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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Marc Loustau / Editor's Introduction
- Kefas Lamak / Trends and Shifts: Migration, Reverse Missions, and African Catholic Priests in Iowa City, USA
- Marc Loustau / The Secrets of Christian Others: Hungarian Catholic Intellectuals Debate Ecumenism at a Transylvanian Pilgrimage Site
- Dr. Ozan Can Yilmaz / Sacred Space and Self: Feminist Reflections in the Church of Mary
- Mathew N. Schmalz / Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska
- Mathew N. Schmalz / Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Francis Galasi
- Mathew N. Schmalz / Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Hansol Goo

MATHEW SCHMALZ

Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska



Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska works in the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She has earned degrees in Ethnology and Latin American studies. Her main areas of interest are the anthropology of religion, performance studies, and forms of religious expression. She received her habilitation in 2019. She is the author of articles on contemporary religiosity and historical reenactments as well as of the books: *The Crucified: Contemporary Passion Plays in Poland* (De Gruyter, 2017) and *World War II Historical Reenactment in Poland: The Practice of Authenticity* (Routledge, 2021). She is currently working on a project funded by National Science Centre Poland, *Producing Medieval History within Roman Catholic and Contemporary Pagan Religious Practices in Poland*.



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Mathew Schmalz: Hey, welcome everyone. My name is Mathew Schmalz and I'm founder and executive editor of the Journal of Global Catholicism. And it's my great pleasure and privilege to be able to introduce Dr. Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska, professor in the Institute of Archeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She has done field work in Lithuania, Poland, and Mexico. And among her monographs are World War II historical reenactment in Poland, the practice of authenticity and The Crucified, contemporary passion plays in Poland. And also on a personal note, she's been a great friend of the Catholics and Cultures initiative at the College of the Holy Cross as published in the Journal of Global Catholicism. And is a really important scholar when it comes to discussing not only Catholicism in Poland and also Mexico, but Catholicism more globally. So Kamila, if I can be informal, welcome.

Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska: Thank you. Thank you very much for such a kind introduction. Thank you. And it's great to see you and great to talk to you.

MS: Oh, wonderful. So could you share with us your intellectual journey, how you became interested in what you're interested in?

KBO: Well, it always has been field work, so I need to start with this because I was studying ethnology in Warsaw and my first field work was in Lithuania. And

that was exactly the moment when I fell in love with anthropology and especially with the practice or performing anthropology. And I think that it is always done or conducted in dialogue. So we need people, simply, we need field work, we need people to be anthropologists. And this is a great journey because it starts anew with all new projects, with all new field works, and then we meet new people, get new inspirations, and this is extremely important. And without our interviewees, we wouldn't be able to be anthropologists. So this is actually intellectual journey to meet people, to go on field work, to talk to people, to get inspired, then of course to read and write. But it all starts with field work. So in my case, it was in 2001 at first and I was doing field work with Polish communities in Lithuania. But then I knew that I would like to turn more in direction of religion and I was thinking about something more exotic. And it is how I ended up with Mexico, although I know we shouldn't, as anthropologists, praise exoticism and everything. But you know, I was a student, so that was actually my imagination about field work. And that's how I get to Mexico and did my first independent research. So my independent research project, graduating from an anthropology at the University of Warsaw. So that was the beginning and I'm continuing, but what I would like to emphasize million times with people, this is very important for me. So this intellectual journey is actually with people who I meet, to whom I talk. And this is just, you know, great pleasure and pretty also.

MS: Yes, as a fellow ethnographer, I would echo your sentiments and perhaps toward the end of the interview we can talk a little bit about some of your most important moments with your informants. You've done particular work on passion plays and could you tell us a little bit about what your work has shown and the kinds of issues that it raises and you're interested in?

KBO: Yeah, so I was looking for something through which, or at least I imagined that I could investigate a religious experience. And I thought that passion plays which really require some engagement and some time and some energy from people who decide to participate in them would offer me that, I wasn't wrong. And I did actually research first on religious experience of people who participate in passion plays, who organize them and who perform the story of Christ's life and

passion in various sanctuaries in Poland. So the research was based in Poland and I did research on more than dozen of passion plays performances here. And what I was interested in was why people decide really to put so much effort, so much energy, sometimes really overcome difficulties, their stage fright, their some kind of insecurity to be able to present their personal devotion, to experience some kind of connection with God, with the saints, with Our Lady, and how would they treat the engagement in passion plays as a kind of a prayer. And on the other hand how they actually do this for their communities, for their family, for tradition and also for some kind of local identity. So passion plays show me how religion actually is not only about exactly personal devotion or religious experience, but also how it is very much about community and also making someone's place in this community.

