

‘There can be no Vacation from God’: Children’s Retreats, Leisure and Social Change in Poland*

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Introduction

In the context of religion in postcommunist Eastern Europe, little attention is paid to the sphere of leisure and tourism, probably because this sphere is believed to be secular and frivolous, whereas religion is considered ‘serious stuff’. However, in Poland during communism one of the spheres in which the conflict between the Catholic Church and the communist state was played out was precisely the sphere of leisure. Recreation organised through state-owned enterprises was meant to absorb the free time of the workers (Jung, 1994) and many adults in contemporary Poland have participated as children in state-subsidised *kolonie*, *obozy* or *wczasy* (children’s villages, summer camps or vacations). The church, on the other hand, started to organise its own leisure pursuits in opposition to the state. The most prominent initiative in this regard were the *Oaza* (Oasis) retreats.

The parish-based Oasis movement initially proposed 15-day retreats for children and youngsters (and later, to some extent, for married couples and families) as an alternative to state-organised *obozy* and *kolonie* ((sport) camps and children’s villages). In the heyday of Oasis over 70,000 people, mainly children and teenagers, participated yearly in its summer retreats. Fifteen years after the end of communism, the number of participants fluctuates around a respectable 50–60,000 (according to the movement). The movement is still widely known as *Oaza*, although officially the name has been changed to the Light-Life Movement (*Ruch Światło-Życie*), while the name *Oaza* specifically denotes the groups for children (Oasis of the Children of God (*Oaza Dzieci Bożych*)) and teenagers (Oasis of New Life (*Oaza Nowego Życia*)). I was involved in a research project in 2002–03 to look into the current significance of the Oasis movement.¹ From interviews with priests and teenagers it became clear that leisure is still as contested an issue as it was during communism, and that Oasis retreats are still seen as opposed to *kolonie* despite the changes that have taken place. The significance of Oasis retreats in relation to *kolonie* in particular and leisure pursuits for young people in general before and after 1989 is the subject of this article.

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The organisation of Oasis in the 1950s was based on a concern for young people in the light of an aggressive state policy in the fields of education and young people's leisure. After 1989, a clear ideological leisure policy on the part of the state, already weakened because of the economic crisis, disappeared altogether. Nevertheless, for the Catholic Church, and for religious groups within that church, leisure has remained a field of conflict about morality in the absence of a clear state policy. I argue that contestation about leisure is the result of current market and consumption conditions, which give rise to a discourse on morality which is new but which nevertheless also draws on continuities with the past. In this article I thus wish to explore perceptions of leisure on the part of state and church during communism, as well as the changes and continuities between the communist and postcommunist period in this regard.

State, Church and Leisure before 1989

As in most other European countries, leisure time in Poland became more abundant for an ever larger number of people in the first decades of the twentieth century. The Polish Tourist Organisation (*Polskie Towarzystwo Turystyczno-Krajoznawcze* (PTTK)), founded in 1950, finds its origin in two older organisations that were founded in 1873 and 1906, and the organised Scout movement dates from 1911, while the famous philanthropist doctor Janusz Korczak started his charity work for children in this same period. In the interwar era, in a sovereign and united Poland, the sphere of leisure expanded further and vacations were even organised for workers and children.

The sphere of leisure that had already developed to some extent in the interwar period in an independent Poland was occupied for ideological reasons by the communist regime in the postwar period. On the one hand, leisure was part of the social policy of the state, according to which everybody was to have equal access to culture and recreation. On the other hand, the specific leisure opportunities offered were meant to socialise the population into 'new socialist men', and simultaneously to keep them away from the 'opium of the people', the church. Many organisations which had organised people's leisure time were therefore disbanded in the early communist period in favour of newly formed institutions of leisure.

The absorption of increasing leisure time came in many forms. 'Houses of Culture' were part of the 'cultural enlightenment' project of the communist state and meant to ward off social problems by guiding (young) people into officially accepted leisure pursuits (White, 1990, p. 3). Their repertoire comprised film, theatre and concerts amongst other activities. Excursions would be organised for workers on Sundays, thereby effectively inhibiting people from going to church. *Wczasy*, summer vacations, were organised for white- and blue-collar workers, with the aim of instilling in them a new notion of class (but in fact reinforcing traditional class distinctions: see Kenney, 1994). Organised tourism even extended to the international level. From the late 1950s 'Friendship Trains' carried people on trips to neighbouring Soviet-bloc countries, to 'further contacts and friendship among them' (Polak, 2003, p. 23).

Although state-organised leisure was in principle meant for all age groups, one can safely state that the most important target groups were schoolchildren and teenagers. Schoolchildren went to *obozy*, camps organised around physical exercise and competition, for which schools selected their best pupils. Physical exercise, sport and mass gymnastic displays in particular were part and parcel of the totalitarian communist state, which asserted its strength by displaying strong, beautiful young bodies (Roubal, 2003). Another form of organised leisure for children and teenagers

were the famous *kolonie*, camps or villages for children of school age. Parents working for state companies could send their children to these *kolonie*, which were usually located in tourist areas such as the seaside. All these different vehicles for leisure served the objective of the regime to socialise people – especially children and teenagers – into ‘new socialist man’. Somewhat paradoxically this building of ‘socialist man’ took place in areas far away from that other project of socialism, heavy industry, which was considered unhealthy for children.

