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Descriptions of Culture in the Media as a Search for its True Image

ABSTRACT

The article confirms the thesis that culture is understood in various ways. There are people who do not know culture and those who want to know more about it. Such a desire stems from the need to solve the problem that arises from different understandings of culture and from the fact that what some people call culture, others call anti-culture. The fact that the media are used in the search for the true image of culture is presented in the article through an analysis of the messages presented in the media. If we assume that the role of the media is to help people to discover the truth by discussing issues that are relevant to people's lives, we can say that they truly undertake such a task when it comes to culture. The media emphasize the fact that values such as truth, goodness, and beauty are present in culture. All of these values come from God and lead to him. They make mankind need and search for culture continuously. Thanks to them, we can experience holistic development and understand more deeply what the essence of true humanity is. Without these divine values, human life—marked by false anthropocentrism—will always be filled with activities that can be described as “anti-culture.”

On the basis of selected texts, the article demonstrates the dependence between recognizing true culture and accepting responsibility for it. This responsibility is expressed in a constant effort to broaden one's horizons of thought, to engage in various areas of life, and to create—through true universal fraternity—various communities. This way, the proper development of not only culture, but also of humanity can take place. It is also the path which leads to an effective defense against secular humanism, which is so hostile to religion.

KEYWORDS: culture, media, truth

STRESZCZENIE

Medialne opisy kultury jako poszukiwanie jej prawdziwego oblicza

Niniejsze opracowanie potwierdza tezę o zróżnicowanym pojmowaniu kultury. Są ludzie, którzy jej nie znają, i tacy, którzy chcą poznawać ją coraz dokładniej. Pragnienie takie spowodowane jest chęcią rozwiązania problemu, który powstaje przez różne rozumienie kultury oraz przez fakt, że to, co jedni określają terminem kultury, inni nazywają antykulturą.

Na podstawie analizy zaprezentowanego przekazu medialnego pokazany został fakt wykorzystywania środków społecznego przekazu do poszukiwania prawdziwego oblicza kultury. Jeśli środki te mają pomagać człowiekowi w docieraniu do prawdy – omawiając aktualne dla ludzkiego życia kwestie – to w temacie kultury rzeczywiście podejmują się takiego zadania.

W umieszczanych w mass mediach treściach dotyczących kultury podkreślany jest fakt obecnych w niej wartości, takich jak prawda, dobro i piękno. Wszystkie one pochodzą od Boga i do Niego prowadzą. One sprawiają, że człowiek nieustannie potrzebuje i poszukuje kultury. Dzięki nim może bowiem doświadczać integralnego rozwoju i coraz dokładniej rozumieć, na czym polega prawdziwe człowieczeństwo. Z kolei życie człowieka bez tych Bożych wartości, naznaczone fałszywym antropocentryzmem, zawsze wypełnione będzie działaniami, które określić można terminem „antykultura”.

Na podstawie zaprezentowanych medialnych treści wskazana została zależność rozpoznawania prawdziwej kultury od przyjmowania za nią odpowiedzialności. Odpowiedzialność ta wyraża się w nieustannym podejmowaniu trudu poszerzania horyzontów myślowych, angażowania się w różne dziedziny życia, tworzenia – przez prawdziwe powszechne braterstwo – różnorodnych wspólnot. W ten sposób realizować się może właściwy rozwój nie tylko kultury, lecz także człowieka. Jest to również droga, na której dokonuje się skuteczna obrona przed wrogim religii laickim humanizmem.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: kultura, media, prawda

The concept of culture is defined in numerous ways and frequently refers to various spiritual and material achievements, both individual (belonging to a person) and collective (developed by a social group). The English cultural anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) explained that these achievements consist of patterns of thought and behavior (1871, as cited in O’Neil, 2006).¹ The descriptions of culture which have been

1 The definition developed by Tylor is one of the most frequently quoted descriptions of this phenomenon: culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871, as cited in O’Neil, 2006).

adopted in academic studies (and they are abundant and diverse) demonstrate that the understanding of this notion undergoes an unceasing evolution. Similarly, discussions devoted to culture held in the media approach culture from many different angles. It is widely accepted that the term “culture” is one of the most complicated concepts, and although over 150 definitions of this term can be found in English, it must be admitted that culture is inherently undefinable. “The definition of culture remains elusive and contested” (Frischmann, 2006). It is also beyond the individual and refers to a particular community, as people create culture by engaging in social life.

