

## Religion and Politics: Religious Values in the Polish Public Square since 1989

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### Introduction

The main aim of this paper is a theoretical analysis of the presence of religious values in the public square in Poland since 1989. I shall approach this very broad issue with special regard to some important contemporary political events, namely the debate over the *invocatio Dei* in the draft Constitution of the European Union and the problem of the Christian component of the European heritage in general. These issues provoked a discussion on the role of Catholicism in Polish democracy, which I shall discuss here in illustration of my theses.

Relations between churches and states in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as relations between religion and the public square in general, have been well investigated by sociologists (see Borowik and Jabłoński, 1995; Borowik, 1999a; Borowik and Tomka, 2001). It might prove interesting, however, to recall here the American experience of the presence of religion in the public arena and to try to apply some of the categories and conclusions drawn there to the description of the contemporary situation in postcommunist Europe.

First, I comment on the 'value-free' model of the state (the 'naked public square'), as proposed by Richard J. Neuhaus in 1984 in response to the rise of the religious new right in America. I then try to adopt his perspective in my analysis of the Polish public square since 1989. Despite the obvious differences between the Polish and American situations, I want to draw attention to some similarities and pose several questions. The most important one is whether Poland after the collapse of the communist regime is moving toward the 'value-free' model of the state, that is of a public square free of any reference to religious values, or whether is it rather experiencing a return of religion into politics, for example in the form of growing support for parties of the religious right. Although I shall talk only about Polish society, and within the limited context of recent events, I believe that much of my argument could have a more universal message and could probably be adopted for a discussion of the situation in various different countries.

### The 'Value-Free' Model of the Public Square

Church-state relations have always been the subject of lively debate. Despite conflicts and clashes between the two realms one can observe that forms of their regulation

undergo certain type of evolution. Until recently it has been widely believed that the climax of this process had been reached in the relatively new formula of 'separation between church and state'.

In no other country are church-state relations subject to such fervent discussion as they are in the USA. It could be fruitful, therefore, to highlight some of the conclusions and observations from the American situation and to try to translate them into the Polish context. One of the important elements in the American debate was, and still is, an insight provided by Richard J. Neuhaus in his *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Neuhaus, 1986). It was first published in 1984 when Neuhaus was a Lutheran pastor; since 1991 he has been a Catholic convert and priest. The book originated as a commentary on the rise of the so-called 'new religious right' on the American political scene in the 1970s.

As will become clear later on, the idea of the 'naked public square' is neither new nor specific to the USA. Sociologists of religion have produced numerous theories of secularisation and privatisation of religion, which, to some extent, express the same ideas, although in different terms. Furthermore, the metaphor itself is rather unhappy: the 'nakedness' of the public square suggests that religious values are only a clothing of some kind used to cover what is hidden deeper and thus more important. For this reason in my paper I shall speak about the 'value-free public square'.

As already noted, it was the rise of new religious right, inspired by fundamental evangelism, that prompted Neuhaus to write his book. The popular sentiment that religion was being driven out of the public sphere and ignored, always present in certain sectors of US society, found new expression after the revolutionary events of 1968. In 1979 Jerry Falwell, a popular televangelist and electronic church leader, founded the 'Moral Majority', a religious movement that quickly entered the American political scene. After contributing significantly to the victory of conservative Ronald Reagan in the presidential election in 1980, the organisation exercised considerable influence on American policy, both internal and foreign. For example, it was a fundamental evangelical background that allowed Reagan to call the USSR an 'evil empire' in a famous speech in Orlando, Florida, on 8 March 1983. The aim of the 'moral majoritarians' was to activate the faithful politically and to gain influence in politics with the aim of combating communism, socialism, atheism and secular humanism (Motak, 2002, p. 86). The new religious right perceived the constitutional formula of separation of church and state as a source of evil and of the moral degradation of the American nation, whom they wanted to become again a 'Christian nation'.

In short, Neuhaus' response to the phenomenon was as follows: the eruption of religious sentiments and their political influences was not merely a temporary religious revival, one of the 'Great Awakenings' recurring regularly in American society. It was first and foremost a clear sign that religion naturally has its public dimension, despite claims made about 'modern societies' being *par excellence* 'secular societies'. Neuhaus' main point here is that it is only religion that can 'help reconstruct the "sacred canopy" for the American experiment', that is to provide an effective legitimisation for the country's rules and laws (Neuhaus, 1986, p. 60). His approach to church-state relations is based on his crucial premise that '... politics is in large part a function of culture. Beyond that is our assumption that at the heart of culture is religion' (Neuhaus, 1986, p. 27).