Concern with leisure time, and especially that of children, is hardly surprising. During the school year children and youngsters were involved in a daily routine that was very much controlled by the state apparatus. School was the primary institution for socialising the next generation into comrades, its work being supplemented by all kinds of after-school activities in Houses of Culture. The summer vacation was therefore perceived as a major problem by the communist regime. It was felt that the work of a year could be undone by two months of absence from socialising influences (Kosiński quoted in Polak, 2003, p. 13). State-organised summer camps were meant to counter this possibility, and as early as 1949 over a million youngsters under the age of 18 attended them (Kosiński quoted in Polak, 2003, p. 14).

It was not only the state apparatus that saw the long period of the summer vacation as a threat. The Catholic Church perceived a similar problem: breaking the routine, taking leave from daily obligations, could all too easily lead churchgoers, and especially young believers, to take leave from religious obligations as well. The church’s concern was epitomised in the slogan ‘there can be no vacation from God’. Temporary leave ran the risk of becoming permanent leave. Many parishes therefore started to organise their own excursions, combining play, sport or visits to cultural and historical objects with prayer and mass. The exemplary role of Pope John Paul II – who before his pontificate could often be found in the Polish mountains – in the development of this ‘religious tourism’ cannot be overestimated. Trips through the mountains – walking in summer, skiing in winter – were and still are very popular. The Jesuits, Franciscans and other religious orders organised meetings, retreats and camps, and in the 1980s they were joined by the independent Catholic scouting movement (the main scouting movement being communist in orientation), by the apostolic Schoenstatt movement, and by other similar bodies. One of the oldest, most prominent, renowned, visible, organised and therefore contested phenomena, however, were the summer retreats organised by the Catholic Oasis movement.²

Fr Franciszek Blachnicki, who before the Second World War was also involved in the patriotic Scout movement, organised his first Oasis retreat in 1954. It was in this same period of Stalinism, which lasted until 1956, that all church organisations, such as the Catholic Youth Association (*Katolickie Stowarzyszenie Młodzieży (KSM)*), were abolished. It is no coincidence that Fr Blachnicki started his retreats in this period of oppression. He was able to get around the decree that outlawed all independent organisations (besides the Catholic Church itself) by organising the retreats in the form of education for altar-boys. Religious vocational education (comprising instruction for altar-boys as well as education for the clergy) had not been outlawed because it was defined as an internal church affair.

The retreats organised by Fr Blachnicki had little in common with traditional retreats, which usually lasted only a couple of days. Characteristic of the 15-day Oasis retreats was – and still is – the combination of religious activities and play. The retreats were thus something between a retreat in the traditional sense and the summer camps for children organised by the state, and should also be understood as alternatives to these *kolonie*. Fr Blachnicki – who did not live to see the fall of

communism but died in 1987 in exile in Germany – had clear opinions on the role of Oasis in regard to other, state-organised leisure pursuits. The large number of textbooks and manuals on how to organise the retreats written by Blachnicki contain manifold expressions of his concern about ‘children and young people being at *kolonie* and *oboz*y in summer time and in sanatoriums where there is a greater “permissiveness”’. (‘Permissiveness’ here is a translation of the Polish word ‘*swoboda*’, which means an absence of restrictions.) ‘These are short periods, but it doesn’t seem that we could conclude from this that even these periods of several weeks, where pausing in religious practices is regarded as something normal, will be without consequences for the religious life of these young people’ (Blachnicki, 1988, pp. 23–24).

These concerns about *kolonie* were not unfounded, and they related directly to the explicitly stated objectives of the communist state. Although it was not forbidden to attend church on Sunday during summer camps, this was certainly discouraged. State policy documents from the 1950s, for example, advise not locating *kolonie* sites too close to churches (Polak, 2003, p. 13). Fr Blachnicki called on participants in summer camps to demand the opportunity of going to church on Sunday, since they had the legal right to do so (Blachnicki, 1988, p. 24).

Vacations in communist Poland were therefore an area in which state and church, the latter particularly through the Oasis movement, competed to keep a grip on young people. Both state and church perceived leisure as potentially dangerous, especially for young people, and felt the need to turn it into a pedagogical project. For both church and state, morality was situated in a *community* of people, whether this was a community of united workers or of committed Catholics. And although the church was in opposition to the state and perceived atheist summer camps as immoral, in fact through *kolonie* the state designed its own project of moral education. The goals of state-organised leisure were very normative indeed: leisure was meant to socialise people into comrades, with all the moral values attached to this concept.

