

## TENSIONS IN POLAND OVER ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

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I teach at Southern Connecticut State University, a school that has no religious affiliation, but I am the coordinator of the religious studies minor, which is a part of the Philosophy Department there. I think that's pretty much legitimizes my presence here.

I am still in the process of working on the paper that I intended to present at this meeting. The paper was supposed to focus on inter-religious dialogue, and specifically on Catholic-Jewish dialogue in today's Poland, not on tensions related to ecumenical dialogue. I still have quite a lot to rethink and rewrite. Eventually, I decided not to read what I prepared for today, but to speak to you about some of the relevant issues.

I will focus on a few things only, and will try to speak about tensions rather than dialogue. I loved the term 'bureaucratic ecumenism' that Tibor Fabiny used. That is exactly how I would describe the ecumenical movement in Poland today – as a 'bureaucratic ecumenism.'

I assume you know that Poland is a predominantly Roman Catholic country. Just how many people in Poland are indeed Roman Catholic is hard to say. The statistics exist, but they vary considerably. I went through some of them, looking at official governmental statistics in Poland, and I even looked at the website of the American Embassy to Poland. Wherever you look, there are differences. Officially speaking, somewhere between 88% and 99% of Poland's population are supposed to be Roman Catholics. With such a great majority representing one religion, inter-religious relations, tensions, or dialogue are often treated as basically non-existent. Other religions play a marginal role in Poland. This is certainly one of the most important reasons why – when one really wants to have a meaningful ecumenical or inter-religious dialogue – it has to happen on an international forum rather than

domestically.

However, the 'bureaucratic ecumenism' (Tibor, I beg your permission to borrow this term from you) exists domestically. It was established in the attempt to follow the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. There were various bodies created within the Church – councils, committees for inter-religious dialogue, for Catholic-Jewish dialogue, and so on. They still exist; some of them include lay members but the Roman Catholic Church in Poland is still very much 'patriarchal' and hierarchy-oriented. Therefore, the clergy plays usually a much more important role in these bodies than the lay members, who sometime complain quite openly about not having equal rights with the clergy. When I was doing the research for the paper I'm working on now, I found several articles written by Roman Catholic lay journalists and scholars who complained about the difficulties a person who is not a member of the clergy has when writing about religion in Poland. The basic complaints were mostly related to the difficulties with accessing certain information, and to the difficulties with publishing texts critical of the Church hierarchy or of some aspects of Church policies.

Thus to a casual observer, the ecumenical and dialogical situation is presently really pretty stagnant in Poland, except for official meetings attended by designated 'dialogue activists.' There would be, e.g., one Protestant person involved, or one representative of the Jews, and so on, and some individuals representing the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Since I was interested in the involvement of the Polish Catholic laity in the ecumenical dialogue, I checked the official website of the Ecumenical Information Agency (*Ekumeniczna Agencja Informacyjna*). I was assuming that if people were interested in ecumenism, they would access this website and have some kind of cyber discussion, raise questions, and the like. I looked for what kind of subjects were raised on that website. To give you an example, I will present my findings from August 7, 2006. On that day, the following were the most frequently searched subjects, in declining order starting with the most popular. (I try to remain as close as possible to the spirit of the Polish language here).

The top place belongs to Joseph Ratzinger, or Benedict XVI (both names were

used). I conducted my search not long after the first visit of the Pope Benedict XVI to Poland, during which he also visited the sites of the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau; and it was shortly before his visit to Germany. The typical questions asked on the website were: Will the Germans welcome the German Pope as wholeheartedly and enthusiastically as the Poles did? (The Germans did not, and the explanation given was that the Germans are really not as interested in religion as the Poles are; and besides, there are many Protestants in Germany, and they don't care about the pope.)

The second most popular topic was Judas and the Gospel of Judas. I attribute the interest in this topic to the then recent announcement of the discovery of the 'gospel according to Judas.' Next, rather unsurprisingly, came the Gospel of St. Thomas; the word 'saint' was used there. Further followed such themes as annulment of marriage; divorce; abortion; Rosicrucianism; *Opus Dei* (it is present in Poland); the human skeleton; conclave; *Rerum Novarum*; greenhouse effect; black mass; and Father Rydzyk. I am not sure, whether you know who Father Rydzyk is. He is a priest, who is controversial because of his extremely conservative attitude towards religion. He founded a radio station called *Radio Maryja*. 'Maryja' is an outdated form of the name Maria (Mary); it is used today only in reference to the Virgin Mary, or perhaps also casually in some very rural and 'backwards' areas of Poland. By naming his radio station *Radio Maryja*, Father Rydzyk actually made two strong statements. One was the testimony to the strength of the cult of the Virgin Mary in Poland; the other was his support for the values of the past. Indeed, the message of his radio programs is very, very conservative.