Such a perspective, which clearly reserves an important if not privileged place for religion within the set of the elements of culture, leads to an important conclusion. When religion is driven out of the public square, there remains a vacuum that needs to

be filled with some ideology. As Neuhaus puts it, 'what is called neutrality towards religion is an invitation for a substitute of religion. That substitute will be constructed from reasoning that is compatible with "a brooding and pervasive devotion to the secular"' (Neuhaus, 1986, p. 102). The religious sphere, which functions according to different rules from those followed by the state, constitutes a protection layer for society against the omnipotence of the state. Denis Wrong has written about the 'over-socialised conception of man' (Wrong, 1961). What Neuhaus (and many other thinkers) are aware of is the 'over-politicised conception of man'. Less religion in the public sphere can only equal more politics, according to Neuhaus, who speaks of 'the imperiousness of the political that would change all public space into political space' (Neuhaus, 1986, p. 29).

The way to protect society from too much state is to develop and support what Neuhaus and Peter L. Berger call 'mediating structures' (Berger and Neuhaus, 1977). In a book entitled *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society* they argue that it is groups like families, voluntary associations and churches that constitute the real environment for individuals. Politics is for few and it should not claim the first place in people's lives. Here, Neuhaus recalls Oscar Wilde's saying 'The problem with socialism is that it leaves one with no free evenings' (Wilde in Neuhaus, 1986, p. 3). In other words, politics – in this view – should in a way 'spare' the daily life of people.

If the value-free model of the public square turns out to be dangerous, what should relations between religion and the public arena look like? Neuhaus talks about the 'theonomous public square', where common reference to God provides legitimisation to the state and the law. The American formula 'one nation under God', as widely shared by the Founding Fathers and since 1954 included in the Pledge of Allegiance, is a good example. According to the Founders, the American Constitution and the very 'American project' itself were designed for religious people. Without religion there would remain no reason to obey the law (Novak, 2003).

### **Religion-Politics or Church-State Relations?**

I have reflected briefly on the 'value-free' model of the state. To make this model more clear, a fundamental distinction should be made. One must not confuse the relationship between church and state with the relationship between religion and the public sphere. 'Church' does not equal 'religion', as 'state' does not equal either 'politics' or 'the public sphere'. The notions of 'religious' and 'political' spheres possess much broader meaning: they embrace social spheres that cannot be reduced to their temporary and institutional forms. Obviously, the distinction is not sharp or easily made, especially when we define both religion and politics as crucial components of culture.

We could generally define the religious sphere as a sphere constituted by human ability to transcend one's physical and bodily limits, to establish and maintain a relationship with a supreme being or supernatural forces of some kind. 'Public square' is the broadest notion; it contains public expressions of the religious sphere and of all other forms of human activity (like politics and culture) that have a societal dimension. The political sphere, in this conception, would be the sphere of cooperation of various individuals motivated by their own beliefs and acting within the public square toward some common good. Politics is thus secondary in comparison with religion. Religion, in this conception, is both a motive and an aim of human activity; politics is nothing but a means to achieve those aims. We talk

about church-state relations and the order of these two words is significant: religion comes first, then politics.

On the basis on those definitions, we could distinguish ten types of relations:

1. relations between church and state;
2. relations between church and public square;
3. relations between church and religion;
4. relations between church and politics;
5. relations between state and religion;
6. relations between state and public square;
7. relations between state and politics;
8. relations between religion and public square;
9. relations between religion and politics;
10. relations between politics and public square.

Of course, quite often, especially in sociological research, it will be very difficult or even impossible to say in which of these theoretically separate fields particular research is being carried out. In Poland, for example, church-state and religion-state relations will overlap to a great extent because of the relative homogeneity of the religious sphere. The Catholic Church in Poland remains the principal bearer of religious values in the public square. This may obscure the differences between church-state and religion-politics relations. They could be more clearly distinguished and investigated in a more pluralistic society, for example that of the USA.