MS: Could you talk about one particular passion play that comes to mind that involves these kinds of issues that you studied?

KBO: Yes, that would be, I'm afraid of saying my favorite because all of them are my favorite. But that would be a passion play in Kalwaria Paclawska which is a calvary. So a beautiful, beautiful architectural place, a complex architecture, complex of chapels placed on two neighboring hills in Kalwaria Paclawska which is a village very close to the border, Polish Ukrainian border. And it is Franciscan sanctuary established in the 17th century and the tradition of passion play there is new. However, there is another kalwaria or calvary in Poland, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, which has a long, long centuries long tradition of passion plays. And Franciscans from Kalwaria Paclawska decided to mimic that tradition and also start their own passion play. So they did. And now for over 20 years, there is passion plays staged by people from neighboring villages and from towns in vicinity performed by them as a kind of a vow of thanks to God, also to Our Lady. And it is also a very, very strong way of connecting or reconnecting community because many people now live in the nearby town Przemyśl, so they come back to Kalwaria only for religious celebrations and one of them is a passion play. So it is staged not only because of some promises made together, not only because of exactly once again personal devotion, but also to again reconnect the community and also attract tourists because nowadays it is also very much, I mean connecting the communities not only about



the community itself, but it's also about showing it to the world. So now it becomes also a bit touristic place and it is, I mean the place is beautiful, it is picturesque and it is a wonderful space for such a kind of performance. And that's why I'm talking about it. Again, I cannot say this is my favorite, but it is one of those passion plays which made huge impression on me. It is in a form of a procession. So all the actors together with the audiences, they walk from one chapel to another telling the story of Christ's death and resurrection. So this is kind of a way of the cross as well. It is kind of a prayer and it is really picturesque. It makes a very strong impression on the audiences and it is really, really one of the most important events that actually takes place in Kalwaria.

MS: One of the things that at least Polish Catholics have told me is that, you know, Catholic identity in Poland is very distinctive and it's, you know, obviously very much tied into national identity as well. I'm wondering are any of these passion plays politicized in any way, shape or form?

KBO: They are, and they aren't, because there are always those two levels of politicizing thing, one, which is obvious and visible for everyone. And the other one which is implicit. So we have to start this discussion from the stereotype of Pole Catholic, which is a stereotype actually criticized and now very, very considered dismantled by researchers and also anthropologists. So we try to show that there are various Catholicisms, that it's not a homogenous religion, that this identity is just very, very a strong oversimplification of the relation between the nation and the religion. It is of course used in policy and state policy, it is consciously used by politicians and in this way it also permits to religious rituals because this narrative is simply there. Some of the passion plays, and this is very important and this is another aspect why I wanted to investigate them. They actually describe not only the story of Christ, but they put to the script an additional history, some a bit politicized, and for example, in Bydgoszcz which is a town, let's say in central northern Poland, there are passion plays which changed this scenario, each year the script is changed and they present different stories on different subjects. And one of them was the subject of treason.

MS: Oh really?

KBO: It was in the moment, yes. Where there was, there were huge debates in Poland about people, mostly politicians but also other people who were collaborating with communist government during the communist times. So it was discussed in the media, it was discussed exactly by politicians, some rules, some laws against this kind of collaboration were introduced or maybe not this kind of collaboration, but against people who were trying to obtain like official post in Polish government. They were introduced and this passion play commented about it presenting two characters of traitors, namely Judas and St Peter. But the whole story was not only about the biblical personages but also about the political situation in Poland. And yeah, so their passion play which referred to the political situation directly, but there are also passion plays which do not, however, inserting prayers for the nation or certain ways of presenting, for example, the believers, the followers of Christ, placing some national emblems on their outfits. We can see some links to also contemporary politics, but they aren't so explicit. So they require investigation and also some kind of a deeper reflection about how it all connects.

MS: Oh, fascinating. So you were saying that you're, you know, particularly interested in themes related to religious experience and building of community. What theorists or theoretical frameworks have been most helpful for you in presenting your research and thinking it through?