Following this came such themes as circumcision; candidates for the Pope; the Pope's funeral; good-luck chain; Brother Roger – the murdered leader of the Taizé community; 'lefevrysta' (a word coined from the name of the French bishop Lefevre); premarital class; female Pope; Scientology; and ordination of women/the church vs. women's rights. As you can see, the only topics that could be possibly treated as related to ecumenism, and were mentioned on that day on the Polish *ecumenical* agency website were Brother Roger, and Scientology. I think that this is telling something about the degree to which the users of this website were interested in ecumenism.

Now, I shall move closer to the subject of the existing tensions, and to the question you asked, whether America can do anything here. Similarly to what Steve Dintaman was saying about Lithuanians, there is this mentality shared by many Poles, according to which unless you are a Roman Catholic you are not a Pole. Basically, it's a total identification of nation and church. Moreover, the present government is very pro-Catholic, and it is conservative in its attitude toward religion. If I would use the phrase, 'the specter of secularization is haunting Poland right now,' that would be probably a good description of the present mindset of great number of people in Poland. The presently existing tensions are not, I think, inter-religious or inter-church tensions. The inter-religious tensions are marginal due to the dominant position of the Roman Catholic Church on the national level.

The potentially tension-building problem is the issue of secularization. Because the Roman Catholic Church was very strong in Poland even in the times of Communism, secularization was not perceived then as a serious danger, unless people would be forced to give up their religion, or in the unlikely case of the Communist ideology winning the people. To battle Communism meant, therefore, to battle the danger of secularization as well. After Communism was gone, there was initially no great danger of secularization either, because the pope was Polish. John Pole II was the pride of the Poles, they loved him, and they seemed not to be interested in secularization. John Paul II, however, saw secularization as a real danger, and he warned his compatriots of it.

The situation changed recently. The present Pope is not a Polish Pope anymore, and Poland entered the European community exposing itself directly to this very danger of secularization the Poles were warned of. Some Polish politicians, now officially members of the European Parliament, voiced publicly their concern about the secularization of Europe. They declared that it was their mission and the mission of Poland as a member of the European Union to bring Europe back to Christianity, and to revive the Christendom. This was not some kind of a whim; rather, these politicians followed a long tradition of seeing Poland as a 'designated' defendant of the Christian (Catholic) faith. This tradition had two main sources. One was that Poland, throughout

the centuries of wars against its neighbor, the Ottoman Empire, perceived itself as a 'besieged fortress,' always in danger from some hostile external forces. The second source of this tradition was in the partitions of Poland in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The countries that partitioned Poland: Austria, Prussia, and Russia – especially Protestant Prussia and Russian Orthodox Russia – not only destroyed Poland's statehood but could also destroy its religion. Thus religion became again the besieged fortress, and the Poles saw it as their duty to defend their religion not only for religion's sake but also for the sake of preserving their nationality. Later, the Communism triggered the same reaction.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was also a wave of messianic ideas sweeping through east-central Europe, and through Russia (with regard to Russia, Vladimir Solovyev comes to mind, among others). In Poland, Messianism took the form of the idea that Poland is the Christ of Nations – a line taken from an immensely influential and popular drama (Poland's "national" drama) *Dziady* by the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz.

As you can see, the Polish politicians who try to 're-convert' Europe to Catholicism have some historic reasons for doing it. From their perspective, this is what Poland should be all about; and it should be Poland's current mission to save Europe from secularization. Needless to say, that the times have changed, and such attempts create tensions not only between Poland and the other EU countries but also among Polish citizens, including the Roman Catholics.

