

Summary

With the XXI century the book of history has opened a new chapter with breakthrough experiences for mankind. Postmodernism, together with its plethora of amenities, brought in its wake the deep-felt experience of alienation and loneliness. Community- feeling and tradition have been substituted by anonymous and impersonal organizations. Presentday's society is deeply affected by an erosion of received rules of conduct and moral principles, of a decline in esthetics, mental and intellectual concepts as well as finance- and business practices. Permanently imprinted into our lives has been the risk factor, which expresses itself in the uncertainty of tomorrow and undermines and destroys the feeling of security. The risk is an omnipresent and ubiquitous phenomenon which spares nobody, no one can feel safe. A considerable number of scientists are convinced that the world as we have known it until recently is losing its transparency. Traditional patterns of values and orientation have become obsolete arises difficulties in defining who we actually are, which directly affects the issue of human identity. The category „identity“ has intrigued philosophers, psychologists, sociologist and has of late increasingly aroused the interest of educational scientists. The term, however, has not yet been clearly defined; it is applied in many contexts and covers a wide range - on the individual, social and group level. Identity is an ongoing process during which the individual incessantly shapes the perception and image of itself. Anthony Giddens refers to identity as the: „reflexive project“. It is, however, not easy to define unambiguously what is to be understood by „reflexivity“. It may be regarded as the entity's aptitude or capability to analyse and assess its life, its actions, its decisions, its „self“ – and give it a meaning, a significance. Reflexivity is the understanding of one's own condition, of the emotions we have experienced.

Besides its stricte sensu physiological features and functions, human life manifests itself in virtually boundless intricate mental, emotional and intellectual processes. Man is characterized through his curiosity about the world that surrounds him, his interest in the human condition, the urges to solve the riddle of his origin (and presumptive ending), the position of mankind within the structures and infinity of space. The participation in religious practices which have accompanied mankind since the dawn of times is one of the ways to provide an answer to these questions. Religiosity is an intrinsic part of humanness. Man craves for spiritual elation, he wants to believe in the incomprehensible and contradictory, thence misterious and inexplicable. Religious activity manifests itself in manifold ways, in the affiliation to one of the big world religions, in cults and rituals, in

new religious and spiritual movements and sects, the latter ones more often than not of controversial and suspicious character.

Each group create their particular visions, reflecting human dreams and desires. These groups, concurrent with the major traditional religions, have become a challenge to representatives of various scientific disciplines. Studies on religiosity conducted nationwide in Poland reveal a gradually increasing willingness of believers to convert to another faith. It seems therefore indicated to investigate the phenomenon of alternative religiosity, as well as describe and understand it.

The results of the studies represented in this doctoral thesis are evidence that alternative religiosity intrigues scientists, but likewise confronts them with various problems and obstacles. These are, among others, the mechanisms that accompany the origins and the development (genesis) of religious groups, their institutionalisation and spatial development, the social standing of their followers, as well as the extent and character of public consent towards such activities .

Astoundingly the scientific literature available, based on survey results, lacks completely in personal testimonies and personality profiles of religious groups' members and the analyses of such materials. This fact was the incentive to do research-work in this field and the personal identity of religious groups' members became the focal point of scientific interest.

The following main issues were to be investigated: What is the identity of religious groups' members/ converts like? Which circumstances inclined the respondents to change their faith? What importance can be assigned to the group and their common practices within the personality forming process of its members? It was the objective of our research project to expose and, as far as possible, understand the phenomenon of the personal identity within the framework of its affiliation to a religious group. The studies were of explorative, descriptive and interpretative character. The project's main objective was to explore the process of personal identity (re)shaping, reveal the personal history of the convert-respondent and detect the significance and purpose they ascribed (retrospectively) to their experiences.

The descriptive aim focussed on the identity description of religious groups' members according to defined categories. The investigations' interpretative goal attempted to clear the circumstances that determined the respondents' decision to convert and the background of the interaction between the individual and the religious group in the individual personality/ identity formation process. The knowledge obtained discloses the converts' personal history and central episodes which helps to understand their crucial decisions and life choices. The investigation method applied within the framework of our research project was the

narrative interview developed by Fritz Schütze. Drawing as non-verbal aqualitative research tool supported the interviews. The examination group consisted of two female and four male persons. Three belonged to protestant groups of Christian provenance- the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Pentecostal Movement respectively, three adhere to groups of oriental traditions- Buddhism and Hinduism- that is to the Chaitanya Mahaprabhu movement (hinduism) and Karma Kagyu.

The investigation of any identity- the personal identity in particular- is a challenge, as it is elusive to concise positivistic methodology. Thence the collection of empirical data as well as their analysis/ assessment are to be classified as constructivist case studies. This allows to deal with this phenomenon in its original setting, to become acquainted and familiar with its subtleties and its uniqueness without depriving it of its peculiar background, and it may even open up a way to its understanding. The qualitative research method naturally implies the implementation of interactionism as adequate sociological perspective, as it allows for an appropriate interpretation and analysis of the collected materials. Interactionism reduces personality- shaping to the interaction between the social environment and the unique process of the unfolding of the individual. Every human being exists, acts and reacts as a member of society and its own self simultaneously. Interactionism as sociological perspective provides the possibility to understand the connection between social reality and the conditions which may lead to an alteration of its significance in the light of later individual experience and personal life-history

The compendium here presented is divided into theoretical and empirical part, the first one containing three chapters. Chapter one deals with the broad concept of the term „identity.“ Presented are selected approaches to this concept as well as fundamental issues concerning various domains of identity- e.g. individual, social and group identities, followed by selected concepts of „identity“ and the attempt of a due classification. The second chapter outlines man's religious activities, explains crucial technical terms and provides a classification of religious groups, determinants for conversion and the results hereof in regards to religiosity worldwide and in Poland particularly. Chapter III presents investigation results on religious groups mainly obtained by pedagogical research. The second, theoretical part, contains two chapters. Chapter I outlines the research project's structure and lists its main objectives, research issues, methods of data sampling and analysis, characteristics and specifics of the investigated groups. The final chapter's three subdivisions present the analysis of the collected data. A summing up and the deductions to be drawn from the study project conclude the thesis.