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Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin – Poland

MARCIN POMARAŃSKI

‘God bless America’. Prayer as a political ritual in the USA

ABSTRACT

The article is an attempt to analyze the relation between religion and politics in the American culture of last few decades. Liberals of western civilization very often look on the religion as an anachronism – something connected with a personal wishful thinking or with the prayers of monks closed in a congregation rather than with the modern political life. But the religion is an important component of the present-day culture in America. A good example of this is the modern use of prayer as a form of political action. The research concentrates on two different forms of religious prayer – ‘the civil prayer’ and ‘the imprecatory prayer’. As we will see, these two forms of confessional practice differ in almost everything, but they share a common political context.

Key words: religion and politics, political prayer, civil religion, imprecatory prayer.

INTRODUCTION

‘The United States has never had a state religion; however, it is impossible to say that America is, or ever was, a Godless country’ [Olehla 2010: 26–31]. The statement of Richard Olehla in simple words explains the main paradox in American political and social culture. On the one hand the USA makes an impression of an absolutely secular state, in which the constitutional principle of separation church and state has been in force for over two hundred years and the public position of many churches and denominations has been systematically restricted. On the other hand, the faith in God is still treated by Americans as one of the most important determinants in

American culture, and even in the 21st century over 85 percent of them admits that they have never doubted in God's existence and ceaseless protection of the political community. The same number of Americans accept any form of prayer as an important practice in everyday life [Pew Report 2003]. Similar intuitions are presented by scholars, as Anna Peck, focused on the problem of the relationship between religion and politics in the U.S. [see e.g. Peck 2005, or Peck 2009].

Apparently, it turns out that the prayer exactly has become an important element of American culture, and not necessarily a religious one. As some scholars noticed the prayer lies at the intersection of few sociological phenomena, including spirituality, psychology and even politics, because it reflects people's main emotions, concerns and needs [Hanek, Olson, McAdams 2011: 30–31]. Therefore, religious prayer quite often can be used in political context and assumes *de facto* a form of political ritual. The Bible already has become a very good source of prayers, which had 'a political undertone'. In the Old Testament for instance prayers have the nature of powerful rhetoric tools and they serve as the factors of being conducive to advance group cohesion and propaganda. At both functions of biblical prayers pointed Chris de Wet, when he had analyzed the '2 Maccabees'. In his opinion, some prayers in the book not only attest to Jewish author's devotion, but also to the political calculation and the ability to lift the spirits of the smashed nation, which was under the enemy rule. Those prayers are therefore not only religious practice, but also a form of 'coercive Realpolitik' [de Wet 2009: 157–158].

The essay aims to investigate the problem of modern religious prayer in America as a political ritual. Like was mentioned above, for over 80 percent of American citizens prayer seems to be quite normal practice, and its religious nature is absolutely in accordance with the federal and state law. The God, as an addressee of citizens' public prayers, appears in American culture in almost every public events, including secular holidays, sport games or motor races, which start with songs and invocations for the protection and happiness of the nation. In the study there will be analyzed the usage of religious prayers in the specifically political context. The research concentrates on two forms of religious prayer. The first one could be called 'civil prayer', and the second – 'imprecatory prayer'. As we will see, they differ in almost everything: the contents of prayers, types of people making invocations, or even the functions of the religious practices, but they share the religious origins, the common political nature, and the political goal of its usage.

Of course, before I focus on political nature of modern public prayers, I feel bound to put in order some outlooks for the role of religion in American political and social life. In a nutshell, I agree with Mark Cladis that the religion, as a social phenomenon, is an absolutely important and omnipresent component of American culture. Since there is no agreement in the scientific world concerning the place of religion in contemporary democratic societies, Cladis proposed four different models of it:

1. Religion Over the Public Landscape, in which religion is an indispensable and essential element of public and political life.

2. Religion Banned from the Public Landscape, in which religion is an absolutely personal element and is kept mostly out of public and political life.
3. Public Landscape as Religious Space, in which the only religious elements of modern democratic culture are some kinds of non-religious, civil beliefs.
4. Public Landscape as Varied Topography, in which the religion is treated in natural way, like any other comprehensive view that may offer a voice in public and political debate [Cladis 2009: 1–19].

