POLAND: PLURALISM AFTER THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DESERT

A ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

By Waldemar Chrostowski

Dr. Waldemar Chrostowski (Roman Catholic) is professor of theology at the Academy of Catholic Theology in Warsaw and editor of Collectanea Theologica. He is the author of several books and writes frequently in the Polish press. He is a frequent contributor to OPREE.

The communist experiment in Poland lasted forty-five years. It changed the life of a few generations of Poles, marking it with violence and crimes, intimidation and incapacitation of the society, the emigration of young and creative people, the ruin of the economy, social and political life, and terrible devastation in the people's minds and hearts. The destruction is so severe and extensive that it is becoming ever more evident that the removal of the communists from power does not automatically lead to a pluralistic society. Poles resemble a collectivity afflicted with a serious illness. Though this sickness is abating, the return to complete health will take a long time. Since humankind has no previous experience of a cure from Communism, the healing of wounds and their scarring are a completely unique process. All reflection on the role of religion and the Church in the new situation must take place in the shadow of the painful past; it has to be based on familiarity with the realities and state of mind of the people who live in these realities.

1

Communism, as it is perceived in Poland, was a utopia. Its economic and social doctrine are typical eruptions of abstraction that ignore reality or even try to stamp it out ruthlessly. From the religious perspective another observation is more important: Communism is a pseudoreligion, a grotesque parody of religion. In its totalitarian form Communism aimed at the subjugation of the entire person; in all of the dimensions of his or her life, it reached into the deepest recesses of privateness and did not conceal its wish to "rule souls." The human being in Communism did not have the right to her/his own thoughts and his/her own evaluation of the world. He/she was bombarded with slogans about the "only correct" outlook and the "only correct" way of life that was worked out by a caste of ideologists and doctrinarians. They demanded faith no weaker than religious faith and the obedience that is due to religious authorities. The "Khomeinization" of life, against which people of the West are warned, never went as far as its "communization" practiced in the East. The author of an illegal pamphlet, an independent journalist, thinker, or writer was a greater danger for the communists than notorious common criminals. The works of the leaders of the revolution attempted to create a new pseudoreligious tradition that was supposed to dislodge and replace all religious tradition. The claims of the doctrinarians were followed by practical measures. Attempts were made to remove elements of the Christian cult, and in their place workers' parades were organized according to the canons of Church processions; instead of holy images and symbols, people carried pictures of political leaders and slogans of the class struggle;

production accomplishments and the feats of heroes of labor and science were supposed to replace the need for miracles; ideologists made long speeches in the style of lofty sermons; revolutionary songs were supposed to supplant the hymns sung in churches; the rhetoric of speakers imitated the rhetoric of consummate preachers.

There were incessant attempts to force people to practice the atheistic religion. The facade of commonness and uniformity propagated by the mass media, culture, art, and statistics were all used to advance this end. The fight with religion was waged on the principles of the most totalitarian religion, which was addressed first and foremost to high school and college students, the police, army, and government officials. Communism wanted not supporters but believers. That is why the fall of Communism does not automatically lead to a pluralistic society. If it is difficult to reorganize economic, social, and political structures; it is even harder to attain real pluralism without casting off once and for all communistic patterns of thinking and looking at the world and the human being. This will not be accomplished in a single act but will require a long and difficult process. Poland was a country in which there was a constant confrontation with the claims of the communist utopia. These struggles found their support in religion. People regarded the Church as the real--and in fact, only--counterweight to Communism. We see this from the fact that religion and pseudoreligion faced each other and that this was a struggle that reached down into the deepest recesses of human consciences. The cultivation of theology in an enslaved country was just as possible as in a free one because theology is dependent on psychological and not on political factors. In spite of this, dialogue in the communist epoch was impossible, though the communists were wont to simulate one. Intellectuals from both sides sporadically started up a dialogue, but this had no real influence on the attitudes and mind of the society.

In the new situation today, people are still living who for long years professed the utopian pseudoreligion or were especially susceptible to its slogans. In the atmosphere of the presidential campaign in the autumn of l990, it is astonishing that the promises of an almost anonymous candidate that wealth and happiness could be achieved in only months. The travestying of religion had to make an impact on the shape of religion itself. Many Christians understand and experience faith in a manner similar to the communists. These Christians, but not only they, are suspicious of the calls for tolerance and dialogue. All too often such words had been uttered by party agitators and speakers. At that time, these words had an entirely different meaning than ascribed to them by linguists in dictionaries and encyclopedias. Before a dialogue begins, the real meaning of these words must be restored.

