

# The Situation of Protestants in Today's Poland

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The last year has been marked by the most radical changes that have occurred in my country since the end of the Second World War. The turning point was 4 June 1989, the date of elections to the Diet and the Senate of Poland. What happened was that our nation absolutely rejected the totalitarian system that for 45 years has tried by all means to bring every realm of human life under the control of the Communist Party. The post-war order in Eastern Europe began to fall apart, and communist-dominated countries started to achieve their liberation. Suddenly and rather unexpectedly our nation found itself in circumstances totally different from those we have lived in for nearly five decades. From the beginning, the Polish nation did not accept the imposed system, but two generations nevertheless grew up in conditions which have undoubtedly had an overwhelming and destructive influence on their way of life and thinking. For about half a century people have lived under the pressure of indoctrination and lies. In addition to 45 years of communist domination, there were five years of war, and of German and Soviet occupation all marked by destruction, persecution, deportation. All this could not help but leave the nation's body and soul deeply scarred. We have inherited ruins at every level of social life: this is the essence of our problem. The destructive forces of the fallen system penetrated not only our economic and political structures, and left unbelievable devastation, but they falsified history, destroyed social links, poisoned human relationships, corrupted the human soul and left it sick. The church is now faced with a huge programme of work. I am referring to the Christian Church, irrespective of denomination.

It is clear that the Roman Catholic Church played a crucial role not only in the process of undermining and overthrowing the communist system, but above all in the constant struggle against the destructive forces of the system. Tremendous efforts were required to defend the religious, moral and human identity of the nation. The Roman Church served many people, including non-Catholics and unbelievers,

as an umbrella that protected them from the downpour of false values. Perhaps some people in the minority churches did not realise that fact, and took their relative freedom for granted.

One of the most characteristic features of the communist system was the play of colours, the lie designed to appear as truth. This was how the system concealed its true nature. In reality its aim was to subordinate everything and everyone to the will of the party leaders; but at the same time it tried to give the impression of making every effort for the good of society, and especially for the oppressed and exploited. It was able to commit every vile crime under the semblance of law, often violating the law under a cloak of secrecy. Nowadays people cannot comprehend how it was possible for so many educated, intelligent people to take empty slogans and false theories for the truth. And this applies not only to people in communist-dominated countries, but to a great many in the West as well.

It is important to realise that government policy towards church and religion was one element in that insidious game. Many times we heard that the situation of Christians in Poland was much better than that in other communist countries, not to speak of the Soviet Union. It is true that apart from a short period of bitter struggle against the church we did indeed enjoy quite a wide area of liberty, which was however strictly controlled by special institutions, even in the case of a small community such as ours, the Polish Reformed Church. The comparatively wide margin of liberties in Poland was due to the strength of the Roman Catholic Church. It was this strength which forced the communists to apply special methods. Their attitude towards the minority churches was also affected.

An impression might have been created that the minority churches enjoyed special favour with the party and state functionaries. It was true that they were granted some privileges, that they did not meet with so many obstacles, for instance in their work with children and young people. This was, however, essentially an exercise in deception, and yet it did indeed deceive many Protestants, who believed that communism really offered them equal rights. It deceived many Catholics as well, who saw Protestants as subordinate and totally subservient to the system. At that stage, party and state functionaries saw the support of minorities as a temporary tactic in the fight against religion. They would support minorities in order to set them against the main enemy, the Roman Catholic Church. It was neither love nor approval of the special values of these minorities which determined government policy, but simple political calculation, sowing hostility among different groups in order to fight them; an application of the old rule *divide et impera*. In fact the true situation was to some extent the reverse: the situation of the Roman Catholic Church was in many

respects privileged in comparison with that of minority Christians. Most functionaries, even party members, were really crypto-Catholics. I once exceeded the speed limit in my car, and was stopped by a policeman. He asked me to show my papers. When he saw I was a clergyman, he said, 'Well, I'm not going to punish a priest!' Evidently he presumed I was a Roman Catholic priest. Another story. At an ecumenical meeting I heard a Catholic priest say, 'Those Protestants! They just cower to the State Office for Church Affairs.' It was easy for him to talk like that, but he was not taking into account the simple fact that the Catholic bishops and priests had the support of millions of farmers and workers. Who was on our side, though? Was the priest or his bishop prepared to defend us? If our churches had been closed down in reprisal for our opposition, would they have offered us a church or a chapel where we could have held our services? Protestants felt obliged to stay loyal, or subordinate if you like, in order to survive.

It was clear, however, that functionaries were kind to you only as long as you were obedient and kept within the limits of permitted freedom. Just one example. It happened long ago, when official relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Polish Ecumenical Council did not as yet exist: the state authorities were preventing any contact. I had nevertheless been invited, on the basis of a personal relationship, to preach in the Warsaw Dominican Church on the occasion of the Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I accepted the invitation and prepared myself; but on Saturday morning, the day before I was to preach, I received an order from the Office for Church Affairs stating that I was absolutely forbidden to preach there. I discussed this serious situation with the Dominican prior, and we decided that I would not appear in the pulpit, but that my sermon would be read by someone else without mentioning my name as its author. The official functionary was furious when he realised what had happened. I was in a difficult situation. The whole affair cost me an opportunity to go to the University of Glasgow to study under the late professor William Barclay at his invitation. From that time I was suspect and discriminated against as an 'enemy' who plotted with Catholics. Many times I was refused a passport for foreign travel.