Culture is certainly a very complex concept and, as such, it has its own complex specificity. Culture is discussed in the media on a regular basis, and the discussions are usually aimed at finding answers to the following questions: What is culture? What is its role in the lives of people and society? How do contemporary societies understand culture and how do they actively participate in it? What human activities in the area of creating culture become anti-culture activities? The synthetic analysis of various descriptions of culture in the media presented in this article aims not only to describe the types of discussions about culture held in the media, but also to demonstrate that their objective is to find the true image of culture.

The confirmation of the significance and timeliness of this topic can be found in the teachings of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, both of whom reminded us that the clearly discernible “split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time” (Paul VI, 1975) and pointed at the media and cultural areas as an *areopagus* with a particular value for human life. In fact, the contents drawn from it not only provide information, but also shape and inspire people in their everyday lives (John Paul II, 1990).

The article is based on the observation method, which is one of the methods used in social science research; it presents the results of an intentional search for facts, a planned activity of cognition. The contents of the article can be used to confirm or contradict formulated hypotheses.

Current state of knowledge about culture

This part of the article will focus on two aspects of culture: one will describe the lack (or insufficient amount) of knowledge about culture and the need to educate people (especially young people) in this area; the other part will present examples justifying the need to define at least basic criteria to be met if human creativity is to be assigned to the area of culture.

Media messages address the state of knowledge about culture in Polish society. For example, Rev. Tomasz Horak (b. 1944), a preacher and long-time editor of the Catholic weekly magazine *Gość Niedzielny* [*The Sunday Guest*], who has written over 1,200 texts, described in one issue a meeting with young people preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation, during which he mentioned the topical problem of the clash of two cultures—Christian and Muslim—in the world. The conclusion he came to—which he shared with the readers of the magazine and on the website www.faith.pl—expresses his conviction that 14- and 15-year-olds do not know what culture is; it is *terra incognita* for them. This discovery prompted him to express the following postulate: the time has come for activities coordinators to come forward to adolescents and explain to them—in language that young people can understand—the “eternal rules of human culture. As a Christian, I will add Christian culture” (Horak, 2018).

An important voice in the discussions about culture—expressed by Michał Merczyński, a Polish culture studies expert and program coordinator—is the claim that there are “more and more young people who are interested not only in their social and emotional life, in showing off, visiting clubs, and having fun. They also want to participate in cultural events of their choice” (Cyz, 2011). Education, therefore, plays a special role in culture (for both its recipients and its creators). As Paweł Potoroczyn, a Polish culture manager and journalist, observes, for “Citizens of Culture” education is more important than the financial resources allocated to various cultural projects (Cyz, 2011). In this context, it is worth quoting one of the comments to the above-mentioned text by Rev. Tomasz Horak. Its author (signed as “SF”) not only agreed with the opinion about the widespread lack of knowledge about “high culture” among young people, but also suggested that *Gość Niedzielny* should include a series of articles devoted to it.

Another issue concerning knowledge about cultural activities is the proper identification of such activities. Apart from culture, we can also talk about anti-culture (which is an obvious contradiction of the former), and the two should be clearly distinguished from each other. However, not everyone agrees with this view and, consequently, certain people do not find it necessary to distinguish between them. Stefan Meetschen—a journalist working for the German weekly magazine *Die Tagespost*—wrote in a Catholic weekly magazine, *Idziemy* [*We are Coming*], that

what was once considered tasteless, low, worthless, and even dangerous has become fashionable, popular, and applauded. This process can no longer be halted and the only thing that cultured audiences can do is to make prudent choices among various cultural offers. (Meetschen, 2015)

Meetschen also wrote that in order to make the right choice, it is probably necessary to know the criteria according to which we can distinguish between culture and anti-culture. In his opinion, when considering any such proposal, we should ask ourselves whether it enriches our lives or whether it constitutes a serious threat to them. If it does harm, it certainly is an anti-cultural—and at the same time anti-social—program (2015).

An example confirming the importance and timeliness of possessing sufficient knowledge about culture—which enriches the life (especially the spiritual life) of both individuals and society—is the dispute over introducing limits to access to cultural works. One such dispute was over a Polish theatrical performance from 2017 entitled *Klątwa* [*The Curse*]. The Polish Episcopal Conference issued an opinion stating that the play met the statutory definitions of blasphemy and that Christians’ religious feelings were offended by the profanation of the cross which took place during the performance. On the other hand, members of a social movement named “Kampania Wolności Sztuki i Nauki” [“The Campaign for Freedom of Art and Science”] demanded unrestricted access to cultural works (including the uninterrupted staging of *Klątwa*) on the basis of the civil rights guaranteed by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. They wrote a letter to Archbishop Wiktor Skwarc, who had made an appeal for the play to be cancelled in one of the theaters within his diocese, demanding that the authorities of the Catholic Church respect the constitutional right to freedom of expression (Kampania Wolności Sztuki i Nauki, 2017; Zielińska, 2017).

