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Poland: a Case-Study in Secularization

Summary

This article analyses religiosity in Poland, twenty-five years after the collapse of communism and the country's transition to democracy. It argues that although Church attendance figures are declining in Poland, the country does not adhere to the normal secularization model that is apparent in most Western countries. The paper argues that Polish belief still has an attachment to a pre-modern sense of the sacred. More importantly, it claims that Poland can provide a model, albeit an imperfect one, of a post-enlightenment, liberal democracy that is open to the transcendent.

KEYWORDS

secularisation, religion in the public sphere,
post-communism, transition to democracy,
transcendence

PRZEJAWY SEKULARYZACJI NA PRZYKŁADZIE POLSKI

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem artykułu jest analiza religijności w Polsce przeszło dwadzieścia lat po upadku komunizmu i transformacji systemu totalitarnego w system demokracji zachodniej. Przytoczone w ramach tejże analizy argumenty wydają się wskazywać na to, iż pomimo pewnego spadku liczby wiernych uczestniczących w praktykach religijnych i życiu Kościoła, ewentualne przejawy sekularyzacji w Polsce nie dokonują się według wzorca, z jakim mamy w ostatnim czasie do czynienia na Zachodzie. Opisany w artykule przykład polskiej religijności wykazuje silne przywiązanie do *sacrum* w jego przedmodernistycznym sensie. Co więcej, Polska stanowi tu pewien model, chociaż niedoskonały, postoświeceniowej, liberalnej demokracji, jednakże wyraźnie otwartej na to, co transcendentne.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

sekularyzacja, religia w sferze publicznej, postkomunizm, demokracja, transcendencja

INTRODUCTION

Poland has always been an outlier in terms of religion. In a *Secular Age* Charles Taylor invokes it as a place, which resists conforming to the secularization narrative; during Communism it proved that the emptying of religion from the public sphere was compatible with a vast majority of people believing in God and practising their faith. Well before that, it demonstrated that the Polish national identity, its struggle for freedom and self-determination were deeply interwoven with the country's religious belief and its allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. Poland's story is unique in the West – both when compared to other European countries and also to the United States, which has itself been called an exception. Sociologist of religion, Jose Casanova has made the case that Poland could exemplify what he has identified as 'multiple modernities', meaning that modernization or the adoption of an immanent framework does not necessarily lead to a decline in religious belief or secularization in the traditional sense. There are many ways of being modern, some which are compatible with devout religiosity both in private and in public.

And yet recent statistics tell us that church attendance in Poland has dropped to its lowest recorded levels, anti-clerical sentiment is on the rise and Poles increasingly hold views on matters of social morality such as divorce, contraception, IVF and homosexuality which are not in keeping with the Church's official teaching. All of these factors seem to indicate that religious belief in Poland will follow the same trajectory as in the West. And yet, a closer look reveals something curious.

An analysis of indicators such as church attendance as well as opinion polls, surveys and examples of religious practice reveals that despite some similarities to Western countries, Poland continues to be an outlier. This does not mean that religious belief and practice have not changed in Poland in the twenty years after Communism's collapse; they have. Neither does it mean that some of the same trends concerning religious decline are not in evidence; they are. But what we encounter in Poland is not the virtually clichéd tale of 'believing without belonging' or 'spiritual but not religious' so prevalent in other European societies. And while there has been some vocal criticism of the Church in Poland as well as infighting over what the correct response to the new realities of a liberal pluralistic democracy should be, there is little to suggest the kind of privatization of religion that has transpired in the West.

Poland's religiosity may be changing, but its exceptionalism continues. Many of the reasons for Poland's historical religious exceptionalism have been well-documented; these include the Church's role in promoting human freedom and dignity during Communism, her status as the reservoir of national identity, culture and language during the country's partitions and of course, more recently, the influence of Pope John Paul II. While all are true, I would like to focus on a fundamental yet overlooked characteristic of Polish religiosity – one that has particular resonance today. Despite her continuing modernization, Poland continues to bask in the afterglow of enchantment. By this I mean that although Poland is a country that has an educated, urbanised and democratic populace, she has not fully adopted the immanent framework of which Charles Taylor speaks but continues to live under the canopy of transcendence. More importantly I want to claim that this provides a model, albeit an imperfect one, of a post-enlightenment, liberal democracy that is open to the transcendent.

SECULARIZATION THEORY

Before discussing the precise character of religious belief and practice in contemporary Poland, let me say a few words about how I understand this particular conversation within the wider discussion of secularization. In recent years José Casanova, Rodney Stark, Charles Taylor, and many other leading sociologists and philosophers have brought it to our attention that the old sociological paradigm according to which modernisation ineluctably leads to religious decline is false¹. They have shown that this purportedly neutral sociological theory is saturated in ideology, entangled in Enlightenment critiques of religion. Some have undermined the paradigm by exposing the ideological biases of secularization theory; others have delivered substantial evidence of a global religious resurgence despite modernisation, others still have undermined the deterministic causal relation between these two phenomena. Thus, in a variety of ways and following the methodologies of a variety of disciplines, thinkers have undermined the plausibility of secularization theory. It is not my intention to repeat what they have said or to call their findings into question in any substantial way.