The normative concept of socialisation was part and parcel both of state-organised summer camps and of Oasis retreats; each had its own utopian idea of what society should look like. Communists spoke about ‘new men’, picturing men and women as able-bodied comrades literally and symbolically building a new society. Oasis, drawing upon the Bible, also spoke – and still speaks – about ‘new men’ (see Ephesians 4: 21–25), envisaging men and women becoming truly Christian and creating a society of authentic believers. Fr Franciszek Chowaniec, who for several decades was in charge of the Oasis communities in the Kraków archdiocese, relates that Fr Blachnicki invented Oasis retreats as ‘quasi-relaxing vacations’: people go on vacation in order to relax, but Oasis retreats were organised in such a way ‘that it was relaxation moulding a person, his principles, his life’. At state-organised summer camps youngsters were to be socialised into *homo sovieticus*, while at Oasis summer retreats they were to be socialised into *homo catholicus*. In both cases the ‘new man’ was supposed to be a social man, realising himself or herself in and through a community of like-minded people.³ The structure of both summer camps and retreats was to teach the participants a new pattern of life, which ideally they would take home with them after the holidays, implanting this new lifestyle in their direct surroundings. (What followed in practice in the case of state-organised tourism was often an exchange of the kind ‘you participate in state rituals, then we won’t interfere with your religious preferences’.)

From the above it becomes clear that Oasis retreats and state-organised *kolonie* did not only compete with each other, they also both competed with a third – implicit – alternative model of spending leisure time, especially associated with young people.

This third model could be called 'hedonistic individualism', in which leisure time would be spent according to the private taste of individuals. According to communist ideology, especially during Stalinism, leisure was not meant to be spent individually; or, as the historian Sowiński (quoted in Polak, 2003, p. 10) puts it, 'the basic idea of communist leisure was that spare time belongs to the state, and not the citizen'. Free time was not time free from responsibility towards society (see also White, 1990). Leisure was meant to serve the state, raising comrades, and organised leisure can therefore be defined as a pedagogical project. Oasis similarly emphasised the pedagogical dimension. Thus, while being in opposition to each other, state and church in Poland shared a common adversary in individualism, which both of them associated with the capitalist West. It is the 'individualist' way of spending one's leisure time that dominates Poland today, and while the state has disappeared as an ideological force from this field, church groups – and Oasis in particular – have remained.

There are, then, many similarities between the communist project of organising leisure and the concerns and forms of organisation offered by the church, especially, but not only, in the form of Oasis retreats. These similarities pertain to both form (communal as opposed to individual) and content (moral education versus immoral 'free time'). It is precisely their shared interest in controlling the leisure time especially of children and teenagers that made them competitors in this field and suspicious of one another. This ideological competition frequently led to open conflict.

From Ideological Competition to Open Conflict: The Repression of the Oasis Movement

When we take into account the shared interest of state and church in controlling the leisure time of children and teenagers it should come as no surprise that the Oasis retreats became the subject of a fierce battle between the state and the Oasis movement. It seems that contention was particularly acute in the 1970s. The number of people taking part in Oasis retreats started to increase from the mid-1970s; at the same time the number of people participating in state-organised tourism started to decline because of the economic crisis. Meanwhile the political-economic crisis was producing a growing opposition, which partly found its expression precisely in the Oasis movement. More and more people joined the movement, and a proportion of them (impossible to determine) were politically active; although the socio-political significance of Oasis has been contested by some⁴ the socio-political involvement of Fr Blachnicki himself is well documented.

The success of Oasis and the political activities of Fr Blachnicki must have been of great concern to the communist regime, and it therefore comes as no surprise that in documents and interviews references can be found to state interference in Oasis retreats in the late 1970s. Fr Blachnicki himself, for example, writes that for him a climax was reached in 1977, when the provincial governor of Nowy Sącz – where the large majority of retreats took place – took it as his duty to resolve the 'problem' of Oasis retreats in his province (Blachnicki, 1989, p. 84). Oppressive tactics used included the harassment of people offering hospitality to retreat participants, the denial of a licence for building a centre, fines for every act that could be considered to be an infringement of the law, the harassment of parents of participants (some of whom were Party members and risked being expelled, as was the case with a nun whom I interviewed), and excessive sanitary controls by the institution for public hygiene Sanepid.

Meanwhile, the role of the Catholic Church in Poland in this conflict between the state and Oasis was ambivalent. Although the church had a stake in promoting Oasis,

the summer retreats became the subject of many discussions between church and state. On the one hand, for example, synod meetings in the Kraków archdiocese between 1972 and 1979 stressed the importance of movements such as Oasis, as reported in the monthly publication *Znak*:

The synod resolutions emphasise the importance of creating apostolic youth groups that should create a climate of intense religious life. They call on young people to participate actively in the liturgical movement Light-Life as well as in the young people's apostolic movement. Everybody who is loyal to the archdiocese should surround the above-mentioned youth movements with special care. (Dyduch, 1983, p. 1139)

Indeed, while before the end of the 1970s church authorities were 'surprised but delighted' if Oasis was organised within a parish, by the end of the 1970s 'they expected this kind of activity' (Mucha and Żaba, 1992, p. 60).

