



# The Crisis of Western Culture and Secularism

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**Abstract:** The subject of this article is the crisis of Western culture (Christianity) in terms of its sources and consequences. The author attempts to present the diagnosis of European culture by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. They associate its crisis with the internal weakness of Christianity (the Catholic religion) and the influence of philosophical trends and ideologies with the purpose of creating a “new culture” on the ruins of the old one. Postmodern thought, which not only breaks with the rationalism of the Enlightenment but questions (in the name of individual freedom) the truth and the ability to get to know it, plays a special role in this respect. The anti-Christian narrative adopted by intellectual elites in the West, which in some manifestations becomes an ideology of secularism, is thus a consequence of philosophical assumptions. The author suggests that the popularisation of a model of life according to the principle “as if God did not exist,” i.e. the acceleration of de-Christianisation processes (e.g. in Poland) is significantly related to the development of the so-called new media, especially in the form of virtual reality.

**Keywords:** culture, crisis, Christianity, secularism, Internet

It is customary to say that a man is a religious being. That statement is confirmed not only by historical data (archaeology, religions of extinct cultures, inscriptions and written myths) but also by the prevalence of religion in the modern human family. For years, however, historians and religious scholars have been writing about the “European exception,” i.e. the phenomenon of non-religiosity, declared – at least since the Enlightenment – by an increasing number of social circles in the West. Mass unbelief and religious indifference are thus a product of Christian culture. Yet, this study does not deal with the processes that led to the above. This is because secularisation, i.e. the emancipation of successive sectors of social life from the guardianship of religion, is an excellently researched and described phenomenon. Even so, there is a connection between secularisation and secularism, i.e. an ideology the purpose of which is to eliminate Christianity from public space. It can be assumed that the progress of the spontaneous de-Christianisation of a particular community facilitates the emergence of secularist trends. (Neuhaus 2010, 59, 381–92)

The abandonment of Christianity includes a whole spectrum of attitudes and theoretical concepts; different types of atheism (from its ideological versions, e.g. Marxism or philosophical atheism, to the committed so-called new atheism, actively eradicating religion); practical materialism (sometimes combined with utilitarianism

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Fragments of this study refer to the texts: Perszon 2024 [forthcoming]; Perszon 2023.

and hedonism); religious indifference – from “scientific” agnosticism, which assumes a conflict between faith and science, to nihilism and unwillingness to pose metaphysical questions. More and more often, sociologists and cultural experts mention the Western fashion of distancing from Christianity imposed on the rest of society by opinion-forming (and with wide-ranging powers) elites. Consequently, it is something normal in most Western countries to have (at least declaratively) a religiously and axiologically neutral state and the dominance of – often aggressive – secularism and laicism in social policy. One of the by-products of such policy is the axiom of desirable pluralism in the sphere of ideas and life choices. Pluralism, i.e. the diversity of society (religious, worldview, ethical and moral anomie, preference for the individual, breakdown of consensus regarding the understanding of a man as a person, crisis of the classical family, etc.), is considered an unquestionable good in postmodernity; therefore, no wonder that every “strong” identity and thought (narrative) is considered a threat to freedom.

One of the consequences of the above processes is the so-called new spirituality.<sup>1</sup> That phenomenon reflects the diversity and confusion of modern society; in a way, it illustrates the internal contradictions that plague the modern Western man. Existing in a *pluriversum*, a man must constantly make choices – to some extent, every day – trying to establish the truth and meaning of his existence on his own. Convinced of his absolute autonomy, the Western man tries to compose his own spiritual and (less and less often) religious creed. A process of weakening – and this applies to the entire West – of religion institutionalised in the Churches has been observed for decades. In the case of Poland, it is primarily the Roman Catholic Church. In Poland, since the beginning of the 21st century, a rather rapid process of de-churchification of young people has been taking place. It may be assumed that the generational departure from the Church, i.e. religious declarations and practices quantifiable by sociological tools, is correlated with abandoning the Catholic spiritual life, i.e. Christian spirituality. Catholic piety based on intergenerational tradition and proven by past generations is weakening. That process, however, is not, as one might think, caused by the poverty of the Church’s spiritual offer and the non-attractiveness of the models of living the Gospel formed over the centuries. The abandonment of the Catholic tradition and its spiritual treasures can, albeit to a limited extent, be linked to the problems that beset the Church in the 21st century (paedophile scandals, doctrinal disunity, loss of credibility of the Church as an institution). Still, giving up religious life (as understood by Christianity) does not always lead to a spiritual desert, to the land of irreligion, atheism or practical materialism and sometimes (though less often than it seems) encourages a spiritual search to construct one’s own individualised concept of personal development and the pursuit of happiness or “salvation.” Such trends are derived from postmodern ideas to a large extent, but also from the development of new

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<sup>1</sup> Sutcliffe and Bowman 2009, 1–13; Pasek 2013; Mariański 2016, 263–330; Leszczyńska and Pasek 2008.

technologies that affect the economic sphere or media communication and – at the same time – transform interpersonal relationships and the way in which individuals perceive themselves and the reality around them.<sup>2</sup> There is a return to pre-Christian ideas of the sacred, a fascination with oriental beliefs, pantheistic concepts and cosmotheism (Delsol 2021; 2023, 117–36).

Of far greater importance seems to be the pressure of postmodern culture, with its predilection for individualism and rejection of everything that restrains unlimited individual freedom. Some even call it a programmatic revolution, abolishing (erasing, the so-called *cancel culture*) the entire cultural legacy to date.<sup>3</sup> Chantal Delsol mentions a rupture and total transformation in the name of progress, and the recognition of individual emancipation as an absolute good. (Delsol 2016; 2017, 17–46) Leszek Kołakowski, in an essay written in the 1980s, asked with great concern: “Will our culture survive if it forgets Jesus? Do we believe that if Jesus is banished from our world, this world will be lost?” (Kołakowski 2014, 11) In the religious transformation, but also in the offensive of militant secularism, too little importance seems to be given to the impact of the Internet, i.e. the virtual world.

