



‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

International Council of Christians and Jews
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Panel A: Enemies or allies? The relations of religions and states

Religion and state in Poland: model of autonomy and independence

Let me first draw your attention to the room where we meet. Precisely this lecture hall was a place of a dramatic event at the beginning of WWII as a part of a broader action called Sonderaktion Krakau. It was the codename for a German operation directed against Polish intellectual elite.

Normally the universities in Poland start their academic year on October 1. However in the war situation universities did not start any activity, but waited for the decisions of the occupying authorities. After a few weeks SS Obersturmbannführer Bruno Müller commanded that all the university professors attend a lecture on German plans for Polish education. The university rector sent an invitation throughout the university. But when the professors gathered in this room (184 of them), no lecture was conducted. They were instead imprisoned under the pretext that the university was working without German consent. All of them were deported to Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps.

Following loud international protest, 101 of professors who were older than 40 were released in February 1940. Additional academics were released later. But 15 professors, some very notable ones, died in the camps and another 5 died within days of release. And the whole operation became a symbol of what are German plans concerning Polish elites.

All Polish higher education institutions were finally closed by the Germans. Those Cracow professors who survived formed in 1942 the underground university. Among its 800 students was young Karol Wojtyła, future archbishop of Cracow and pope John Paul II.

A. After the fall of communism In 1989 we Poles had to rebuild our own state. It was and still is a very complicated issue – for many reasons. And one of the most important reasons is the fact that before 1989 throughout last 200 years Poles were able to enjoy freedom for only 21 years.

Why so? Let me give you the briefest possible explanation of Polish history (very simplified one, of course):

- in 1791, on 3 May, the Parliament in Warsaw adopted the Constitution of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was the second constitution in the world (after USA, of 1787, and the first one in Europe, before the French one that was passed in September 1791).

- This attempt to reform the weakening Polish state provoked the hostility of the neighboring countries: Russia, Austria and Prussia (then form of the German state). The result of it were so called partitions of Poland. All the Polish territories were divided between the three neighboring states.
- Since 1795 there was no Polish state.
- Independent Poland emerged only in 1918, i.e. after 123 years. But Poland enjoyed freedom for only a short period between the two world wars.
- In September 1939 Germany invaded Poland from the West and Soviet Union from the East. The war lasted till 1945 and included among others an annihilation of the Jewish people.
- Since 1945 Poland was a part of the Soviet empire. Officially the Polish state existed independently, but decision-making centre was definitely not in Warsaw, but in Moscow. A symbolic expression of it may be the fact that the first draft of the constitution of the Communist Poland of 1952 was written not in the Polish language, but in Russian, and corrections to the draft were introduced by Joseph Stalin himself with his pencil. Today one can see this draft with handwritten Stalin corrections even on the internet.

With history like this it is understandable that such a thing like a deeply rooted democratic culture does not exist in Poland. Building of democratic culture takes many years and generations. But there is something even worse. Throughout last 200 years Poles developed a tradition of non-identifying themselves with a state. The state was not “us”, but “them”. A sharp distinction exists in Polish consciousness between society and state. Society is “us” and we are good; state is “them” and they are bad.

Another result of the partitions is a close combination of Polishness with Catholicism. Under partitions it was the Catholic Church that united Poles who were divided into three states. It is at that time when a stereotype of “Pole = Catholic” was born, of course in opposition to Orthodox Russians and Protestant Prussians. This national-Catholic mentality became an important part of Polish politics, sometimes with the support of the Church’s hierarchy.

B. Let me name 3 other reasons why it was difficult for a free Poland after 1989 to define anew relationships between religion and state.