The other tension, which I would like to discuss briefly, has been also mentioned by Tibor Fabiny with regard to Hungary. Ever since the fall of Communism, there were waves of activities aimed at purging the state institutions of former Communists and collaborators with the Communist regime. (The definition of a 'collaborator with the regime' is very fluid and depends on many factors.) The intensity of these attempts depends mostly on the current political climate. Recently, for the first time voices were raised that the clergy should too undergo this procedure, known in Poland as *lustration*. Apparently, there were priests who worked with the Communist

secret services. The problem is that the Roman Catholic Church supports the *lustrations* and the publication of the names of former collaborators with the secret services, except for the clergy. The Primate, Cardinal Glemp, stated officially in a radio address that it would be a bad idea to subject the clergy to *lustrations*. He further said that the nation should be forgiving and not demand to make public the names of priests who collaborated with the secret services.

This position of the Church hierarchy towards the *lustrations* of clergy can potentially cause a serious problem. For a long time, the Roman Catholic Church has been regarded in Poland – and regarded itself – as the epitome of ethics. The Church was supposedly above reproach. It seems, however, that some priests were not above reproach. Yet, being made accountable to the laity would be quite a new experience for the majority of the Polish clergy. In the past, it has been usually “here are the priests, there are the masses, and the masses are there to be told what to do, but not to tell the priests what the priests are supposed to be doing.” This state of affairs would have been acceptable to the laity even as recently as 20 or even 10 years ago; however, as some of the other presenters have pointed out already, there occurs now a generation shift. Many members of the young generation, more worldly, more self-assured, and more used to the concept of the individual human rights than their parents have been, seem to be also less accepting of the special treatment of the clergy.

A marginal remark: The Polish people who are now 30-35 years old don't remember the Communist reality. Moreover, the only reality they know regarding their religion is the Roman Catholic Church with a Pole at the helm. To them, the death of John Paul II must have meant a greater shock, and a greater change regarding their relation to the Church than it did to the people of an older generation who remember the Church being led in succession by two or more Holy Fathers.

All over Eastern Europe, one of the things for which people were fighting against the Communist regimes was the right live and to work wherever one wanted. Their dreams have come true at last. Presently, Poland is a member of the European Union, and countries like Great Britain and Ireland willingly gave Poles the permits to

work in these countries. Within the last two years, hundreds of thousands of – mostly young – people left Poland to work there. Probably no one in Poland expected that it would be such a mass migration. This is a phenomenon that raises a considerable concern in the Roman Catholic establishment because no one knows for certain how much religion means to these young people, and how much it will mean to them in the future, if they will stay abroad for a prolonged period of time. Will they decide that they I don't need to be Roman Catholic anymore; or will their Roman Catholicism strengthen? No one knows – the church, the nation, these individuals themselves. No one knows, but the fears are there.

I found an article that I think is significant and says more than I can say here on the subject. In *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a Roman Catholic weekly very popular in Poland, (it is regarded as moderate), an article published in August 2006 by Father Andrzej Dragula warned that Poland might repeat what happened in Quebec, namely a 'Quiet Revolution' against the Church. Quebec used to be *the* Roman Catholic Canadian province for a very long time. Like in Poland, the Church was very well established there, and very confident that nothing would change in the attitude of people towards their religion. But all of the sudden, with no apparent reason, a great many people left the Church. Father Dragula warned that it could happen in Poland as well. I think that one cannot exclude such possibility because there really is no way of knowing what this new generation, which is now really the important generation in Poland, would do. I think that this uncertainty causes one of the important tensions among the Roman Catholics in Poland today.

It so happened that I went to a conference in Canada shortly after I read Father Dragula's article. I asked, whether this had really happened so suddenly and unexpectedly, this dissolving of interest in Roman Catholicism among Quebecers; and the answer I received was yes. It happened pretty quickly, and no one really expected it.

Q: Are the priests being sent to this economic emigration, going to London and Ireland to accompany the people you spoke of moving within the European Union?

A: I don't really know. I don't think, however, that there would be many priests

sent to serve the Polish people abroad, especially in Ireland, since Ireland is mostly Roman Catholic, which actually might be the reason for many Poles to go there rather than to some other country. The mostly non-Catholic England is very close to Poland, when you realize how small Europe is. For those who want, it is easy to travel back home for weekends, and to go to church in Poland. England uses now the old military airports from World War II for very cheap flights to Eastern Europe. It is actually possible to get a roundtrip ticket from Poland to London for about \$20. There seems to be no need for sending priests there, because the majority of people who work abroad still have their families living in Poland. This, however, is another problem. The older generation stays in Poland, and the young people are leaving. No one knows how many will actually come back, but for now the majority of them are still visiting their parents regularly. The Polish priests (Poland and probably Ireland too are maybe the only countries in the world that seem to have a surplus of priests) are actually sent where needed, namely to America, Africa, wherever, and not necessarily to serve the Polish population.