In that depiction, the most rational as well as the most common model of the role and place of the religion in North American societies is the fourth one. In this sense public prayer is not only a theological, personal practice, reserved for the private sphere of life but also it could get some social and political sense, as a form of communal integration or other political tool.

There is necessity to devote a little attention to the notion of 'political ritualism' as well. The term refers to an emphasis on the forms of political behavior and symbolic actions, which manifest belief in the Divine impact upon the world, on the one hand, and which attempt to validate the authority and supernatural roots of political power, on the other. In this context, the political ritual is comprehended as a form of communication between some authorities and a community, e.g. between the government and the society. The main goals of this form of communication are: the integration of the political or social community, and the commitment of its members in the political process. That's why, the ritual concentrates on group imaginations and common experiences. In comparison with other public actions, ritual behavior is characterized by enormous number of used significant symbols, touching celebrations or other dramatic events. Accordingly, the political ritual appears as a vitally capacious scientific category, which comprises every acceptable form of communication, including words, gestures, sounds etc. To the category of 'political ritual', as Maria Marczewska-Rytko suggested, we can include even some outwardly non-ritual events, as presidential and parliamentary elections or the ceremony of the swearing-in a new government. It means that the nature of political ritualism is dependent on the context, in which some public actions and other events are used [Marczewska-Rytko 2006: 111–112].

PRAYER AS A CIVIL RITUAL

On July 17th 1980 in Detroit (Michigan) on the Republican Party National Convention Ronald Reagan received a GOP presidential nomination. At the end of his official 20-minute acceptance address he asked the audience in Joe Louis Arena for an offbeat proposal: 'I'll confess that I've been a little afraid to suggest what I'm going to suggest. I'm more afraid not to. Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer? God bless America'. [Reagan 1980; Domke, Coe 2007: 3–4]. Although the offer seemed to be a kind of political *faux pas*, Reagan's address ended with a standing ovation and it secured for him the winning in the presidential

race. What's interesting, the American society accepted this kind of public practice without any controversies. The event shows that in modern American culture the religious prayer can fulfill the civil or political function in spite of constitutional separation of church and state.

It turns out that Reagan's speech in Detroit wasn't the first public prayer in America, supported by the authority of the U.S. President, and definitely wasn't the last one. In 1953 Dwight Eisenhower began his inauguration presidential address with the prayer to 'Almighty God', in which he asked for the wisdom and the strength for himself and his coworkers to 'distinguish the right and wrong'. Also both Bush presidents prayed openly during their public appearances. The first one, with that kind of practice started his rule in the White House, whereas the second one made use of some biblical passages in the national addresses, especially after the 9/11. In television speech after the terrorist attack in New York 'A Great People Has Been Moved to Defend a Great Nation' for example he openly prayed with the words of Psalms (Chapter 23): 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me' [Bush 2001, see also: Burdziej 2009].

What's more, the public prayer to God in American politics seems to be something commonly accepted in the society. Even politicians and other public figures representing secular, American culture regard this kind of religious practice as something normal and popular. On the political scene public prayer is acceptable not only for Republicans, but also for Democrats. Extremely meaningful in that context is an analysis of David Domke and Kevin Coe, in which scholars have compared the national addresses proclaimed by twelve successive American presidents, from Franklin D. Roosevelt, to George W. Bush. The authors of the analysis noticed that every president had mentioned God in at least 20 percent of his speeches, and 3/4 of them had putted some religious elements in at least half of their public addresses. The most references to God and prayer had made Ronald Reagan (96 percent of all addresses), George W. Bush (94 percent) and... Bill Clinton (93 percent)! [Domke, Coe 2007: 33–41]. We can notice that the analysis indicates the usage of public prayer and invocations to God as typical to both, Republicans and Democrats, and the number of these incidents rises permanently in the last few decades. The remarks are confirmed by some scholars and journalists. Amy Sullivan already in 2003 reported that Democratic leaders in Washington had modified the political program with the help of a theological rhetoric as a form of electoral competition with president Bush [Sullivan 2003: 31–36].