In this study, the crisis of a culture that for centuries has been considered Christian is presented first. Based primarily on the teaching of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the issue of its genesis (sources, mechanisms; thought, intellectual and social processes) will be addressed (although only in rudimentary form), which has prepared the ground for “living as if God did not exist.”<sup>4</sup> This cannot be done without even a cursory analysis of the crisis of religiosity (and religion) introduced in traditional Christian churches and communities.

More and more often, not only in the circle of Catholic thought, one can notice totalitarian attempts of liberal democracy inherent in the project of creating a new man and a new, perfect world. The obstacle to the implementation of that project is – primarily Catholic – Christianity. Therefore, its elimination is necessary; by mockery, marginalisation and other “soft” methods of social engineering. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI warned of a “camouflaged totalitarianism” and a “dictatorship of relativism” that threatened people – not only those who believe in God – in the countries of Western civilisation. Their diagnoses indicate that laicism and secularism are becoming the dominant religion in the West.

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<sup>2</sup> Postmodernism – with its programmatic deconstructivism, rejection of the Enlightenment and Cartesian thought, radical relativism and axiological minimalism – is characterised by Andrzej Bronk (1998, 23–74). Attention is drawn to the blurring and fluidity of the terms used in sociology: religion, spirituality and postmodernism (Zwierzdzyński 2010, 79–93).

<sup>3</sup> Critical accounts of that phenomenon are written by Kevin Donnelly (2021), Alan M. Dershowitz (2020), Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay (2020), inter alia. Cf. Wildstein 2020 (especially chapter “Nowy, wspaniały totalitaryzm,” 80–106).

<sup>4</sup> That expression (*etsi Deus non daretur*) was used by both John Paul II (*EiE*, 9) and Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

In the next section of the paper, the potential impact of the Internet on the changes taking place in terms of culture and religiosity will be outlined. The impact of virtual reality changes not only the forms of social communication but also largely shapes (forms) the mentality, views and attitudes of a considerable part of the population. Unrestricted access to the immeasurable resources of the Internet accelerates the pluralism postulated by postmodernism, promotes the absolute freedom of the individual, allows a man to break with tradition (and the whole existing culture) and construct his own “self.” It can be assumed that in the religious/spiritual sphere, the influence of the Internet (at least to some extent) – precisely due to “erasing” the past and focusing on the present and the postulated establishment of a human paradise – accelerates the de-Christianisation of its users/participants. It is also becoming a dynamic factor in the secularisation of public space (both virtual and real).

## 1. The Crisis of Western (Christian) Culture

The popes at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries (especially John Paul II and Benedict XVI) were well aware of the difficulties encountered by the world of faith and the mission of the Church in the modern world. They expressed their opinions in many speeches and documents. Their teaching has remained relevant even today, when the crisis of Western culture – which they diagnosed – has coincided with a growing crisis and confusion in the Catholic Church. The situation is viewed similarly – although from a different perspective – by social analysts. Many thinkers, analysing the transformations taking place in the minds and existential attitudes of the inhabitants of Christian civilisation, consider them to be a comprehensive crisis (Delsol 2011; 2021; Chaput 2017; Mariański 2006). Thus, it is not only about the religious dimension (secularisation processes, the rapid and systematic weakening of religiosity, the crisis of the so-called traditional Churches and denominations, the privatisation of religion and the selective approach to the truths of faith and morals, the removal of Christianity from public life, etc.) but the whole social, family and personal life (R. T. Ptaszek 2023, 13–19). If society is defined as a system of communication and relations (as Jürgen Habermas does, for example), it is difficult to speak of the privatisation of religion or individual spirituality (Besecke 2010, 98–105). They always have a social dimension. The transformations – in the context of subsequent stages of secularisation – are described by Charles Taylor in his monumental monograph (Taylor 2007).<sup>5</sup> Some selected and signalled by both popes symptoms of that crisis are analysed below. Since contemporary culture (e.g., human relationships

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth paying attention to the sequence of stages of secularisation in the West. The researcher considers the Enlightenment as the “turning point” in this respect (cf. Kaufmann 2004).

mediated by electronics) is hybrid in nature (with a growing predominance of virtual reality), traditional means of communicating the Gospel are largely failing. The new culture generated by the computerisation of life is mentioned more and more often.<sup>6</sup>

For the reflections in the study, postmodernism is an important aspect. As Max Seckler notes, secularisation, postmodernism and religious pluralism are intrinsically interconnected. Thus, the gradual liberation of the state, society, culture and science from the governance of religion and churches already in the 19th century resulted in the “de-churchification” of social institutions, the de-Christianisation of customs and the removal of religion from public life. Secularisation (but not secularism) was viewed positively (in theological terms) by Friedrich Gogarten and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, inter alia. One of the leading motifs of postmodernism is pluralism and diversity, encompassing the entire social life. Factual and postulated pluralism gives up one “strong” principle, which for centuries has been God the Creator; thus, it promises the contemporary man liberation from Transcendence and the universal moral law. However, at the same time, it places the postmodern man in a situation of fundamental disorientation, uprooting, helplessness and relativism. A reality composed of “equivalent” fragments, disjointed, “condemns” a man to constant choice, collisions of values, contradictions, conflicts and confusion. Moreover; pluralism and relativism become social “virtues” as – by definition – they shape a tolerant, diverse society that respects differences and minorities. Every “strong” idea and philosophy – since it may not respect other views – must be depotentialised, weakened, incorporated into a democratic, tolerant universe (Seckler 2002, 150–52). Therefore, it is not surprising that any clear identity, rational metaphysical thinking or traditional doctrine of Creator and creation are questioned and eliminated. Postmodern thought assumes the unknowability of truth in the field of religion; it excludes a universal methodology and convergence of types of rationality. Instead, it proposes a plurality of forms of thought, a multiplicity of ways of knowing, language games and criteria of rationality. With such an approach, omnipresent pluralism allows humans to better realise themselves (Seckler 2002, 156–64). John Paul II claimed that “the synthesis of culture and faith is a requirement not only of culture but also of faith [...]. A faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not fully thought out, not lived faithfully” (Giovanni Paolo II 1982). Even at the end of the 20th century, the pope postulated – although he was well aware of the power of secular globalisation processes in Western culture – the inculturation of the Gospel in the “modern public square.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The threats of manipulation (or even dictatorship of electronic media) that the virtual world poses to modern societies are discussed by: Osiński 2023; Zybertowicz and Piekutowski 2022; Kreft 2019, inter alia. The literature presenting the dramatic effects of human computerisation is vast and well-grounded in reality. While assessing the possible effects of computerisation, Jastrzębski (2020, 15–27) warns against both hurray-optimism and gloomy vision (cf. Izdebski 2019; G. Ptaszek 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The European debates known as Areopagi have long had a negative approach to Christianity and are methodically eliminating it from the *forum publicum* (Weigel 2005).