KBO: I was focusing from the very beginning on the performativity of religious practice. So I wanted to show the experience not only as a very, very internal and this way inaccessible thing, but also as a performative one, which actually creates something. So from the very beginning I was really inspired by classics like Victor Turner or Richard Schechner and their cooperation, they were very important for me. Also Erving Goffman with his performance of the self and this direction also Julie Butler and performance of identity, that was very important, the background for me. So I was thinking about performance, performativity, embodying things and performing experience on them. Also came Rebecca Schneider, it just a bit more connected to my research of historical reenactment. However, I really claim that historical reenactments and religion are very connected, very strongly connected. So Rebecca Schneider, her work on reenactment and reenacting, embodying



was also very helpful for me for interpretation of religious practice, which is a bodily practice as well. So this is like one part of my inspirations. The other would be pilgrimage scholars because many of passion plays actually resemble kind of pilgrimage or there are pilgrimages coming to see or participate in passion plays, so here, Simon Coleman and John Eade would be probably the main names for me. And also scholars who actually worked to work out a solution, how to deal with nonofficial ways of practicing religion. So all those popular religions, vernacular religions, lived religion. So here I would think start with with Leonard Primiano, Marion Bowman, Robert Orsi, Nancy Ammerman. And also I would like to emphasize very strongly Polish scholars are incredibly important for me. And here I would like to name at first Magdalena Zowczak who is professor in the anthropology of religion at Warsaw University. And she did a huge, huge work on sensual relations with material items, with images, and also sensing actually religion and how it is a sensual practice. I would like to also refer to Anna Niedźwiedz, her work not only on pilgrimages in Poland, but also religious images and especially the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa which is like very, very important item for Polish religiosity in the main image, which is venerated here. So I don't want to forget about them. And there also comes Agnieszka Pasięka, who wrote this book about hierarchical pluralism of religions in Poland. And this is also very important because this is critical take on Polish Catholicism, which shows that it is dominant, but this dominance comes not only from the position of Catholicism in tradition or in politics, but also from the way Polish anthropologists actually deal with religion. So we have those Catholic lenses looking at religions and we need to be really careful and really conscious actually investigating religion in Poland.

MS: As ethnographers, whether we're researching and teaching in Poland or in the United States, we read many of the same works and are engaged in thinking through together many of the same issues. But I'm wondering if you could expand on that and talk a little bit about the study of Catholicism, you know, the ethnographic study of Catholicism in Poland and the kinds of issues that scholars are talking about right now.

KBO: First I'll be back to this whole Catholic stereotype because this is very

important for us. For quite a long time we have been researching Catholicism with this identity question in mind and also this critical way of perceiving Polish Catholicism, for example, by Geneviève Zubrzycki, this stereotype of a Pole Catholic is always there and we somehow circle around it. So what we now would like to offer are different ways of looking at Catholicism, not only through this prism of national identity, but also devotion to materiality, exactly, embodiment, sanctuaries, places, and heritage. I think this is very important because nowadays this discussion on religious heritage is somehow blooming. And I think that in Poland we've got a quite practical situation of heritage actually created within religious practice. So not only by heritage institutions and finance, not only by Polish state or UNESCO but also we've got ways of creating heritage by religious institutions. So this is one more way of perceiving Polish Catholicism or Catholicism in Poland because I shouldn't be talking about Polish Catholicism as there are many, many Catholicism. So this is exactly the way we're now fighting for, to present Catholicism in Poland as very different, very heterogenetic actually phenomenon. And also to show this critical aspects not only of research, but also of policy towards Catholicism. Because nowadays some Catholic institutions, some priests are very, very strongly criticized. So it all becomes an element of actually anthropological reflection and anthropological research that we're showing not only this devotion and Catholicism as an element of Polish identity, but we also show how actually Catholicism becomes subject of criticism and some kind of distancing people from this kind of identity.

MS: Yeah. Can you talk, could you give a specific example of religious practice in Catholicism creating heritage? I think it's a very interesting idea.

KBO: Yeah, yeah. It would be passion plays because I was-

MS: Okay, there we go.