However some terminological clarification is necessary at the outset so that the use of the term 'secularization' can be as unambiguous as possible. In this context, it is worth reflecting on Casanova's distinction between secularization as a sociological theory and secularization as a social process; only by keeping this distinction clear will it be possible to understand the otherwise abstruse reality of secularization in Poland, and elsewhere. As Irena Borowik correctly summarises in her introductory essay to the Polish translation of *Public Religions in the Modern World*, when Casanova rejects the 'myth' of secularism he has in mind secularization as a *sociological theory*. This is distinct from and compatible with secularization understood as a *social fact*².

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- 1 For more on this see J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1994, R. Stark „Secularization RIP”, *Sociology of Religion*, 1999 (60), p. 249-273 and Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007.
 - 2 I. Borowik, „O deprivatyzacji religii Jose Casanovy na tle debaty wokół sekularyzacji” in: J. Casanova, *Religie publiczne w nowoczesnym świecie*, Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, 2005, p. 12.

The first of these refers to the causal theory that modernisation (itself understood in a variety of ways) brings about religious decline (at least a in public faith). The second refers to an actual decline, or not, of religious belief and practice (again measured by a variety of different indicators).

One can reject the theory of secularization as the causal relationship between the phenomena associated with modernisation – industrialization, urbanisation, mass education, growing material prosperity – and a decline in religious belief, whilst still noting that in many Western countries religious belief and traditional forms of religious practise are in decline. In the same way a scientist can reject a theory of genetic determinism while still concluding that genes play certain foundational roles in the character, behaviour and development of a given organism. In what follows I reject secularization theory in the first sense, whilst still asking whether levels of belief and practise are in Poland are in decline.

Complicating matters further, I want to introduce and situate the discussion in relation to Taylor's innovative definition of secularization – uninspiringly named 'Secularity 3'. This definition of secularity is distinct both from one understood as religion retreating from the public sphere (Secularity 1) and as one which supposes a certain type of belief and practise to be in regression (Secularity 2). 'Secularity 3' refers not to what we believe, the fervour of our practise or the role religion has in public life, but it seeks to describe the conditions of our belief or unbelief³. The central claim of Taylor's thesis is that regardless of what we have to say about Secularity 1 or 2, we in the modern West are all secular in the sense of Secularity 3, for even the staunchest believer realises his faith is only one human possibility amongst many. This, he claims, marks a significant shift from a time when not to believe in God was virtually impossible. And yet, in a few offhand remarks (interestingly, both of which invoke the Polish site of Marian pilgrimage, Częstochowa) Taylor admits that our secular age in which faith is no longer the „naïve” experience it used to be has its geographical, social and temporal boundaries. We are not necessarily as „modern” as we think we are⁴.

3 Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, op. cit., p. 1-22.

4 Ibid., p. 59 and 546.

I examine Poland's religious beliefs and behaviour with a view to Taylor's concept of 'Secularity 3'. Is it true to say of Poles that faith is no longer a „naïve” experience? Do they, like the rest of the West, realise that their Catholic faith is just one human possibility amongst many?

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND: ATTENDANCE

Since 95% of Poles identify as Catholic, the current study will be limited to this religious group. Moreover since the data available on church attendance, and to a lesser extent on religious attitudes, only reaches as far back as 1980 the study is limited to asking what how far the role of Catholicism in Poland today has changed since the 1980's.

If one were only to rely on media reports or the recent parliamentary election results in which the Palikot movement won 10% of the vote⁵, one would have the impression that Poland was decidedly more secular than the country which toppled communism in 1989 or to put it more bluntly, the time of Polish exceptionalism is over. The truth however, is much more complex. First, it is important to distinguish the question of secularization from the increasing polarization of the political factions which emerged out of the old Solidarity coalition. These two main parties to emerge were the currently ruling centre-left Civic Platform (PO) and the major opposition party, centre-right Law and Justice (PiS). The animosity between these two parties and within them, especially at the leadership level, has unfortunately spilled over into religious issues especially where they have involved questions of patriotism, the Catholic Church's institutional support for one party over another, as well matters of personal loyalty.

5 *Ruch Poparcia Palikota* ('Palikot Support Party' or 'Palikot Movement') ran its election campaign on an anti-clerical, anti-Catholic platform. Its stated political goals include ending religious education in state schools, ending state subsidies of churches, legalization of abortion on demand, distribution of free condoms, allowing same-sex marriage, dissolving the senate and legalizing marijuana. See <<http://www.ruchpalikota.org.pl>>.

Regarding the result of the recent elections, some consider that 'it indicates a sudden, vicious turn against the Catholic Church on the part of a large number of Poles...rather than calling for a modest re-examination of the Church's privileges, or even for a move towards an officially secular constitution, the source of the Palikot movement's popularity was its unabashed rejection of Church teaching and its near-mockery of the clergy and societal social norms'⁶. But this is too hasty. It is worth remembering that the tradition of anti-clericalism in Poland is as long as the history of the Church in Poland. The members of the communist party who imprisoned and even killed Catholic priests and attacked the Roman Catholic Church, whilst never a majority in Poland, existed in large numbers and did not simply disappear after 1989. No, Palikot's relative success is more indicative of to this irreverent showman's ability to capitalize on voter apathy, frustration at the ruling parties and infighting among moderates than it is of Polish secularization. That said, I would like to set aside these issues for one very simple reason: Poland underwent enormous changes after its transition to liberal democracy in 1989 – these changes were political, economic, social *and* religious in nature. Despite their interconnectedness, it befits us to isolate religion in order to avoid attempting to recount all social change in Poland after the collapse of communism.