Over the centuries, the Church has grown into specific European cultures, gradually evangelising them (Shorter 1988; Perszon 2019, 21–68). The most important tool and forum for the inculturation of the Gospel, according to John Paul, is the media (the world of mass media) and digital communication (*RM* 37; Kamińska 2020, 91–199).

Thirty years later, the pope's hopes seem unrealistic (even naive), or at least over the top. The new media, without which humanity is no longer able to live, are a threat rather than an opportunity for the world of Christian faith (understood as a community of persons rather than a “system” of ideas).<sup>8</sup> It is worth adding that for John Paul II the crisis of European culture meant not so much the depopulation of churches and the departure of a significant part of society from the principles of Christian morality. He claimed that the source of the crisis (including de-Christianisation) was the abandonment of culture in favour of the cult of power and wealth, the primacy of the ideology of “having” over “being.” Knowing that it is part of the nature of European culture to question established truths and structures and to strive for the whole truth (and thus also to contest Christianity), the pope saw the abandonment of reference to transcendence as a crisis-generating factor (Jan Paweł II 1985, 15–16; Giovanni Paolo II 1990). Towards the end of his pontificate (20 years ago), the pope, stating that the adoption of anthropology without God and Christ leads to the false divinisation of a man, wrote: “Forgetfulness of God led to the abandonment of a man,” therefore “no wonder that in this context a vast field has opened for the unrestrained development of nihilism in philosophy, of relativism in values and morality, of pragmatism – and even a cynical hedonism – in daily life” (*EiE* 9).

In postmodern society, which is hugely diverse (fragmented), the sacred (outside the context of the Christian faith, the sacred is essentially undefinable) has “spread” beyond the framework of traditionally understood religion (institution).<sup>9</sup> Due to increasing structural and functional differentiation, there is a breakdown of social consensus (and of all traditional communities) in the sphere of ontological and moral certainties.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the coupling of new technologies with its concentration in the hands of large owners allows a few to create a new world and a “new man”; it also means (at least potentially) breaking with the existing vision of a man,

<sup>8</sup> Andrzej Zybertowicz (Zybertowicz and Piekutowski 2022, 310–11) argues that the owners of the Internet (transnational corporations), in an almost perfect way (i.e. complete, holistic), first make their “customers” dependent, format their perceptive abilities, and then shape them arbitrarily (preventing reason and conscience from working). According to the sociologist, it is a programmatic manipulation of broad masses of society, who voluntarily surrender their souls to the control of the owners of virtual space.

<sup>9</sup> Hence, many sociologists mention “liquid spirituality,” “liquid religiosity” and “liquid sacred” disseminated in society, e.g., in the digital world. It should be added that a distinction is made between the religious/theistic sacred and the sacred understood as a non-theistic category (Mariański and Wargacki 2016, 7–12). The “fragmentation of existence” of contemporary Europeans was mentioned already by John Paul II (*EiE* 7–9).

<sup>10</sup> Zybertowicz sarcastically states that contemporary young people are “bound” and held together not by a common culture and tradition (or moral principles), but by money; specifically, by the obligation to repay the loan (Zybertowicz and Piekutowski 2022, 147–50).



culture, society and religion. (Zybertowicz 2015, 429–52)<sup>11</sup> It also makes it impossible (or difficult) to reach wider sections of society with the Gospel (Capucao 2010, 183–86).<sup>12</sup> The contemporary mentality is characterised by pragmatism and belief in democratic mechanisms. Hence the prejudice towards authoritarian (including religious) leadership and individualism, often associated with an autonomous approach to morality, criticism of inherited tradition, social order and religion.<sup>13</sup> The image of God has also been changing for several decades. Fewer and fewer people believe in His actions and interference in the human world and space (Ven 2001, 195–217). God is perceived as energy, the spirit of the universe, a cosmic power. Thus, He is aiconic and non-personal.

Since the world of faith no longer communicates with culture (both high and mass, popular) and does not inspire it, as it – although not entirely – has moved to the Internet or has been fragmented into different segments, it is slowly becoming an open-air museum, a space set aside for religion. Faith is becoming a private hobby, irrelevant to public affairs and everyday life. This, in turn, means that the process of deculturation of Christianity is progressing. That process is spontaneous only in appearance.<sup>14</sup> For decades, actions have been observed in the West, effectively marginalising the presence of Christianity (the Church) in social life. Many of those seem to be an extensive programme or implementation of the ideology of secularism. The fashion for secularism is created by the so-called elites, i.e. opinion-forming circles. The secularising assumptions of the social sciences (including the sociology of religion) are extensively discussed by (Kupś 2021, 79–95; Limbaugh 2006).<sup>15</sup> It is, obviously, about Christianity having a real impact on society, institutional and ecclesiastical, which – at least in Poland – is still folk, popular and mass in many of its manifestations.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to the so-called People’s Church (mass), the latest research and forecasts are not encouraging (Szauer 2023, 19–30). Particularly

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<sup>11</sup> John Paul II (*EiE* 9) speaks of the birth of a new culture, which – due to erroneous anthropology – becomes a “culture of death.”