On the other hand, however, the attitude of the church towards Oasis was at the same time fraught with ambiguity. The historian Andrzej Grajewski, vice-editor of the Catholic magazine *Gość Niedzielny* and member of the council of the Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* (IPN)), attributes this ambiguity largely to socialist propaganda. In an article in the Catholic intelligentsia magazine *Więź* Grajewski writes about the surveillance of Fr Blachnicki by the Security Service (SB) and its consequences for the relationship between Oasis and the church. The Security Service magazine *Samoobrona Wiary* paid particular attention to clergy and laity involved in Oasis. In this magazine Fr Blachnicki was presented as a schismatic who maintained 'suspicious contacts' with Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses. The magazine also made use of negative opinions about Oasis among clergy in order to discredit Blachnicki further, which indicates that Oasis was itself regarded as an ambiguous phenomenon in church circles, for reasons I will discuss below. In one particular instance, Blachnicki's radical statements about both socialism and the role of the church – Grajewski (2001) reckons Blachnicki's statements among the most radical of those times – caused a good deal of unrest in church circles, and resulted in a critical letter from the Polish primate, Cardinal Wyszyński, to Bishop Błaskiewicz, the delegate of the episcopate in matters concerning liturgy and the Light-Life Movement. Blachnicki did not limit himself to statements, but was for example also involved as a retreat leader during the strikes in Gdynia.

While Oasis certainly contributed to the church's oppositional role, then, it also endangered the position of the church in that it escaped its control and put great pressure on the precarious relationship between church and state.

The concern for a workable relationship with the state authorities was certainly not the only reason for the church to be concerned about Oasis. Grajewski's reference to Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses in the critique of *Oaza* reflects the fact that there were indeed contacts between Blachnicki and various renewal movements of Protestant origin. The formational programme of Oasis is derived in large part from the evangelical Protestant Campus Crusade for Christ (Cupiał, 1996). Not all priests applauded these evangelical influences, which were also gaining ground in Poland outside Oasis, most clearly in the Catholic charismatic movement *Odnowa w Duchu Świętym* (Renewal in the Holy Spirit).⁵ Using the pseudonym Kowalski, a former leader of Renewal in the Holy Spirit tells in an interview of a conflict he had with a priest at that time. The priest wanted him to write down his testimony first, so that he could read it. Kowalski objected that the priest intended to censor the Holy Spirit, to which the priest

reacted that Kowalski perhaps thought that he was the Holy Spirit himself. This incident highlights the distrust felt towards new approaches to Christianity in Poland in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁶ Both Oasis and Renewal in the Holy Spirit were suspected of being too much influenced by Protestant evangelicalism, as a result of which the authority of the Catholic Church was in danger of being undermined, with believers potentially becoming full converts to Protestantism. Examples of individual and group conversion over the years show that this was indeed a reality to be feared. Cupiał (1996, p. 131) mentions the Christian association 'Pojednanie' in Lublin as an example.

When Fr Blachnicki went to Germany during Martial Law the church took the opportunity to appoint Fr Wojciech Danielski – who had already unofficially led the Oasis movement since 1982 – as the new leader. This apparently happened 'in agreement with the proposal of the founder and the moderator of the movement Fr Franciszek Blachnicki', as Paluch (1998, p. 94) argues in the historical overview of Oasis published by the movement itself. Paluch explains the appointment of a new national moderator as evidence of the church's desire to protect Oasis. It also clearly suited the church, however, in the light of the church's ambiguous relationship with Blachnicki.

The conflict between Oasis and the church, and between Oasis and the communist state, ended with the fall of communism. Oasis retreats are still organised today, however, and what seems to have persisted to the present day is the stark opposition imagined to exist between Oasis retreats and *kolonie*. The state has largely retreated from the sphere of leisure, but *kolonie* are still organised, albeit on a much smaller scale than before, by state enterprises (from universities to public transport companies) or by commercial travel agencies. As a way for teenagers to spend their vacations (without their parents), *kolonie* are widely accepted, and an integral part of contemporary Polish reality, alongside other ways of spending vacations with parents or friends. Nevertheless, the disappearance of a clear state policy on leisure for young people raises questions about why and how *kolonie* figure in contemporary narratives as a reference counterpoint to Oasis retreats.

After 1989: Filling the Moral Vacuum

The variety of leisure opportunities available under the aegis of the Catholic Church has increased considerably since 1989. The Catholic Youth Association, disbanded in the early years of communist rule, has been revived. Religious festivals, often specifically for young people, are organised year-round. International events, such as the ecumenical activities at the Taizé community or the Roman Catholic World Youth Day, have come increasingly within the reach of Polish teenagers, notwithstanding the country's economic difficulties. These religious leisure activities have an advantage over market-regulated activities in that they are usually cheaper and sometimes subsidised by parishes and dioceses. Amongst these options, Oasis retreats, far from seeming outdated and old-fashioned, are still popular. In a climate of increasing anxiety about the harmfulness of secular leisure possibilities for young people, Oasis retreats, suggesting a place that is distinctly different from the 'desert' society, do ever more justice to their name.

