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“About God at war”. *Forms and features of religious* *Internet folklore pertaining* *to the Russo-Ukrainian war*

„O Bogu na wojnie”. Formy i funkcje religijnego folkloru internetowego o wojnie rosyjsko-ukraińskiej

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian war began with the Russian Federation invading Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022, and constituted an escalation of a conflict ongoing since 2014, along a frontline running by Ukraine’s eastern border with the separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. The first days of the war, undertaken on a mass scale in 2022, did not bring a spectacular victory for Russia (cf. Kowalczyk 2022), but certainly contributed to the Ukrainian nation becoming unified in their fight against the invader. Most countries of the Western World condemned the act of Russian aggression, as did international organisations, providing Ukraine with political and

military support, as well as humanitarian aid (cf. Szałdecki 2023). Within the first few months of the invasion, Western governments imposed economic sanctions on Russia, while the nations of Europe – including (on a mass scale) Poland – offered shelter to citizens of Ukraine fleeing the war zones, mainly women, children and the elderly. Russia began to work towards the aim of destroying Ukrainian statehood and national identity, whereas Ukraine was forced to defend her society from extermination (cf. Dębski 2022). The aggression of Russian soldiers has brought widespread destruction, violation and death to the civilian population of Ukraine; mass graves of local residents of Ukrainian towns and villages were discovered in territories from which Russian troops had withdrawn (cf. Sitnicka 2022). The Ukrainian nation was faced with the great tragedy of war. The authorities ardently sought political and military support through contact with Western European governments and the USA, while “ordinary” people expressed their “victims’ cries” in every possible way, also using the communicative potential of the World Wide Web, including social media platforms.

The experience of war is among the most critical situations in social life, one that always elicits strong emotional responses – fear, panic, anger, helplessness – and prompts one to call for other people’s help and seek aid beyond the earthly plane. Addressing God with a plea of help and support is a perfectly natural reaction for religious people if their life and health is threatened and their sense of security is lost. It is rooted in the belief in the existence of a higher spiritual power which may provide aid when the established social order is shattered, bring deliverance from the evils one is witnessing and establish the desired order. Such actions may take various emotionally charged forms of expression, referring to linguistic and visual concepts that are well known in a given cultural and religious tradition, including messages with the features of folklore. The study of religious (or, more broadly, sacral) elements in folklore art usually implies asking questions about the vision of the world and of humankind the analysed content presents and the place it reserves for God. It involves reflection on the system of values, imagery, religious symbols and motifs present in such folklore, as well as the religious motivation for promoting specific content (cf. Bartmiński 1995: 10). Answers to questions posed in such a manner reveal how a religious person experiences and interprets the reality that surrounds them, and how religiosity is manifested in the structure of texts of folklore, in their internal composition and choice of forms of expression which – significantly – “are treated semiotically and axiologically, as representations of certain hidden core values and assumptions about the nature of the world” (Bartmiński 1995: 10).¹

The content used as the source material for the present study was published during the first stage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, between April and June 2022,

1 All citations from non-English-language sources have been translated solely for the purpose of the present article.

on the online social media platform of Facebook (in its Ukrainian version).² Within that period, religious messages with the features of folklore appeared on the platform with considerable intensity, only to gradually disappear in the following months – which was due to the nature of the next phase of the war and Ukrainians' growing accustomed to the constant danger. The space of Facebook was the basic instrument in the research, as well as the primary source of data and the performance situation of the posts under scrutiny. The use of the "ethnography of Facebook" as a new type of research methodology allowed for the overturning of the traditional dichotomies of "the researcher and the researched", "the observer and the observed" and "the agent and the subject", casting the researcher in a double role: both a professional "in the field" and an active participant in the ongoing communication (cf. Trzeszczyńska 2016: 24–25). The gathered material may be regarded as a form of collective worship expressed in texts that are essentially secular in nature – posts made on a popular social media platform which, owing to its accessibility and social reach, proved to be the most convenient channel for exchanging information and sharing important and urgent messages in wartime. It was chosen as the best way to express human despair, pain and helplessness in the face of the war, and to send prayers and pleas for help to higher powers, for divine aid and intervention. The aim of the present analysis is to determine the detailed forms of religious folklore messages shared in the Internet, their connection with other texts of religious nature and modern forms of Internet communication, as well as to identify the function these messages served in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The concept of religious folklore is usually applied to texts that fall under very specific thematic criteria (related to religiosity), as well as situational and intentional markers (Bartmiński 1995: 12). Other significant distinguishing features include the vocabulary used in such messages and the choice of their main protagonists. All of these may be dubbed the "emblematic" aspect of texts of folklore. The so-called sacral perception of the world and humankind does not necessarily have to feature in the foreground (Bartmiński 1995: 12). What is more important, as Jerzy Bartmiński rightfully observed, is the "poetics of the *sacrum*", composed of such elements as the autonomous value of the word, the formulaic nature of expression, repetitions, parallelisms, symbolism, the concepts of time and space and dialogue with the universe (Bartmiński 1995: 13–17). The autonomous role of the world in texts of religious folklore is not limited to the function of communicating things; in this case the word carries a certain truth about the world and humankind, and using it means action.

