

The role of religion in social transformation within Poland since 1970

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The political and social structure of the state

At the close of the Second World War in 1945, Poland was consumed by the totalitarian, communist regime of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union. The ideology of Stalinism was heavily based on the work of Karl Marx and what later became known as Marxism. There is much debate amongst social scientists over the detail of what constitutes a totalitarian regime. According to Scott and Marshall (2009) totalitarian regimes usually include an elaborate, total ideology with a promise of a utopian future. Such regimes feature a single mass party, typically led by one person, operating a system of terror, either physical or psychic. Totalitarian regimes usually maintain a monopoly on arms and communication, with central control and direction of the economy through a bureaucratic co-ordination of all resources.

Poland was ruled by the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR) from 1945-1989, under the governance of Moscow. In common with other Soviet Union countries it was a secular state, in that, the Church and State were separate entities. Under communism, religion was an undesirable element of society but tolerated.

The communist regimes saw that it was impossible to get rid of religion completely so they begrudgingly allowed people to retain their religious beliefs - but only as a private concern (Haynes 2001, 440).

The control exercised by the communist state in Poland was facilitated by the use of hegemony and ultimately force if necessary. The state purposely fell short of providing the conditions for the main cultural values of modernity to exist. Freedom, equality and fraternity were the values held most sacred by Western Europeans after the Enlightenment. These values were the main aims of the French Revolution in 1789, for example. These concepts were particularly important in Eastern European Poland also.

Poland has been a Christian nation for over one thousand years and the values of Western civilization are deeply rooted in Polish culture. The new social order implemented in Poland after the Second World War, brought an alternative, and often

contradictory, set of values. A clash of the two value systems was inevitable (Wnuk-Lipinski 1991, 7).

This clash, or more accurately, a series of clashes, was to come with the spread of Globalization. Globalization is essentially the spread of Western political and cultural factors, and especially Western market based economics, around the world.

These factors are all interconnected but perhaps the main failing of the communist regime, in the increasingly global world of the twentieth century, was the inability to produce goods that were desirable enough to export. Exporting goods would build up reserves of foreign currency; this would have enabled the regime to then import foreign goods to satisfy the demand that existed for such goods behind the Iron Curtain.

This major failing of centrally planned economies in the Soviet Union frequently led to shortages of basic foodstuffs and other necessities. Inevitably these shortages led to price increases, as the regime attempted to reduce demand. Poland experienced these shortages and price increases. Several times since 1970 the response of the Polish workers was to strike. Poland had some level of autonomy from Moscow and the PZPR attempted a series of economic reforms to rectify their particular problems.

During its existence Communist Poland attempted three major reforms of the traditional state socialist economic model: one in 1956-57, another in 1973-1975, and yet another in 1982. Each attempt was induced by a deep socio-economic and political crisis, in the main, well supported strike action. Each resulted in concessions to the striking workers including the relaxation of central planning and some encouragement of private business. In each case as soon as the regime reconsolidated its position 'retreat and recentralization of planning and control took place' (Porket 1990, 90). These actions effectively created the conditions for a new crisis (Karol 1981; Korbonski 1999; Porket 1990).

Government initiated, consumer price increases led to strikes in 1970 and 1976. Similar strikes that broke out in the summer of 1980 were especially significant because they took on a political dimension as Solidarity (Solidarnosc), an independent trade union, emerged. Solidarnosc was 'the first worker-run union in the Soviet bloc ... the first real break with the theory and institutions of

Stalinism' (Karol 1981, 48). Solidarnosc was also significantly associated with the PCC and used the religious symbols of Catholicism to build its support and give credence to its aims.

A lack of resolution to this crisis led to the imposition of martial law in 1981. A further economic crisis and the inevitable strikes, in 1988, led to the Round Table talks between the government, Solidarnosc and other civil society actors. These talks were mediated by the PCC. They eventually led to the 'Peaceful Revolution' or 'Great Transformation' in 1989 when the communist regime was overthrown in Poland. Poland's first Solidarnosc led government, headed by Lech Walesa, took office on 12th September 1989 (Karol 1981; Korbonski 1999; Porket 1990).