Despite the changes brought by the end of communism, it seems from the way young Oasis members today speak about the retreats that *kolonie* are still seen as the main counterpoint to them. It is the degree of their *dissimilarity* to *kolonie* that is regarded as proof of the quality and success of Oasis retreats, as an interview with

19-year-old Marek suggests: ‘the first retreat I still treated as a kind of *kolonie*: as a summer *kolonie* which on the one hand was dedicated to God, because there was a lot of prayer, and a daily mass, but still a *kolonie* and not something that would help me in my formation’. Other teenagers too spoke about retreats and *kolonie* in terms that strongly recalled the critique voiced before 1989. They employed a language in which a dichotomy was drawn between Oasis retreats and *kolonie*: retreats are ‘good’ and ‘moral’ whereas *kolonie* are ‘bad’ and ‘immoral’. How is it possible that *kolonie* have remained a major point of reference for both priests and teenagers involved in Oasis beyond 1989? Here I shall show that, in the eyes of their critics, *kolonie* serve equally well to epitomise the post-1989 evils of the market, in particular consumption, as they served to epitomise the evils of communism. Although the language of criticism sounds very similar, it actually targets very different social realities.

Before discussing the relevance of the new social reality for the continuing dichotomy between Oasis retreats and *kolonie*, however, some qualifying observations need to be made, since dividing Polish history into pre- and post-1989 periods mystifies certain developments. First, the state had already started to retreat from the sphere of leisure long before 1989 (Roberts and Jung, 1995). Second, concern over the role of the state on the part of the church authorities has continued beyond 1989. The article in the Concordat about the responsibility of the state in ensuring that teenagers at *kolonie* are able to practise their religion is telling in this regard.⁷ Third, the marketisation of leisure is not limited to the post-1989 period, and therefore neither is the critique of it. Gierek’s economic reforms in the 1970s led to a temporary increase in affluence, allowing many to buy a car and to go on holidays. In the same period, an Oasis manual (dated 1977) speaks of relaxation being treated ‘as equivalent to thoughtless idleness, which often leads to boredom and killing of time with various entertainments, often of a dubious value, leading to a temporary satisfaction or pleasure without a real, deep relaxation and peace’ (Blachnicki, 2001 [1977]). The tone is strikingly similar to that of contemporary criticism of *kolonie* and other leisure pursuits, although the contemporary concern is with leisure as focusing mainly on pleasure, rather than with leisure as a venue for socialist indoctrination. Nevertheless, the year 1989 does constitute a turning point, when the state ceases to be an ideological opponent and can therefore no longer – or certainly no longer to the same degree – be held accountable for the spread of ‘immorality’, as defined by concerned laity and clergy.

Not surprisingly, contemporary Oasis members between the ages of 15 and 25, with often only very vague memories of the period before 1989, do not speak about *kolonie* as an ideological tool designed to raise young people as comrades. In the communist period *kolonie* were considered as a competing pedagogical project, teaching the wrong kind of morality; currently the *kolonie* are perceived as devoid of any pedagogical meaning at all. Kamila, who had just started her studies at university, described the Oasis retreat she attended:

We were on the beach non-stop. There were few meetings. I didn’t like that. I liked it in the sense that I looked good, because I had a suntan. I was happy to relax at the seaside. But when it comes to the retreat, I experienced it more like something like *kolonie*. Not as a retreat, but just as an unstructured outing.

Kamila clearly thought that individual leisure activities had dictated the programme of this Oasis retreat too much. In the opinion of participants, then, Oasis retreats,

unlike *kolonie*, are supposed to teach people something, to educate them. Interviews indicate that the essence of the retreat is that it contributes to individual *development*, as opposed to individual *consumption* of leisure.

Central to the current contrast between Oasis retreats and *kolonie* is the idea, deemed characteristic of the contemporary mentality in Poland, that one can do whatever one wants, that one's personal preferences take precedence over values. According to Asia her Oasis retreat 'was different from a vacation, because we did something other than... you see, we did something other than what we wanted to'. Asia stressed that the retreat, unlike other vacation options, involved a certain sacrifice on her part.

Behind the comparisons made by young people between Oasis retreats and *kolonie* lies a broader cultural critique of contemporary Poland. Fr Dziewiecki speaks about this culture as promoting 'anti-educational slogans (for example "do what you want" and "easy living")' that seem attractive most of all to young people, because of their lack of experience. In Oasis, as in Poland in general, the pleasure-oriented 'do what you want' (*róbta co chceta*) is contrasted with the Augustinian 'love and do what you want', which emphasises that you can do what you want only if you put God first. Dziewiecki (2004) argues that it is the promise of 'easy happiness' that is the most destructive; it is relevant to seductions ranging from alcohol and drugs to religious sects. 'Happiness coined with false money' is the telling title of an article on sects in the Polish version of *L'Osservatore Romano* (Krysa and Petrus, 2002). 'Sects' are seen as promising people a formula for happiness, and are therefore to be regarded as a symptom of the consumer society, in which promises of 'easy happiness' lead people to believe that true happiness can be bought or otherwise easily obtained.

Vacation is seen as the period when the promise of 'easy happiness' is at its most seductive. A religious magazine notes that young people at *kolonie* and *obozy* are far away from their parents, who are thus unable to check up on them, while those running the camp may not notice if their charges are exceptionally lively or cheerful, since this is after all a time for play and rest (Mical and Chwełatiuk, 2002). Another magazine warns that although vacation can be a period of rest and making new friends, one has to be aware of sects, since vacation 'is a special period, because when we take a break from our daily responsibilities we also often forget about our primary obligation – staying a Christian' (Szydłak, 1999).