Let us therefore examine the data. Despite the momentous social transformation that in Poland in the early '90's, church attendance numbers have not significantly changed. The table below shows the data from the last thirty years collected by ISKK (The Institute for Statistics of the Catholic Church). Their annual study *Dominicantes et Communicantes* measures the percentage of church attendance on one normal Sunday of the year (i.e. not a major holiday)⁷. They also measure the amount of participants who receive Holy Communion. The study seeks to determine the percentage of attendees out of those obliged to go to attend Mass. The figures are accordingly adjusted by subtracting 18% from the number of total baptised

6 M. Cantarino, „The End of Polish Exceptionalism”, *First Things*, available at <<http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2011/10/11/the-end-of-polish-exceptionalism>>.

7 For the full data set see <<http://www.iskk.pl/kosciolnaswiecie.html>>.

Catholics as this represents the estimated numbers of Catholics exempt from attending Mass (i.e. children under 7, the infirm, house-bound or elderly).

Figure 1. (Poland) Church Attendance figures – percentage of Catholics attending ordinary Sunday Mass by year.

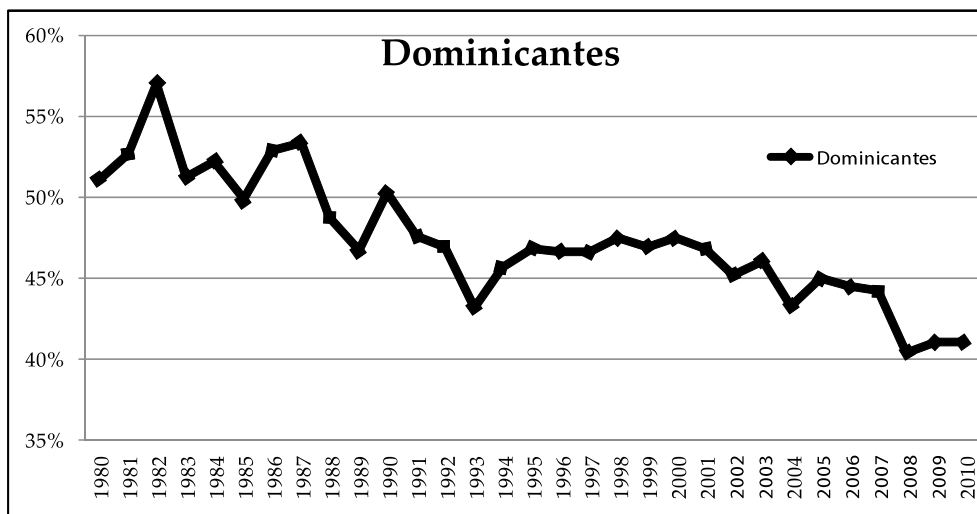
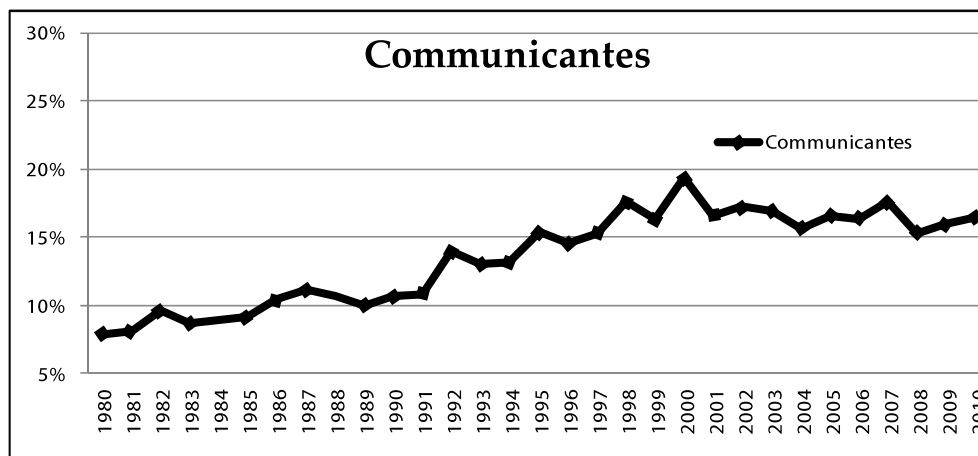


Figure 1 shows that, despite some variation, there has been a small but gradual decline in church attendance (approx. 10%) between the years 1980 and 2010. Many have suggested however that it may have been the 55% church attendance in the 1980's that was the anomaly, with circa 45% being the norm before that, and the number to which it reverted and seemed to stabilize at during the 1990's. The second drop to around 40% seems to have coincided with Poland's entry to the EU in 2004. Was this due to the secularizing effect of increased contact of Western European values or the mass emigration of Poles (and greater amount of people travelling), which occurred at this time? It is hard to say conclusively, although there is much evidence from recent upticks in church attendance figures in England and Ireland that many Polish Catholics are attending church services in their new country of residence⁸.

⁸ See the Telegraph available at: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1573452/Britain-has-become-a-Catholic-country.html>> and Guardian available at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/dec/23/religion.anglicanism>>.

An interesting growing trend however has been the amount of people receiving Communion at Mass. In absolute terms, figures are up by about 10% over the course of the last 30 years, but the relative change is even more pronounced given the fact that the number of churchgoers has decreased by about the same amount in that time-period. In other words whereas in 1980 approx. 16% of those attending Mass would receive Communion, in 2010 almost 43% of those attending Mass receive Communion.