As such debates reflect the differences in worldviews which are hotly debated in our society, numerous examples regarding culture (and anti-culture) can be found in the media, such as an exhibition of artwork in Miejska Galeria Sztuki [City Art Gallery] (with a discussion on the profanation of the cross and the national emblem);² the screening of Jacek Markiewicz’s film, entitled *Adoracja* [*Adoration*] (he was accused of desecrating holy symbols and claiming that something blasphemous is a form of art);³ or the theatrical performance of *Golgotha Picnic* at the Malta Festival in Poznań (with a discussion on freedom of speech and artistic expression in Poland).⁴

These comments on culture presented in the media confirm the need for a reasoned discussion on the subject. The need for individuals to shape their identity (contemporary society) in this aspect of everyday life is

2 See Białous, A. (2018).

3 See KAI (2013).

4 See Garcia (n.d.)

confirmed by the opinion expressed by Jacek Kowalski, an academic lecturer in art history at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, regarding different understandings of the issue:

One can say that there are people without culture and that there are cultured people. But there is also another division: between people of culture and people of anti-culture. The latter two categories are not clear to everyone. Many people also surely think that such a distinction is pointless. It will be pointless for those who, for example, do not understand the term 'blasphemy.' Or who don't accept it. (Kowalski, 2014)

The values that make up culture and their meaning for mankind

The facts presented in the first part of this article—addressing the very heterogeneous state of knowledge about culture in society and frequent disputes revolving around definitions of culture—should be supplemented with at least several observations which seem to be important for the proper reception of cultural thoughts and human activity. These observations are taken from the media and serve as evidence of the ongoing discussion about the true image of culture.

Culture is of particular importance for humanity, both for an individual and for society. It contains—and conveys—values that are important for human beings. A person not only creates it, but is also subject to its influence. The Second Vatican Council expressed this characteristic of culture in a document devoted to the pastoral work of the Catholic Church: true and full humanity is achieved through culture, that is, through the cultivation of natural endowments and values. Thanks to our daily activities and attitudes towards our everyday tasks (and the way we perform them), each of us is part of the next generation of creators of culture. At the same time, “the circumstances of the life of modern man have been so profoundly changed in their social and cultural aspects, that we can speak of a new age of human history. New ways are open, therefore, for the perfection and the further extension of culture. These ways have been prepared by the enormous growth of natural, human, and social sciences, by technical progress, and advances in developing and organizing means whereby men can communicate with one another” (Second Vatican Council, 1965).

Tomasz Cyz, Michał Merczyński, and Paweł Potoroczyn—who held an interesting discussion devoted to culture on the website www.dwu-tygodnik.com—emphasized the particular role values play in human life, which is inseparably connected with culture. Describing the role of culture in social life, they unanimously concluded that it is a “place of values

which, especially in times of crisis, must spread as far as possible” (Cyz, 2011). Values have the power to overcome crises marked by human problems in the political and economic spheres. At this point, we cannot ignore the opinion that cultural values—through which a crisis can be overcome—affect not only material and temporal realities, but also spiritual and eternal ones. Humankind is, after all, a work of culture, originating from and directed towards God. Culture and faith cannot be separated. The values which are present in culture—through which our relationship with God is created—allow people, at every moment of our lives, to perceive its noticeable and recognizable meaning. Thanks to the meeting between a human being and God-Love, which happens when we perceive this meaning, each of us can create “a model of integral culture, harmonizing body and soul, person and community, reason and emotion; culture based on love, leading—in faith—to the consolidation of the hope of eternal life” (Sochoń, 2015).

Since ancient times, culture has been based on the trinity of the highest values: truth, beauty, and goodness. These values are the only ones which—as Bishop Ignacy Dec reminded us in the Catholic magazine—allow us to talk about true humanity. They condition the happiness of human beings. However, we must not forget that “the source of these three fundamental values is God himself. He is supreme Truth, supreme Goodness, and supreme Beauty” (Dec, 2013).