KBO: My research, yes, I was conducting my research on passion plays, like this main research, this extensive research from 2006 to 2012. And then I came back because I was in a project on religious heritage in Poland in vicinity of Krakow, which is in the south in Poland. And I came back exactly to passion plays to see how this idea of medieval theater is nowadays used by Catholic institutions, not

only to promote religion, not only to evangelize, but also to attract people who are not so very much interested in religion or religious practice itself, but maybe through looking at some kind of a resemblance of medieval theater, they would be more interested in religion. So here we've got a church which uses exactly the tools or some methods, but maybe some kind of patterns of heritage. How to present things in this ancient way and this kind of a value for humanity and this universal value, not only religious, of course it is religious and heritage becomes, in my opinion, plays a role in evangelization. But it allows or enables church institutions to actually invite people who aren't religious who want to see a piece of theater which is somehow remotely related to medieval theater. And then maybe they would be interested in religion. So this is, and I did this research actually in Krakow, about Salesiansl, a passion play there. And this is exactly what, because it is a very, I would say, theatrical passion play in this way that it is directed by a professional actor. Again, the script is changed every year and it is a good play. So it presents not only religious values, although it does, but also this kind of a theater which remotely refers to the middle ages and this long, long, long tradition and heritage. So this is how I see it and how I see how nowadays the church and church institutions actually use heritage to affect different kind of audiences.

MS: There's also a similar kind of pattern in the historical reenactments that you study?

KBO: Yes and no, because with historical reenactments it is tricky. It is tricky because I see them as a kind of religious practice in many ways because there is this value of a nation and honoring nation which is in a way religious. There are of course reenactments which connects to religion directly. For example, reenactments of Polish Soviet war of the 1920, which are historical reenactments, but they're also opened with a holy mass in a sanctuary. And there is this narrative behind the reenactment that the victory in a battle was thanks to Our Lady and that the prayers of the soldiers were heard. So there is this direct reference between, yes, so religion and the historical reenactment. But there's also a very, very interesting connection, not to Catholicism, but to neopagan religions in the reenactment of early middle ages. So to talk about reenactments and religion, this is completely different

subject, but there are so many connections. And this is exactly what I am trying to do now because now I have a project somehow summing up those two directions of my interest. I mean historical reenactments and my study of religion. And now I'm trying to see how religious practice and Roman Catholicism among them is producing history and the vision of the past. So yes, so now I'm trying to put those two ways of my thinking and also my interests in one direction and see if that's possible. And I would like very much to investigate exactly how religious practice, but also religious architecture influences our vision of the past and of history. And then trying to do this for middle ages to see how they're presented in Catholicism in Poland and also in contemporary paganism. And to see how much they influence actually our perception of history.

MS: No, excellent. I'm particularly interested, I'll, you know, have to reread your book, and about the connections with paganism that you're finding or, and you know, it's all so fascinating. As a concluding question and as a fellow ethnographer, wanted to just ask you if you could share with us a particularly transformative or meaningful moment that you've had as an ethnographer with your informants.

KBO: Yeah, it was actually a moment when I was doing research on passion plays in Poznan, which is another quite large city in Western Poland. And I was interviewing a guy playing organs during a holy mess. And it was, the interview was during the holy mess, which for me was absolutely astonishing because I couldn't believe that it is actually happening. And I was asking him several times, several times, how is it possible? Isn't it the kind of a sacrilege or something? And he told me that no, because we are not participating. And it was a very formative moment for me because in this moment I realized that not only participating should be conscious, it should be acknowledged and also embedded. So in order to participate in a religious event or liturgy, we need to be there. We need to decide to participate. And even being in the very same place in this very awkward situation, we weren't participating. So there was this difference. And it really changed my thinking about religion because I was born and raised in with Catholic grandparents who were taking me to a church and when was there a mass where I was, I need to behave in a very particular way. They wouldn't accept me being in a church during a holy

mass just talking to a guy next to me, that would be unacceptable for them. But you know, it was only about a habit in the case of my grandparents who are actually learning me a certain habit. But then exactly during my research I understood that there's so much more in it and that this participation is very meaningful. Not only practice, but also reflective process. So in order to participate, we actually need to create this kind of participation, prepare ourselves better and consciously participate with our bodies, our minds, and just get involved into this Holy Mass into liturgy. And otherwise if we don't do this, we're not there. We're not participating. So that's something I remember very well. And it was really formatting experience for me and very important for my research at that time.

MS: Well, I mean, we're going to be very excited to see where, you know, the the final products or the continuing products of your research trajectory. Thank you so much for-

KBO: Thank you.

MS: Talking with us, and you know, your work is really, really wonderful and I know for me personally, it's you know, giving me new avenues to think about, you know, performativity particularly and embeddedness. And so thank you so much.

KBO: Thank you. Thank you for the talk. I really appreciate it. Thank you.