Figure 2. (Poland) Communion figures – percentage of Catholics receiving Communion at Mass by year.



How should this trend be interpreted? There are those who argue that it is also an indication of secularization as it reveals that people now have less of a sense of reverence for Communion. They do not consider it necessary to be in a state of grace (i.e. without mortal sin) before receiving Communion, in other words. The anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise however – the numbers going to Confession are still high and there is much more of a sense amongst Polish Catholics that you cannot go to Communion without having been to Confession first. This is especially true of individuals who are divorced or cohabiting.

The other interpretation of these figures is that they indicate a rise in religious piety. This theory combines two explanations. The first focuses on the fact that church attendance during communism was often motivated by non-religious reasons i.e., as a form of political protest, expressing the need for community and, of course, those who

attended as informants. No one attending Mass for these reasons, it claims, would go to Communion. And in fact this argument does go some way in explaining the relative increase in those receiving Communion, since the non-religiously motivated attendees simply stopped going once Communism ended. However, this does not explain the absolute growth in the number of communicants. This can be clarified by the second reason, which is the greater diffusion and acceptance of post-Vatican II teaching on the reception of Communion, that venial sins are not a reason to refrain from receiving Communion.

Church attendance and Communion figures only tell part of the story, however. It is necessary to understand the beliefs and attitudes which motivate this behaviour. The variety of regional and national studies on religious beliefs and attitudes can broadly be divided into three categories: i) self-declarations of religious practice, ii) beliefs concerning doctrinal issues and iii) beliefs concerning moral issues. Let us examine each of these in turn.

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND: ATTITUDES

It is interesting that self-declarations of Mass attendance are 10-20% higher than measured attendance rates. 55-60% of Polish respondents describe themselves as regular churchgoers (defined as once a week), as opposed to the real figure of circa 45%. A further 15-20% describe themselves as occasional churchgoers (1-2 a month), 20% as infrequent churchgoers (major holidays and family celebrations – weddings, funerals, baptisms etc) and 10% as being essentially non-practising⁹. These statistics show that people in Poland ‘round-up’ the frequency of their church attendance because being in Mass on Sunday is still the expected social norm¹⁰. About 70% of people declare that they attend Church at least once a month, which

9 These figures are taken from J. Mariański's, *Katolicyzm polski – ciągłość i zmiana. Studium socjologiczne*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2011, p. 56. He calculates the average figures from surveys conducted by CBOS, TNS OBOP, O OPINIA.

10 Interestingly in Western European countries the tendency is to ‘round-down’, which mean that stated attendance is lower than actual attendance.

even when adjusting for the round up, still leaves monthly attendance rates at a high rate when compared with the figures for other European countries or even the United States¹¹. By taking into consideration the self-declaration data we can conclude that there has been no significant change in the percentage of those who affirm that they attend Church at least once a month, there has simply been a slight downward shift in regularity of attendance and an upward shift in the numbers receiving Communion.

A more significant discrepancy arises between self-identification as a Catholic and the profession of doctrinal orthodoxy, which grows even bigger when it comes to an adherence to Catholic social and moral teaching. There is still a good deal of religious heterodoxy, that is the holding of beliefs which are not consistent with the Church's official doctrines. Only some of this is self-consciously dissenting however, much of it is based on a lack of knowledge of the faith. In the following survey participants were asked which of the following dogmas of the Catholic Church they accepted: a personal God – 90%, a God in three persons (the Trinity) – 93%, eternal reward or punishment after death – 77%, existence of Hell – 72%, resurrection of Christ – 90%, Immaculate Conception 91%, Virginity of Mary – 84%, the Assumption of Mary 78%¹². Although all are still accepted at a fairly high rate it is interesting to note that 3% more people believe in the Trinity than in a personal God. This is surely due to a lack of religious instruction since a belief in the Trinity presupposes the existence of a personal God – it means accepting that there is one God in three persons. Furthermore, about 5% more people consider themselves to be Catholics than those who declare belief in a personal God!¹³. Moreover there is a significant drop in acceptance when it comes to eschatological beliefs – those concerning the afterlife. It seems that even high rates of religious practice do not translate into more orthodox beliefs on

11 *Gallup* poll figures for Church attendance in the US 2010 35% stated every week 55% at least once a month. This is approx. 15% behind Poland. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/141044/americans-church-attendance-inches-2010.aspx>>.

12 M. Zarzecki, *Religijność w dynamice zmian. Pluralizm i heterodoksja religijna Polaków*, „Ateneum Kapłańskie” 2 (609), 2010, p. 250-252.

13 M.L. Gauthier, „Church Attendance and Religious Belief in Postcommunist Societies”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1997, 36(2), p. 291.

this question. In another survey conducted in 2009, the results among people who declared at least weekly church attendance were as follows: belief in final judgement – 84%, heaven and the existence of an immortal soul – 83%, original sin – 81%, bodily resurrection – 78%, miracles and the afterlife – 77%, and Hell – 72%¹⁴.

This discrepancy is even more pronounced when it comes to moral issues – especially those pertaining to sexual behaviour. The following survey shows that respondents find the following behaviour, all of which is not contrary to the Church’s teaching, to be acceptable: pre-marital sex – 74%, contraception – 75%, divorce – 60%, abortion – 31% and adultery – 15%¹⁵.