1. The structure of the Polish society has changed dramatically. Traditionally Polish society was multicultural, multinational and multireligious; with a strong Catholic domination, but without state religion. In 1918 Catholics made up to 64% of the Polish population. Before WWII 10% of the Polish citizens were Polish Jews. Now the vast majority of Polish citizens are ethnic Poles and baptized Catholics. This is a result of the Shoah, of the changes of borders (decisions were taken by the superpowers, not by us), of the forced migrations (expatriations) of millions of people. For the first time in our history Poland has become a homogenous country both ethnically (99%), and religiously (> 90% are Catholics or were baptized). This is the great harm to our identity. Poles today live in a monolithic society and do not have an experience of “others”. It is contrary to the old Polish tradition, but it is so.
2. The Catholic Church’s position on Church-state relations has changed. After II Vatican Council it is the official Catholic stance that we do not support any more an idea of creating an ideal Catholic state, but we live in a democratic society based on the principle of religious freedom, and respect autonomy between religious and secular communities. But there are still some tendencies within the Catholic Church in Poland to rebuild the position of the church based on legal privileges, as if Vatican II did not exist.
3. In the Communist times an idea of separation of religion and state was compromised. The constitution (the one corrected by Stalin) had a regulation that the Church is separated form the state. Even in the constitution this relation was not symmetrical. The Church was separated form the state, and not vice versa. The state was allowed to intervene in the Church’s matters. It meant (in some periods) an open conflict and fight of the state authorities with the Church, official atheisation policy, liquidation of Catholic associations, anti-religious propaganda, etc. Even in the 1980’s, when the Church’s position was much stronger and the official state policy vis a vis religion was liberalized, a few Catholic priests were killed either by Communist secret police officers or by so called “unknown perpetrators”, what means more or less the same.

C. After 1989 Poland has gone through many sharp debates about the role of the Church and relationships between Church and state. Finally, and I’d say quite quickly, the new Polish model was defined as system based on autonomy and independence of religious organizations and state institutions.

I find it very good theoretically. Of course, a good theoretical model does not automatically eliminate tensions and conflicts in practice. But since I’ve understood the theme of this panel as the more theoretical

one (searching for a good model), and since we have little time, I'll limit myself to a more theoretical reflection.

The present Polish system is based on a new constitution that was passed in 1997. Its basis was earlier defined in the concordat signed between the Republic of Poland and the Holy See in 1993 and ratified 5 years later, after the constitution was accepted.

Our constitution has three very interesting moments that I want to mention.

1. In the preamble it defines the values to which citizens adhere. Among others it speaks about foundations of these values:

We, the Polish Nation - all citizens of the Republic,
both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty,
as well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values as arising from other sources [...] hereby establish this Constitution.

What I find important here is that this formula speaks about God as the deepest source of respect of values for believers, but includes non-believers as well. It is inclusive and not exclusive. And it does not define God in any confessional way. This is not a theological definition of God, but He is recalled here as a "pre-democratic" source of values that are important for democratic system.

2. In paragraph 25 of the Polish constitution we read:

The relationship between the State and churches and other religious organizations shall be based on the principle of respect for their autonomy and the mutual independence of each in its own sphere, as well as on the principle of cooperation for the individual and the common good.

This formula makes use of the rules presented by the II Vatican Council in its "Gaudium et spes" declaration which said:

The political community and the church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. They are both at the service of the personal and social vocation of the same individuals, though under different titles.

I don't find it dangerous that the basic state document used the phrases taken from the Church document. I'd rather find it proper that the new modern Polish state uses wise developments of the modern Catholic Church for its own purposes.

Additionally (it's something similar to the German model) Polish parliament accepted special agreements with the largest or most important religious organizations, including the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland. These agreements are also based on the principle of autonomy and independence.

3. Another important passage of our constitution is paragraph 53 which defines religious freedom. Freedom of religion shall include the freedom to profess or to accept a religion by personal choice as well as to manifest such religion, either individually or collectively, publicly or privately, by worshipping, praying, participating in ceremonies, performing of rites or teaching.

What I find important here is acceptance of the public character of religion. I remember I was taught in my school under Communism that religion is a private matter. When I consciously became a Catholic, I understood that religion should not be defined as a private matter. It is a personal matter, maybe the most personal matter, but not a private one. It has a communal aspect, in the case of Christianity it has a missionary aspect, it has a vision of a just society and just of private morality. That's why it is personal but not private issue.

Summarizing, modern Polish theoretical model of religion-state relationships understands that democracy needs values and in human history no better institutions were invented that are able to teach values than religion, family and school.

Democracy and religion need each other. Democracy needs religion, because it needs values. And religion needs democracy, because it needs freedom.