

Religious Renewal or Political Deficiency: Religion and Democracy in Central Europe*

PATRICK MICHEL

Religion made a significant contribution to the long process whereby Eastern Europe emerged from communism. This process was primarily a process of differentiation, insofar as it is true that the Soviet project aimed fundamentally at homogenisation. Merely affirming that politics must be submitted to ethical principles is already an instance of pluralisation, an integral element in the process of emergence from totalitarianism and the establishment of democracy.

Emergence from the communist system has an effect, however, on the type of relationship the churches maintain with society. The movement is from a relationship of obligation to one involving a free choice of values. The church has struggled for the establishment of democracy – that is, of the relative. The problem for the church today is to define its place within the ‘relative’, which is plurality. Everything seems to indicate that this will be a challenge much more difficult to meet than that which was posed by the Soviet system.

I have analysed elsewhere the three types of relationship between politics and religion which have existed successively or simultaneously in this part of Europe over the past four decades: persecution, compromise and conflict. Here we may recall that precisely these three types of relationship have emerged because of the status accorded to religion by Soviet policies. Communism refused to integrate religion ideologically; and religion was the only phenomenon that communism refused thus to integrate. As a result, religion was established in a potential triple role as vector of disalienation (at the level of the individual), of detotalisation (at the level of society) and of desovietisation (at the level of the nation). We are speaking of a potential role: the churches had to take positive steps to realise it. But it is important to underline the fact that it was Soviet practice itself that assigned religion its potential role in Eastern Europe, and that now this practice no longer exists, the role allocated to religion can only undergo a total redefinition.

The ‘political’ and the ‘religious’ are now redeploying themselves in parallel. This process of transition is characterised by two tendencies: firstly, the removal of the ambiguities which attended any appeal to religion; secondly, the political reinstrumentalisation of the religious.

*This paper is an abridged and modified version of the concluding chapter, ‘Religion, sortie du communisme et démocratie en Europe du centre-est’, in Patrick Michel (ed.), *Les Religions à l’Est* (Cerf, Paris, 1992). It was also presented at the conference ‘Religion in the Common European Home’, organised by the British Sociological Association at St Mary’s College, Strawberry Hill, London, 8–11 April 1992.

The second tendency does not require much comment. In an unstable situation, where all points of reference have disappeared, there is an obvious temptation to turn to the religious for purposes of legitimisation or the management of a political clientele. In Poland, as in Slovakia or Croatia, to take just three examples, Catholicism can be used to mobilise the nation. Religious processions to celebrate the end of communism, such as those which took place in Slovakia, were no doubt part of a process of appropriation of developments which the great majority of the population simply endured. The aim of these processions was to attest to both a personal and a collective victory over an adversary whom most people most of the time had not really combated. The aim of the processions was therefore also to take revenge on history, to tame the past, to overcome accumulated frustrations. But the processions also served to bear witness to an identity which the previous system had been aiming to disperse, and to reforge in the religious context – where basic identity myths are most readily preserved – a temporal chain which the communist regime claimed to have broken. Equally they contributed to the reappropriation of a *national space*, by way of a sacralisation of the geography of everyday life. Finally, in offering an occasion to proclaim explicitly a Slovak identity, they provided the possibility, rich in political potential, of taking a position on a union with the Czechs within one and the same polity.

The church itself is also in the position of having to reorientate itself. In that it allows itself to be used as a political instrument, with all the consequent risks (such as were evident during the presidential campaign in Poland, or during the debate on the abortion issue), it indicates in the final analysis the difficulty it has in defining and occupying its place in a climate of social upheaval. In response to the unanimist fiction by means of which the Polish authorities attempted to establish the legitimacy of the official political system, there was constructed the counterfiction of a society entirely regrouped behind its church. Now that the first of these fictions has disappeared, it is logical that the second will do so too. The return to reality that constitutes the pluralisation of the political landscape brings to light the existence of an ambiguity which conditioned the very functioning of the mechanism of social resistance: in opposing its own conception of totality to that which the official system was attempting to impose, the church, whether it knew it or not, was in fact defending the relative. The diverse constituent elements in society used the church, its messages and its values emblematically, as instruments to bring into question the legitimacy of the regime. But the choice of a vehicle derived from a totality does not necessarily imply adherence to that totality. In this way, Poland produced the original sociological type of the 'practising non-believer', who used the religious for purposes that were explicitly proclaimed to be non-religious. Today, the difference between the church on the one hand and the ex-opposition laity and society on the other is clearly evident – on the question of human rights, for example, or as far as attitudes to modernity are concerned.

Naturally, these developments have produced some very different conceptions of the unshakeable model of 'democracy'. In Poland alone, in addition to the 'western' democracy subscribed to, notably, by Geremek and Mazowiecki, at least two other conceptions exist.

