reflects a degree of determinism derived from the formulaic character of expression of Evangelical speech, whose crucial role is predicated on its guarantee of the performative success of meetings. In place of other signs, typical of liturgical churches, such as officially recognized formulae, gestures, and symbols, these formulae and expressions, which may be recognized as a form of religious jargon or specialized terminology (Coleman 1980), help to fulfil the role of elements which facilitate the occurrence of identification.

Furthermore, the idea of evangelicalism in Poland is largely based on the principle of freedom of choice, which is expected to permeate all spheres of life, including one's own, undisturbed search for God. Seen from the outside, this religion can be perceived in terms of choice. Looking at a community from the inside, however, brings the realization that the implications which determine the decision to enter this movement are essentialized in the act of conversion. This postulate suggests that, if anyone, irrespective of religious background, truly desires redemption through Jesus Christ, he or she should make the choice and convert (Grabowska 2017, 195).

Choice-based thinking impacts the autonomy of churches and communities and engenders proliferation. The uninterrupted ease with which new groups are brought to life or the possibility to change affiliation also result from a considerable organizational freedom and lack of rigid norms of conduct. In place of official regulations, though, Evangelical Christians rely on tight bonds. Thus, the building blocks of

a communal identity are the relations which are sustained by frequent meetings and community activism (Grabowska 2017, 196).

The observable mechanism of institutionalization sanctions new members' identification with the community. This action enables new participants to define their position in the group and adjust the existing systems to individual situations (Schütz 2008 in Modnicka 2013, 74 in Grabowska 2017, 179). There are certain, but very few, procedures governing conduct, but also, and more importantly, suggested, albeit tacitly understood, ways exist for reading the Bible, and these may, to some extent, impede the promulgation of the idea of freedom of choice.

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