Figure 3. CBOS Survey on Issues of Catholic Morality 2009

Do you think the following are?	Definitely Acceptable	Somewhat Acceptable	Somewhat Unacceptable	Definitely Unacceptable	Hard to say / no response
Pre-marital Sex	36%	38%	14%	7%	5%
Contraception	40%	35%	13%	6%	6%
Divorce	18%	42%	22%	14%	4%
Abortion	6%	25%	27%	37%	5%
Adultery	5%	10%	36%	45%	4%

Most respondents also declare that their decisions about ethical norms are made on the basis of their consciences, rather than dependent on the Church’s teaching. However, it is clear from the data that people’s attitudes are greatly shaped by factors other than their own consciences – more than they themselves realise. It is interesting to note that the approval levels for abortion significantly decreased, and remain low, after 1993 when much more restrictive abortion legislation was passed. The inverse effect can be observed

14 J. Mariański, *Katolicyzm polski – ciągłość i zmiana. Studium socjologiczne*, op. cit., p. 42.

15 R. Boguszewski, *Aktualne problemy i wydarzenia* (225), *Komunikat z badań CBOS* (Warsaw 2009) available at <http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2009/K_040_09.PDF>.

with the liberalization of divorce legislation in 2004. Both demonstrate the strong didactic power of the law. Moreover, pre-marital sex and contraception have been widely promoted through advertising and the popular media (especially via Western films, TV-series, „life-style“ magazines etc). And unlike the issue of abortion, on which there was long-term and systematic catechesis and preaching, the teaching on chastity and methods of natural family planning has been limited and poorly executed. It is ironic, for example, that John Paul II's Theology of the Body teaching is much better known and promulgated in the United States than in Poland, where it is virtually unknown by the general public.

Two questions ought be raised at this juncture. First, how far do doctrinal heterodoxy and the rejection of Catholic moral and social ethics constitute a change or erosion in values? Have people's moral values really become more lax and their knowledge of doctrine decreased in the last 30 years or have they stayed at the same levels? This is a difficult question because we do not have the same kind of datasets on these issues prior to 1990. Moreover while it is clear that the issue of premarital sex and cohabitation predated the 1960's, contraception, abortion, IVF, euthanasia were literally non-issues before then, so it is difficult to measure long-term change. We are therefore left to infer counterfactually as to whether people would have considered these practices immoral had they been available at the time.

However it is vital not to ascribe some impeccable morality and piety to past generations. There is plenty of historical evidence to suggest that premarital sex, cohabitation and adultery were common and although it is true that these activities were less socially acceptable compared to today, the reasons for their disapproval were often socio-political rather than religious in nature. Moreover the as issue of abortion shows, in some cases attitudes and behaviour have shifted *towards* greater conformity with the Church's teaching. Abortion rates in Poland have dropped from 260,000 per year in the 1960's to 130,000 per year in the 1980's to approx. 200 per year between 1997-2004. It is interesting to note that although the rates dropped dramatically after 1993 when the more restrictive law was passed, already by 1991 rates were as low as 30,000¹⁶. This shows

16 <<http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/policy/abortion/ab-poland.html>>.

that the education of the faithful, combined with legislative reform, can have a significant impact on people's moral views.

The second question concerns the relative importance of religious practise, doctrinal orthodoxy and moral behaviour. Ideally all three ought to be seamlessly integrated, but that is seldom the case. And it is important to ask what is really being measured here – secularization or Christianisation? If tomorrow every Catholic in Poland stopped believing in the doctrine of the Trinity and rejected the Church's teaching on contraception, we could certainly conclude that they were being de-Christianized but could not on the basis of that evidence alone say that they were being secularized. They could have all become Muslims or Buddhists. So if secularization is the issue, then we should ask what is most indicative of it – heterodox beliefs, lax moral values or religious apathy? Rodney Stark is correct to undermine the myth of a 'Golden Age of Faith' that has gradually been eroded. Quoting K. Thomas he says; „not enough justice has been done to the volume of apathy, heterodoxy, and agnosticism that existed long before the onset of industrialization”¹⁷. He is right. These facts do not show a decline in religious beliefs *per se*, but they may show a change or a trend going in a direction that is highly troublesome from the point of view of orthodox Christianity.

So the real question becomes is Poland becoming less Catholic? The first part of the answer to this question is that there *has* been a real and noticeable change occurring in the character of Polish Catholicism – one which is actually pulling in two opposing directions. On the one hand traditional Catholic piety is increasingly being combined with a hitherto unseen sense of evangelical purpose and greater theological knowledge. On the other there are a growing number of the religiously apathetic, and those who continue to consider themselves Catholic but are much more selective about the beliefs to which they adhere especially concerning so-called 'lifestyle choices'¹⁸. The second part of the answer will depend on what

17 R. Stark, „Secularization R.I.P.”, op. cit., p. 260.

18 In his typology of different Catholics, Marianski describes the new phenomenon of 'engaged' Catholics; that is ones who are associated with some sort of renewal movement. Mariański, *Katolicyzm polski – ciągłość i zmiana. Studium socjologiczne*, op. cit., p. 86-87.

we consider to be more essential to Catholicism – religious practise, doctrinal orthodoxy or conformity to the Church’s moral and social teaching. It is to this question that I now turn, and in answering it, I hope to shed more light on Poland’s situation.