<sup>12</sup> One should not succumb to the illusion that conscious, integral Christianity was a mass phenomenon in the distant past. Even in the centuries of the reign of the so-called *christianitas* or Christian civilisation, the actual living by faith concerned minorities. (Ven 2001, 188–91; Stark 1999). On the structural and cultural dimensions of secularisation and the response of churches to it, see: Ven 2001, 1996, 153–62.

<sup>13</sup> Egalitarian universalism and tendencies towards the (often extreme) emancipation of the individual are, as Jürgen Habermas argued, a legacy (consequence) of the Jewish ethics of justice and the Christian principle of love. (Reikerstorfer 2001, 67).

<sup>14</sup> The thesis of a natural (and therefore not programmed) weakening of religion in the context of other social systems (e.g. technology, politics) is promoted by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1985, 339–79).

<sup>15</sup> David Limbaugh (2006) mentions the “elimination of religion” from education, political circles, the media and the U.S. judiciary. In the American media (in the 1990s), there was an over-representation of atheists and those openly fighting Catholicism among journalists (over 90%). (Riley and Shaw 1993; Massa 2003; Lockwood 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Until recently, the stability of religiosity (i.e. Catholicism) in Poland, despite slow secularisation (de-Christianisation), was considered obvious (Grabowska 2018). The crisis of the Churches throughout the

alarming are the data on the sharp decline in the religiosity of children, adolescents and young adults (Adamczyk 2023, 31–44).

It is worth mentioning a significant detail: a sharp drop (by 26%) in the declarations of affiliation of Polish youth to Catholicism (from 83.9% in 1994 to 54.4% in 2021) is associated with the unification of attitudes of urban and rural residents regarding marriage and family morality (Adamczyk 2023, 39).<sup>17</sup>

John Paul thought that the remedy for anthropological reductionism and materialism (consumerism) was the opening of society to Transcendence (Giovanni Paolo II 1985). However, this is hindered by practical agnosticism, widespread religious indifference and the emptying of interpersonal relationships of reference to God.<sup>18</sup> The consequence of that attitude is the demand for Christianity to justify its presence in public space (Giovanni Paolo II 1985). This is undoubtedly an echo of the Enlightenment, which recognised reason as the only criterion for knowledge and action. Religion would have the right to exist if it was “rational.” Hence a popular conviction among elites in the West that anything bearing the imprint of faith must be treated with suspicion and rejecting unproven claims of faith is an act of intellectual honesty. With such a mentality, faith (especially Christian faith) is synonymous with obscurantism (Capucão 2010, 182–83). For that reason, Joseph Weiler wrote twenty years ago that there was a superstition among the political elites of Europe that religion and reason were in contradiction with each other, therefore Christianity (as the constitutive basis of European culture) was deliberately “suppressed.” In turn, Joseph Ratzinger (in the same period) attempted to answer the question of what the so-called “Constitution for Europe” should contain. His answer included three elements: the affirmation of the inalienable dignity of the human person and his rights, the defence of marriage and the family (in the context of the claims of homosexual organisations), and respect for the sacred in public life. The latter, of course, refers to the supreme holiness, i.e. God. “In the eyes of the cultures of the world, the absolute profanity gradually assuming form in the West is something profoundly alien. These cultures are convinced that a Godless world has

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West is confirmed by all sociological studies. This does not mean that religious sensitivity and personal religiosity are also disappearing.

<sup>17</sup> Tomasz Adamczyk (2023, 39) adds that secularisation (over the last 5 years) has changed from creeping to galloping in the group of teens. The equalisation of differences between the urban and rural communities (where religious practices are still much more popular) in relation to morality related to sexuality (marriage) indicates a strong normative influence of Internet patterns. A teenager spends approximately 5 hours a day on the Internet (during out-of-school time), on average. Research conducted in Kashubia indicates that the process of “breaking” the religious tradition within the family was already evident several years ago in that region (Perszon 2015, 53–67).

<sup>18</sup> Years ago, the well-known constitutionalist Weiler (2003b) wrote about the intellectual revulsion against Christianity and the fear of it (Christophobia) among European elites and the deliberate elimination of it from the public space (also the reasons for that).



no future” – wrote the Ratzinger (2007, 21–30; cf. Weiler 2003b; 2003a, 11; Delsol 2021; 2023, 56–60).<sup>19</sup>

John Paul II – like Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI – notices the loss of hope and fear of the future among the manifestations of the “non-existence of God.” Existential emptiness and loss of meaning in life make it difficult (especially for the young) to make decisions about marriage or priesthood, generate reluctance to pass on life to children and give rise to sadness and despair (*EiE* 7). John Paul II states:

Man is no longer able to see himself as “mysteriously different” from other earthly creatures; he regards himself merely as one more living being, as an organism which, at most, has reached a very high stage of perfection. Enclosed in the narrow horizon of his physical nature, he is somehow reduced to being “a thing”, and no longer grasps the “transcendent” character of his “existence as man”. He no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something “sacred” entrusted to his responsibility and thus also to his loving care and “veneration”. Life itself becomes a mere “thing”, which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation. (*EV* 22)<sup>20</sup>

In turn, Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

Is European culture that civilisation of technology and trade so victoriously widespread through the world? Or didn't that civilisation come into being in a post-European world following the end of the early European cultures? What I see here is a paradoxical synchrony: with things like the victory of the technical-secular/post-European world and the globalisation of its model of life and way of thinking, people all over the world [...] have the distinct impression that the values, culture and faith of Europe – the very bases of its identity – have reached their end and exited life's stage, while now the centre stage is being taken by the value systems of other worlds [...]. Europe seems to have reached the pinnacle of success, it seems like it has become empty within, paralysed by a crisis of its circulatory system, paralysed by a crisis threatening its very survival, which is entrusted to transplants that cannot help but alter its identity. Corresponding to this interior sapping of its constituent spiritual forces is the fact that Europe seems to be taking its leave in ethnic termsq (Ratzinger 2004; cf. 2007, 23–24).