Important religious movements

The PCC is the predominant church in Poland today; in the years leading up to the democratic transition this was especially the case. Religious pluralism in the period post 1989 has created a growth in New Religious Movements in Poland. This has produced a swelling in the membership of the congregations of Hare Krishna and Jehovah's Witnesses in particular (Froese and Pfaff 2001).

The communist era however saw 'more than 95% of the population as steadfast Catholics' (Froese and Pfaff 2001, 491). The PCC was very much associated with national identity and culture, being catholic was synonymous with being Polish. This concurs with the hypothesis that 'Only churches that enjoy little or no religious competition can become identified with a national culture' (Froese and Pfaff 2001, 485).

It is important to note at this point Haynes' (2001) observation:

Before the democratic revolutions of 1989-1990, church state relations fell into two broad categories - 'accommodative' and 'confrontational' ... Czechoslovakia and Poland offer perhaps the best examples of prolonged confrontation between state and church (Haynes 2001, 440).

This confrontation with the state, combined with the PCC's close association with national identity created the conditions that enabled the PCC to play a role in Poland's social change since 1970.

The role played by the PCC in social change since 1970

Essentially, as Borowik observes 'the church became a symbol of freedom and the hope of regaining political autonomy and democratic life' (Borowik 2002, 241). Borowik goes on to outline the four main areas that the church played a role in social change in Poland.

- 1) The communist system in Poland moved the Church closer towards a traditional society which gave the church bigger influence in people's lives. The oppressiveness of the communist ideology had created a counter ideology in which the most important political actor and symbol was the church.
- 2) The church was a midwife of civil society; its catechism classes and other activities became arenas for the debating of questions of the day.
- 3) Religious ritual became the central expression and manifestation of civil society: pilgrimages, processions and attending mass became ways of opposing the regime and instigating social change. Even atheists were known to attend mass because of this function.
- 4) The 'Polish Pope', John Paul II, provided a hope of freedom and also united Poles. He represented the Polish people to the whole world and gave strength to all those social forces that opposed communism (Borowik 2002).

The symbols of the Church, not least the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, were important in uniting the Polish people. They illustrated the common heritage and culture of all Poles. Solidarnosc used these symbols openly, with the blessing of the church, to epitomise what they were trying to achieve. The success of the strikes and their cohesive nature were partly due to the use of these symbols. The close association of Solidarnosc with the PCC is another example of the PCC being very important in the processes of social change.

Martial law was introduced on the 12th December 1981 by General Jaruzelski, the then head of the PZPR 'explaining its necessity by the desperate political and economic condition of the country, for which he blamed Solidarity' (Mazierska 2009, 290), illustrating the power of Solidarnosc and their union with the PCC.

Martial law was suspended in December 1982. 'An important factor in this was the visit by the Polish Pope, John Paul II, in March 1983' (Mazierska 2009, 290). One month after the visit by the Pope it was abolished on the 22nd of July 1983, this can also be seen as an example of the important role the PCC played in the processes of social change. The abolition of martial law was particularly significant because the communist authorities were conceding that they had 'lost any ambition for ideological hegemony' (Mazierska 2009, 292).

It can be argued that the role of the PCC was fundamental in helping to shape the strikes, and the Solidarnosc movement, that caused the transformation of Poland to a democracy. Wiegel (1992) states that workers' consciousness was transformed by 'the steady catechesis of human rights preached by the church since the 1960's' (cited Osa 1996, 69). Walaszek (1986) is in agreement of this diagnosis when he states that 'Nowhere else in Eastern Europe did the church's teachings focus so much on national sovereignty, dignity, freedom and human rights, as well as on the inseparability of the nation from its church' (Walaszek 1986, 131).

A survey conducted by a team of sociologists from the Polish Academy of Sciences in 1980 would suggest that the Polish people agreed with this position. Their findings showed that 'about 80% of the sample favoured increased involvement of the church in public life' (Walaszek 1986, 129). There is no doubt that the church became a functionary of civil society 'its institutional infrastructure provided a basis within which some form of organized resistance to martial law could emerge' (Walaszek 1986, 133). However, subsequent events may be taken to suggest that this functional role may have been over interpreted by the PCC as a mandate for involvement in politics, ad infinitum.