2

During the international symposium on the theology of suffering organized in March l990 by "Pax Christi" in Utrecht, one of the Dutch participants stated that Communism as an economic and social theory is a splendid doctrine guaranteeing the prosperity of the people who choose it as a way of life. In Central-Eastern Europe this doctrine failed for one simple reason: people in this part of the world were not mature enough for Communism and were unable to cope with it, and as a consequence, they twisted the

lofty ideas of its founders and theoreticians. The real solution would be to try again but this time with awareness of the dangers from immature groups of the society. Listening to these arguments, I was ready to accept them, but on one condition. I suggested that the communist experiment be repeated elsewhere, the best place being Western Europe, perhaps Holland. Why should we play the role of a laboratory?

Religion in Central-Eastern Europe has endured despite the shattering of people's lives and consciences. Two young generations of Poles were born and brought up without the right and opportunity of normal development. The wrongs inflicted become ever more painful in comparison with life in the West. Communism created a class of *nouveau riche*, a "red bourgeoisie." Every teaching, including that of religion, has to bear in mind the fact that people have had enough of platitudes about a better future. It is no accident that Poland was the place of the most frequent and strongest anti-communist outcries. In Poland, the conviction took root earliest that the communist promises would never be kept because they they simply are not attainable and that the repetition of these promises is a manifestation of the enslavement of the individual and the society. Taking advantage of the emerging pluralism, the communists, who are somewhat altering their habits and rhetoric, also are demanding complete freedom and social acceptance for themselves and are ready to enter into an alliance with the Church. Meanwhile, millions of people are mistrustful of all attempts at communist indoctrination, and the church sees no need to become an intermediary and bridge for the communists to regain credibility. The postulate of pluralism cannot assume that in a situation of the scarring of wounds and a painful cure every person <u>must</u> talk with every other person, as though nothing had happened, as though the hunter and the victim had committed the same errors.

There is no doubt that dialogue is necessary. But a dialogue assumes that one first must get to know one's partner. This was not possible as long as the partner was, in fact, an opponent. The communists defined themselves in categories of the class struggle and entered into contacts and discussions as such. They never allowed themselves to be really known; they always wore a mask. So the actors faced each other in feeble attempts at dialogue. The aim was not to reach understanding but to outsmart the other side, for this was a condition of survival. Religious people also became masters in the art of concealing their intentions, and in some situations there was even an accommodating symbiosis of the actors. In the new situation, the Church has to learn how to conduct a real dialogue without simulation and suspicion. A pluralistic world and religious outlook cannot be attained without creating a spiritual climate based on trust and respect for the other person and other social groups. Meanwhile, trust cannot be compelled; one can only try to earn it.

3

Communism was something very common, uninteresting, and gray. While remaining a utopia, it gradually stripped people of their sublime dreams and eradicated their more subtle needs. The overworked peasant, worker, and woman tractor-driver were set up as idols. The Church gave the weary and despairing faithful the feeling of being valuable and needed. Encouragement and keeping up the spirit often boiled down to the formula

Ex Oriente lux, ex Occidente luxus. Recognizing the unattainable material status of the West, the Church relied on setting greater store by the spiritual richness of the inhabitants of Eastern Europe. After the fall of Communism and the opening up of borders, this formula is waning as a result of the ever greater awareness of the extent of spiritual and moral devastation in a society systematically subjected to indoctrination and desperately adapting itself to the conditions imposed by the regime. On the other hand, during the historic turning-point religion is warning against the dangers of a pure and simple imitation of the models of life in the West. Looming up before people emancipating themselves from numerous limitations and restrictions is a vision of freedom mistakenly identified with complete freedom, even license. In fact, there is a danger of uncontrollable "consumerism" that will draw people away from God as the ethical foundation of life. Teaching and counseling restraint are perceived as a new attempt to limit people's aspirations. People who have become accustomed and sensitized to pseudodidactic platitudes do not want to be lectured any longer. The message of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church are received with the same attitude as people listened to the instructions of communist educators. The difficult task of believers in God is to bear credible witness confirming the need for moral values. Unfortunately, here the Churches in Central-Eastern Europe cannot always imitate co-believers from the West. We get the impression that there also the tension between the temptations of consumerism and solid moral values still has not been overcome.

For more than forty years Poles cooperated effectively to dismantle the political system imposed by force. They did this in a number of ways, sometimes through laziness. The communist critique of private property and its debasement stifled social responsibility for work. Now when the utopia is receding into the past, its legacy and dangers remain. Among them are laziness and the widespread lack of respect for work and the common good. Religion has a lot to do in this field. The Church is accused of making light of these matters, but it gives one food for thought that with unexpected energy the Poles have entered on the road leading to a free market. The task of the Church is to teach realism and call to mind the postulate of the patient building of life now, before the arrival of the "new heaven and the new earth." One cannot rightly long for heaven without any idea of what a happy life on earth should be.

