

**POLAND AS CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT:
THEOLOGY AND ECONOMICS IN TRANSITION
FROM THE COMMUNIST TO THE POST-COMMUNIST ERA**

by Halina Grzymala-Moszczyńska

Dr. Halina Grzymala-Moszczyńska is a professor at the Institute for the Science of Religion, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland. She has contributed previous articles to REE.

An analysis of the changes which are taking place in Poland could be probably most efficiently understood in the context of cross-cultural transition from one political and economic system to another.

The first system--the Communist one--belongs to the period 1945-1989 while the second-- Post-Communist--to the period from 1989 till now.

Examining the broad scope of political, social, and economic differences in daily life of Polish citizens during these two periods, the case can be made for understanding the communist to post-communist transition as a cross-cultural transition. The communist period has been dominated by an inefficient command economy, with equally little income for everyone, and with equal access to poor health care and educational systems.

The Post-Communist period brought extreme polarization in terms of income levels. It has created a base for unequal access to better health care and educational options: private health clinics, private medical consultants and private schools. The scope of the changes and a very short time of transition between two periods seem to justify that a parallel be made not only to cross-cultural transition but even to cross-cultural experiences. Rapid cross-cultural experiences create a cultural shock. The situation of Polish society seem to require explanation in the terms of the aspects of cultural shock proposed in the literature. Oberg (1960) has specified the following dimensions of the cultural shock:

1. Feeling of helplessness and ineffectiveness with dealing with new culture.
2. Sense of being uprooted, confusion of roles, values and feelings.
3. The strain involved in expanding effort of adaptation.
4. Mutual rejection of newcomers by traditional culture and rejection of old traditional culture by newcomers with attendant feelings of discomfort, disgust and anxiety.

Oberg's factors will be used further on as the tools for a psychological analysis of the social situation in which economic changes in Poland are taking place and in which theological response of the Catholic Church towards these changes should be examined.

As one of the most debilitating aspects of the problems created by rapid transition between two systems one can specified fear which stimulates in very many people state of the learned helplessness. This is the state which could be described by first of Oberg's factors. Psychological term learned helplessness describes an attitude of the person who believes that nothing can be done by him/her to improve own unfavourable and unbearable situation.

Such a perception of the situation causes very low self-esteem and eventually might lead towards a depression. In Poland this syndrome is getting gradually more and more conspicuous. It is caused first of all by fear of loosing a job paired with very deep conviction that nothing can be done in order to prevent it.

Because of the very deep structural changes in the Polish economy many professions which traditionally have had enjoyed very high prestige became worthless almost overnight (example: coal miners, steel mill workers). Those people became confronted with the situation that their previous skills and education become totally irrelevant and offering them no chance to look for the new jobs. This is the situation described by second of Oberg's factors as an experience of confusion of roles, values and emotions.

As a very dramatic indicator of the psychological situation of deep distress could be probably seen increasing trends of suicides (from 3,657 cases in the whole 1989 to 3,000 cases in the first six months of 1993). Along the same line could be seen increased level of alcoholism, drug abuse and family violence. Particularly high rate of social pathology prevails in regions of mass-unemployment. As particularly endangered by unemployment perceive themselves people over fifty and men. What really aggravates the situation is the fact that even if many people (in the research conducted by group of psychologist from Wroclaw University they constituted fifty per cent of the sample) agree that they chances on the work market would increase if they decide to get new qualifications they refuse such an alternative. The reason for that refusal is their conviction--inherited after period of communist command economy with virtually no unemployment--that this is state obligation to supply their citizen with jobs, not citizens' role to look for job by themselves and try to adapt to demands of the market.

At this point one should pose well-justified question why adaptation process to the demands of the market goes so incredibly slowly, why learning process on the social level is so inefficient. As the possible answer to that question let us analyze the general educational situation in the country. Seventy per cent of the population has only primary education i.e. eight years of schooling. Even more alarming are results of the research conducted by Professor Zbigniew Kwiecinski from Poznan University who has found that thirty people among one hundred are so called functional illiterates. They know letters but they do not understand texts. These result got confirmation in mass-media research which proved that seventy five per cent of all-nation sample does not understand basic terms appearing in press and TV. They also never read any book. Such a situation brings very large portion of population towards functional separation from information available in the surrounding world unless this world gets translated into concrete, linear terms, which in the same moment don't create any base for further personal development.

It does not open also path for permanent education and prevents from finding new perspectives. In Oberg's terms the situation of being confronted with incomprehensible language (third factor) pertaining to the surrounding reality creates considerable strain and distress. Such a strain usually accompanies adaptation to linguistically new language but since in Poland terms pertaining to new economic reality and to political sphere of life especially related to election campaign are totally inaccessible for the majority of the population one can speak of new language being used in Poland with all of the resulting stress such invokes.

