

CHURCH AND STATE IN POLISH HISTORY

"Religious war" is a paradox. Religion preaches peace, harmony, and concord; war stands for hate, hostility, and discord. Anomalous as they are, however, religious wars have been a tragic reality for European nations. Profiting from the bitter experience of history, therefore, the Founding Fathers of the American republic wisely provided that in the pluralistic society of the United States no one, religion would be officially established. Subsequent interpretations of this non-establishment proviso have gone beyond the original intention to create the doctrine of the "wall of separation" between Church and State.

The modern American, therefore, has to divest him/herself mentally of this cherished "doctrine" in order to understand the dynamics of Polish history. The Polish experience has been the opposite of America's. In America the state arose apart from any church. In Poland--and this is the thesis I want to illustrate --it was the Church that created the State and still nurtures it.

I said "illustrate," because I am not attempting an exhaustive survey of the relationship between Church and State in Poland. I merely want to single out certain events in Polish history to help us understand the present mindset of the Polish citizen.

When Americans celebrated their Bicentennial in 1976, they celebrated a political fact, viz., the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When the Poles celebrated their Millennium in 1966, however, what they commemorated was not primarily a political event, but a spiritual one --the conversion of Poland to Christianity. The Communist regime tried to foist upon the nation another year to make this a secular celebration. The Polish masses, however, clung tenaciously to the belief that the beginning of their nation coincided with the conversion of Mieszko 1 to Roman Catholicism in 966. While not primarily a political event, the baptism of the tribes under Mieszko's rule had profound political consequences. It deprived the German "Holy Roman" Emperor of an excuse to attack his Slavic neighbors

under his policy of "conquer and convert." By placing his country under the protection of the Holy See, Mieszko strengthened his political position by allying himself with the most potent political force in Europe at that time.

Christianity also brought further advantages. Socially, a common faith gave cohesion to the disparate tribes confederated by their ruler. Ethnically, their Slavic identity was maintained by the missionaries coming from Bohemia rather than the Germanic territories. Culturally, the Baptism made Poland face the West. The link with Rome meant that monks came from Italy and France, bringing with them education, the Latin language, and Western culture. An obvious example of this Westernization is the Polish alphabet written with Roman, not Cyrillic, characters.

As Polish history unravels, spiritual and political events are inextricably intertwined. In the year 1000, the German Emperor Otho III paid a state visit to the Polish ruler Boleslaus II. The occasion, however, was a spiritual one --to visit the shrine; of St. Adalbert, the Bohemian

missionary martyred by the Prussians. The result was, that not only was a bishopric established at Gniezno, but also that in 1025 Boleslaus was able to be proclaimed King.

Boleslaus II was not as virtuous as his predecessor. In 1097 he staged his own version of "Murder in the Cathedral" by executing St. Stanislaus, bishop of Cracow. The consequences, however, were opposite of those following the recent similar occurrence, the assassination of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador. Boleslaus was forced to abdicate and do penance for his crime.

In 1241, the Mongol hordes under the grandson of Genghis Khan were stopped at Lignica in Southern Poland. This was the beginning of the onerous responsibility thrust upon Poland to defend Western civilization from menacing forces from the East. The process culminated in Jan Sobieski's defeat of the Turks at Vienna in 1683, thus earning for Poland the immortal title of "Bulwark of Christianity."

The fourteenth century witnessed a glorious era under King Casmir the Great (1331- 1370). But this eminence was not achieved without the influence of the Church and the achievements of the clergy in maintaining unity. This century also saw the foundation in 1382 of the first monastery at Czestochowa on the banks of the Warta River. The influence of this shrine, with its popular veneration of the famed "Black Madonna." has been and still is an incalculable force of unity in the nation.

The impetus for this phenomenon can be traced to 1655, when the Swedish invasion of Poland was stopped at Czestochowa. Militarily, the Poles were doomed to defeat. Their victory, therefore, was explained as a "miracle," and the country was dedicated to its true ruler-- Mary, Queen of the Crown of Poland.

The period of the Jagiellonian Dynasty (1386-1572) was the era of the union of Lithuania and Poland. The political bond was as multi-religious as it was multinational. Jagiello and his native Lithuania adopted the Roman

Catholicism of his wife, Jadwiga of Poland. In the realm were included the Ruthenians and the Ukrainians, who accepted Christianity from the Byzantine East. When the Reformation came in the sixteenth century, the dissident views of the Protestants were accorded such tolerance in Poland that it was feared that large segments would splinter off into many sects. This did not occur.