In these young people's narratives the concept '*kolonie*', which in socialist times epitomised the state's educative project, now epitomises the amoral leisure pursuits which have become available to an increasing number of young people especially in the cities – television, the internet, the disco – and is placed in contrast to Oasis in general and to the Oasis retreats in particular. Lucyna, whom I came to know as one of the most conservative members of Oasis – with her young husband she was involved in the ultracatholic Radio Maryja – told me

Of course I very much like the form of those vacation retreats where, as I see it, young people are taught culture (*kultura*), refinement. They are taught that life is not just about television and stupid music. We also have a programme for the evening. You could organise for example an evening about poetry, teaching people how to understand poetry. During retreats you don't watch television or listen to the radio. The retreat provides a kind of isolation [from 'television and stupid music']. A lot of attention is paid to nature. When you live in a city like Kraków you only see large flat buildings,

and then when you go somewhere to a small village, then you are not always able to discern the beauty of nature. And you see the Lord in nature.⁸

Participation in Oasis is thus no longer cultural criticism of the state, but – in an equally coherent narrative – criticism of a hedonistic lifestyle focused on pleasure. The champions of Oasis argue that the retreats foster responsibility, values and culture as opposed to leisure pursuits in which engagement presumably follows from the anticipation of pleasure. It is a short step from here to arguing that Oasis retreats are valuable precisely because they are difficult and challenging. One Oasis priest, for example, warned in a sermon in a service I attended at the end of the school year that vacation was the ultimate time ‘to do something stupid, like not coming back [to Oasis] after vacation, because you didn’t like it last year’. He was warning the teenagers not to act on their fickle emotions and give up something good simply because it was difficult. It is particularly the more experienced teenage members who think in this way. They take care not to speak in terms of happiness when describing their religious engagement. Marta, about to finish her studies at university, commented to me about the veneration of the Stations of the Cross organised in her parish that ‘people don’t have to *like* the Stations of the Cross, it has to be a *struggle*’. When speaking about themselves, teenagers generally emphasised the *difficulties* they experienced when trying to deepen their religion.

In the discussion about leisure today *kolonie* are perceived as a particular manifestation of a larger popular culture that carries no moral message and has no pedagogical function, but instead focuses on consumption and pleasure. Although consumerism and popular culture often relate back to the state, which ‘allows’ them, today’s argument goes beyond the traditional struggle between church and state in communist times. The church felt that it could claim a moral monopoly under communism, but now it is confronted with a free market of leisure pursuits. The clash of ideologies has thus been replaced by a clash in the context of an *ideological vacuum*.

Although clergy and laity often imagine consumption to be an ideology in its own right, it lacks clear, identifiable protagonists. In an ideological vacuum there is no clearly defined actor to be blamed for ‘immoral’ leisure pursuits. This raises the question how to deal with the danger and what role Oasis can play. Because it is not clear where the perceived danger is coming from, warnings tend to be issued in ‘blanket’ terms. Any leisure pursuit is potentially dangerous. As one priest instructed teenagers at a general meeting I attended:

You may think ‘I can go everywhere with my friends and still be with Jesus at the same time’. But you have to be realistic. Even the ‘tough’ ones go down. You have to be able to avoid situations that will lead to sin. When you’re in a disco, for example, and you feel you’re in danger, don’t go next time. The same goes for magazines. You have to have your wits about you. Don’t think ‘nothing will happen to me if I read this’. Why? It gives you nothing, it doesn’t enrich you and it can only make it difficult for you to remain pure. You have to decide for yourself not to read it. You have to protect yourself, because they’ll eat you.

It is deemed difficult to withstand immoral forces precisely because of their innocent appearance. It is no longer clear, as it was before 1989, who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’.

The dangers potentially presented by leisure, then, do not come only from the outside, but also, and perhaps primarily, from the inside. The ‘rest from values’

offered during vacation is seen not as a result of the activity of an external force (such as the state), but as a result of failure to resist temptation. Asia comments on the influence of her classmates: 'They are a long way away from this spirituality and that's why I sometimes get influenced by them. I'm not saying it's only their fault, though. Because that's certainly not the case. If I wanted, it would be entirely different.' Subjugation or unfreedom (*zniewolenie*) is no longer externally imposed by the state, but has its internal causes. Drug use, involvement with 'sects' and excessive consumerism are all spoken of in terms of 'unfreedom'. Some zealous Catholics in Poland talk in terms of conspiracy in connection with these vices, but the general perception is that people today become 'unfree' as a result of their own free choice.

It is therefore not surprising that children and teenagers are no longer just the *subject* of debates about morality, but have become the *addressees* of direct appeals to their sense of morality and responsibility. In the words of the priest just quoted, 'You have to decide for yourself not to read [magazines]. You have to protect yourself, because they'll eat you.' One Oasis internet site, for example, puts questions for the reader to ask himself or herself: 'How do I plan to spend my vacation?' 'Is there a church in the place I plan to spend my vacation?' 'Have I planned time to spend with my family, friends, God?' (Rachunek, 2004).