2 All materials under scrutiny were gathered by Iryna Koval-Fuchylo in the course of active participant observation (cf. Jurek 2013: 90) conducted on her Facebook profile. The analysed posts were public, and the researcher was acting as a person directly involved in the experience of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

The Internet has become one of the main spaces in which folklore-making situations are occurring, as it is a place in which informal, grassroots-generated content may easily be put into a very broad social circulation (cf. Hajduk-Nijakowska 2009: 23–24; Grochowski 2013: 47–49). The manifestations of folk religiosity and the associated e-folklore observable within the space of social media platforms fit the framework of a collective practice in which even the most personal and difficult experiences are translatable into standardised formulas and reproducible patterns of behaviour. This does not negate the depth and gravity of the actual experiences and religious practices that the individuals engaging in the Internet communication are sharing (cf. Kowalski 2004: 104–137). Furthermore, in the analysed case the universally accessible space of the social media platform has opened up broad opportunities for taking action using words, and affecting reality.

Analysis of the source material

The Internet materials gathered in the course of research are multi-genre and syncretic in nature, including visual, visual-verbal and purely verbal forms exhibiting the features of folklore. The principal selection criterion was the number of times a message was shared and the noticeable presence of a given text in popular circulation within Facebook. The material collected encompasses small folklore forms (formulas, proverbs, sayings, prayers), anonymous messages with the characteristics of naïve poetry, posts referring to personal experiences, employing reproducible linguistic and semantic conventions, Internet memes (combining visual form with text), visual forms – photographs, images, collages (signed by the creator or made anonymously). Their connection to folklore messages is apparent from several basic components: the repetitive and conventional approach to the subject, the syntactic and lexical features of the text as well as its construction, variability, the fact that the message is anonymous and functions in popular circulation, and includes formally abbreviated references to a significant and current social situation.

The religious nature of the texts under scrutiny, in turn, is manifested mainly in the verbalisation and visualisation of specific topics and meanings. What constitutes the largest group are texts that may arbitrarily be categorised as forms of prayer. These include (1) numerous everyday appeals for prayer for the Ukrainian army and people involved in the fight (prisoners of war, volunteers); (2) signalling that a given individual, group or nation is praying for the soldiers; (3) texts of prayers; (4) stories of "miraculous salvation"; (5) direct pleas to God. The most represented category is group one, illustrated by the examples below:

Once again there is a great request to PRAY FOR MARIUPOL! The boys of the 80th brigade are very much asking for prayer! These are very difficult days and nights! Our only

hope is in Him, God is helping a lot! Good people, pray for us, for the 24th brigade, the 46th battalion and all the soldiers, this place is HELL.

21:00-22:00 I invite you to pray the daily Jesus Prayer for God's protection over Ukraine and our soldiers.

APPEAL! Do not stop praying for anyone that is [in] Severodonetsk, Lysychans'k, Bakhmut! There is heavy fighting, uneven odds.

The men defending SEVERODONETSK, LYSYCHANS'K, RUBIZHNE, KREMINNA ask for prayer, they say that they can really feel invisible protection.

Pray for our defenders, there are fierce battles going on. The frontline is actual hell! The boys are asking for prayer, like never before.

I humbly ask for intense prayer for my son Dmitri, his brothers and all the soldiers that are now in the frontline...

I beg you, pray for my grandson Arsen, who has been captured. I believe that sincere prayer will help him come back home as soon as possible.

I ask for sincere prayers for my husband Vitali and his brothers! Heavy fighting is going on. May the Lord take them under his protection and keep them alive! Thank you.