The dark hour of Polish history came during the latter reigns of the Elective Kings (1573-1772), which ended with the Period of the Partitions (1772-1914). During this time, when Poland did not exist as a geo-political entity, the unity of the nation was maintained by two forces: language and religion. Polish was taught in spite of the threats of official interdict. Roman Catholicism was affirmed in the face of the Protestantism and Orthodoxy of Poland's oppressors. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was largely the Church. Education was carried on by the clergy. When, for example, Bismarck directed his Kulturkampf against the clergy in 1873, his policy back-fired. The

peasants, who had been liberated as a ploy to create opposition to the gentry, became united with the rest of the nation in the struggle against the partitioning powers. They would not tolerate the persecution of the Church. Finally, in Poznan a priest, Fr. Peter Wawrzyniak, became the¹ leader of the Union of Cooperative Societies. Because of the success of this financial and economic enterprise, he was known as the "Uncrowned King of Poznan."

In the twentieth century two events deserve mention before coming to the present situation. Immediately after World War I the reformed Polish state had to face the Bolshevik threat. In 1920, on the Feast of the Assumption, the Red advance was stopped at Warsaw. The papal legate, Achilles Ratti, was a witness of this "Miracle of the Vistula." Later, as Pope Pius XI, he installed a picture of Our Lady of Czestochowa in the papal chapel at Castel Gandolfo.

An event in the Second World War was the death of St. Maksymilian Kolbe at Auschwitz in 1941. He serves as a grim reminder of the 4,000 clergy among the

3,000,000 Polish Catholic victims of Hitler's rabid insanity.

The present Situation is part of the post-World War II era. It can be summed up in the persons of the three W's: Wyszynski, Wojtyla, and Walesa. In 1948 Stefan Wyszynski was designated Primate of Poland. What is not so well known, however, is that In 1946 He published a book called Duch Pracy Ludzkiej {*The Spirit of Human Work*). In it he evolved a creation-centered theology of work. But his social doctrine did not remain in the realm of abstract theory. He advocated and fought for higher wages and matching higher prices, independent unions, freedom of speech, individual ownership of land and farms, and universal access to the media. Wyszynski resisted, and was persecuted by, totalitarianism of both the Right and Left. He was open, however, to the socialist doctrine of concern for the worker and the just distribution of the world's goods.

Similarly, we should not neglect the intellectual influence of Karol Wojtyla. He was a member of a group of thinkers in Cracow, who were discussing the Personalist Philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier. Again, there is here

an openness to the "left" that kept a link with the intelligentsia. It helped defuse the anticlericalism of the type found in those countries where the Church was regarded as reactionary and obscurantist. Despite their involvement in political realities, however, both Cardinal Wyszynski and Cardinal Wojtyla have insisted on the Church's mission as transcending partisan politics. As Pope, John Paul II prohibits all clergy from holding political office. There is a touch of "the plague on both your houses" for the politics of both the Left and Right. The positive side of their thinking is that religion, far from being the "opium of the people," must be a burning for justice and social well-being in our political and social institutions.

The influence of Lech Walesa, therefore, extends beyond the rosary he wore and the papal pen he used when he signed the Gdansk accords recognizing Solidarity. They were symbols he used to show that the underpinnings of his movement for free labor unions rest on an enlightened social doctrine and a religious respect for human values. His pacifist tactics are an incarnation of

the gospel values of forgiveness, love of enemies, resistance with dignity, opportunity for conversion, and respect for the human person. The effectiveness of Solidarity in unifying the diverse strata of society -- intellectuals, peasants, and workers -- was due in no small measure to the work of the Church.

I conclude as I began — with the tragedy of "religious wars." We see Protestants vs. Catholics in N. Ireland; Moslems vs. Christians in Lebanon; Shiite vs. Sunni in the Persian Gulf. In some conflicts the religious element is very strong; in others, it is a label to cover causes that are primarily economic and social. The problem is that "religion" is not a purely spiritual reality. Religion incarnates itself in societies which have struggles, fears, and aspirations. As a result, religion will intertwine itself with forces that are ethnic, cultural, economic, and political.

Such has been, and is, the case in Poland. Politically, religion in Poland is a threat to the totalitarian aspirations of a materialistic and militantly atheistic regime. It claims an allegiance more profound than any citizen's loyalty to the party. It proclaims a transcendence beyond the confines of the national borders. And so, religion is persecuted and people with religious convictions are oppressed. But true religion is on the side of humanity. It will, therefore, prevail.

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New Horizon, Vol. IX, No. 4-5-6

June, July, August, 1983