BELONGING WITHOUT BELIEVING

Sociologist Grace Davie famously described the state of religiosity in Britain post-1945 as that of ‘believing without belonging’¹⁹. With this succinct phrase she captured the idea that whilst the British may have retained a personal faith in God, they no longer felt strong ties to the institutional Church – of any denomination. This trend seemed to hold good in other Western European countries as well as in America. There a good many more people declare a belief in God than those who consider themselves belonging to a specific religious denomination.

This marks a sharp contrast with Polish self-identification as Catholic. Not only is there no noticeable difference between Catholic self-identification today and that of ‘80’s and ‘90’s, but more people in Poland actually identify with being Catholic than they do with believing in a personal God – 95% and 90% respectively. The issue here is not religious practise, which, though significantly higher in Poland than in Britain is still significantly lower than the percentage who identify as being Catholic. The contrast is between belief and affiliation to a religious denomination. Although not by much, in Poland, more belong than believe²⁰.

What are we to make of this phenomenon? It would be easy to dismiss it as tribalism, or attribute it to the fact the Polish national identity is so intertwined with Catholicism that it is hard for people to disassociate the two, even if their personal faith in God is not

19 G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

20 A curious fact is that 1% of Poles describe themselves as regular practising non-believers – although perhaps this describes those who attend Mass with a spouse or family member. B. Roguska and B. Wciórka, „Religijność i stosunek do Kościoła”, *Nowa Rzeczywistość. Oceny i opinie 1989-1999*, Edited by K. Zagórski, M. Strzelewski, Warsaw: Dialog, 2000, p. 185-187.

strong²¹. In this way it may be thought to as analogous to Judaism, where many will self-identify as Jewish even though they do not practise the Jewish faith or even believe in God at all. It is as much a national or ethnic identity as it is a religious one. The Catholic Church in Poland was the only institution to emerge unscathed out of the partitions of the 18th century. Moreover her position as defender of the Polish nation was only strengthened during communism. And thus, so the story goes, the vast majority of Poles identify as Catholics even if they do not accept all its articles of faith or the moral values it teaches.

However, this is unsatisfying as an explanation. In 1931, Catholics only made up 65% of the Polish population; the rest was comprised of Jews, Protestants and Orthodox Christians. It was only the effect of the Nazi extermination of the Jews and the moving of Polish borders westward that changed this figure to 96.6% in 1946. Did those other religious groups identify any less with being Polish? This is, of course, an open question. But it would be a mistake to understand religious affiliation to Catholicism as merely an extension of Polish national identity. There is something deeper at stake here, something that can only be grasped once we stop trying to reduce religious affiliation and practise, to the mere expression of a moral code, a series of dogmas and a cultural identity. Religious practises, both individual and communal, are the result of belief in a sacred reality. And religious affiliation is membership in a group which carries out those practices according to some defined rituals.

Of course the problem, from a sociological point of view, is in establishing how far this ritual / ceremonial behaviour manifests a real belief in a transcendent reality and how far it is the result of a common socio-cultural heritage. But perhaps even posing the problem in this way reveals that we are indeed in the grip of Taylor's 'Secularity 3'. For us modern Westerners belief in God is simply one option among many. Today I am a Catholic, a Muslim, a Jew, agnostic or atheist because it is my choice. I may have been born into and raised in this or that religious tradition, but ultimately it is my choice to remain in it. That is what makes it meaningful and it means that I accept at least the majority of the religion's articles

21 See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, op. cit., p. 92.

of faith, try to abide by its moral teachings and follow its practices. Taylor is right that is *not* the same kind of thinking that occurs within a transcendent framework. There were no shortage of sinners, doubters or spiritually indolent in the past – one need only read to the Old Testament to know that is true. The difference however is that belief in some transcendent reality, whatever its form, seemed inescapable. Moreover there was no sharp distinction between faith and culture. It made little sense to say I am merely a cultural Catholic, for example, because the culture was an expression of the people's deepest beliefs.

As Taylor himself notices; 'a striking feature of the Western march toward secularity is that it has been interwoven from the start with this drive toward personal religion'. What he means is that both the Reformation and Counterreformation tended to devalue ritual and external practice in favour of personal, committed and inward devotion. Taking religion seriously began to require personal engagement over cultural forms of expression²². It was this movement of religious reform that drove the West ever further into an immanent framework.

But does Polish religiosity conform to this model? What if Poland, despite changes in religious belief and practice, is still living within a transcendent framework? Does she continue to bask in the afterglow of enchantment?

THE AFTERGLOW OF ENCHANTMENT

Sadly no opinion polls including the question 'On a scale of 1-10 how much do you consider yourself to be living in a transcendent framework?' have been conducted in Poland. And even if they had, they would not help to settle the matter conclusively. The point is that we are seldom fully aware of the conditions of our belief. Instead the evidence remains highly anecdotal, but I believe, no less compelling. Any visitor to Poland, even the most devout, will be struck and

²² Ch. Taylor, „The Future of the Religious Past”, *Dilemmas and Connections*, p. 216.

surprised by the 'festive' nature of its Christianity, its embeddedness in religious traditions, its paraliturgy and sacramentals.