The values present in the culture we create should not be used to spread propaganda or for business purposes. They should always lead to the discovery of truth, beauty, and goodness. This claim is confirmed by Paweł Potoroczyn’s conviction that “conventional diplomacy is used to do business, [while] cultural diplomacy is used to tell the truth” (Cyz, 2011); he believes that only culture as the message of truth—and not a propaganda tool—gains numerous followers. Only as such is it a form of national identity, an object of national pride, and a force that promotes the state. Such a conviction, Potoroczyn claims, justifies his “dealing with” culture, which aims at educating future generations of its creators and recipients in Poland.

The descriptions mentioned above confirm the unique role of values conveyed by culture in shaping the identity of both individuals and a nation. The goodness, truth, and beauty present in human achievements—which are passed on—have the power to create a community out of individuals and to determine their attitude towards the world and other people. Thanks to them, others can get to know us; they reveal the actual state of reality in which we live and what we are. Bearing this in mind, the organizers of the World Youth Day in Poland in 2016—wishing to present Warsaw in the best light possible—decided to showcase Polish works

of culture. Their presentation was aimed at young people from various parts of the world, who spent several days in the capital of Poland (before meeting Pope Francis in Częstochowa). In a special pavilion, resembling the interior of a cathedral, tourists and pilgrims could admire an exhibition entitled “John Paul II: Sources,” which outlined the history of Poland and Polish Christianity. It included, among other things, several historical events which were important for our nation, whose central figures were Polish saints and other people whose lives linked the history of Poland and the history of Christianity. Moreover, they had the chance to listen to concerts of Christian music and Chopin’s music, taste regional Polish dishes, learn to weave on a loom and make flowers out of materials characteristic of different Polish regions, admire folk embroidery and paper art, and dance Polish folk dances. Young people from all over the world watched films about Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko, a Polish priest, a martyr for freedom and the truth, and about Saint John Paul II, the Pope for whom culture was a system of values confirming and developing humankind and human society (Jureczko-Wilk, 2016).

Dominic Christopher Sandbrook, a British historian, journalist, and television presenter, confirms the view that culture has the power to promote the state—which is important for those searching for its true image. In his opinion, the successes of the native culture are not only more numerous than high-profile political events, but also have a stronger impact on both individuals and societies. The opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London in 2012 can serve as a perfect example which demonstrates this role of culture. Viewers and spectators followed the transformation of Great Britain over the centuries through the works of British culture taken from literature (e.g., William Shakespeare, *Peter Pan*, or Lord Voldemort—a fictional character from the *Harry Potter* series), music (e.g., the songs of the Beatles, Queen, and the Rolling Stones as performed by the London Symphony Orchestra), or film (e.g., Mr. Bean and James Bond) (Sandbrook, 2016). According to many observers—including the commentators of Polskie Radio Program Pierwszy [Polish Radio 1]—it was the best opening ceremony of sports competitions in history.

Discovering culture by accepting responsibility for it

Culture, as a carrier of values, creates human life. Thus, values are important and cannot be neglected. People who reflect on their own existence can discover that they exert an influence on the world around them. Creating cultural works and participating in culture enable us to gain control over what is happening here and now. This way human life can become

easier and more joyful. We must acknowledge those who, while revealing the image of culture, emphasize that the measure of its truthfulness is the full and integral development of all mankind. It must be admitted that those who fall into the trap of misunderstanding human action are those who assess the level of cultural development by calculating material goods (their production and consumption) or by measuring one's level of pleasure. The objectives of human creative efforts cannot be confined to what is material, temporal, and pleasurable. Culture is measured by human development, and its progress should include the physical, mental, and spiritual spheres of human life. When even one of these aspects is neglected, we cannot talk about the development of an individual, but about his/her regression. Cultural activity is one that allows for a fuller development of humanity.

It is true that each of us not only creates culture, but also depends on it. Culture shapes people and allows them to develop in their humanity according to a system of values. This system is created and expressed in human activity. It is, therefore, impossible to separate the world of culture from the world of values.

When we talk about the relationship between everyday life and culture, we should point to the obligation of human beings to broaden their horizons of thought. Possessing more detailed knowledge about oneself and the world allows one to create wonderful works of culture. The development of thought results in dynamism in the area of cultural activities. Therefore, it is our duty to take care of our own intellectual development as well as the development of other people. Our task is to develop the human spirit through the acquisition of wisdom and reflection on our own life and the world around us. "Only such formation is culture-forming and bears fruit in the works and acts that are at the heart of every culture" (Rosik, 1992).

