

# FACTORS AFFECTING UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE INSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH IN POLAND

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An analysis of reasons which contribute to changes in social attitudes towards the Roman-Catholic Church in Poland could be conducted in at least two ways.

The first is based on a listing of many social and political errors made by the Church hierarchy. This approach does not, however, provide an understanding why certain decisions turned out to be mistakes.

The second is based on a more systematic undertaking. It aims to assess the following tentative statement: Diminishing social support for the Roman Catholic Church in Poland stems from the failure of the Church to fulfill its implicit functions. The Church does not meet the requirements of the changing contemporary socio-political situation in Poland.

In order to proceed with validating or falsifying the statement let us take a brief excursion into the domains of the sociology of religion and science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*).

Sociologists describe religious institutions as a distinct aspect of religion. Meredith McGuire states: "Each institutionally specialized religion typically consolidates its beliefs, values, and practices into a coherent model. These official models typically include a prescribed doctrine, set of ethical standards, cultic expression, and institutional organization."

The science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) specifies the following functions which have to be fulfilled by a religious organization:

vertical function - mediating between humans and the deity,

horizontal functions - creating associations between people, structuring the religious community, carrying religious doctrine through generations (quite often together with the feeling of social identity of the group which accepts the doctrine), and offering interpretation of this world (provision of *Weltanschauung*).

We next try to answer the question how the Roman-Catholic Church in Poland is responding to specific demands connected to the above specified functions.

Originally Polish religiosity displayed an extremely "Church oriented" structure. Research clearly shows that the core of typical individual religiosity consisted of attending Sunday service. No consequential aspects were attached to it. At the same time the institution of the Church was perceived as a structure located above ordinary members and separated from them. The notion of the Church was confined to the Church hierarchy of priests and excluded lay people. And yet members of the hierarchy enjoyed very high prestige. On lists of most respected occupations priests always occupied the highest rank.

More recent research has supplied data revealing a significant change in both respects of the role of the Church in individual religiosity and originally positive attitudes towards a Church hierarchy.

There is a marked motivational switch from religiosity based on tradition to religiosity based on the individual's own choice and own religious experience (which is quite often rooted in Eastern tradition). Polish youth has turned out to be very receptive to Eastern kind of experience. Cross-cultural research demonstrates it very convincingly.

Another confirmation of this switch was supplied in July 1991 during the admission examinations to Cracow University. The number of students applying for one place in the Institute for the Science of Religion at Cracow University reached ten candidates for each place (the highest rate in Poland). The applicants very often described their motivation for studying the Science of Religion as a need to confirm their own religious choice by learning about religious traditions other than their own they had inherited (i.e. Roman Catholic).

Generally speaking the Roman Catholic Church has lost its role as an agency providing the only eschatological perspective. Due to the general availability of personal passports, the withdrawal of visa requirements for Polish citizens by a majority of Western countries, Polish youth have begun to travel extensively to the West. There they meet different religious traditions and become confronted with the supermarket of eschatologies. The Roman Catholic option has lost its uniqueness and obligatory character. It has become relativized rather than absolute.

The Church has begun to be perceived by many young people as an "excessive" institution because God is understood as an impersonal power (62 percent of respondents), and forms of religiosity displayed by the older generation (i.e. Church-centered religiosity) are considered superficial.

Another group of respondents stresses a strong need for the revitalization of a strictly religious function for the Church. There is a sharp contrast between these needs and the growing political (as opposed to spiritual) activity of the church. Particularly damaging for the Church's image is the Church hierarchy's legislative role in introducing an anti-abortion law and attempting to secure the current religious instruction in the schools.

The political involvement of the Church brought about a measurable drop in the confidence in which people hold the Church. This has dropped from 90 percent in the autumn of 1989, to 72.5 percent in December 1990 and 59 percent in May 1991. At the same time, there is a growing disappointment concerning the political activity of the Church. In December 1989, 5.7 percent of respondents agreed with a statement that the church was excessively involved in political life; 17 percent accepted the same statement in December 1990 and 67 percent in February 1992.

To conclude the first part of this analysis, one should state that the Roman Catholic Church in Poland clearly fails to perform its vertical function of being a mediator between God and God's people. Activities of the Church hierarchy have grown irrelevant in comparison with the expectations of lay members of the Church. Being always perceived as separated but at the same time superior to ordinary believers, the Church is now losing its status and becoming threatened by marginalization, its decreasing influence over people's life.

What about horizontal functions of the Church?