Indeed, I would ask you to imagine a place where the old ways are not wholly forgotten, where the enchantment lingers and the glow of the numinous endures. It survives in the dawn Advent masses (*roraty*) in the plethora of Polish Christmas traditions emotional apex of which is the sharing of the unconsecrated wafer (*opłatek*) on Christmas Eve. It continues in the Way of the Cross celebrations and Passion plays, the traditional Bitter Lamentations (*gorzkie żale*), the blessing of the Easter Baskets (*święcone*), Marian and Corpus Christi processions and summer pilgrimages to the Shrine of Częstochowa for the Feast day of the Assumption. The liturgical year comes to a close with *zaduszki* the traditional All Saints and All Souls day practise of visiting cemeteries, aglow with candles as families pray at the gravesides of their ancestors. There are also saint's days – *Sylwester*, *Andrzejki*, *Barburki*, carnival, the celebration of one's name day (*imieniny*), the blessing of chalk and incense for the Epiphany and countless other ways in which festive Christianity is alive and well in Poland. Some of these customs were, of course, common practice in other Catholic countries but a number of them are unique to Poland.

Two facts about these customs are particularly noteworthy. The first is that these festivals and traditions involve mass participation. People's attachment to them is intense as they articulate times of celebration in which living individuals, as well as past and future members are knit into a single community. Although not all practitioners of these customs exhibit a strong personal relationship with God or the Church, a refusal to carry them out or failure to participate in them would violate both individual and collective expectations. Again these could all be dismissed as the vestiges of folk culture, but herein lays the second noteworthy fact. Poland is in other respects very similar to modern, industrialised, urban democracies. Although significantly more agricultural than the European average and with a slightly lower GDP, factors such as literacy, secondary education rates, family size, life-expectancy and marriage age put Poland firmly within the family of European countries. It has long ceased to be a folk society. And yet in the practises described above, the idea of religion as an optional, voluntarily embraced

belief retreats and it becomes a feature of basic experience²³. They witness to an experience of the world that has all but died out in the West.

Echoing Taylor, John Milbank argues that 'a certain mode of monotheism has tended to disenchant...this is in the long term *fatal* for religion'²⁴. In other words, 'the overconcentration of Latin Christendom on behavioural reform tended to dampen down a popular festive and ecstatic spirit, intimately linked to enchantment'²⁵. Whether by active choice or a fortuitous omission, Poland avoided the focus on behavioural reform and as a result a popular, festive form of Christianity has survived. There is even evidence to suggest that it has become more popular after the collapse of communism as older traditions and practises are being revived²⁶. The negative aspect of this phenomenon however, is that behavioural reform in Poland has not been achieved to the nearly the same extent as in countries directly affected by the Reformation and Counterreformation, which helps to explain Poland's huge discrepancy between religious practise and conformity to the Church's social and moral teaching. So does behavioural reform always come at the cost of enchantment and vice-versa?

When it comes to matters of human choice, nothing is predetermined. There is no *a priori* reason why behavioural reform should lead to disenchantment or to suggest that the two are incompatible. The message of the Gospels is one of both moral reform and openness to transcendence. So the better question to ask, given the historical separation of these two phenomena, is how should behavioural reform and enchantment be integrated? What constitutes right praise, and can it be achieved in the modern world?

Reformation criticisms of religious practises without personal involvement are well-known and in Poland they ring truer than in the West: lax morality, a lack of knowledge of the faith, retreat into

23 Ch. Taylor, *Connections and Dilemmas*, op. cit., p. 219.

24 J. Milbank, „A Closer Walk on the Wild Side” in: *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Cambridge M.A: Harvard University Press, p. 63.

25 Ibid., p. 63.

26 For example the restoration of the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6th) as a national holiday in 2011.

heterodoxy, passivity and the absence of interiority. At the other extreme however piety has come, wrongly, to be identified with a stringent moral code (often regarding sexuality). In the final analysis a worldview in which happiness is understood in purely materialistic terms and the pursuit of which trumps every other moral consideration is incompatible with Christianity but the Church's primary concern is not the defence of traditional family values or the instilling of a moral code. In many instances today she is the only institution to defend them, and of course where this flows out of the Gospels it is right and proper for her to do so. But Christianity cannot be reduced, as it has been in many Protestant countries, to the values of thrift, chastity, honesty and hard-work. For we can easily imagine a society in which people upheld the strictest moral code, in full accordance with the natural law but which was not Christian in any recognisable sense and which had little or no sense of the sacred. Again, as Milbank puts it: 'Monotheism that allows no sacramental mediation, that renders the divine will remote and inscrutable, that sharply divides nature from supernature, itself engenders an impermeable, drained meaningless immanence that can readily be cut off from any transcendent religion whatsoever'²⁷.

The challenge for Polish Catholicism is how to respond to the Enlightenment critiques of religion, a task which in great measure it was spared from carrying out in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, without discarding the pre-Enlightenment forms of religiosity that its Western contemporaries have forgotten and are today attempting to recreate.

CONCLUSION: SOLUTIONS NOT PREDICTIONS

Instead of venturing predictions on the future of Polish religiosity, in my closing remarks, I would like to submit a series of recommendations. The first proposes some responses to the reformulated Enlightenment critiques of religion. The second highlights the aspects of Polish religiosity which I hope will not be forsaken but emulated elsewhere.

²⁷ J. Milbank, „A Closer Walk on the Wild Side”, op. cit., p. 62.