As the consequence of restricted access to the language in operation one can also see limitation of chances for further restructuring of own qualifications and job's profile.

Research data demonstrate quite convincingly that people with primary education are not able to re-qualify again as soon as they are forty. In Polish population it means that majority of employees fall into this category since only six persons among one hundred has academic education and twenty for one hundred secondary education (i.e. after eight years of primary school additional four years of gymnasium or vocational school).

Such an educational deficit creates mentality which could be described at the best as a passive, anti-individualistic, with no initiative, oriented on external commands, feeling quite at home with populist language.

Let me now present the response of Roman Catholic Church towards new economic situation and towards introducing capitalistic mechanisms in Poland. This response should be seen against the social situation described above.

It should be stated probably first that in contemporary Poland there are no existing realistic experiences with capitalism. One can find an uncritical apology of contemporary western capitalism or panic fear against it. There is no first hand experience available. People visiting West encountered western already developed capitalism, people remembering inter-war period in Poland remember capitalism of twenties and thirties. But in the same time nobody was really exposed on contemporary capitalism within the Polish context. Current economic system existing in Poland can be probably called at the best as the system of primitive accumulation, the earliest phase of capitalistic system. Very often people who use the same term "capitalism" are in fact talking about very different things recalling completely different frame of references. It causes the situation in which using Oberg's fourth factor again, one can speak about mutual rejection of newcomers by traditional culture i.e. rejection of those who like to endorse free market economy by traditionals who are fearing of capitalism and rejection of traditionals by newcomers. Newcomers view traditionals as those who are responsible for Poland's slow economic recovery and who prevent the country from further progress.

Generally speaking reaction of the Roman-Catholic Church towards the changes which are taking place in Poland seem to be based on the two papal encyclicals "Centessimus annus" and "Laborem Excernses". The reaction indicates that market economy in general is getting the approval. First of all because it is based on personal freedom and secondly

because it supports human creativity and ability for cooperation. Because of that it does not create any problem that it should be possible to combine contemporary capitalism and social teachings of Roman Catholic Church.

In the same time however, papal encyclicals left no doubts that some problems should be voiced quite clearly. How one can stimulate social energy, which institutions should be created in order to bring toward appearing in Poland economic mechanisms which will stimulate development of more creative individuals, prepared for challenges which economic freedom poses - they are most eminent problems on that agenda.

Actual situation creates for Church many challenges on the practical level. How parish could be converted into the real centre of helping actions for those who are mostly needy. What are means for influencing social policy of the government in respect of radical market economy. As one of the problems officially addressed by Church-oriented media one can specify the problem of placing efficient managers in charge of plants and companies instead of selling whole plants to western capitalists. Privatisation of the industry is generally opposed by the Church and system of managerial responsibility endorsed. It is also proposed that industrial giants like steel- mill factory in Cracow should be converted into group of smaller independent units more flexible than huge plants are.

In the same time Church is taking very uncompromised stand towards unemployment. She considers unemployment as an ultimate evil, particularly when the planned, structural, permanent unemployment becomes considered as a mean for rectifying country economy. Because of that Church is setting help for unemployed people among its primary goals. It is suggested that not only financial help should be offered to people who are loosing their jobs, particularly if it happens in families of many children but as a more important should be seen creation new jobs, and help in finding already existing ones. Several conferences of Polish bishops set these very goals. On the level of the dioceses they are starting committees for helping of unemployed people. They not only help financially but also teach people important but totally unknown for majority of Poles skills how to write c.v., how one should act during interview with prospective employer, where to look for job offers, how to start own enterprise.

In the same time it is however stressed by Church and government alike that there is no comebacks to previous economic system, and no alternative for market oriented economy. Because of that even new government which could be considered as a leftist one is getting support from the Church. Farmers Fraction which has form the union with post-communist social-democrats is seen as a mediator between radical demands of market economy and church interpretation on economic laws.

And the final remark. Language mirrors our perception and mediates our action. Because of that it is interesting to bring one more research results on media language. Respondents has been asked what is the worse word from the list of words covering various negative deeds and situation. The result was striking. It was no word which got more negative evaluation than unemployment.

This brings us back towards first part of my analysis. Among many costs which society has to pay during process of transformation from one political system to another fears connected to losing job and lack of skills to find the new one seem to be most expensive. It also explains why Church in Poland is setting this issue on her official agenda. By doing so Church tries to help people to overcome set of difficulties created by cultural shock of transitional period.