Q: I was in Poland a few years back, and there seemed to be a fairly active Polish Ecumenical Council – Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, but also a Protestant theological faculty. Are they still there, and what is their tension or interaction with the dominant Catholic church?

A: They are still there. To my knowledge, the Theological Academy still exists. However, there is some discontent regarding the privileged position of the Roman Catholic Church. This position is now legally sanctioned due to the concordat between the Polish government and the Roman Catholic Church, which was signed at the beginning of the 1990s. This concordat was modeled after the concordat that existed before World War II. Already then it caused some tensions. Under Communism, in Poland, like in the other Eastern European countries, the political powers were using minority religions to ‘keep in check’ the dominant religion. In a sense, the minority religions were treated relatively better then because they would have at least nominally the same rights (or lack of them) as the dominant religion. After the fall of

Communism, however, the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church has been officially and openly acknowledged and sanctioned.

Probably the religion that gained most in Poland after the fall of Communism was Judaism. There was a renewal of interest in the Jewish culture. There are new Jewish periodicals in the Polish language (not Hebrew or Yiddish); their content is mostly cultural, not religious *per se*.

In the press, mostly in letters to the publishers of various Polish magazines, there are sometimes complaints from Protestants, or Russian Orthodox, or even Greek Catholics that they feel discriminated against.

The Polish Ecumenical Council was one of the institutions that were actively involved in the matters of ecumenical dialogue and inter-religious dialogue from the beginning of their existence. What I see as a problem is that those involved in this kind of dialogue are for the most still the same people who initiated it. I sometimes think that the Polish people assume that this Council will do the necessary job, and the issue of ecumenism will be taken care of, so that there is no need to worry about it, and consequently the public is not much interested in it. This is the way I interpret the results of my search of the website of the Ecumenical Information Agency I presented to you earlier. Certainly, there is some dialogue among intellectuals, church officials, and theologians, but there is not as much among the general population as one would wish it to be.

Q: Is this Protestant theological faculty weaker, stronger?

A: I honestly don't know. But right now our political relationship with Germany is quite tense, and for the majority of the Polish people, Protestant means German. This may or may not have an impact on the position of the Protestant theological faculty.

I would like to add that many people in Poland don't know much about religions other than their own. I even know a university professor who would argue that Buddhism is just a religious sect. In a sense, in Poland it is a sect because there are very few Buddhists in Poland. I don't really blame people for this kind of ignorance, in Poland or in the United States, or anywhere else. No offense, but I think that we all

here in this room are not representative of what an average person knows about religions other than this person's own. The CAREE people are committed to dialogue; they are also what I would call the insiders of ecumenical or inter-religious dialogue. At conferences, we meet mostly with people who are already 'in,' and who basically made a career of being involved in the ecumenical movement, just like the majority of us here, or maybe even all. We would not be at this conference if we were not intellectuals interested in inter-religious dialogue, or in Eastern Europe. But we don't usually meet with people on the street to talk about inter-religious dialogue; we rarely, if ever, have a town hall discussion about religion, etc.

Q: A comment on the Quiet Revolution in Quebec in the 1960s under Trudeau, and your drawing attention to its potential happening in Poland. I think what Steve Dintamen presented here today is a rather relevant way of starting to look at that. The Silent Revolution in Quebec involved a decline in religious practices. That is its main meaning. The laity and the intellectuals connected to it, disassociated from what the clergy was doing, and it wasn't really noticed, it was under the radar screen. But at the same time, there were those religious seekers who found their own ways, or were then introduced to a variety of Protestant groups who didn't really have a civil society agenda, but a religious agenda, so they stayed under the radar screen too and became part of that Canadian French culture. Two years ago I met the dean of a Pentecostalist Seminary in Poland, which had started in 2003. He was in his early 30s, finishing a doctorate at a seminary in USA, and the first thing he showed me was his CD of music he had written, very contemporary. He was talking as if the only way for the future of Christianity in Poland is lots of people coming to join them. That is also a way of reading the religious side of the Quiet Revolution.

A: This is a valuable comment, and I will readily agree with you. By the way, if I'm not mistaken, the Pentecostal Church is presently the largest non-Catholic church in Poland, and the fastest growing.