Of primary importance is what could be entitled „lessons from Tocqueville“. The French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville noted with some prescience the falseness of secularisation theory. ‘Religious zeal, they said, was bound to die down as enlightenment and freedom spread. It is tiresome that the facts do not fit this theory at all...in America the most free and enlightened people in the world zealously perform all the external duties of religion’²⁸. Religion, argued Tocqueville, was flourishing in America not despite of the separation between Church and State but because of it. Religious communities themselves insisted on the disunion, because by remaining outside the sphere of politics they hoped to focus on their primary task of preaching salvation. They also wanted to be free of those who would seek to instrumentalise religious sentiments for their own political ends. The strength of religion in America was owed to the fact that it remained entirely distinct from political organization. In this way it was easy to change the old regime without changing the old beliefs²⁹.

This does not mean that there is no room for Church-State cooperation; there is and ought to be. But its proper place, like so much on the Tocquevillean model is on the local level. In the US this already occurs in a very organic and spontaneous fashion: charity, fundraising, the organization and promotion of cultural events, the arts, music, sporting and social events is often carried out through the cooperation of faith-based groups and local authorities and it has the approval of the general public. It only becomes problematic when relations are institutionalised at the national level. Poland’s history is not like France’s or Spain’s; liberation from autocratic forms of government came because of the Church not despite it. Nevertheless, whilst the majority of Poles consider the Church as a trustworthy institution, over 70%, a great deal of them consider the direct influence of the Church into political life as highly problematic and almost 65% think that her political influence in the country is too high³⁰.

28 A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, op. cit., p. 295.

29 Ibid., 432.

30 J. Mariański, *Katolicyzm polski – ciągłość i zmiana. Studium socjologiczne*, op. cit., p. 156.

On the other hand the moral issues matter. Opinion polls reveal that while the majority try to separate their political and religious views, many also say that religious and moral values shape their political decision-making. This is not as contradictory as it may appear at first blush. Rather it reveals that a decrease in direct political influence needs to be matched by a radical increase in indirect influence and on shaping of *mores*. Again Tocqueville is instructive here. The great usefulness of religion for democratic societies, and Christianity in particular, is that it mitigates the self-destructive tendencies of individualism, materialism and anti-egalitarianism that democracy inadvertently fosters. Love of other, the creation of community, the subordination of material pleasures to moral and spiritual goods and a deep commitment to egalitarianism are indispensable to the survival of a free and just democracy; Christianity cultivates these virtues like nothing else³¹.

The challenge for Poland is to learn from the lessons of the West – to avoid its mistakes and to imitate its successes. The Church ought to self-consciously withdraw from direct political influence, especially using its institutional clout to make its social influence felt. At the same time it ought to intensify the imparting of its moral and social doctrine so as to generate a well-versed, socially engaged laity capable of articulating its positions in the language of the public sphere.

But Poland also has lessons that she can impart to others. Much has been made of America's exceptionalism; a country which is paradigmatically modern but fervently religious. But even the most devout believer would find it difficult to deny that America is also the main vehicle for secularization. As Peter Berger famously put it, 'if India is the most religious nation on earth, and Sweden the most irreligious, then America is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes.' America has never cultivated a sense of the sacred. And that is why she suffers from religious bi-polarity.

Without going too much into the details at this juncture, it is worth mentioning that in addition to the festive and communal elements of worship cultivated in Poland, the liturgy itself is very important. Poland was essentially the only country to translate the Roman Missal into the vernacular after the Second Vatican Council in a way that

31 A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, op. cit., p. 442-450.

remained faithful to the cadences of the Latin. The practical effect of this was that the Mass could still be sung, as it is in Poland, according to the old Gregorian chants. Not only was the more 'courtly' language of the original preserved, it meant that the liturgy could be sung and the set pieces (i.e. *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, *Psalms*) did not have to be set to contemporary music. The overall result was greater liturgical continuity after Vatican II and a more pronounced sense of reverence. The importance of preserving the sense of sacred mystery in the liturgy is evidenced by the recent decision by the USCCB to adopt a revised English translation of the Missal that will come into effect on the First Sunday of Advent 2011 in the entire English-speaking world.

A recognition of sacred space and the cultivation of ritual and communal worship in Poland goes beyond the liturgy of the Mass, although this is of central importance. Mention has already been made of processions, pilgrimages and paraliturgical practices, alongside these one ought also to note the incorporation of religious symbols in everyday life – religious images are ubiquitous in homes, gardens, shops and wayside shrines. Particularly beloved in Polish folk art is the image of *Chrystus Frasobliwy*, meaning or 'sorrowful' Christ. It imagines Christ sitting pensively crowned with thorns and is supposed to symbolize of Poland's historic suffering at the hands of its neighbors as well as its dedication to its religious heritage. More than any other, this epitomizes the incarnational aspect of Christianity that is still very much felt in Poland. These symbols bind the transcendent to the human in a very immediate way; they serve as gateways to a reality that has been elsewhere relegated to the private and the inner.

As a final thought, let me add a word about why Poland matters. I am reminded here of the words of Alexander Hamilton in the first Federalist Paper on the future of democracy. He wrote: 'it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force'³².

32 A. Hamilton, J. Madison, J. Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, Edited by Clinton Rossiter, New York: Penguin Group, 1961.

In a somewhat analogous way, it has been given to Poland to decide the question whether modern nations – democratic, urban, industrial and enlightened – are capable of being open to the transcendent in the way their forbears were. Where raising ones eyes to heaven and lifting one's hands with one's fellows in prayer is the result of a free, informed choice *and* an unquestioned response to the divine. Or whether modernization, even if does not compel a decline in religious belief and practise, takes us ever further from the transcendent so where it does remain it reminds us more of a benevolent moral code than a relationship with God.

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