

The Insoluble Problem: Church and State in Poland

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By one of the ironies of history, it was the godless Orthodox seminarist Stalin who made present-day Poland into one of the most Roman Catholic countries in Europe, and indeed in the world.

In the inter-war Polish Republic (1918-1939) at least a third of the population were of other denominations. This was a source of complicated relations and conflicts. The Yalta and Potsdam agreements, plus the annihilation by the Nazi occupiers of the million Polish Jews, left inside the frontiers of the new People's Polish Republic less than 800,000 citizens belonging to non-Roman Catholic Churches. Thus, at least formally, present-day Poland's population consists of 97 per cent Catholics, or more than 32 million souls. In 1971, the atheist Society for the Propagation of Secular Culture numbered 316,000 members, who were recently described by one of its leaders, Dr. Wieslaw Myslek, as having purely formal links with this Society (Party members of any standing have to make this gesture).

The Roman Catholic Church in Poland is a thriving organization. In 1972 it had 6,437 parishes with 13,518 churches and chapels. Its clergy consists of 18,300 priests, 7,000 more than on the eve of the war (but since then the membership of the Church has grown from approximately 25 million to 32 million). The Primate, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, two more cardinals and 67 bishops constitute the Episcopacy, whose authority is rarely questioned inside or outside the Church.

The Church maintains 47 higher seminars with more than 4,000 alumni. They are financed by voluntary donations from believers, and from funds collected among Poles living abroad (some ten million, the majority in North America). The government provides funds for the Academy of Catholic Theology in Warsaw, where 800 students complete their higher theological studies. The Academy, created in the Stalinist period, was intended to produce a new type of priest, who could at one and the same time perform his traditional pastoral functions and intellectually accommodate himself and his flock to the materialist secular power. The results until now have deeply disappointed the initiators of the Academy.

The 50-year-old Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) is a unique

educational institution in any communist country, and its survival, albeit in a truncated form, is a kind of miracle. It is now allowed to have only four departments: theology, canon law, Christian philosophy and the humanities. This latter in practice encompasses sociology, the study of comparative literature and history. In the academic year 1971-72, the KUL had 2,460 students (of whom 1,190 were women). Nearly half studied theology. The KUL is the only private, non-Marxist university between East Berlin and Vladivostok. Its degrees are recognised as comparable to those obtained at state universities. It is true that the government taxes KUL heavily (e.g. the students' hostel is taxed as a private hotel) and the debts to the tax inspector have long ago reached the astronomical figure of 30 million zlotys. Threats of closure have been made by the government more than once when relations with the Church were particularly inflamed. But they never materialized.

One more sign of the vitality of the Church is the growing number of young men being ordained. 381 were ordained in 1970, 480 in 1971, and 604 in 1972 who more than replaced the 201 priests who died in 1971.

But is not the Church in Poland becoming divorced from the people? After all 50 per cent of the population were born in the last 25 years, and received Marxist-Leninist materialist education from their earliest years in school. All forms of communication, radio and television, the publication of books and practically the whole press are Party-controlled. Outside the pulpit no Christian, no religious thought can be publicly proclaimed and propagated. Since 1945 the state controlled economy has worked incessantly to change the country from an agricultural into an industrial one. In 1939 nearly two thirds of the population were villagers while now 53 per cent live in towns and cities. Has the urbanization of Poland produced the same spiritual consequences as in the industrial West? Are the Churches getting emptier and the faithful becoming an ageing group with their eyes on the past?

According to reliable information, 95 per cent of the nation's children are still baptised at birth. In 1972, according to this source, no less than 95 per cent of all Warsaw children eligible received preparation for their first communion. This must include the children of nearly all leading Party members, most of whom live in the capital.

In December 1956 the then new, non-Stalinist Gomulka regime, keen to avoid the danger of a Hungarian situation in Poland, agreed to introduce religious instruction in the state schools (the agreement was unilaterally broken by the Party three years later) at the request of the parents. In the course of one month 95 per cent of all parents sent in written requests demanding the inclusion of the catechism in the school's curriculum.

Of the 17,000 primary and secondary schools only 30, belonging to a secular Party association, kept religion out of the classroom.

Five years later the Warsaw Radio conducted an investigation into the belief and opinions of the Warsaw students. Naturally Warsaw's institutes of higher education have a very high proportion of the sons and daughters of the leading communists in the country ; yet only four per cent of the students declared themselves to be Marxist-atheists, while 76 per cent declared themselves to be practising Roman Catholics. An investigation among teachers in industrial Lodz, conducted in the middle '60s, showed that 60.3 per cent of those in whose hands is the secularization of the future generation are practising Catholics. It may sound sensational to a Western reader of these lines that the youngest group of teachers (aged 18-24) included no less than 75.2 per cent of active Catholics.

The explanation of this last fact brings us to the heart of the problem. The Church in Poland has succeeded in preserving its historical position as the spiritual home of the nation. The chequered history of the country has prepared the Church for the dangerous and complicated role it has to play inside the tightly controlled block of communist countries. After the political disappearance of Poland in 1795, it was mainly the Church which preserved the language and the cultural traditions of the partitioned nation. It paid a price in suffering but emerged triumphant in 1918 to ring its bells for the resurrected republic. After September 1939 the time of great trial arrived again. 3,646 Polish priests were sent by the Nazis to concentration camps. 1,996, or every fifth Polish priest, perished there. Many Catholic priests died at the hands of the Stalinists in the eastern parts of Poland, incorporated in October 1939 into the USSR. The Church thus became the symbol of national martyrdom. It is still the symbol of the internal freedom of the nation, and thus the spiritual and institutional opposition in a formally oppositionless system.

There are many obvious points of friction between the Party and the Church. I have mentioned taxation. The government takes its cut from the Sunday donations of the believers, and fixes the amount quite arbitrarily. Seminarists are called up to do their national service, although as students they are entitled to have it postponed. Then a continual dispute between the hierarchy and the government exists about the availability of licences to build new churches for the growing Catholic communities (e.g. since 1956 the authorities have permitted only one new church to be built in Warsaw, although the churches overflow on Sundays and holidays).

But the most fierce and stubborn battle rages over the moral upbringing of the young. The ruling communists have given up any hope of being the spiritual leaders of the middle aged and the elderly, who remember how

the communist political and economic system was imposed on Poland after the war. The children and the young are their only hope of being able in the future to dominate the country without the physical support of Moscow. For the Church the religious education of the young is the condition for its survival. In 1959 the Party closed the schools to the catechist. The Church answered by building up a nation-wide network of parish classes. In the villages the attendance is 100 per cent. In the towns and cities, between 80 and 95 per cent of the children get their religious instruction at least twice a week, after school hours.

The conflict between two basic views of life cannot be solved by diplomats. But in Poland both sides want to avoid the supreme crisis, which the USSR would not allow the Poles to solve by themselves. Neither the Polish Politburo nor the Roman Catholic hierarchy think of capitulation. They practice a policy of compromise, without which the nation could not survive.