This unusual connection between public religion and democratic politics was called 'civil religion' by social scientists, including Robert Bellah. It signifies a sphere of common and public religiosity with its own religious doctrine and ritual practice. What is characteristic, the civil religion goes beyond the individual beliefs of Americans, or even beyond the ecclesiastical teachings of any religious denominations. It doesn't represent any church or faith-based group. The doctrine of the civil religion and its practice seem to be a general elements of American culture, risen from the history

and religious tradition of the USA [Bellah 1967: 1–21]. In this kind of religion, God isn't only the Christian God or the Muslim God, but the universal Almighty Being. Likewise, the prayer to this 'civil God' isn't a Protestant, Catholic or Judaic prayer, but religious prayer of all Americans. Even the presidents of the USA analyzed by Domke and Coe didn't refer in their addresses to any elements of ecclesiastical teachings, but they did invocations to universal God as the protector and the benefactor of the American state and society [Domke, Coe 2007: 33–41].

Maciej Potz suggested that the 'civil prayer' in the USA, as well as a whole phenomenon of civil religion, serve at least as three functions important for the society. First of all, it legitimizes the political system and leads the democratic power out of the divine source. Special role in that context is played by 'The United States Declaration of Independence', which justifies the legal right of American colonies to independence: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. What's more, the civil prayer can confer the significance on American tradition, because it combines the historical truth with historical mythology, presents the subjective image of the nation and it interprets the necessity of making sacrifices. In this sense for example the American Revolutionary War was the Manichaeic battle against the tyrant – George III, the King of the United Kingdom; the Civil War was a struggle in defence of justice and peace; and the 9/11 was a brutal attack done by forces of evil [Potz 2008: 204–210].

The third function pointed by Potz is integration. The civil prayer combines into whole the American society, because it is organized usually around some significant dates, holidays, places and figures, which have meaning for all citizens regardless of their religious beliefs or native culture. The activities of celebrating some important events as Thanksgiving Day or revering unique personalities as Martin Luther King take the form of 'cultural binder' in the pluralist, multi-confessional community. Furthermore, the traces of the religious and ritual character of American culture are noticeable both at the more and less formalized level of social activity. An example of more formalized civil prayer in the USA is the Opening Prayer, the traditional religious practice carried out before the opening of each session of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The history of the ritual started in 1774, when the Reverend Jacob Duché and members of the Continental Congress began the session with the asking to 'Heavenly Father and mighty King of kings' for 'wisdom in Council and valor in the field' [*First Prayer of the Continental Congress, 1774*]. From that moment every session of the U.S. Congress is started with a prayer to Eternal God. The civil character of the prayers is emphasized by its universal content and the formal offices of the U.S. House of Representatives Chaplain and U.S. Senate Chaplain.

On the other hand, an example of less formalized civil prayer in the American community are famous patriotic as well as religious songs *God Bless America* and *God Bless the USA*. Both take the form of a prayer to God for blessing the nation and peace all over the world, and usually are performed before some important, public

events, e.g. baseball games, the Indianapolis 500-Mile Race or official celebrations of Memorial Day and Labor Day. The songs are also used in more precise political context. In 1984, just few months after writing *God Bless the USA* by Lee Greenwood, the song was performed at the Republican National Convention and have become one of the recognition signs of Reagan's presidency. The song also gained enormous prominence in America after the Gulf War in 1991 and after the 9/11 in 2001. The most notable political performance of the second song has been placed on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington after the terrorist attacks in 2001, when during a live television broadcast Dennis Hastert and Tom Daschle, members of the United States Congress, on the spur of the moment raised *God Bless America* [Gallagher 2010; Ventura 2011].

PRAYER AS AN IMPRECATORY RITUAL

Another and much more radical form of political prayer is imprecatory prayer. The modern variety of the ritual has appeared just few years ago. On the 2nd of June 2009 the listeners of Alan Colmes' radio show in Fox News heard uncommon declaration, when protestant pastor Wiley Drake, a minister of the First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park in California and former vice-president of the Southern Baptist Convention, openly admitted that he had prayed to God for the death of president Barack Obama. Drake announced that in his opinion that kind of prayer is absolutely admissible for a Christian, because the imprecatory passages appeared in the whole Old Testament. He also promised that 'if he [Obama] does not turn to God and does not turn his life around' pastor would ask God 'to enforce imprecatory prayers that are throughout the Scripture that would cause him death' [Allen 2009 I]. In a short time Drake found many proponents of his prayer initiative. One of them, pastor Steven Anderson from Faithful Word Baptist Church in Tempe (Arizona), even wrote to Alan Colmes a letter, in which he promised to continue Drake's work [Colmes 2009].