The level of participation in culture (manifested by human involvement in various areas of life) has a great influence on the preservation and consolidation of certain works and the disappearance of others. All values, assessments, and norms shaped in society are eroded as a result of the emergence of foreign cultural content and the cultural inactivity of the majority of society. The ever-diminishing influence on the younger generation of artistic, patriotic, or scientific works which are preserved in the collective memory and valued by the old can serve as an example here (Kołodziej, 2014).

While discussing the process of discovering the true image of culture, we should emphasize the role communities play in it. Our responsibility for this field of human activity is expressed in creating communities. The effort of building a community is to be undertaken (among other things)

in order to create cultural works. Only in a group do people learn to create and serve, that is, to act in a culture-creating manner. Neither egoism nor consumerism can create culture. Culture is created by social love, which also motivates people to take responsibility for it. This view is confirmed in the teachings of Pope Francis, who—while pointing to the cultural rejection of God’s fatherhood in the modern world—recognizes the increasing difficulty in achieving an authentic universal fraternity. The rejection of the Christian values present in culture leads to a decrease in both fraternal acceptance and the unity of the human race (Francis, 2019).

Other areas in which definitions of culture embrace an acceptance of responsibility for it are conducting scientific research, making philosophical reflections (shaping one’s worldview), undertaking ethical reflections, developing aesthetic trends (related to authentic art), and performing religious practices. The path marked with such difficulties leads to participation in works of culture, in a broad sense of the phrase. Not making this effort or opposing such practices in other people’s activity should arouse anxiety and objection. For a more detailed understanding of the need to practice these ways of learning about culture, it is worth recalling the observation of Bishop Ignacy Dec. While expressing his opinion on contemporary society, the Shepherd of the Świdnica Church noted that it is marked by a wave of aggression directed at Christianity, especially Catholicism. As the most severely persecuted religion (and followers) in the contemporary world, it is experiencing a dictatorship of relativism. Christianophobia can be easily observed in various parts of the world; it is aimed at systematic demoralization and it ridicules everything that is Christian. “The liberal media are ruled by political correctness built on the neo-Marxists’ ideology. In the name of lofty slogans (modernity, freedom, tolerance, or democracy), it attempts to destroy the traditional form of marriage and family and cut the roots of European culture and Christian civilization” (Dec, 2019).

Mirosław Winiarczyk, a journalist, cultural journalist, and film critic, expressed his opinion about the threats to European and Christian culture when writing in the weekly magazine *Idziemy* about the Polish film *Polityka* [*Politics*], directed by Patryk Vega:

Under the guise of exposing Polish politicians, we are watching a festival of vulgarity, rudeness, and lies on the screen. In six chapters the author reveals his fascination with the brutal media language.... It is based on hate speech, used today in the media and on the Internet by enemies of traditional values of our culture”. (Winiarczyk, 2019)

These words confirm the need for our continuous acceptance of our responsibility for culture.

These reflections on the ways in which culture is presented in the media its creation, reception, and promotion (by taking responsibility) of the values it contains—should be concluded with a description of one of the editions of “Noc Kultury” [“The Night of Culture”]. This event is organized annually in Opole and consists of various cultural events. In 2004, as Rev. Marek Lis, a lecturer at the University of Opole, observed, the program of this event was very rich. However, it included only one Christian offering: the concert of a local choir. Describing this situation in the Catholic weekly magazine *Gość Niedzielny* [*The Sunday Guest*], he noted that this cultural event, which enjoys great popularity, did not include anything offered by the Church. Not participating in such an event, not preparing any musical, artistic, or theatrical performances, or film presentations to be included in it, means silence. It is a wasted opportunity to lead people along the paths of faith, which run through aesthetic experiences and through contact with beauty and art. We must not forget, as Pope Francis warned us, that the sources of cultural works are faith, the Gospel, and spirituality. The text also contains an opinion, in line with the comments regarding “Noc Kultury,” that the Church does not notice (or even neglects) artists. Not participating in this event, which is important for the population of Opole, seems to confirm this attitude of neglect towards people creating culture. They become convinced, as well-known Polish director and film producer Krzysztof Zanussi, cited in Kerner (2014), claimed, that

they cannot really count on the support of the Church: it is not about financial support, as it was centuries ago, but about noticing that culture is an important partner in a dialogue on faith or fundamental values, nowadays discredited in so many environments. It is about telling people who create culture—like John Paul II and his ‘Letter to Artists’—that they are needed in the Church, also as its sensitive and critical observers!”

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