Some Christians felt sincere gratitude to the communists because it was the communists who had granted their church legal recognition. One has to understand their feelings. Before the War they were not recognised as churches: at best they were acknowledged as associations; and they suffered discrimination if not persecution. When the communists came to power they were officially granted equal rights. Is it any wonder if some of them, like the Polish National

Catholic Church, held special services of thanksgiving on 22 July, the official celebration of the People's Republic?

Nevertheless, there were always those amongst us who saw through the deception, who did not let themselves be deceived, and who therefore helped our community to preserve its reputation.

It must be remembered that non-Catholic Christians total no more than two or three per cent of the population; and if you add to this the effect of traditional Catholic intolerance, it is quite understandable that minorities should suffer from phobias, complexes, and hostile attitudes. Amongst the minorities there are the Protestants, totalling only 120,000-150,000 individuals. In the context of the recent changes in Poland a strange phenomenon is becoming evident. There are large circles of people who fear Catholicism much more than Marxist ideology. They are actually more afraid of a Christian church than an atheist ideology which involves the destruction of all religion. I would like my Catholic friends to consider that phenomenon and try to decide what the reasons are for it. In my view, it is not only one side which is to blame.

It is true that the ecumenical movement has changed the atmosphere and reciprocal attitudes, and has opened the way to better mutual understanding. More than two decades after the Second Vatican Council the Protestant minorities in Poland can see a considerable change in the Roman Catholic Church, and this is reflected in the situation of the Protestants themselves. However, the old phobias have been revived after the recent political changes. On radio, on television you hear and see Catholic priests. If there is a Solidarity meeting, it starts with a mass. If there is a national festival, the official programme includes a mass. If a new party organises a congress, it starts with a mass. If there is a military celebration, there is a mass in the programme, and all the soldiers in their ranks with guns and bayonets receive communion one after another. Anyone who wants to achieve an important position in the country tries to get the support of a bishop, of the Primate or of the Pope, or at least tries to act together with a priest. Now, on the insistence of the Bishops' Conference, religious instruction is being introduced in schools and kindergartens.

No wonder, then, that many Protestants feel threatened by the increasing clericalisation of everyday life. Everywhere — in political parties, in trade unions, in schools, in the army, in hospital — they have to explain why they do not go to mass, do not receive Catholic communion; they have to explain that they are Protestants and that Protestants are Christians. Many Protestants will tell you that they honestly believe that nothing has changed in the Roman Catholic Church, and that the whole conciliar reform process is only a deception operation aimed at the Protestants.

There are, of course, a few people who are in a position to see a much broader panorama. They have met open, ecumenically-minded Catholics, and they know how complex things are. When I read the list of participants to this conference, I saw names of old friends of mine, like Mrs Halina Bortnowska, the Rev. Hauke-Ligowski, Mr Stefan Wilkanowicz, with whom we long ago broke down old barriers of prejudice and superstition. Personally I feel that they and many others are responsible for a radical change of attitude. However, it is not my task here to describe the various different tendencies in the Catholic Church. I am speaking of the situation of Protestants in today's Poland, and I must tell you what an average Protestant sees and feels. He lives in the midst of the Catholic faithful, and his situation is largely conditioned by this environment.

It is important to consider the question of the place and role of a minority church. It requires Biblical and theological reflection, and more study needs to be done. I would, however, just like to mention one Old Testament text which is crucial to my thinking.

. . . You are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God chose you out of all nations on earth to be his special possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other nation that the Lord cared for you, and chose you, for you were the smallest of all nations; it was because the Lord loved you and stood by his oath to your forefathers, that he brought you out with his strong hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery. . . (Deut.7:6-8, *New English Bible*).

It is clear that neither strength nor large numbers are important for the Kingdom of God. We do not however easily accept this view; we tend in fact to believe the opposite. And recent events in my country, as well as the history of the last 45 years, may indeed seem to prove the opposite. Without the large, strong Catholic Church it is hard to imagine either how we could have survived the totalitarian system, or how it could have been abolished so that we could escape from slavery. We are always inclined to interpret events according to our own wishes and expectations, even when this clearly goes against the will of God. We are not inclined to override our own views in order to ascertain what the will and Word of God actually are. A small community which is of no importance from a sociological point of view is however able to comprehend that truth. Therefore a small community may serve as a prophetic sign to other communities and as a challenge to them. The condition for its being able to do so is that it is ready to obey the will of God. Not quantity but quality is important.