Imprecatory prayer is a controversial form of religious practice, which is derived from the biblical tradition. According to social scientists, it reminds the curse much more than traditional prayer, because it is characterized by a specific intention of praying – the painful punishment or even death of the adversaries. From the social and moral point of view such radical goal of the prayer is only a trace of brutal ancient times and shouldn't be used nowadays. But, as some theologians argue, the imprecatory prayer cannot be identified with curse also, because both have absolutely different natures. The curse is usually a simple 'death wish' to someone and imprecatory prayer implies 'the giving up of personal enactment of vengeance via the curses'. It is rather an extreme form of begging for God's justice than a simple anathema [Peels 1994: 236].

As Drake mentioned the source of imprecatory passages is the Bible, especially the Old Testament, in which the Chosen People repeatedly are praying to God for a revenge, a death or an eternal damnation for enemies. The Psalms are good examples:

- ‘Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth: break out the great teeth of the young lions, O LORD./ Let them melt away as waters which run continually: when he bendeth his bow to shoot his arrows, let them be as cut in pieces./ As a snail which melteth, let every one of them pass away: like the untimely birth of a woman, that they may not see the sun’. [Chapter 58, *King James Version Bible*];
- ‘O my God, make them like a wheel; as the stubble before the wind./ As the fire burneth a wood, and as the flame setteth the mountains on fire;/ So persecute them with thy tempest, and make them afraid with thy storm./ Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek thy name, O LORD’. [Chapter 83, *KJV Bible*];
- ‘Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow./ Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg: let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places./ Let the extortioner catch all that he hath; and let the strangers spoil his labour./ Let there be none to extend mercy unto him: neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children./ Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name be blotted out’. [Chapter 109, *KJV Bible*].

The Polish theologian Wojciech Węgrzyniak admits that the question about the sense of this kind of prayer and the issue of the theological value of the biblical ‘imprecatory passages’ are the incessant topics of religious debate in all Christian churches and denominations. Part of them, including the Catholic Church and Church of England, decided to remove imprecatory prayers from the Breviaries in order to counteract some possible ‘psychological nature difficulties’ of the worshippers, who resolved on explaining that part of Old Testament by themselves. Other Christian denominations, especially the protestant ones, have left the decision on using the ‘imprecatory passages’ as an important part of the religious practice to the faithful [Węgrzyniak 2011: 23–25].

Unfortunately, the issue of imprecatory prayer has been so far only a theological problem and it has been disregarded by the scientific community. But the situation has changed. The number of imprecatory prayers, which have been announced in public, dramatically raised in the last five years. The example of pastor Drake is significant here. Since 2007, he has proclaimed openly six politically motivated imprecatory prayers and he has become ‘an expert’ in using this kind of political manipulation. One of the most impressive Drake’s campaigns has been taken in March 2010, when he created the ‘Imprecatory Prayer List’ and the ‘Telephonic Imprecatory Prayer Team’ in order to fight against Obama’s *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* and against liberal politicians who backed it up. To the list of people who should die after God’s intervention Drake attached not only Obama’s name, but also the name of the Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and the 219 members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Furthermore, he promised in Alan Colmes’ radio show, broadcasted on 24 March 2010, that he was going to put on the list the name of every American

who would support the Obama's health care reform, including even his interviewer Alan Colmes [Avlon 2010 I].

In the same purpose own imprecatory prayer has announced also another protestant preacher. Pastor Peter J. Peters, the head of the extremist religious community from Arizona – LaPorte Church of Christ, published in the church newsletter in January 2010 that he was praying to God with 'imprecatory passages' because 'in the darkest month of the year, at the darkest time of the darkest month, these children of darkness in December of 2009 voted in favor of another tax burden to put on the people, called health care. Its death care' [Peters 2010: 12–17].