The above distinction has certain implications. Whereas one can talk about a particular church or religious leader being involved in politics it is more difficult to talk about the interference of religion in politics. Every politician is driven by some sort of motivation; religious motivation is one of them. It is not worse to be driven by religious belief in one's political activity than to be driven by any other form of motivation. As Jacek Salij observes, 'agnosticism is a one of the human attitudes toward the ultimate questions; it is a worldview choice and it has nothing to do with worldview neutrality. Therefore imposing such an attitude on a society which does not identify itself with it is a theocratic abuse' (Salij, 1994, pp. 121–22).

This view, however, is often rejected. Many fear that religious motivation in the public square can result in totalitarianism of some kind. As Neuhaus puts it, 'historically, it [the fear – SB] is based in the remembrance of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ...' (Neuhaus, 1986, p. 205). As the examples of communism and fascism make clear, a 'naked public square', that is, a public sphere without reference to transcendental values, cannot remain 'naked'. Other ideas will cover it, sometimes of a totalitarian character, whereas 'the transcendent dimensions of religious faith should provide, even make mandatory, a critical distancing from all temporal movements' (Neuhaus, 1986, p. 7).

### **Catholicism in Poland: Recent Debates**

Voices expressing the fear that religious values in the public square may well lead to intolerance are frequently heard in Poland too. After the collapse of the communist regime, there were warnings against 'black totalitarianism', that is, a dictatorship of the clergy (Borowik, 1999b, p. 15). The voices of secular humanists on such themes continue to be heard. To take only one recent example, let us recall the debate over the position and role of Catholicism in democratic Poland which took place in

*Rzeczpospolita*, one of country's most important dailies, in 2003. Dariusz Gawin spoke of a 'new religious cold war' (Gawin, 2003). In an article entitled 'Poland in the shadow of the church' Jolanta Brach-Czaina argued that

The Catholic Church denies an individual the right to formulate moral judgments independently or to decide freely about his or her own fate. The hierarchs pursue the subordination of all people's private lives to Catholic doctrine. This is why constitutions, their preambles and penalty codes are the area of the church's particular interests. Today, Poland is a model country where lay law is constructed according to the Catholic Church's will, in all spheres in which the clergy is interested . . . . How is it possible that in a democratic society small groups of fanatics can terrorise society, under the rule of both right-wing and left-wing parties? (Brach-Czaina, 2003)

It is noticeable that Brach-Czaina adopts a position according to which the public sphere should be 'free' of every religious reference. Any attempt to bring about religiously motivated values, no matter whether on the part of church authorities or of laypeople driven by their religious belief, leads simply to totalitarianism. Jarosław Gowin, a prominent Polish Catholic intellectual, replied:

Let's call things by their name. Professor Brach-Czaina dreams of a Poland in which Catholics could, in fact, freely follow their private rites, but at the same time would be denied the possibility of pronouncing them in public square (as this could result in filling this square with religious content). Many professors of philosophy used to support actively this model of state, demanding limiting the influences of religion. They could claim some success in this field, in particular between 1949 and 1956. But finally they did not succeed. And that is why not only Jolanta Brach-Czaina can nowadays present her views in *Rzeczpospolita*, but I can also polemicise with them. Well, this is the price of freedom. (Gowin, 2003)

Other participants in the debate, Kinga Dunin and Sławomir Sierakowski, pointed out that as there is a plurality of worldviews in Poland, the only way to resolve controversial issues is to vote on them. They wrote: 'if we are to be a civil society, various agreements made over the heads of society, for example the decision of the government not to hold a referendum over abortion or the "back-door introduction" of religious education into schools should be again made public' (Dunin and Sierakowski, 2003). It is often assumed that pluralism of worldviews results in a conviction that none of them can prevail or claim to be 'better' than others. The only way to resolve difficult questions is through the application of democratic procedures. This is in line with what Neuhaus observed to be true of the American liberal elites of the 1970s. He writes: 'The term "pluralistic" is often preferred to "secular", but this is much of the sameness. The point is that there are no religiously grounded referents which should be normative for public discourse and policy' (Neuhaus, 1986, p. 242).

Those of the above-cited authors who were critical of the church's position in Polish society largely ignored our distinction between church-state relations and religion-politics relations. Terms such as 'the church' or 'the hierarchs' were opposed to 'society' or 'individuals', similarly to the way in which under communism people referred to the regime as 'they', opposed to 'we' – society. Polish bishops and Catholic

intellectuals questioned by Paweł Załęcki have also noticed this phenomenon of replacing the 'red enemy' with the 'black enemy' (Załęcki, 1999, pp. 107–8).