The posts cited above, as well as texts from the two remaining groups (2. Signalling that a given individual, group or nation is praying for the soldiers; 3. texts of prayers), constitute a verbal expression of the belief in the need for and utility of prayer practices in times of war. To encourage people to pray, these utilise the formula of a ritual folk invitation, typical for rituals in the family cycle, especially nuptials (Dubyna 2010: 99–104; Koval-Fuchylo 2010: 143). To increase the authenticity of the message, the text included the names of specific military units and the administrative names of localities involved in the heaviest fighting. This technique is characteristic for folk tales, anecdotes and gossip, in which references to specific locations and time of the events, or the name of a particular character, stem from the genre-specific features of such messages and allow them to be relatable to a given recognisable social reality. Mentioning the names of specific localities in which the fighting took place may also be regarded as a kind of documentation of the war, illustrating and commenting on the most recent events that happened as the analysed posts were published, e.g. the fighting in Mariupol, very difficult for the Ukrainian side. It may be surmised that the emergence of the above-presented posts resulted from the social need felt by the platform's users to get involved in matters related to the war, to have the people fighting on the frontlines (often members of their close family) constantly on their mind, to unite in the war effort.

Texts from the second category distinguished here act as confirmation of their authors' commitment to prayer, through which they tried to express their emotions and involvement in the war, as illustrated by the following examples:

We are praying for you, dear ones. May all the holy heavenly forces protect each soldier.

Mariupol! Hang in there! The whole world is praying for you! We pray to God to help you hold out! You have to live!

PRAYER FOR UKRAINE. The battle for the east has begun, may God help us. Let us pray together! God keep the defenders taking part in the fight. We pray for you, Soldier.

This group of texts features the assurance and affirmation of support for Ukrainian soldiers through prayer, and moral assistance from the entire nation. In order to reinforce the semantics of the joint aid, the authors of these messages use the plural pronoun "we", the noun "everyone", the superlative "the whole world" and the adverb "together".

The third group of texts, created anonymously or signed by their authors, takes the form of an actual prayer addressed directly to God. These include both commonly known short-form prayer formulas and longer texts, often based on certain existing structures, and disseminated in the form of Internet memes and verbal messages. They may be compared to non-canon individual prayers, which religious people often incorporate into their daily prayer routine, especially in the case of folk religiosity. In this kind of prayers, the supplicant composes the entire message from "an open set of segments, ready-made structures and commonly known formulas", which serves to mitigate the threat posed by war (cf. Brzozowska-Krajka 1995: 183; Kuzmenko 2018: 272). Such forms of prayer are decidedly messages of religious and causative nature, in which – by virtue of faith – words become a separate entity, performative in character, while the repeated dissemination of the message is meant to strengthen its causative power (cf. Zowczak 2000: 455–456; Engelking 2000: 44–47; Hunchyk 2011: 107). The structure of this type of message implies starting with a direct appellation, such as: God, Lord, Mother of God, etc., followed by the formula of supplication. Here are some examples of such content:

May God protect you!

God, save every one of Ukraine's defenders!

GOD! Walk before our soldiers!

MOTHER OF GOD, walk behind them!

ANGELS, stand on their flanks, protect them on all their paths!!!

Lord, intercede for Ukraine, get ahead of all the soldiers.

Save and protect every son, protect every child from evil and trouble. Amen!

Our Lord God and all the heavenly powers!

Hear the sound of our prayer!

Protect our Ukraine, our soldiers, medics, volunteers.

Protect the entire Ukrainian nation from all evil!

Queen of Heaven, cover our Ukraine with your Veil! Amen.



Fig. 1. "We pray for Ukraine", Facebook, acquired 15 May 2022.

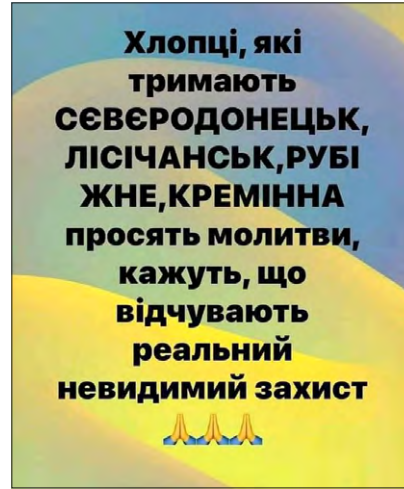


Fig. 2. Appeal for prayer, Facebook, acquired 14 June 2022.

Texts belonging to this group are the ones that best fit the framework of content classified as religious folklore. They seem to be recalled from memory, in contrast to colloquial utterances, created *ad hoc* in the process of transmission. They employ commonly known formulaic expressions and linguistic clichés with an established semantic charge (cf. Bartmiński 1995: 13–14). They clearly contain references to folk Ukrainian supplications in which patron saints directly accompany the recipients of such messages, e.g.: "Beyond the mountains, beyond the rivers, we go to sleep. Mother of God at the bed head, Jesus Christ at the foot of the bed, and guardian angels by the sides – protect my soul till morning come, from the knife, from the sword, from evil men" (Moskalenko 1993: 195); "I leave my house, and Jesus Christ and Mother of God follow; Nikolai is on the path – helps me in my journey" (Moskalenko 1993: 196). It is clearly apparent that the appeals to God for salvation found in these messages constitute an expression of a religious act of faith and hope.