As we see, modern imprecatory prayers, unlike biblical ones, get typically political character. This statement could be confirmed by the analysis of every example of it, announced openly in the last years. We are able to assign forms of modern imprecatory practice to three main categories of political involvement:

1. prayers against godless law,
2. prayers against sinful politicians and other public figures,
3. prayers as a form of political retaliation.

Among the first categories we could rank imprecatory prayers mentioned above by Drake and Peters as a protest about reforms of president Obama's administration. Another example of this form of political activity could be the 'Broken Arrow' campaign, proclaimed by Neal Horsley, anti-abortion activist and member of the conservative organization Creator's Rights Party. In August 2009 he brought an imprecatory action against the U.S. federal government in response to the pro-abortion legislative resolutions. The term 'Broken Arrow' refers to the military terminology from the period of Vietnam war and it signifies a group of soldiers embattled by enemies and required the urgent help [Davis 2010: 102–103].

As we noticed this form of imprecatory prayer is characterized usually by the collective enemy, which is identified with group of politicians creating the government or the Congress. But the recipient of the imprecatory prayer can also be a specific public figure, who represents the odious ideas and values on the one hand, and symbolizes the secular and sinful reality on the other. To this category, except president Barack Obama, was included in the past John Murtha, U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, or George Tiller, famous American physician and abortionist, assassinated on May 31st 2009 by an anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder. Pastor Wiley Drake announced the imprecatory prayers against all three of them and after Tiller's death he even stated: "I am glad George Tiller is dead. Would you have rejoiced when Adolf Hitler died during the war? Or would you have said, 'Oh that is terrible for him to be killed'? No, I would have said, 'Amen, praise the Lord, hallelujah, I'm glad he's dead. This man, George Tiller, was far greater in his atrocities than Adolf Hitler'" [Avlon 2010 II: 43–50; Allen 2009 II].

The activists from the Religious Right, the American fundamentalist political movement, including conservative lawyers (e.g. Roy Moore or Herb Titus) and republican congressmen (e.g. Samuel Brownback), who participated in the *Judicial*

War on Faith Conference on April 2005 in Washington, also announced publicly the imprecatory prayer against the specific public figures. At the end of the meeting they proclaimed a prayer against George Greer, the judge from Florida, who agreed to carry out the decision of the Terri Schiavo's husband to terminate life support for her. In the imprecatory prayer members of the *Judicial War on Faith* asked for the eternal damnation of judge Greer because he helped in the killing of the human being [Blumenthal 2009: 118–119, 121–122].

The political and public context of the imprecatory prayer can signify a kind of inclination to withhold approval from some figures, but also a sign of the long-standing conflict – a form of retaliation on enemies. Again, Pastor Drake is the author of the most well-known prayer of that type. In 2007 he announced the prayer for Barry Lynn's death. The prayer against Lynn – the manager of the Americans United for Separation of Church and State, was a retaliation for the denunciation to Internal Revenue Service that Drake, as a church leader, had supported Mike Huckabee's presidential campaign and had broken the federal law. The Huckabee's Case wasn't the only example of the antipathy between Drake and Lynn. The history of mutual conflict has lasted for two decades and clearly confirms the political nature of proclaimed 'death prayer' [Conn 2007: 12–13].

But, not only political context characterized the ritual nature of imprecatory prayer. Every form of that practice is a public incident and it should influence society or even bring pressure to bear on citizens. The audience of the 'prayerful performances' becomes, e.g. the listeners of radio broadcastings (as in Drake's case), the participants of public events (e.g. conferences) or activists and members of the political organizations (like in Neala Horsley's action). The scenic nature of imprecatory prayer determines it to the promotion of specific values and rules of behavior, usually connected with protestant philosophy of life in the context of American imprecatory prayers. What's more, the imprecatory prayers as typical political and religious rituals pursue the distinction and intensification of the social stratification. In modern imprecatory prayers the internal political conflict seems to constitute the deliberate strategy. On the one hand, it integrates the inner structures of religious or political community, coordinates the common undertakings and reinforces the leader's position in the organization. On the other hand, the aggressive rhetoric and the confrontational attitude of the imprecatory prayer have to draw a well-defined distinction between 'we, the good ones' and 'they, the bad ones' and have to determine the clear criteria of the membership in the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Forms of prayer mentioned above are just two examples of the well-defined religious rituals, which can be used as political tools in some circumstances. Initially, both rituals seem to differ in almost everything. The first one is more common. Because