### **Poland: toward a 'Value-Free' Public Square?**

Under communism in Poland religion was officially banned from the public sphere, at least for some periods. Despite this, the Catholic Church received strong support from society (including nonbelievers), and contributed to the collapse of communism. In 1989 the situation changed dramatically. Paradoxically, while the formerly totalitarian and officially atheist Belarus, Ukraine and Russia turned to Orthodoxy in search of moral legitimisation (Agadjanian, 1995), Poland experienced a notable decrease in social acceptance of the involvement of the church in current politics. The Catholic Church in Poland found itself in a completely new situation and initially had difficulties with adjusting to religious and cultural plurality (Eberts and Torok, 2001, p. 147).

At the beginning of the transformation up to 90 per cent of Poles approved of the position of the church in public life. Public opinion polls show that after 1989 '... the perceived growth of the church's presence in the public square is accompanied by a decline of social acceptance of the church as a public institution and the growth of support of the limitation of its influence upon the country's life, state policy in particular' (Roguska, 1999). In 2002 42 per cent of Polish citizens thought the church should be less involved in politics. At the same time 57 per cent of Poles perceived that the church exercised strong influence on politics (Roguska, 2002). These results indicate that Poles increasingly disapprove of the church's involvement in politics, and that they are satisfied with church-state relations when they believe the church does not play an important role in politics. This could indicate that the mechanism working towards the production of the 'value-free' model of the public square has been working in Poland since 1989.

There is another clue that could suggest the above conclusion. As we have already seen, in the USA popular discontent with the lack of religious values in the public square resulted in the appearance of the new religious right in the 1970s. Here a parallel with the phenomenon of Radio Maryja in Poland can be drawn. To some extent Radio Maryja was created by the same sentiment, that in the Polish public arena there is, as one Catholic writer observes,

a call to apply different principles in public life (where I adopt a 'neutral worldview') from those in private life (where I am a Catholic). This is double-dealing, this is a theory of double truth, so close to certain groups,<sup>1</sup> commonly called hypocrisy, expressed in conformist or opportunistic attitudes. (Jackowski, 1997, p. 50)

Radio Maryja was created in 1991 and now claims to have between one and three million regular listeners. It also contributed to the forming and success of a new Catholic party, *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (League of Polish Families, LPR), by providing extensive media coverage and promoting the League's candidates and their agenda on the radio.

The LPR was not the first religiously inspired party in democratic Poland: Christian-oriented right-wing parties have gained a stable, albeit marginal, position in the Polish political spectrum since 1989. The LPR, however, has been experiencing constantly growing support since its foundation in 2001. In the 2001 elections it

received over 7 per cent of the votes and thus gained representation in parliament. Two years later, Fr Tadeusz Rydzyk, the head of Radio Maryja, withdrew in public his support for the LPR, because of the fact of the LPR's growing independence and supposed non-compliance with the Radio's ideology. However, the LPR could still claim between 6 and 13 per cent support from the electorate. In the 2004 European Parliament election the LPR took second place, with ten deputies elected.

In 2003 a new religious television network connected to Radio Maryja was established. A 'religious right' and a form of 'electronic church' have thus become part of the political and social spectrum in Poland. The question remains, however, whether the religious right is going to have a success comparable to that of the Moral Majority in the USA, with the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980, or whether it is only a transitional phenomenon which will disappear as the economic situation in Poland begins to improve.

Social scientists and political commentators tend to interpret the activity of both the Radio Maryja movement and the LPR in the light of economic or political considerations. In these perspectives, both phenomena are a product either of social disillusionment with the effects of the 1989 transition, or of people's difficulties in adjusting to the requirements of the market economy. While not denying the epistemological value of these interpretations one should add, following Neuhaus' idea, that there might be another reason for their appearance. Some people might simply reject the idea of the strict separation of the religious and public spheres. The views that the Catholic Church might under certain conditions be a threat to the democratic order in Poland are expressed not only by radical political analysts, but by some sociologists as well (Woźniak, 2002). For example, Katarzyna Gilarek, a sociologist from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, claims that 'the duty of the liberal state is to defend freedom of the individual from the pressure of any religion, even if it is the religion of the majority' (Gilarek, 1999, p. 198). The 'value-free' model of the state not only has its proponents among 'militant secularists', but is part of the creed of the country's liberal elite.