The primate Glemp has called for a 'unanimist democracy' in which Polish identity is fundamentally defined by Catholicism. Thus, during the debate on the introduction of the catechism in schools in March 1990, the primate affirmed that 'if we look closely, we find that the key word describing Polish identity seems widely unacceptable. It is passed over in silence. There are people who are irritated by the word

“fatherland”. It is sufficient, they say, to speak of “country”. “Why say ‘nation’,” they ask, “if we can substitute the word ‘society’?” On the basis of criteria presented as ‘absolutes’, democracy tends to become the expression of a whole people, of a nation. But referring to this totality only works to the detriment of pluralism, as appeals are made to national exclusiveness and the so-called moral norm.

In fact, these references to the ‘nation’ indicate that the church has not reflected on the very nature of democracy, and on the changes that it brings about. The reintroduction of the catechism in schools had not been the subject of any consultation beforehand, and some clergy were irritated by negative reactions when it happened. Bishop Goclowski of Gdańsk was quick to correct a question put to him by a western journalist: ‘Public schools? We would rather talk about Polish schools. These are the schools of a nation where 100 per cent of the children receive a religious education. The nation must preserve its Catholic identity, as Polish history shows us.’ The church is apparently unable to admit the autonomy of the political, and this shows itself in the persistence of a desire to control the political sphere. The existence of an episcopal commission to prepare for the formation of a new government is evidence enough, as is the drawing up of a list of parties for which Catholics were invited to vote at parliamentary elections. What is more, even while the episcopate was appealing to the clergy not to involve themselves directly in politics – not to give their sermons too much of a political tone, for example – the clergy were coming up against a refusal to allow them to renounce the status of ‘social leaders’ which had, by force of circumstances, been theirs for years.

The ‘populist’ conception of democracy, which President Wałęsa incarnates well enough, borrows a number of themes from the ‘unanimist’ concept, largely in order to disqualify political adversaries – that is, that part of society which does not think as the ‘nation’ is said to think. At the close of the debate on abortion in Poland, Senator Kaczyński said: ‘All the good Poles are against abortion. Those who are in favour are an evil part of the nation.’ Does anyone have the right, in the name of what he believes to be the truth, to exclude those who do not share this truth?

In the new context of transition in Eastern Europe today, the Catholic Church seems paradoxically at the same time reinforced and weakened. Towards the end of communist power the Polish church obtained the legal status it had been demanding ever since the regime was established. Since the communists abandoned their monopoly on power, the church has been benefiting particularly from its institutional influence, which plants it firmly as an actor on the political scene. Tadeusz Mazowiecki defines himself as a Catholic, and during the presidential campaign Lech Wałęsa continually referred to his religious identity and to religious values. In Czechoslovakia, where the regime refused any normalisation until it collapsed, the episcopal hierarchy remained incomplete, despite nominations in the last period of the old order, until the ‘Velvet Revolution’. The hierarchy is now reconstituted, and the church enjoys an authentic prestige, even though in Bohemia religion has again become a ‘private matter’, and even though the priests who were active in ‘Charter 77’, such as Fr Václav Malý or the pastor Miloš Rejchrt, have resigned the official positions they were offered in order to go back to parish life. Finally, in Hungary the church has had restored to it all its possessions confiscated by the communists (with the exception of land), and the hierarchy is trying to encourage people to forget what its stance used to be. The reevaluation of the rôle of Mindszenty is part of this process. The Cardinal-Primate of Hungary had ferociously denounced the communist regime. The solemn transfer of his remains to Esztergom in May 1991 was an opportunity for the church to present itself as a victim of the old regime. Like the textbooks used by

schoolchildren in the East, the history of the relations between church and state in Hungary has been permanently reworked: during the 1970s and 1980s, the official history deliberately overlooked the role of Mindszenty; today it is Cardinal Lékai, his successor at the head of the Hungarian church, architect of the policy of 'small steps', who is being forgotten.