The view of leisure as being potentially dangerous calls for organised and supervised leisure, a domain from which the state has retreated. Oasis attempts to satisfy young people's leisure and tourism needs completely. As well as organising summer retreats, Oasis attempts to offer religious substitutes for all 'secular' leisure activities, for example parties on the occasion of Carnival or at New Year's Eve celebrations. One gets the impression that competition over leisure is sometimes seen as a race against time. As one Oasis organiser observed about the need to involve children as early as possible in Oasis: 'Life today is so rich and full of all kinds of attractions, so if we start recruiting later, they are already taken up. And today with the help of television, advertisements, well, occupying people with something, incorporating them in one group or another starts very early.'

Anxiety about leisure time among Catholic circles in Poland today, I argue, stems from a more general ambivalence about the meaning of 'freedom' in contemporary 'free' Poland.

The Ambivalence of Freedom

Ambivalence about leisure time becomes more understandable when we look at the discourse about 'freedom' in post-1989 Poland. Freedom from oppression had long been desired, but the idea that 'true freedom' comes from within was already an important motif in the Oasis movement in the late 1970s on the eve of the rise of Solidarity. It became even more important in Poland when political freedom was regained and a market economy introduced. The new circumstances seemed to exacerbate the 'problem' of freedom. One of my interviewees was the oldest member of Oasis I met, having attended retreats in the 1980s. He remembered those times, as he put it, 'very positively', but, he continued, 'now they are different, now there is freedom, *freedom*'. The interview was in Polish, but he bitterly added the last 'freedom' in English, which immediately drew attention to the ambiguous nature of post-1989 reality.⁹

The ambivalence about 'freedom' which is an integral feature of postcommunist Poland is conveyed in the paradoxical title of the book *The Unfortunate Gift of Freedom* by the famous Catholic philosopher Józef Tischner (1993). The word 'gift' is

easily associated with religion (think of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts that are carried towards the altar during mass), but freedom is an 'unfortunate gift', in that it seems to impose another kind of 'slavery' upon people.

In discussion of 'freedom' in post-1989 Poland a distinction is made between two kinds of freedom, 'moral' freedom and 'immoral' freedom. These can be defined respectively as 'freedom to' and 'freedom from'. The former is the freedom to act in a moral way; the latter is the freedom to withdraw oneself from the *mores* of the larger community. It recalls the distinction made by Isaiah Berlin (1969) between positive and negative freedom. For Berlin positive freedom derives from the wish of the individual to be his own master. Of central importance here is the individual's wish to be treated as a subject; this resonates with traditional Catholic understanding of the dignity of the human being and the necessity of treating others as subjects rather than objects (in Poland pedagogical texts and debates often centre around the idea of *podmiotowość*, which can be translated as 'subjectivity'). The emphasis in the distinction between these two kinds of freedom is an *individual* emphasis, and it is the emphasis on the individual dimension of freedom that makes the current discussion about leisure so different from the discussion in communist times, when it revolved around at least two (political and religious) understandings of *community*. The debate about Oasis retreats and *kolonie* focuses on the individual; Oasis retreats, although a communal activity, are spoken about by participants in terms of their contribution to their *personal* development as people and Christians.

The ambiguous nature of 'freedom' has been a preoccupation of Polish Catholic intellectuals ever since the fall of communism. Discussing the period 1989–99 one writer even argues that 'the history of freedom in Poland is just beginning', and that 'freedom and religion are slowly learning how to be allies in Poland' (Gowin, 1999, p. 465). There is a similar discussion within Oasis. Freedom and liberation are concepts that are frequently repeated at meetings and retreats. The national moderator of Oasis, Fr Litwinczuk, recognised in an interview in 2001 that Oasis had to answer new challenges: 'It's more or less the same as with the works of the new evangelisation. The content is the same as was passed on by Fr Franciszek Blachnicki, but it has to be adapted to the new mentality of people choking in freedom' (Kempny, 2001).

Litwinczuk points out that Oasis has not only not lost anything in actuality in postcommunist Poland, but that it has even become *more* relevant. Leisure is now perceived as the time of freedom *par excellence* and carries with it the potential for both kinds of freedom. Thus, whereas before 1989 *Oaza* opposed oppression, it now has to oppose 'freedom', a far more difficult task, since the distinction between moral and immoral leisure pursuits along religious lines is not easy to maintain.

Although on the discursive level a clear distinction exists between proper and improper leisure pursuits for young people, in practice the situation is markedly more complex. Outside Oasis priests explore the possibility of organising commercial leisure activities with less overt moral aims, or in the absence of any moral claim. Priests start travel agencies, or attract young people by for example organising a disco in the church (Czerwiński and Blawaska, 2005). In a popular magazine even Oasis itself was classified as a regular leisure pursuit alongside bungee jumping, paragliding, sailing, diving, climbing, horse-riding (Henzler and Zagner, 2002). Indeed, my research revealed that parents sometimes send children to Oasis retreats because of the relatively low cost of this form of vacation.

In the 1980s Fr Blachnicki (1989, p. 84) spoke of the 'struggle for man' (*walka o człowieka*). The struggle still continues, but has become a struggle to save man from *himself* rather than from the external oppression of the communist state. The field of

leisure has remained an important battlefield for the contestation of morality, because it is easily regarded as one of the most prone to promising 'easy pleasure'.