What is more, the visual composition of messages disseminated in the form of Internet memes most commonly included the image of a pair of hands folded in prayer, images of Jesus Christ in a supplicant position, Holy Mary, as well as the image of a *Viburnum* plant (the symbol of Ukraine), an embroidered pattern and the national colours of Ukraine (blue and yellow).

At the beginning of the fifth month of the war (in late June 2022), a very poignant prayer by the famous Lviv-based poet Maryana Savka began to circulate on Facebook:

Our Father, who sees it all,
For everything is better seen from heaven

Than from down here,
Thy name be
On all who have been slain,
Thy kingdom come
To all who have endured and not betrayed.
Thy will be done –
For without will there will be neither son nor father,
Nor even the Holy Ghost.
Our daily bread we will yet harvest,
Once we have taken the bodies away.
And forgive us for not forgiving them that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation
To seek enemies amongst our own,
For it comes from the evil one. Amen.

It is Savka's own original version of the most important Christian supplication, the "Lord's Prayer", containing direct references to the realities of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Through specific wording and phrases characteristic for the text of the well-known prayer, the author emphasised the most tragic consequences of the war – its casualties: "Thy name be / On all who have been slain, Our daily bread we will yet harvest, once we have taken the bodies away". The original lines "And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us" were rendered into a plea to forgive Ukrainians for the fact that they are not able to forgive their enemies – the occupiers. Opinions on whether one can or should forgive the invaders have often been verbalised in the analysed Internet folklore: "Jesus taught us to forgive and love people, but he said nothing about Russian occupiers". In the material under scrutiny, the prevalent view was that reconciliation is not possible.

Maryana Savka's poetry is not the only example of a specific reinterpretation of the Lord's Prayer. A similar message was also circulated on Facebook as a text authored by Bohdan Tomenchuk:

Our Father... Art thou still in heaven?
What does Thy name mean now?
Now this is no longer Thy Kingdom?
Where is Thy will in it?
Give us our daily pain
And forgive us not their trespasses,
After giving bread to them who trespass against us...
And forgive us also our temptation
Come for their souls from this pain...
Lord, we drink from this bitter cup,
Of the cry of the body, in a vineyard of pain... I believe...

The above example of naive poetry modelled after a prayer expresses an idea that was verbalised relatively often in other texts published on Ukrainian Facebook during the war and pertained to the fundamental question of the doubting man: does God really exist and, if so, why does he allow so much suffering to happen on Ukrainian soil? However, there were also other texts of prayer (classified as group four) that started to feature in public circulation at roughly the same time, and stood in opposition to the above question, presenting folklorised tales of "true" cases of "miraculous salvation", i.e. situations in which prayer contributed to saving the life of soldiers, as illustrated by the following example:

God is with them [the warriors]! And they feel it

Location. Lysychans'k. Kitchen. On the table there are many shared mugs which we drink from. I start making tea and I suddenly realise – I need MY mug that I have in my backpack. I exit the kitchen, go down the corridor, take a step towards the door, and a blast wave hits me from the room. A missile has flown into the kitchen, but by miracle it did not detonate, only fell apart, saving our lives. Not so long ago the orcs blew up the chemical plant in Severodonetsk, the aim being to poison us. But the wind suddenly blew in their direction! Once again the angels have turned the situation around! Oksana [an apostrophe to a typical Ukrainian woman], there are many such stories. All of them refer to God, to God at war! His love and justice. Pray for us, we really need it.

I may be afraid and want to scream: stop it, you have a family, you could die!

But in these moments my heart knows: it is a soul that follows its own path. It is fire in his eyes, the desire to live! The desire to live free!

Praying for our soldiers is our main task!

Pray, sending them the energy of love and faith!

Pray and feel pride, because our warriors are those who sincerely ask themselves: if not me, then who?!

The above-presented text is composed of a story and a motivational justification of the need to pray for soldiers, put in the imperative. It employs the motif of a miracle, which is referred to everyday occurrences – the sudden need to find a specific item prompts a person to leave the room which, moments later, gets hit by an enemy bomb that does not explode but "falls apart", thus saving people's lives. The second motif involves the direction of the wind, controlled by angels, which blows toward the enemy lines after they had bombed a chemical plant. In another tale of miraculous salvation, a Gospel booklet stops a bullet, thereby saving the life of a soldier who was sceptical towards the significance of divine providence:

A story of a warrior

Before the battle began, the priest distributed the Gospel to the soldiers. Small, beautifully designed books. And you took it as well. And you remarked dismissively: "We need steel and lead here, not books. If steel does not save us, books won't do it either!" This is the remark you made then, because until that day you had believed that faith in God was nothing. You saw it as an old piece of clothing that humanity had worn to no purpose at all, since time immemorial.