The clericalisation process described above shows how human beings, even in the church, are endangered by pride. This is why

minorities do not need to be afraid; instead, they should see in this an opportunity to play a prophetic role, based on the doctrine of election. According to Biblical teaching, any success in which we participate is not the result of our strength and wisdom, but of God's will. We are a part of it, because God has chosen us according to His free will and not because of our merits. The place of the Protestant minority should be considered against the historical background of Poland. From its very beginnings Poland was a pluralistic country. There was always Latin and Eastern Christianity, as well as Lutherans, Reformed believers, and Czech Brethren since the 17th century. Jews, persecuted in Western Europe, found shelter in Poland and were able to nurture their religion and culture. There were some Armenians and Muslims too. From the ethnic point of view society was also varied. Besides Poles, there were Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Germans, Jews and Tatars living in Poland. The country was a melting-pot of nations and religions, where people lived largely in peace until the time of the Counter-reformation when under the kings of the Vasa dynasty Catholicism became the official religion. Even between the two world wars no more than 60 per cent of the population of the Republic of Poland were ethnic Poles. It was the Yalta agreement, initiated by Stalin and supported by President Roosevelt, which created a monolithic nation. This meant an impoverishment of culture: Polish culture lost the creative power that came from being at a crossroads, where different traditions interpenetrated and inspired each other. Nevertheless there are people who fail to understand the meaning of diversity, and they glorify the new borders of Poland, which they see as ensuring that the nation is without foreign elements. This was an argument constantly used by communist propaganda. Unfortunately, it was not only the communists who used that argument. Protestants cannot forget, for instance, that Cardinal Wyszyński, a great statesman in many ways, used to say at the shrine of Mary in Czestochowa that Poland must become a completely Catholic country.

The inspirational role of the Protestants in this historical tradition is clear. They are a warning to the majority not to fall into pride and self-satisfaction. And this is more than just a theoretical possibility. Nowadays, as a new social, economic and political order is evolving, noisy and active political parties have arisen which make use of, or rather abuse, nationalistic and Catholic slogans. A not inconsiderable number of priests and bishops have been attracted by these aberrations and support these parties.

The people of Poland are harassed, tired and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. For long decades they have suffered under the iron yoke of a totalitarian regime. Liberated from that regime, some

people are passive, others are active in a thoughtless way; they are vehement, hostile, and aggressive. Still others feel threatened by forces beyond their control. This gives rise to hatred of what is different, to detestable chauvinism, even to pathological antisemitism. Stupidity and pride appear in many national democratic, Christian democratic, or national Christian slogans. Stupidity and pride — because those people forget how much work there is to be done among the people whose glory they are proclaiming. Solomon said: 'Proud men, one and all, are abominable to the Lord; depend upon it: they will not escape punishment' (Prov.16:5).

Society needs the witness of small Protestant communities, with their specific traditions, knowledge of the Bible, ethical values, sense of community and other attributes. They constitute a challenge to the traditional values represented by the majority. Of course, the minority, being part of society, has been corrupted as well as the others, and needs regeneration. That is why both sides need each other. Different values and ideas must encounter and cross-fertilise each other to bring forth new ideas.

A small community has a limited field of influence, and this is a disadvantage; but there is a corresponding advantage: the small community does not constitute any danger to the majority. Therefore it may become a partner on condition that it does not acquire a ghetto complex, and on condition that the majority is not so proud as to neglect this potential partner. The small Protestant communities are able to serve society with their particular values — for example, their clear Biblical teaching, which is attractive for the people of today, their simple liturgy, the presbyterian structure of their church, which has no hierarchy and includes a measure of democracy. These are just a few examples of subjects for ecumenical dialogue; this is an area where we are looking forward to greater progress.

By its very existence a small Protestant community shows that no minority group, even the smallest, should be treated with contempt, because those groups are sources of unique, enriching values. When they speak in public, from a different point of view, they put forward new solutions, sometimes better ones. When they publicly witness to their faith and proclaim the Gospel in a particular way, characteristic of their tradition, they help the clergy and hierarchy to understand that despite what they may think ecumenical question exists in our country also.

Protestants and some other non-Catholic Christians in Poland have paved the way for Christian cooperation and mutual understanding. By organising the Polish Ecumenical Council they have taught themselves to live together, to respect each other, to help each other in case of need, to accept their colleagues as they are, and to receive them

in prayer as brothers and sisters, not as rivals and enemies. The Lutherans and the Reformed have formed a fellowship of pulpit and sacraments, and they recognised each other's ministry as early as 1570 at the Synod in Sandomir. A solemn confirmation of that *Consensus Sandomiriensis* took place in 1970. Now, in 1990, the Reformed and the Methodists have just formed a similar fellowship.

In coming to the end of my presentation I would like to say a few words *pro domo mea*. As a small Reformed Church in Poland we have special cause to glorify God and to give him thanks for the wonderful protection we have received during the past 50 years. After the disaster of war, when the church was almost completely destroyed, and many doubted whether it would be able to exist at all, it rose up, thank God, gathered together the faithful, and rebuilt its structures. Then during 45 years of communist domination God protected us so that we were able not only to preserve our own identity, but even to serve society through values specific to the Reformed heritage. Having thus survived both the war and ideological repression we could cherish the conviction that it was not without reason that God preserved us. Apparently he has his plans for us. Our task is to discover them, to understand and to fulfil them. So we are trying our best to find the right place for ourselves, in serving the people and bringing *solī deo gloriā*.