Conclusion

The 'problem' of leisure is situated in the fact that it is morally indifferent, because it can equally well serve purposes that are defined as moral by the church, as purposes that are defined as immoral. What has changed since 1989 is the perceived source of this immorality. During communism, the sphere of leisure was contested by state and church. They opposed one another; but both of them also opposed a third, individualist model of leisure. Whereas during communism one could speak of two pedagogical projects competing with one another, after 1989 just one of these was left, and its aims were now defined not in relation to an alternative pedagogical project, but in the context of the *absence* of a clear pedagogical project. The third, individualist model of leisure became the norm after the fall of communism. The leisure market became privatised to a large extent and the state, while financing summer camps for certain groups of children and providing guidelines for organising youth camps, ceased to be directly involved in leisure as pedagogical project. However, not only did the end of ideology not put an end to expressions of concern about *kolonie* and other leisure pursuits for the youth, but postcommunist conditions even exacerbated these concerns. The 'market' involves competition for the attention of autonomous consumer-individuals. It is this autonomy, the freedom to choose, the consumer mind inside the individual, that is regarded as ambivalent: people can choose the wrong things, and are in fact likely to make the wrong choice, because of the attractiveness of what is offered and the promise of pleasure it entails.

As before 1989, the *kolonie* still figure as counterparts to Oasis retreats. In the new context of consumer choices, however, the conflict over free time has been redefined: it is no longer a struggle of 'freedom against oppression' but a struggle of 'freedom against freedom'. The disappearance of external forces has brought to the fore the problem of individual autonomy and temptation. The struggle has become interiorised, against the evil within as opposed to the evil outside.

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Notes

- 1 The research consisted of participant observation at Oasis meetings and retreats, interviews with priests and young people (about 60 in total, the majority young people), and the study of manuals and secondary sources. The age of the young people interviewed ranged from 15 to 24. In quotations from interviews with young people, pseudonyms are used for reasons of privacy.
- 2 Religious leisure could be considered to be a form of that 'pastoral mobilisation' which Osa considers to be crucial in understanding the roots and rise of Solidarity. She defines pastoral mobilisation as taking the forms of 'programs designed to strengthen the link between church and society by involving believers in intensive religious activities'. It 'differs from other organized collective action or political mobilization in that it lacks explicit political goals.

- although it carries strong political implications' (Osa, 1997, p. 354). Concretely, Osa considers the Great Novena (the peregrination of the image of the Black Madonna through Poland in 1956–66 and 1967–80) to be one of the social forces implicated in Solidarity's emergence (Osa, 1997). More research would be needed to investigate if and how religious leisure also contributed to preparing the ground for political protest.
- 3 Although the ideal is spoken about as 'new man' it comprised an ideal for women as well as for men, in both the communist and the Catholic understanding. Gender was in fact of central importance to the cultivation of the new man (Fodor, 2002; Haney, 1999; Zembruska, 1999).
 - 4 A general comment heard repeatedly from the 1980s was that teenagers from Oasis were not 'fit' for real life. According to Mucha and Żaba (1992, p. 59), many people thought that when teenagers left Oasis and entered the everyday world 'they were helpless, completely unprepared to deal with the social, political, and cultural reality in which most Poles lived'. Lewenstein and Melchior (1992, p. 177) even go so far as to argue that such teenagers were not motivated by a religious search at all, 'but above all by a search for a protective community'. Nosowski (1989), an apologist for Oasis, of which he himself had been a member, appeared to agree with this criticism to some extent when he wrote in 1989 about Oasis as a 'sleeping giant'. However, in a speech at the 27th congregation of Oasis in Częstochowa in 2001 Nosowski expressed his joy about Oasis having remained a giant, whether asleep or not.
 - 5 It seems that Renewal in the Holy Spirit and Oasis to a certain extent share similar origins. A former leader of Renewal in the Holy Spirit pointed in an interview to the many contacts that existed between the two movements, and Cupiał (1994) writes about a woman who, whilst being a member of *Oaza* in the 1970s, was delegated to help build charismatic prayer groups.
 - 6 Although Renewal in the Holy Spirit has by now been accepted as one of the largest movements within Catholicism, distrust towards charismatic Christianity has remained in large circles of both clergy and laity.
 - 7 The Concordat settled the relationship between church and state. It was drawn up in 1993, but ratified only in 1998. Especially relevant here is Article 13 concerning the *kolonie*. As if the fall of communism had never taken place, the article states that 'children and adolescents participating in summer camps or other forms of group vacations are assured the possibility of carrying out religious practices, especially participation in Mass on Sundays and on feast days' (my translation).
 - 8 The reference to nature points to another topic which is interesting in itself. Nature has traditionally been an important element amongst those oriented towards nationalism. This subject requires separate investigation.
 - 9 I came to know this young man as highly critical of contemporary Poland, as a strong patriot who lamented what he saw as the excessive influence of 'the West'. By using the English word he stressed the foreign nature of contemporary Polish freedom, simultaneously delegitimising it: how can you say that you are free if what you have is not your own freedom?

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