But even so, you took the book and put it in the inside pocket on the left side. And what happened? You yourself call it God's miracle, and I can attest to it. Men were falling wounded right beside you; and soon enough you too were shot. A grain of steel pierced through you. You pressed your hand to your heart, expecting the flow of blood. Later, when you undressed, you found the bullet lodged in the hard cover of the book; a bullet aimed straight for your heart. You were shaking as if in fever. The hand of God! The holy book saved your life from the lethal lead. You consider that day to be your spiritual birthday. It was since that day that you began to fear God and study the creed carefully. This is why belief in Christ is not an old piece of clothing, and is not worn in vain.

God, in his mercy, has opened your eyes. It is written: "God loves the just and pities the sinners".

The motif of miraculous escape is known from traditional folklore, where an extraordinary event that cannot be explained rationally serves as proof of belief in the existence of some higher order and the interference of the (broadly defined) *sacrum* in the earthly plane. The characters experiencing it usually manage to avoid unwanted oppression (cf. Wróblewska 2018: 351). Religious miracles are mostly characteristic of folk legends, in which they refer to the axiological aspect, directly "connected to a given religion and the moral principles professed by it" (Wróblewska 2018: 356). The topos of miraculous protection from a sacred item also appeared in accounts of World War II soldiers. The prayer supplications expressed in the analysed material resemble petitionary offerings which materialise the intention in the form of a written message – testifying to an important feature of religious culture. Following Jacek Olędzki's line of argument, one may note that these oscillate between expressions of miraculous sensitivity and the desire to experience miracles, and an actual ambition to acquire tangible support from a higher power (cf. Olędzki 1989: 147).

The emotionally charged posts and the naïve war poetry published on Facebook also feature the motif of a direct plea to God. It was an expression of the heartfelt entreaty for punishment for the occupiers, salvation for Ukrainian soldiers and mercy for the Ukrainian nation; it also testified to the belief that only God is able to free Ukraine from her invaders. This theme usually involves asking God rhetorical questions filled with doubt, which give ample proof of the utter despair of men of faith, as seen in the following examples:

Yet I believe that you can do ANYTHING
And this horde will fall!

How much blood does putler
[a modification of Putin's name as a comparison to Hitler] need?
God, please, kill the executioners!

Oh God! Only don't take him!
I have no-one but him! He is the only one!
And God is silent... This is not his war!
He teaches us to live in peace and love.
But Satan wants to rule the world.

Not even an animal would do the things,
That this accursed filth has done.
Why do you not punish them, Lord,
Why do you not wreak your crushing vengeance?

I am five.
Mom was killed yesterday
They tortured her in the room... I was screaming.
I am now alone under heaven.
God, where are you?
I cried out to you so much!

Help me, God, to pray, for I am no longer able to.
The price is rising fast, becoming unaffordable.
At Easter, rain washes over cemeteries,
God, does it not hurt you there? (Maryana Savka)

The above texts portray God as the one who can do anything, helps Ukraine, is "with us", is able to punish the occupiers and is merciful. At the same time, however, he seems indifferent to the ongoing tragedy, does not listen to the pleas of the wronged, is the one who takes beloved soldiers and ordinary people. Nevertheless, the dominant motif in the gathered material is that of addressing God with hope for aid and faith in his intercession.

The analysed examples of naïve war poetry reveal that in wartime God becomes a particularly close and important presence, since his aid is very much desired. Even before the most intense phase of the war began, one of the texts that were very popular on the social platform of Facebook was "Molytva vojina" ("Pobud', mij Bozhe"):

Stay, my God, here with me,
In this field, amidst the battle.
Amidst ruin and amidst destruction,
Do not let me know the depths of fear.