The pope mentions the astonishing disappearance of the will to survive, for Europeans do not want to have children.

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<sup>19</sup> Ratzinger (2004) adds that the sanctity of Judaism and Islam are rightly protected in European countries; but when it comes to Christ and Christianity, one encounters a strange “West self-hatred” i.e. a pathological consent to tarnish its sanctities.

<sup>20</sup> Benedict XVI (*SpS* 10) writes about Europeans “being tired of life” and their resignation from the idea of eternal life, which for many is something unrealistic and undesirable. Cf. Ratzinger (2012, 489–94).

Ratzinger adds that a major challenge for Christian culture (and therefore also for the Church) is the secularisation of salvation. Salvation is already an empty word for many, absent from public discourse and increasingly misunderstood. It has been replaced by – located exclusively in the temporal – happiness; this, however, does not concern everyone (as salvation does) but only one's own self, which approves one's quality of life only if it serves the happiness of the individual. In this way, faith (Christianity) has become an obstacle, an impediment to human progress and an enemy of future (accomplished by revolution and therefore by the power of a man) happiness (Ratzinger 2012, 489–94; Delsol 2016; 2017, 173–84).

With the increasing fragmentation of the Catholic Church, which in many dimensions – at least as far as the West is concerned – is rapidly becoming a more and more pluralised society, it is becoming more and more difficult to get to know what (whom and why) the Church believes in; what worship should be given to the God of Revelation; what moral and ethical principles flow from the faith and remain binding for Catholics.<sup>21</sup> For several decades now, there has been a blurring and fluidity in the area of Catholic doctrine; this is currently evident, e.g., in the attempts to modernise the truths of the faith, including the resurrection of Christ (Skrzypczak 2023, 273–83; Salij 2021, 69–91; Piotrowski 2022). The same is true (since Vaticanum II) in the sphere of worship (crisis or renewal of the liturgy: Benedict XVI 2023, 59, 183; Skrzypczak 2023, 35–36),<sup>22</sup> especially in matters of moral principles after the 1968 revolution. (Skrzypczak and Chmielewski 2021, 143–68; Skrzypczak 2021a, 18–24). The turning point for the internal breakdown of the Church in the West (which was no longer a monolith, contrary to popular belief) could have been the revolt of 1968. At that time, a large group of Catholics (including clergy) joined the student protests and brought revolutionary ideals into the Ecclesia (Chiron 2021).

One of the characteristics of contemporary culture is – largely as a result of the influence of mass culture – the departure of young people from tradition, universal values and moral authorities. More than 30 years ago, John Paul II spoke to the youth about the “temptation,” the essence of which was liberation from all constraints and autonomy: to possess more, to be famous (well-known) and to experience pleasure. He said that social media, the entertainment world and literature would present the old moral ideals as limitations and deprivation, an obstacle to the full development of the personality. They would suggest a model of life in which everyone lived only

<sup>21</sup> The authors of the book: Grzegorz Górny, Krystian Kratiuk, Paweł Lisicki (2023) talk in a simple, critical and specific way about the confusion in the Church (starting with the actions and statements of the papacy and Roman dicasteries). Antonio Socci (2016, 78–127) asks Pope Francis why he does not defend the Church and faith and preaches relativism instead (indulgence, prayer, the Eucharist, marriage) focusing on helping the poor, waste selection and climate protection.

<sup>22</sup> Skrzypczak (2023) discusses at length the crisis in the Church caused by the reformist reception of the Second Vatican Council and the widespread attitude among theologians to question the competence of the Church's Magisterium (especially Pope Paul VI). One of the factors blurring the identity of the faith was the absorption by the Catholic theology of the methodology of “demythologising” of the sources of Christianity.

for themselves and the most important thing was unbridled self-affirmation (Jan Paweł II 2008, 30–31). The pope's predictions, as we saw during the so-called “women's strike” three years ago in Poland, are coming true.

The symptoms of the transformation of European culture indicated above – although only selectively – were identified by John Paul II and Benedict XVI as its deep crisis. In their view, the fundamental source of that crisis is the “forgetting of God,” i.e. the gradual perception of a man, society and the world in separation from the Creator. This contributes to the disintegration of society and the extinction of civilisation, the splendour of which grew from the Gospel. It also intensifies the pressure on Christians to become silent and disappear from the public space.

## 2. The “Camouflaged Totalitarianism” of Democracy and Secularism

Although the copyright to the expression “camouflaged totalitarianism” is disputed (as it was used by John Paul II and Benedict XVI), it denotes those forms of society, which – by calling themselves democratic, liberal and free (and functioning according to democratic mechanisms) – in a “soft” and informal way eliminate the Christian God (and the world of faith – the Church) from community/public life (Tarasiewicz 2011; Kucharczyk 2010; Kiereś 2011; Bartyzel 2011; Lekka-Kowalik 2011; Delsol 2016; 2017, 28–85). Benedict XVI speaks of the clash between the intolerance of the modern state, the lifestyle it shapes and “fidelity to the faith of the fathers.” John Paul II (CA 44–46), on the other hand, states that totalitarianism is born from the negation of objective truth:

If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over, and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal [...]. Thus, the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate [...] if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism (CA 44–46).

In turn, Ratzinger (2005) says: “Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labelled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine’, seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognise anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires.”