The first of the horizontal functions is a communal function. This function was never very strongly present in the Polish Church. Very few actions unite parishioners. One of very few unifying actions concerns the building of new churches. Communist authorities were very reluctant to give permission for erecting new church buildings. Because of that many of them were built quite illegally, sometimes in an amazingly short time (one night) with a considerably high involvement of all members of the parish. Collaboration in such seemingly subversive actions towards political authorities created one of very few occasions for real social action concentrated around the organization of the Church. Another sphere of social life in which Church tries to incorporate all parishioners concerns excessive drinking. Anti-alcoholic programs and some help for alcoholics' families are getting some limited support among parishioners.

In principle however the Church has never succeeded in building strong social ties between parishioners. At the same time parishioners did not usually influence the functioning of the parish. The communal dimension of religiosity specified by Lenski (1961) does not apply to the majority of Polish parishes. They display rather an associationalistic pattern.

Another horizontal function of the church concerns carrying religious doctrine through generations together with structuring national identity. This function was always particularly prominent within the Polish Church. The content of religious doctrine remains largely unknown for the majority of church members although they identify themselves with the doctrine as with the teaching of Roman Catholic Church. All research results consistently point to the fact that Polish believers do not know the basics of Catholic doctrine (members of the Holy Trinity, meaning of sacraments); they are also largely ignorant of the history and contemporary events of Church life. Selective knowledge of the doctrine accompanies very selective beliefs in particular dogmas.

Eighty-eight percent of respondents believe in God, 76 per in creation of the world by God, 50 percent believes in an afterlife, 41 percent in miracles, 35 percent in Devil.

The low level of religious knowledge has never prevented people from having a strong identification with the Roman Catholic Church. "To be Polish means to be Roman Catholic," the famous stereotype formed during the partition of Poland in the 18th Century remained lively until recently. Religious affiliation was a very important indicator of national identity. By means of identification with the Roman Catholic Church, Polish people could be differentiated from foreigners who arrived after the partition of the country in 1772. The stereotype got a new life after the Second World War. It helped to distinguish truly Polish citizens from Communists, atheists, or a godless authority imported from the East.

The identity-giving function of membership of the Roman Catholic Church was not only successfully performed but actually never questioned by the Polish people. However one particular aspect of the stereotype mostly remained overlooked--its negative character. Religious identity remains strictly connected with an evaluative understatement: to be religious means to be religious in one particular 'proper' way as contrasted with all other ways of being religious and being communist or irreligious.

The discriminating and selective character of the religiosity expressed itself in the answers to a question about unwanted neighbors. Forty-nine per cent of respondents would not accept members of other religious denominations as neighbors; forty-four per cent would not accept members of new religious movements, and forty-three would not accept Jews.

The stereotype "To be Polish means to be Catholic" got into trouble very recently. The reason was the abuse of the stereotype in a political campaign against Poland's integration with the rest of Europe. Political parties connected with the Church opposed the integration process. They stressed that signing the Convention of Human Rights would immediately bring the declaration of the anti-abortion law illegal, i.e. the Convention would violate the principles of a religious ethics.

Turning to religious arguments, stressing the exceptional position of religious tradition as a major obstacle in the integration process provided for a stimulus for questioning the value of tradition. At the same time tradition became perceived as an obstacle in a much wanted process of modernization of the country, as a factor retarding progressive developments. Two processes occurred at the same time. Catholicism lost its identity-giving function (no enemy against whom an identity must be held), and the Church has become associated with conservatism both in social and in a political sense.

Last but not least the Roman Catholic Church used to be an opinion leader. The hierarchy provided people with an interpretation of the surrounding world. An important role was ascribed to bringing new information and new interpretations of the information disseminated by the official media. The role of opinion leader always grows if the situation becomes more ambiguous; this is particularly important in a threatening

situation. Dramatic changes in the life of individuals, poverty, unemployment, shattering individual dignity connected with low salaries for professions which demand lengthy education, create meaning-crisis. The Church does not respond towards it in a coherent manner, helping to construct different coping strategies. On the contrary it reacts with increasing demands for money for the building of new churches and aims for the return of buildings it once owned but which have been converted into hospitals and orphanages. At the same time it reveals the Church's affluent financial position. This situation creates a cognitive dissonance which most likely could be resolved by the statement, "I am Catholic, but I am critical of the Church." It will result in a growing amount of unchurched Catholics, for whom being religious becomes far more important than being a participant at Sunday Mass.

In summary, many indicators point to the fact that Polish religiosity is undergoing quite dramatic changes. The diminishing social support for the Roman Catholic Church in Poland stems from the failure of the Church to fulfill its implicit vertical and horizontal functions. This can be accepted as a tentative statement and deserves further research.

The growing influence of the Church in political and economic reality coincides with the diminishing role of the Church in individual lives. People stay religious; many grow religious in more private and more intrinsic (as opposed to extrinsic) ways. In many cases, however, people's religiousness does not include the Church as an indispensable element.

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