Do not let me fall into gloom and despair.
And may the brothers not run.
Stay, my God, here among us
Through the soul of a father, a mother's tear,
A sister's love, the arms of a brother,
The waiting of a beloved, her eyes.
Be, my God, here with me,
At the centre of the world, at the centre of pain.
Protect me from death, from the enemy bullet.
Be my guard, my God.
I offer you my body and soul.
Stay, my God, with me! I believe! (Lubov Burak)

The messages disseminated on the Ukrainian version of Facebook are a direct reaction of people experiencing the war, a reaction to their sense of security being shattered. They may be regarded as an attempt to control the overwhelming fear and panic of the first weeks of the Russian aggression. They also refer to attempts at nationalising God, known from cultural practices, in which social groups and individuals try to win favour and support for their various needs (in this case very urgent and important ones) through direct references to patron saints, the Virgin Mary or God himself (cf. Bystroń 1995). They thus identify the universal Christian macrocosm with the microcosm of the local homeland, which is the basis for the existence of the *homo religiosus* (Zowczak 2000: 26–27). This practice, especially in a war situation, "is something extremely common, appears at every level of social development, in various forms and seems to only disappear with the dissipation of faith" (Bystroń 1995: 30). The analysed text also contains references to the poetics of the suppliant psalms derived from the Bible – i.e. religious songs with the nature of a prayer (Sławiński 1989: 413). The sender of the plea presented in these texts finds themselves in a difficult situation in which their life or health is threatened, while the addressee is God himself. The analysed texts, as examples of informal and grassroots-created art, evoke even stronger associations with posts of a votive nature that contained pleas to God to reverse bad fortune, stop some evil or the progress of a disease, all serving the purpose of building community with God in order to survive the most harrowing experiences (cf. Kowalski 1994: 13). The messages under scrutiny therefore fit the semantics of pleading texts, "which have for centuries told the same story of human anxiety, fear and the need for security" (Kowalski 1994: 5). And although the space in which these posts materialised is not imbued with the *sacrum* by design, it acquired a special nature during the war. What became important is public expression of individual intentions, which ceased to be connected to the author the moment they were posted; upon entering public circulation they began to function as a separate message-entity addressed to a higher power in order to acquire the desired results. What serves as a votive message in this case is a personal formula of a prayer,

sometimes poetic in nature. The space of the social media platform is a substitute for the more traditional means of conveying such messages, such as a book of solicitations or a box/urn placed in a temple, where the congregation could place their pleas and intentions, which were later read out by a priest during masses (Kowalski 1994: 198).

Religious folklore also contains commonly known ritual forms. During our research, Ukrainian Facebook users actively employed the subject of the Holy Week and the upcoming Easter to emphasise the importance of suffering. Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Stations of the Cross and Easter became the basis for creating Internet memes. The forms used in this thematic group included holiday wishes, magic formulas, comedic appeals and ritual calendar-related proverbs:

Happy Palm Sunday!
Holy God from Paradise. I beseech You.
Touch Ukraine with a willow branch.
So that she can flourish, have peace and freedom, and not burn in war.

May the willow bless and bring peace to the home,
And may the Lord help and accompany in everything!

For fuck's sake, putin, surrender!
We need to clean our windows and wash our curtains, Easter is a week away!

I am whipping – and a "willow" is whipping! EASTER is next week!



Fig. 3. "Willow whipping", Facebook, acquired 17 April 2022.



Fig. 4. "Happy Palm Sunday", Facebook, acquired 18 April 2022.

The willow branch appeared in memes as weapon to fight invaders with, functioning in the context of customary ritual behaviour – whipping others with a consecrated willow branch on the Sunday before Easter – the so-called Palm Sunday. One of the texts presents a jocular justification for the need to have the enemy surrender, because nobody has time to fight, as they need to prepare the house for the Easter holiday. The comical implication is that holiday preparations have become more important than the war. It also emphasises the importance of Easter as a ritual time for the Ukrainian nation.

Texts combining visual and verbal elements employed the images of willow branches, the Ukrainian flag and combat vehicles named "Willow", used by the Ukrainian army:

Just before Easter, there was another poem circulating in social media, a work by Oleksandr Irvanets dedicated to the defenders of Mariupol, who found themselves in an extremely difficult, life-threatening situation while carrying out the order to hold the city:

The ashes and blood of Mariupol
 Will not washed away even by the Azov Sea.
 If a "Topol" lands a hit,
 Everything will disappear in an instant.
 And they will always look upon us
 They from the subterranean caves.
 And the boys have no place to wash
 On this Holy Thursday.
 And the unbearable pain sucks away at them:
 What will the future bring them?
 Betrayal and unjust judgment,
 And a path to Golgotha? /.../
 The boys are holding out well,
 Although their pain grows greater.
 Will some European Simon
 Help us bear the cross?
 This will always remain incomprehensible
 To the damned stench of Moscow.
 This is where we become a true nation
 And overcome death! (Oleksandr Irvanets)

The poem makes references to the meaning of the folk custom of cleaning houses and washing clothes on Holy Thursday, before the holiday begins, as well as to the desperate situation of soldiers from Mariupol, who have nowhere even to simply wash