The proclamation of tolerance and unlimited freedom is accompanied by the persistent pushing of Christianity underground, into the private sphere. Hence the mockery, contempt and ridicule of those who dare to publicly demonstrate their faith (and its consequences). Obviously, such a form of public life has a philosophical basis, history and specific implications for citizens. It may also take the form of hidden (or overt) discrimination of Christians and the Church. Although the modern Western states consider themselves models of tolerance (for they break with the pre-racial claims of each religion), they impose a radical manipulation of a man and his gender at the same time. The embodiment of those aspirations is the gender ideology with all its consequences. Therefore, the demand (using authoritarian legal tools) for the abandonment of Christian anthropology and the morality that follows from it. It is precisely the fact that Christianity understands itself as truth and claims universality contributes to it being accused of intolerance (Benedict XVI 2023, 31–33, 37, 39, 41–46). The pope adds that this is because the postmodern culture “makes man his own creator and disputes the original gift of creation.” And continues: “[...] society that sets itself against the truth is totalitarian, and therefore, proudly intolerant [...]” (Benedict XVI 2023, 46).<sup>23</sup> Those statements relate us in many ways to the long process of de-Christianisation of European countries. Robert Skrzypczak notes that the first revolution in the Western world was the Protestant reform, separating Christ from church structures.<sup>24</sup> A significant breakthrough and symptom of the decline of the “primacy of God” in societies was the French Revolution (1789).<sup>25</sup> As Joseph Ratzinger writes: from that time onwards “God ceases to be the public *Summum bonum*” and His place is taken by the nation, then the proletariat and the world revolution. Post-Christian Europe, and this process accelerated after World War II, keeps moving away from its spiritual and religious identity (Ratzinger 2024, 59–60, 62).<sup>26</sup> Enlightenment rationalism has turned into a dominant scientism: only what is experimentally verifiable is rational (reasonable). Hence, the whole sphere of morality and religion, which is beyond the rational, becomes private and subjective (Ratzinger 2024, 59–60).

<sup>23</sup> Delsol (2016; 2017, 226) reports that in January 2014, the German parent association Besorgte Eltern in West Germany published a list of ten parents who were sentenced to prison for refusing to send their four-year-old children to *gender classes*.

<sup>24</sup> On the spiritual processes, the disenchantment of the world, the change of social structures and the preparation of the ground for deism by the Reformation, see: Taylor 2007, 75–89. Cf. Dalferth 2017; Kaufmann 1979, 54–60.

<sup>25</sup> Skrzypczak (2021a, 14). Deism emerged from the revolution of the Enlightenment rejecting Revelation (Christ as Saviour) in favour of an “indifferent God.” The construction of a new world required the desacralisation of power (the beheading of Louis XVI) and the sacralisation of the collective will embodied in an idealised democracy. It has become the sole legislator, the arbiter over good and evil. Cf. Delsol 2016; 2017, 86–125.

<sup>26</sup> As the latest sociological study concludes, “de-churchification” and de-Christianisation are processes that result in a systematic increase in the number of irreligious people (*the nones*). Secularisation trends make the West (Europe) an exception on a global scale; in Africa and Asia, religions are doing well (Díaz de Rada and Gil-Gimeno 2023, 1–48).

Moreover; the post-Enlightenment belief that economics and technology would bring true liberation to a man had a significant impact on the deconstruction of a society based on religion founded on the biblical concept of God. Marxism brought a radical breakthrough in this regard. Since the world is the product of irrational evolution, a man must create his own rational world. The belief in progress brought about by a man has made the “happy society” the ultimate normative moral idea (Delsol 2016). Good is whatever serves the establishment of universal happiness; bad is whatever hinders that process. The “Second Enlightenment,” that we are currently dealing with – as Ratzinger writes, postulates a rational goal of the future being the “new world order” constructed entirely by a man (Ratzinger 2024, 164–65; 2007; Delsol 2016; De Mattei, 2007; Wildstein 2018, 17–35).

The Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce described the era of post-war modernity as “anthropological nihilism.” The radical equality and freedom proclaimed today abolish all differences (including those determined by nature) destroying (eliminating) the entire culture and foundations of anthropology (Skrzypczak 2021b, 15).<sup>27</sup> A significant moment in this reconstruction of the world of values (and social mentality) was the 1968 rebellion. It intensified the fascination with ugliness, proclaimed the rejection of all moral brakes (and principles), the subordination of life to the principle of pleasure (erotic debauchery and the praise of drugs) and introduced the duty of optimism (Ratzinger 2024, 172, 256).<sup>28</sup> Robert Skrzypczak proposes to distinguish a fourth revolution, which he calls the “particle revolution.” Here, the anti-Christian offensive is transferred to the interior of a man; from rebellion against God the ruler and the state, the new man moves to rebellion against moral conscience. He rejects them and chooses savagery, i.e. self-will (anarchy), liberation from all obligations, the obligation to seek the truth and respect it (Skrzypczak 2021b, 15–19).<sup>29</sup>

The status of Christianity is thus changing not only because of the attractiveness of alternative proposals and because of the loss of evangelistic zeal by the Churches. For at the root of its crisis lies, as Benedict XVI argued, the new (i.e. non-Christian) vision of reality, of man and human freedom is widely shared (and embraced) by Christians. It is not so much a matter of widespread opposition to the Church’s teaching on morality, especially sexual morality (Szauer 2022, 307–44), but of changing

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<sup>27</sup> The theologian adds that the “remodelling” of society questions gender differences (woman, man), destroys the family and marriage, normalises homophily and promotes sexual perversion. As a result, marital fidelity, chastity or virginity are considered to be manifestations of psychological disorders that hinder human development.

<sup>28</sup> The pope, reflecting on the consequences of rejecting the transcendent dimension (man’s reference to God), claims that it leads to the elimination of a man. Indulging in all desires inevitably turns into contempt for life. He writes: “Misshapen triplets – abortion, euthanasia, suicide – are the natural progeny of this fundamental decision – the denial of eternal responsibility and eternal hope.” (Ratzinger 2024, 202)

<sup>29</sup> The author wryly states: “Among the standards of pop culture, the apotheosis of a happy, mindless idiot takes the lead.”

the socially professed paradigm. This paradigm rejects the doctrine of creation and metaphysics (and consequently of nature and the doctrine of natural law derived from it), resulting in people feeling they are creators of themselves and builders of a utopian better world. The realisation of this utopia increasingly takes the form of “soft totalitarianism” towards Christians and the marginalisation of the “God question” in public life (Ratzinger 2024, 158, 365; Delsol 2021). Benedict XVI notes that the Christian faith, as a result of its very essence (i.e. its claim to truth: the revelation of the true, monotheistic God), is, as it were, condemned to an irremediable conflict with the modern, supposedly tolerant state. Ratzinger undoubtedly alludes to the ideas of postmodernism, which emerged in Europe as a result of the disillusionment with modernity and the havoc wrought by totalitarian systems (communism and Nazism) (Bronk 1998, 23–113; Mariański 2016). It would not be out of place to mention the so-called cultural Marxism that has inspired the intellectual and political elites of Western Europe even before the Second World War. Its ideas perfectly coincide with calls for the creation of a new man and a new society (Rozwadowski 2018; Wildstein 2020).