of its public nature, the words of the civil prayer have to be much more balanced than the words of the imprecatory prayer, and the connection of the civil prayer with a religious rhetoric isn't so obvious. The roles of preachers in civil religion usually are played by political leaders and other public figures, and all citizens are included in the structures of the 'civil church'. The American nation in this context is one big congregation, which has its own religious doctrine and its own rituals. The religious/political prayer is a significant sign of this religiosity. The second type of prayer is more radical for a change. Because of its close connection with a specific religious doctrine, the imprecatory prayer often takes a form of the orthodox ritual, and that is why it can be characteristic only of small alienated groups of the most zealous believers. The religious fervor of the imprecatory prayers can be noticeable: in the public rhetoric of the main religious leaders, in the words of prayers, and in the forms of taken actions. The radical nature of the prayer cannot be approved by the masses and it has only a sparse character. The followers of the imprecatory prayer represent usually some extreme parts of American society, normally connected with a political radical right.

In spite of all differences, both prayers present an uncommon example of using a religious ritual in a general political context. Components of a political spectacle in both cases are identical. On the one hand, we have leaders who are trying to achieve political goals. They directly or indirectly initiate prayer projects, and they are the main beneficiaries of the social and political gains. They may well be politicians, from the president to the head, as well as religious preachers with the political ambition and the will to make a social change. On the other hand, we have in both cases also a group of people, which plays a key role in the release of these prayers. These people constitute a guarantee of carrying out the ritual, they appropriately propagate it, and ultimately transform it into a tool to make social and political change. Of course, characteristic of both practices is also the same form of adopted ritual – prayer of petition, along with the entire faith-based beliefs in the divine activity and the possibility of God's influence on the political space.

However, these aforesaid rituals aren't the ones and only ones types of 'theo-political tools'. Even in American society we are able to find some other political prayers, whose nature isn't as obvious and straightforward as we imagine. An absorbing example of it has been proposed by Mathew Staver, a president of conservative Christian organization called Liberty Counsel. In 2009 Staver started the 'Adopt a Liberal' Project, in which every orthodox protestant U.S. citizen should select for himself one liberal American politician, and should pray daily for his immediate turning to God. In the right decision has to help a pack of cards with pictures of fifty the most popular (and the most heretical) liberal politicians, including president Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, Janet Napolitano or even Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Bloomberg [Conn 2009: 12–13].

Staver's action as well as the analysis of the aforesaid prayers allow to assume the conclusion that the process of creating a new political rituals with a help of Christian doctrine and elements of religious practice is something common and in large measure

accepted in American culture. Obviously, the civil prayer and the imprecatory prayer do not exhaust the wealth of political tools created with a help of religious doctrines or denominational practices. The initiatives resembling the Staver's 'Adopt a Liberal' Project appear quite often in American society, especially in the last few decades, when politicians have found out that they could capitalize on religion some political benefits. Contrary to civil and imprecatory prayers these initiatives are much more difficult to the simple description. As we have seen above, there were no troubles to point at the main goal of the civil prayer (integration of the community) and the imprecatory prayer (political manipulation). The answer to the question about the main goal of the Staver's project and similar rituals is not so simple, because in most of these practices the authors of the political prayers are trying to kill two birds with one stone. They want to integrate their own communities as well as use their prayers as an efficient tool in a political struggle. It can be safely assumed that – from the point of view of the overriding objective of prayer – if we decide to treat the civil prayer and the imprecatory prayer as some extreme poles of the axis, the all other examples of the practice, including the Staver's project, should be placed on the axis approaching closer to one or the other pole.

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BIOGRAPHY

Marcin POMARAŃSKI, PhD, a junior member of research staff in Political Movements Department (Faculty of Political Science, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin). He specializes in the relations of politics and religion as well as in the modern political and religious extremism.