("And the boys have no place to wash / On this Holy Thursday"). There is also a reference to Jesus' stations of the cross and the tragic position in which the defenders of *Azovstal* found themselves ("What will the future bring? /.../ And a path to Golgotha?"), as well as the motif of Christ receiving help from Simon of Cyrene, forced to carry Jesus' cross by Roman soldiers. This incident is compared to the situation of the Ukrainian army, waiting for military aid from their European partners ("Will some European Simon / Help us bear the cross?"). The entire message is a reference to an Orthodox hymn focusing on how Christ defeated death through his resurrection ("overcame death with death"), just as the defenders of Mariupol overcame their fear of death with their deeds ("This is where we become a true nation / And overcome death!").

The form of naïve poetry and prayer was used in the online space of social media to conduct a kind of dialogue with the outside world regarding the war in Ukraine. The users of Ukrainian Facebook expressed particular disapproval of Pope Francis' decision to have a Russian and an Ukrainian woman participate jointly in the Stations of the Cross in Rome, as the Russian occupation of their country continued:

I do not debate, Your Excellency,
You are here, and God is with you...
Yet I am certain, that the heart of Christ
Beats also in me, a sinner... /.../
I thank you that my Homeland
Was equated with a violator... /.../
Does it turn out that Christ's cross on the Golgotha
Was carried not by the Son of God, but by Pilate himself? (Borys Tomenchuk)

One particularly telling reaction to the Pope's decision came in the form of a meme image depicting a woman in yellow-and-blue clothing carrying a cross under the



Fig. 5. "Stations of the Cross in Rome 2022", Facebook, acquired 16 April 2022.

watchful eye of a woman in blue-red-and-white attire, carrying a machine gun. It was a metaphorical representation of the Russo-Ukrainian relations in times of war, referencing the events of the Vatican Way of the Cross.

Prayer texts, naïve poetry and Internet memes also used Marian motifs, characteristic for Ukrainian religious folklore:

Mother of God, like a star, you are majestic in the sky.
Be the guardian in every hero's struggle.
Help them in their fight at a difficult time.
I will pray sincerely every God's day
To Jesus and to you, the only Mother...
I raise my hands for Ukraine!

Queen of Heaven,
Holy Mother of God,
we turn to You
ask for your help.
Cover our soldiers with Your Holy Halo,
that protects our land
from the vicious enemy. Amen.

Mother of God walks the earth,
And sees everything burning,
She asked her Son:
– What is this?
Jesus looked at the land,
Where fire is smouldering,
Pointed to Ukraine
And said to Mary:
– These are people who believe,
Their righteous deeds
Cry to the world for peace
Unite against evil. (Tetyana Marochko)

The last of the cited texts is a fragment of a poem written in the form of a conversation between Mary and Jesus regarding the fate of the Ukrainian nation. The exchange ends with Mary deciding to save Ukraine. The texts under analysis present Holy Mary as an intercessor and a guardian watching over soldiers, surrounding them with warmth and protecting them from evil. The main attribute of the Mother of God is her veil:

Mother of God stopped,
Embraced Mother [Ukraine],
Wrapped in holy robes,
[Pressed her] to her heart. (Tetyana Marochko)

The image of a veil in wartime texts seems inspired by a popular icon type, the Protection of the Mother of God, much venerated in Ukraine. The same attribute (and the motif of Holy Mary in general) was used particularly often in texts referring to the defence and blockade of Mariupol, the "City of Mary":

Yes, your invincible city, Mary!
Free the earth from the bonds of darkness!
Yellow-and-blue ray of hope
Lead us to light and love!



Fig. 6. "The Protection of Our Lady of Mariupol", Facebook, acquired 21 May 2022.



Fig. 7. "Our Lady of Mariupol", Facebook, acquired 07 May 2022.

Two icons depicting Mother of God trying to save Mariupol became popular on the social media platform. Each of these images featured Mary's veil and was created in connection with the ongoing war.

The first of the images, dated 20 May 2022 and created by Ukrainian illustrator and graphic designer Maksym Palenko, depicts Holy Mary whose robes seem to be woven from *Azovstal* equipment and the defenders of Mariupol huddling under her veil. The work is titled "The Protection of Our Lady of Mariupol" and is a digital piece. In the other depiction provided above, Mary's garments resemble a shell of a residential building with shattered black windows. An image of Mary also appears in a Kiev mural entitled "the Virgin with Javelin". Its creator Christian Borys admitted that he came up

with the idea when he was sent a meme with "Saint Javelin of Ukraine" (cf. <https://elle.ua/ludi/novosty/bozha-matr-z-dzhavelnom-lyustracya-krstana-borisa-zbrala-mlyon-dolarv-na-pdtrimku-ukrani/>). The use of religious images in the analysed materials was likely intended to help in the effort of directing supplications to God through the medium of a visible image that materialises the invisible and is an opening to heaven, allowing for a closer contact with the highest power (cf. Zowczak 2000: 457). Similarly to textual prayers, the presence of religious imagery therefore testifies to the importance and impact of the messages circulating in Internet communication.