The extent the PCC shaped social and political change since 1970

The six years that followed martial law can best be characterised by a gradual decline in the power of the communists. This was juxtaposed by a corresponding increase in the standing of the PCC and Solidarnosc. Both parties 'emerged from the period of martial law as the moral victors' (Mazierska 2009, 291). The failure of a third wave of economic reforms by the PZPR led to more strikes in 1988.

The PCC mediated at the Round Table talks. Talks instigated to resolve issues relating to the strikes. 'The regime's key concessions at the Round Table talks were the re-legalization of Solidarity and the acceptance of free elections in 1989' (Porket 1996, 91). These elections led to democracy for Poland.

Since 1989 the PCC has been very active in exerting its influence on the government and the political process (Borowik 2002; Froese and Pfaff 2001; Korbonski 2000). This can be regarded as a misunderstanding of the mandate held by the PCC; a mandate understood by the PCC in relation to being under communist rule, but which does not carry over to democracy. The main areas of PCC activity are illustrated by considering the main areas of contention between the PCC and the Polish people:

- 1) The introduction of religious instruction to schools and, in particular, the Church's attempts to make religion a compulsory part of students final grades when they leave school.
- 2) Attempts to enshrine in law a total ban on abortions, procedures freely available during communist rule.
- 3) The campaign for a quick signing of the Concordat with the Vatican, which would enshrine Poland as a Catholic country, and resists secularisation.
- 4) Closely connected with the Concordat are the debates about the new constitution and EU membership and the Church's interference in these debates.

(Borowik 2002; Froese and Pfaff 2001; Korbonski 2000)

These key areas are seen by the Polish people as instances where the PCC has been putting their own agenda before the wishes of the people. This view is summarised by Borowik: 'It appears that the bishops did not and do not differentiate between engagement in public life for "common interest" and in political life for "particular interest"' (2002, 247). This has led to a reduction in support for the PCC (Borowik 2002; Froese and Pfaff 2001; Korbonski 2000).

The main reason for this misunderstanding is that 'Civil society released from totalitarian pressure has regained its voice and is creating diverse agendas of social discourse' (Borowik: 2002: 242). Examples include feminist groups and anti-dogma pressure groups. 'Much of this ferment is in direct reaction to the activity of the Church' (Borowik: 2002: 242). It can be argued that the PCC's role in the processes of social change was only mandated by the Polish people until the dawn of democracy. Their pursuing of personal goals in the public sphere since has led to a decline in their moral authority. Korbonski gives an explanation for the actions of the PCC.

Under the communists, the church could always play the martyr; mobilize support at home and abroad, ultimately forcing the regime to surrender. Under a democratic system such tactics were no longer possible and other means had to be used, such as consensus building, compromise and tolerance. The problem was that the Polish church did not understand the meaning of these tactics: Never in its history had it coexisted with democracy (2000, 125).

The respected Polish philosopher Lezek Kolakowski states that if 'the church participates in political games – even if priests do not stand for parliament – it must bear political defeats' (cited Borowik 2002, 249). The defeat of Lech Walesa was also seen as a defeat for the church (Borowik 2002). These defeats have been costly to the PCC. This has perhaps produced one consensus in Poland. 'The

need to reduce the political engagement of the Church is one issue on which there is agreement' (Borowik 2002, 249).

Conclusion

This paper has shown the role played by the Polish Catholic Church in processes of social transformation since 1970. It has argued that the momentums from these victories, over the communist regime, were taken to be a mandate for continued action in the public sphere after the transition to democracy. It has argued that this was a mistake on the part of the PCC stating that:

Whilst after the overturn of communism the Church still enjoyed huge, although unofficial, influence on political decisions, its moral authority has been gradually eroded (Mazierska 2009, 292).

The future for the PCC may not be as bleak as this paper suggests; there is still a huge amount of religiosity in Poland (Froese and Pfaff 2001), the final position of this paper is summarised by Korbonski:

It may be hypothesised that the power and influence of the church actually peaked in the early 1990s and that, having absorbed some of the lessons from its decline, its future policies may well be less triumphalist and controversial, and more accommodating (2000, 123).

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