Following the revolution of 1968 in the West, the crisis of the Churches and the exodus from them (Ratzinger writes of the “progressive dissolution of religion”) resulted in politics taking over the role of religion. Belief in transcendence no longer seems rationally indefensible and, at the same time, the “experience of non-redemption,” which people expect not from God (religion) but from this world, is intensifying in society. The disintegration of religion has given rise to various forms of substitute religions, esotericism, occultism, magic, rituals and psychological practices. All of these do not require faith but offer the possibility of self-salvation. Thereby, a change in the essence of religion takes place, according to Ratzinger (2024, 261). The processes signalled by Ratzinger set the stage not only for religious pluralism and extreme individualism (together with the idea of self-salvation – autosoterism) but also for various types of new spirituality, often involving elements of so-called mystical religions (Benedict XVI 2023, 26).

As can be seen, the popes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries accurately diagnosed the crisis of European culture and the threats it presents to Europe’s identity and the future of its people. The publications by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI note that the Church in Europe (as a real community of people) is also experiencing a profound crisis and, in some aspects, even a breakdown. The rapid (and unexpected) de-Christianisation of a large part of society, particularly after the Second Vatican Council, coincided with the growing influence of ideological secularism, which aimed to eliminate Christianity from public discourse. This, in turn, draws abundantly on the philosophical upheaval wrought by the luminaries of postmodernism. It can be concluded that the changes taking place in Western societies (which include Poland) will continue in the same direction as before. The Living Church is becoming an increasingly marginalised minority; the social elites, constructed on mechanisms of influence and power (and money), are implementing the successive



stages of the revolution described by the ideologues of postmodernism; the education system of children and young people is subordinated to the ideal of self-fulfilment and the individual pursuit of happiness. “The dictatorship of relativism” – for the time being – appears to have triumphed, eliminating, step by step, the Christian vision of the world and the anthropology that created the greatness of European culture for centuries.

### 3. The Levelling Power of the Internet

The impact of the so-called new media appears to be underestimated in social diagnoses and research (concerning changes in religiosity, among other things). The world of electronic media (with the Internet at its forefront) is by its very nature indifferent to Christianity. Indeed, there are media scholars – not excluding Catholic researchers – who emphasise the more positive aspects of virtual reality. Mariusz Kuciński (2019), Józef Kloch (2011, 282–97) and Justyna Szulich-Kałuża (2021, 133–50), among others, write with hope and optimism about the Internet as a space for evangelisation.<sup>30</sup> However, there is much evidence that the presence of religion on the Internet is significantly changing it (Hjarvard 2012, 21–44; Hjarvard 2011, 119–35; Sierocki 2021a; Sierocki 2021b). Computerisation encompasses all dimensions of people’s lives, radically changing not only the tools they use but, above all, themselves. This is the reason why there is talk about the construction of a new identity and its fluidity, about the loss of the human being and the transformation of the “pilgrim” into a “vagabond” who is nowhere at home and self-defines temporary goals (Szczepański and Śliz 2015, 79–96; Mariański and Wargacki 2016). Thanks to the Internet, the Western man simultaneously exists in many cultures; therefore, a personality type that is a cultural hybrid has emerged (Szczepański and Śliz 2015, 86–92). In sociology, one speaks of a hybrid, fluid and online identity. This is because most young people live more in the virtual than in the real world. Cyberspace also shapes – at unprecedented intensity – interpersonal relationships, subverting the existing social set-up and value system (Konarska and Urbaniak 2020, 7–13). Stig Hjarvard concludes that mediatisation has remodelled the essential foundations of culture and society: the media has become an “opinion industry”; media-delivered excitement has taken the place of ecclesiastical religion; entertainment and games are the domain of bytes; traditions and customs have been displaced by a socially determined new individualism (Hjarvard 2023).

<sup>30</sup> For example, Wojciech Misztal (2020, 157–69) tracks the number of views for the entry “Spirituality” on Wikipedia in 2015–2019; it amounted to 70,223, indicating little interest from Internet users. The author cites numerous positive statements by popes (Pius XI, Pius XII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis) encouraging the proclamation of the Gospel in modern media.

This is why this paper attempts to show that the religious changes taking place in Europe (and more broadly in the West) (including laicisation, secularisation, de-Christianisation and “de-churchification”) are caused by the dynamism of the transformation of social life of the entire cultural context. One of the decisive factors that (as we can see in Poland) lead to the rupture of young people with the Catholic religion (the entire faith tradition) is the widespread, daily and many hours of “being” on the Internet (virtual world) (Perszon 2019, 154).<sup>31</sup> The question remains whether, in the face of the dominance of the Internet, it will be possible to save human beings and genuine culture, i.e. one corresponding to human nature. The generational changes that occur every 15 years or so in a hybrid world (interpenetration of virtual and real dimensions) make the dominant category of change somewhat invalidate classical models of understanding culture and human beings and force educators and parents to make (constantly new) attempts to understand young people and communicate with them (Nowicka 2020, 164–76; Batorski 2017, 79–94; McCrindle and Fell 2019; Turk 2017; Twenge 2017). A separate issue, which is rapidly levelling out the legacy/established and inherited culture, is the peculiar digitalisation of the mentality of Internet users. Although IT tools represent an invaluable treasure trove and excellent equipment for “enhancing” human potential, they paradoxically often lead to the instrumentalisation of the person and the degradation of cognitive abilities. The impact of technology (the Internet) on the intelligence and cognitive faculties of its users and, consequently, on their mentality, spiritual life, moral conduct and social relationships is richly debated in the literature (Morbiter 2007, 115–30; Tapscott 2010; Carr 2011; Flynn 2012; Small and Vorgan 2008).<sup>32</sup> Exposure from early childhood to electronic media (television, tablets, smartphones, computers) leads to changes in the structure and functioning of the human brain (Morbiter 2014, 118–20). The educator, citing research, states that digital natives show no resilience in the face of adversity, lacking fortitude and a sense of responsibility. They are “strangers” to their (older) relatives, as they inhabit “a different anthropological space.” The consequence of being online for a long time is the emergence of so-called hypertextual minds, i.e. a change from linear to multithreaded thinking. The digital native remembers much information but is incapable of interpretation and creativity. Children show impairment of the part of the cerebral cortex (prefrontal cortex) responsible for empathy, higher emotions, tolerance (Morbiter 2014, 118–20). In light of research from a decade ago,