### **Reference to Christianity in the European Constitution**

The possibility of the formation of a 'value-free' model of the state in Poland can be productively examined through the debate over European identity and its Christian sources. These issues have arisen in debate over the Constitution of the European Union and whether it should include a direct reference to God (*invocatio Dei*) as a source of values upon which Europe is founded or to Christianity as one of the factors that have contributed to the shaping of European identity.

Some western politicians argue that God should not be mentioned in the Constitution because this could lead to intolerance towards nonbelievers or agnostics. They favour the general formula of the 'spiritual heritage' of Europe, naming the Enlightenment but ignoring the Christian legacy (both Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic/Protestant). Meanwhile Polish politicians (even those representing the left wing of the Polish political scene) who are members of the body working on the draft Constitution, together with members of Christian Democratic parties in the European Parliament, have promoted the so-called 'Polish solution' to the problem, referring to the Polish Constitution which was adopted in a national referendum in 1997.

The long-debated preamble to this Constitution includes the following compromise formula:

We, Polish citizens – both those believing in God as the source of truth, justice, goodness and beauty, and those not sharing this faith, deriving the values they subscribe to from other sources – equal in rights and obligations with regard to Poland's common good . . . , do establish this Constitution of the Republic . . . .<sup>2</sup>

This Polish *invocatio Dei*, proposed by the first non-communist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, 'refers to the triple division: (1) for those who believe in God and for those who do not share such faith, (2) for the Christian heritage and universal human values, (3) for their responsibility before God or before their own conscience' (Hambura, 2003). Many Poles believe that only a formulation such as this treats believers and nonbelievers equally and respects the important role played by the various religious denominations in European history.

A recent survey has shown that 41 per cent of Polish citizens believe that it is essential to include a reference to Christianity in the preamble of the EU Constitution (Roguska, 2003). Signs that the Polish position was not likely to be reflected in the draft significantly decreased the number of Poles in favour of the Constitution: from 76 per cent in a Eurobarometer survey of May 2003 to 53 per cent at the end of June 2003 (Eurobarometer, 2003). Meanwhile some Catholic intellectuals have expressed the view that the Constitution is not a creed and that a reference to God is not therefore appropriate, but that the situation is different with regard to a reference to Christianity: the Christian legacy of Europe is simply a historical fact and therefore cannot be denied.

## Conclusions

Peter Beyer has predicted that in the postcommunist countries of Central and Eastern Europe religion will become 'more private and more public at the same time' (Beyer, 1999, p. 21). Perhaps this is particularly true of those countries of Eastern Europe where Orthodox churches provide legitimisation for the governments. In Poland, despite the still relatively strong position of Catholicism, religion is hardly likely to become more public, as there are signs that Poland is currently experiencing the arrival of what is already normal in the West: a lack of moral consensus, a situation in which a monopoly in basic moral norms cannot be claimed by any 'moral majority'. The appearance of new religious phenomena will not contribute to the restoration of this consensus; quite the opposite, it will lead to further moral fragmentation of society. As Christie Davies has written of religious trends in contemporary Britain, 'religious fragments do not constitute a moral community . . . . The moral centre cannot hold; things moral fall apart' (Davies, 1995, p. 40).

After having commented on the idea of the 'value-free' public square, I have tried to show certain similarities between the contemporary situation of religion in Poland and the situation in the USA in the 1970s. Although we can observe a Polish equivalent of the religio-political movement in the USA at that time – in the form of Radio Maryja and associated phenomena – it is difficult to say whether this phenomenon will result in a successful political movement on a larger scale, as took place in the USA in the 1970s. However, it is clear that debate is still in store for the future. What are the sources of legitimacy of the Polish state? What is Polish identity? Does religion influence people's political and cultural choices? Has the Polish experiment, that of introducing capitalism into a traditionally Catholic society, succeeded? The answers to



these questions will require, I believe, a rethinking of the place of religious values in the Polish public square.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'certain groups' was intended by the author to be obscure, yet in Poland one knows that he meant 'liberals and freemasons' – as he would put it – from the Freedom Union (*Unia Wolności*), a formerly centre-right party. The party still exists today as a social-liberal party after its right-wing members withdrew in 2001, but it is no longer relevant in Polish politics.

<sup>2</sup> English translation of the preamble cited from <http://www.warsawvoice.pl/old/v426/View01.html>.

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