It is a paradox that in the period of the imposition of the communist system, the Church in Poland became stronger and more unified than ever before. One gets the impression that the situation in which an opponent existed benefitted even the Church. In proclaiming the catchword of the "class struggle," Communism put people on their guard and made them aware that this was a serious confrontation from which only one side could emerge victorious. The uphill task of building a pluralistic society has begun, and it is important for the Church to cast off the mentality of a "besieged fortress." In past years, religion was pushed outside the pale of public life. Today people are ever more willing to admit to their religion, but they do not want to define themselves in terms borrowed from military terminology.

Meanwhile, many believers have become accustomed to the old rhetoric. This makes it incumbent on the Church to define and describe its own identity, not by cutting itself off

from any one long tradition of the universal Church and the experience gained in the postwar period. In the conditions of confrontation, the Church at all costs strove for unity that would enable it to close its ranks and offer successful resistance to the opponent. Now this is more difficult and requires a basic reorientation in the thinking and actions of believers.

The atheism decreed by the communists attempted to divest people of any relationship to God whatsoever. Since the fight with religion was a political program, it is not surprising that the return to religion and ethics based on religious values became integral parts of the political movements that sprang up in opposition to Communism. This was especially true in the time of the rise and consolidation of "Solidarity," but we can observe similar tendencies even after l989. Both during the attempts to destroy and suppress religious life and in the course of the restoration of its place and role in public life, religion easily was made into an instrument. There are profound analogies between the communist idealization of the "working class" and the Christian idealization of the "nation." An important task of the Church is to watch over the autonomy of religion and to warn people against manipulations and bringing religion into the political game.

4

For people of the West, everything behind the "iron curtain" was a monolith contained in the word "eastern bloc." Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, etc. did not really exist, for they did not have real identity. Without understanding, Westerners believed in communist reports of the intention to maintain and develop language, history, material culture, folklore, folk customs, and also religious rites and practices. The nature of Communism was the destruction of tradition and the falsification of history. Communism introduced a suggestive "cowboy" tradition: it divided people into reds and others, good and bad, suppressing the voice of public opinion on this matter and becoming the sustenance for the contempt and disrespect of individuals and social groups. The defense of national identity took place in a sharp confrontation with the "sovietization" of life and at the cost of conflicts with ethnic minorities and neighboring nations. The view became popular in Poland that around us we have only enemies or neighbors on whom we cannot rely. Such an opinion was extended to the Lithuanians, Byelorussians, Russians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Czechs and Germans. Injurious stereotypes of all of these nations have formed in the mind of the average Pole, which is in flagrant contradiction with the communist slogans of internationalism and peace among nations. These slogans were never taken seriously, and so no real thought was ever given to the attitude toward other nations. The image of international enemies--the clergy and Jews--was cultivated with the same obduracy. They were saddled with responsibility for setbacks and misfortunes. But in papers written for foreign consumption, the responsibility for anti-Semitism in its various forms was thrown on the Church. Only the most recent, independent surveys of the Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (autumn l990 - spring l99l) have shown that the "most rabid anti-Semites are people who rarely go to Church."

The nations of Central-Eastern Europe are regaining their historical and linguistic identity, but observation of their life shows that this life is quite varied. It is manifesting

itself in long suppressed needs, and inhibitions are being laid bare. After the utopian experiment of Communism, freedom must be restored to the imagination. Instead of emphasizing the collectivity and sovereignty of the State, greater stress must be placed on the sovereignty of the individual. So the role of religion and theologians is to seek inspiration not so much in the collective mind or in their own subconsciousness as in coming to grips with real needs and problems and deciding what causes concern and the individual search for truth, no matter how difficult it may be to accept.

On the way to a united Europe, there is a tendency in all of the countries east of the Elbe to ignore and omit their closest neighbors, a tendency which sometimes transforms itself into open rivalry. But there is no other way to the building of a pluralistic society than by focusing on the lot of ethnic and religious minorities in one's own country and on establishing better relations with neighboring countries. Religion also has a tremendous role to play here. In exhibiting fundamental ethical values, religion ought to stress that true patriotism means concern for life in harmony with neighbors and respect for every person. The regaining of liberty must go hand-in-hand with rebuilding the moral strength of the society, democracy, and tolerance in the wide sense, including that of religion. Peace excludes intolerance and callousness. The mission of the Church is to promote the real understanding of other people, to build coexistence among people on the basis of the ethics of the Ten Commandments, and to intensify the attitude of respect for every person.

Conclusion

The destinies of the nations of Central-Eastern Europe including Poland's bring to mind the forty-year march of the Israelites through the desert. The oppression and persecutions are over, but the contours of the Promised Land are not yet clearly visible. The opinion that the last four decades are lost years would mean a wasted life for many people. Instead of this pessimistic vision, one ought to ask about the meaning of the "march through the desert" and try to discover what it means for believers in God. This is an indispensable condition for accelerating the integration of Europe, regaining one's own independence, and building a true pluralistic society.