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<sup>31</sup> The author conducted a survey in 2017 (a total of 123 respondents) with lower-secondary school students in Jastarnia and Lipusz in Kashubia (Poland), regarded as a hotbed of Kashubian and religious tradition. In the surveyed group, young people spent between 3.5 and 4 hours online (outside of school) daily. Only three people used the Internet less frequently, under parental supervision, while the “record-breakers” stayed in the virtual world 12 hours per day.

<sup>32</sup> Manfred Spitzer (2013, 64–65) warns that replacing a book with a display impairs the development of synapses in the child’s brain.

the Internet generation is not interested in politics, religion and work. Many behave like autistic patients (Carr 2013, 21–23, 36).

There is no shortage of scholars who do not hesitate to refer to the Internet reality (dominated by a few powerful owners) as a “new dictatorship,” not only perfectly controlling all participant-users, imposing a way of thinking and living on billions of people, but beforehand training and formatting their minds accordingly (Zybertowicz 2015; Zybertowicz 2022).<sup>33</sup> Leszek Kołakowski warned against such a turn of events more than 40 years ago, writing about an “anthropological catastrophe” and digital (technological) totalitarianism (Kołakowski 2012, 13–33; Kołakowski 2009, 145–62).

Janusz Morbitzer takes a moderate stance on this issue; he recognises the dangers that the dominance of new technologies brings to human beings and their development; on the other hand, he adds that the Internet offers an excellent opportunity to access information. In his view, however, it is difficult to blame the technology itself as a tool. The impact of the Internet and other communication tools on human beings (their intellect, imagination, moral attitudes and concept of reality) depends on prudence in their use. The problem is that the “communalised intelligence” or collective knowledge is shallow and chaotic and inclines the user to mental laziness. The vastness and excess of information give a sense of having “knowledge” but impair not only thinking but also will, emotions and social behaviour (Morbitzer 2014, 126–28).<sup>34</sup> The culture crisis in general (especially true of the Christian culture of the West) is therefore not only strongly related to the trends/characteristics of postmodern society (e.g. pluralism and individualism). Nor is it merely the result of the dominant elite (professors, intellectuals, the political class, literary authors, philosophers) of postmodern ideas that, as it were, a priori exclude the seriousness of the Christian proposal. The cultural rupture, observed mainly in the younger population, is due to the literal dismantling of traditional society and the traditional family, enforced by the spread of new technologies, especially the Internet. In conclusion, the Internet is of paramount importance for the state of the Christian religion (and spirituality) and its profound crisis. At the same time, it is a crisis of culture, the destabilisation of which must hit the world of faith, *nolens volens* based on tradition (and Tradition).

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<sup>33</sup> In contrast, US professor Mark Bauerlein (Bauerlein 2022), in his comprehensive monograph, traces the decline of (primarily higher) education in the United States, which the country “owes to” the massive (and compulsory) computerisation of the school and teaching process. As the eponymous “dumbest generation” is approaching the age of 50, in his view, not only American culture but the very existence of the United States as a country is under threat. For example, a dozen years or so ago, students spent only about seven minutes a day reading books. In his view, Western culture is under mortal threat from the “feral” and stupefied relativists that the modern school and society educate.

<sup>34</sup> The author adds that the “digital dementia” that Manfred Spitzer wrote about may be a deliberate effect, for narrow elites are sufficient to rule society and generate progress. Moreover, the Internet and computer lobbies are interested not in human development but in profits. Morbitzer asks why we as a society (parents, teachers) permit a “hard media determinism,” which is destructive for the young person.

In other words, the digital natives, shaped by the Internet, do not so much abandon the religion of their fathers (probably never have accepted it in a personal act of faith) as they do not encounter it, fully incorporated into virtual reality. When a significant part of the population is cut off from the culture or heritage of past generations, this can have dramatic consequences for society as a whole.

## Conclusions

From the perspective of the Catholic Church (John Paul II and Benedict XVI), Western culture has been gradually, yet continuously, cutting itself off from its Christian roots for over 200 years. In their view, this process is perhaps the most important cause of its crisis and increasingly visible decline. The papal reflection on Europe and its state of affairs emphasises the importance of an erroneous anthropology which contrasts man with God and – already in the postmodern era – proclaims man's absolute autonomy. Both popes and many other contemporary thinkers see a shift – typical of the West – from laicisation (secularisation) of public life and de-Christianisation of nominal (cultural) Christians to open hostility towards the Catholic Church and the biblical vision of man. Secularism, seeking to eliminate any influence of Christianity in public life, as well as the “question of God” itself in the social space, systematically conquers territory, taking society through successive stages of revolution. Starting from the French Revolution, through Marxism and postmodernism, to the very aptly named technological revolution, an attempt is made to create a new man and society. The Catholic Church appears in this context as an enemy of progress and of this project. In the context of the internal crisis that Ecclesia is experiencing (at least in Europe), it seems incapable of reversing de-Christianising trends as things stand.

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