Conclusions

The poetics of all texts from the material collected is deeply embedded in the war situation, and the principal intention behind sharing them was mutual support and integration in the face of crisis, putting emphasis on Ukrainian identity and distinctive nationhood (including a separate language), as well as an attempt to contribute to the fight against the aggressor and stop the death of civilians and soldiers defending Ukraine. In this case, religion served a deeply social purpose. The analysis of the materials collected, regardless of the space in which they were disseminated, has revealed the deeply religious mindset of the participants in the communication under scrutiny, who – having experienced the war – used the space of the social media platform to create networks of community relations, so important in such circumstances. With much emotional investment in the task, they stimulated identification with a given religious community to try and neutralise the sense of danger and hopelessness of the situation. They were doubtlessly building an online community that provided members of the Ukrainian nation affected by war with an efficient means of immediate and possibly widespread mutual exchange of messages (cf. Podgórski 2006: 96–97). The individuals participating in this communication referred to shared perceptions stemming from a community of social experiences and models of cultural identity, including its religious aspects (cf. Podgórski 2006: 98; Kowalski 2011: 42). They employed certain conventional linguistic messages created by a given religious culture, such as prayers, pleas and appeals which – to a religious person – seem to be the best way for contacting God, owing to their culturally recognisable form (cf. Zowczak 2000: 452). The choice of certain genre conventions was therefore strongly connected with axiological and worldview-related choices made by representatives of the Ukrainian nation, which translated into producing and distributing texts of religious folklore that were highly involved in nature. Thus, the messages under scrutiny ought to be interpreted in the context of the broad social and political situation, and in reference to internal genre rules for prayer texts and the character of Internet communication.

The final consideration to be made pertains to the role of the new media, not only in everyday communication, but also their significance at a time of crisis, a challenge

that transcends the concerns made in times of peace and stability. In such circumstances, communication mediated through social media platforms currently seems to dominate over other channels of mutual contact between people. Facebook becomes an instrument of inclusion into a community functioning online, allowing for instant communication and understanding. Due to its immensely wide reach, it provides an opportunity for "cries of despair" to be heard by supra-local audiences, in this case the inhabitants of all of Ukraine, who are otherwise difficult to contact in wartime. It also involves types of activity that used to be reserved for more private and intimate spaces. By appearing in technologically new performative situations, the analysed texts of folklore, mainly prayers, gain more power of expression and clearly transcend individual experiences, constituting an attempt at causative intervention into the surrounding reality, while on the other hand serving as a form of group therapy providing support in times of extreme crisis.

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Summary

The article focuses on the issue of religious online folklore disseminated in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the popular social media platform Facebook (Ukrainian version), between April and June 2022. The aim of the analysis of the collected material presented in the text is to show the basic forms and functions of religious folklore in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, their relationship with other messages of religious content (prayers, appeals and supplications) and the specificity of Internet communication. The authors undertake to show the connections the studied messages exhibit with religious thinking and the Christian tradition on

a verbal and visual level, as well as the identity of the Ukrainian people. They also point to the importance of Internet communication in times of helplessness and deep crisis.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, religious folklore, Internet communication, prayer, experience of war

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy problematyki religijnego folkloru internetowego, jaki upowszechniany był w związku z inwazją Rosji na Ukrainę na popularnym portalu społecznościowym Facebook (wersja ukraińska), od kwietnia do czerwca 2022 roku. Celem prezentowanej w tekście analizy zebranego materiału jest ukazanie podstawowych form i funkcji folkloru religijnego w kontekście wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej, ich związku z innymi przekazami o treści religijnej (modlitwy, apele i prośby błagalne) oraz specyfiką komunikacji internetowej. Autorki starają się pokazać powiązania badanych przekazów z myśleniem człowieka religijnego i tradycją chrześcijańską na poziomie werbalnym i wizualnym oraz tożsamością narodu ukraińskiego. Wskazują również na istotne znaczenie komunikacji internetowej w sytuacji bezradności i doświadczenia głębokiego kryzysu.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, folklor religijny, komunikacja internetowa, modlitwa, doświadczenie wojny

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