Meanwhile, as we have noted, the ambiguities which had made it possible for religion to be used in the political struggle against a Soviet-type system have been disappearing. The church has applied itself to helping Polish society to give birth to political modernity. Today the church must find its place within this modernity. Yet all the indications are that this is difficult to achieve. The church will have to abandon all claims to the central position that it occupied by force of circumstance during the years of the resistance. 'To live in pluralism', said Adam Michnik, 'is to know how to limit oneself, to know that we live with others and to make that cohabitation viable.' 'Limiting oneself', however, has to entail leaving the realm of totality and entering the realm of the relative. Yet the Polish church seems to have some difficulty in resolving to do so: its victorious confrontation with a Soviet-type regime has in fact done little to prepare it for its meeting with modernity. Poland has particular significance as far as its relation to modernity is concerned, because of the origins of the Pope and the status to which the church in this country has laid claim. In fact, Polish Catholicism has benefited from an enforced secularisation at the hands of a political power which relied on the totalitarian project as a source of legitimisation. From the middle of the 1970s, it was clear to certain key players on the Polish scene that dismantling the totalitarian political structure would be the only way to produce a secularised society. At the end of the 1980s, these same people could with reason warn of the danger that the country would be 'Iranised' if those outworn structures were not destroyed. Today, this perspective is no longer relevant. On the contrary, the pluralisation and democratisation of the Polish scene might seem to be putting in place the minimal conditions for a 'Quebec' scenario, involving a rapid weakening of the influence of Catholicism as Polish society rallies round the values of an American-style modernism. The victory of Stan Tymyński over Tadeusz Mazowiecki in the first round of the presidential election was a serious warning. In raising no protest against the use that Wałęsa and his entourage made of Catholicism for electoral purposes, as the constitutive criterion of Polish identity, the church no doubt aimed to reaffirm the central character of its position on the Polish scene. Resting on the laurels it won for its resistance to communist power, the church seems to be aiming to compensate by increasing its institutional power for the already discernible decrease in its social influence. More than the 'Quebec' scenario, the church seems to fear a development of the Spanish type, whereby the end of dictatorship and the transition to democracy led to a distinct weakening to the Catholic position. And indeed, the level of recruitment to seminaries fell by some 10 per cent in 1990, and priests are now having to defend their status as social leaders. Denunciations of the 'black totalitarianism' that has replaced the 'red' variety are heard coming not only from feminist organisations protesting against 'medieval' laws on abortion but, more widely, from average Poles exasperated by massive church influence in the media and schools. An opinion poll in May 1991 showed that only 58 per cent of Poles were satisfied with their church, as against 83 per cent one year earlier, and 60 per cent of those interviewed affirmed that the influence of the church was 'too great'.

A similar development in the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe is being reinforced by debates on restoring to the church the property which was confiscated by the communists. In Hungary, as noted by the Piarist László Lukács, when the

church was given back its property in line with the law of 10 July 1991, appeals for charity and generosity came from the political world whereas the church proclaimed the rights of ownership. In Czechoslovakia, as noted by Pastor Miloš Rejchrt, accumulated confidence in the church is also diminishing rapidly, precisely on this question of the restitution of church property.

To return to Poland, it is of course very difficult to foresee how relations between church and society will develop, with the clericalisation of politics at one end of the spectrum and the liquidation of the social influence of religion at the other. Developments here are inseparable from the current recomposition of the Polish socio-political landscape: redefinition of the role of the church and of religion is very much a function of parallel redistribution on the political scene. This is to say that the future of Catholicism in Poland depends on a considerable number of variables, of which only some can be directly influenced by the church. The fact remains that the church seems more at ease in a struggle over 'totality' than in a period of breakdown. Yet today it is this perspective that opens before the church, in a country which, in the context of multiple crises, has to define the rules of a fundamentally new social game. The weakness of the democratic tradition and the gravity of the socio-economic crisis in Poland might produce popular desire for a strong power, within which the church would be tempted to take its place. This would be to risk a return to the situation that existed between the two world wars, to a certain form of confusion between religion and the Nation State, the latter feeding the former with legitimising stereotypes.

Czechoslovakia faces this problem too, despite its democratic tradition, the movement for the independence of Slovakia now posing, in effect, the problem of the very existence of the federation. In this situation of tension, Catholicism may be required to act as a vehicle for Slovak nationalism, serving there too as a constitutive criterion of a makeshift identity put together for tactical purposes. It is notable that, in contrast to the situation in Bohemia–Moravia, the Christian Democratic movement finished on top in the Slovak parliamentary elections in June 1990.

As far as Hungary is concerned, in the words of Ivan Varga, 'the Christian Democratic Party has rallied social forces and interests that have not clearly discerned the changes that have taken place during the past 45 years... The Hungarian Christian Democrats want to resuscitate a party and a movement which are in direct relation to (or subordinate to) the church.' In a country where according to the most recent opinion polls only 10 per cent of its population affirms a regular religious practice, the church none the less carries a political influence out of proportion to its real significance. As well as the restoration of church property, the Catholic 'lobby' has thus achieved the reestablishment of religious instruction in schools, and leads campaigns against pornography and abortion.

When we consider the wide range of problems confronting the societies of Central Europe, we can see that incantational references to western democracy and to the market economy with which it is associated are far from being enough to assure that a difficult transition goes smoothly. The collapse of the East–West polarisation means a fundamental redefinition of identities and associated criteria and points of reference. As a privileged vector of the affirmation of identity, religion is permanently called upon to lend itself to this enterprise of redefinition, which is involving (or will involve) the societies of both East and West, as well as those of South and North.

The whole of Europe today is in the grip of a triple crisis of transition, full of positive possibilities as well as dangers. The collapse of communism and the consequent disappearance of points of reference lie at the basis of a considerably increased demand for meaning and direction, especially in view of worldwide individ-

ualisation and relativisation. This demand for meaning and direction is to be heard as much in the East as in the West. And in conclusion we might note that if the role of a church is indeed to respond to this demand for meaning, the churches in the East – but also in the West – seem to be doing so by producing moral norms, even though the individualisation, relativisation and particularisation of the contemporary world are leading precisely to the rejection of rigid norms of this kind.