

TRANSFORMATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLAND. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH AS 'ALLIES'. SOME CONSIDERATIONS BASED ON NEW STUDIES

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When transformation began in Poland in 1989, it was dedicated to three fundamental objectives: Introducing a liberal democracy under the rule of law, building a market economy, and establishing a civil society with the capacity to take action. While the nation has come considerably closer to the first two objectives despite certain problems, the road towards a civil society appears somewhat rockier, for the extent to which it has been implemented so far is not satisfactory.

Helmut Anheier sees civil society as a sphere composed of institutions, organizations, networks, individuals and their respective values situated between the family on the one hand and the state and the market on the other. According to Herfried Münkler, the rules that apply in a state and its economy spring from civil society which, consequently, forms an entity that limits political and social risks. The state, the market, and civil society are interdependent. A civil society generates public spirit, enabling people to identify with their polity. This being so, democracies without a sound foundation in civil society suffer from a dangerous deficit in Münkler's opinion. Maria Jarosz states that civil society in Poland is still limping, dominated by struggle instead of a search for shared traits and dialogue. Jarosz suggests that society should be treated with respect and regarded as a subject, not merely as a host of potential voters.

In the opinion of Piotr Gliński, civil society in Poland is structurally weak and incapable of joining the spheres of business and politics as an equivalent partner. To underpin his contention, he points at a variety of observations, saying that the model practiced at the local level, in districts and voivodships, was one of 'self-government without participation'. Ranging below 20 percent, Poland's social capital was one of the lowest in Europe. Only a scant two percent of Poland's non-governmental organizations were engaged in politics and civil rights. Efforts to build a civil society were hampered by lack of funds. The civil-society sector was being financed largely by capital from abroad, including the European countries. Its development was obstructed by the largely dismissive attitude of Poland's elites. Further stumbling blocks included an immature participative democracy, specifically hostile pressure groups, the state of public awareness, and the immanent weakness of civil society itself. On the other hand, most positive developments were caused by continuous pressure 'from below'.

In view of the strength and efficiency displayed by Poland's civil society in the time when it was struggling against communism, its present weakness gives rise to some concern. In the opinion of Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński, the ethical civil society was highly effective in the process of societal emancipation from the communist regime. He believes that such an ethical civil society is more likely to appear under an ideological undemocratic rule that strictly controls the public. He goes on to say that actions that are risky in a dictatorship were motivated by a belief in values, the remarkable point being that it was Poland which initiated the erosion of communism, a Catholic country in which religion assumed a dominant role in the subsequent transformation. More than anything else, the Papal visit in 1979 and the foundation of the Solidarność movement in 1980 had motivated the formation of an ethical civil society which, consolidating itself as a parallel underground society under the protection of the Catholic Church, had later been supported by the Perestroika policy.

Following Samuel Huntington and Bhikhu Parekh, Mr Wnuk-Lipiński believes that Christian culture had a controlling influence on the general course of the third wave of democratization in the seventies and eighties. Democracy ruled in no less than 72 percent of the Christian states worldwide, but in only four percent of the Islamic countries and 37 percent of the nations that followed other religions. This clearly proved that the Christian faith provides a cultural seedbed which favours democratization after the decay of authoritarian forms of government. At the same time, Mr Wnuk-Lipiński does not fail to recognize that an ethical civil society might be corrupted by the pluralization of public life after a transition, when the struggle for moral values is replaced by contending group interests.

If it is true that civil society is needed to defend democracy while the ethical civil society is eroded by the pluralization of public life, we must ask ourselves what forces might support a vibrant civil society in a liberal and pluralist democracy. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde believes that a liberal secular state is founded on conditions which it cannot guarantee itself. Regarding the role of religion, he asks whether it might not be true that even a secular state ultimately needs that inner strength that stems from religion, although it is certainly not the aim of such religiousness to restore a Christian state but to give freedom a chance.

The Catholic Church forms the most highly institutionalized segment of Poland's civil society, and there is much to indicate that it has a balancing influence on civil society. Even though people of a liberal and laicist bent tend occasionally to lose sight of this fact and misinterpret the historical and cultural significance of the Church in Poland, there is enough historical and sociological evidence to support the view that Poland's Catholic Church

constitutes one of the essential forces of regulation and equalization in the country.

For more than two centuries, the Church was the force that kept the Polish nation together during the time from 1772 to 1918 when the country was ruled by foreign powers, during the years of the German occupation from 1939 to 1945, and during the era of Soviet ascendancy after 1945. The oppression of the Church ended with the peaceful revolution of 1989. At the same time, however, it lost its privileged position as the champion of the people and had to look for a place for itself in the new pluralist society. Dirk Lenschen suggests that while the Church certainly did have some trouble with its new role, particularly in the nineties, it was at least partly due to the distorted image of the Church that was propagated by leftists and post-communists that problems arose between the Church and society. Still, he is convinced that the Church by now has become a powerful promoter and stabilizer within the civil society of Poland.

There was no spread of laicism after 1989, and religiousness remained stable at a high level. More than 90 percent of the country's citizens are Catholics, and more than 45 percent of those have been regularly attending divine service on Sundays since 1992. The faith of the Polish population is the strongest among all major EU member states. This high degree of religiousness is especially remarkable because it extends to the young people, a situation that drastically differs from that prevailing in the territory of the former GDR, for example. Next to the Red Cross, the Catholic Church and the Catholic Caritas enjoy the highest confidence ratings among the Polish population. Tadeusz Szawiel names five reasons why the attractiveness of religion continues unbroken, particularly among young Poles: The roots of religion in the culture of the country, the continued stability of local environments after 1998, the functionality of the institutions of the Church, religious instruction in schools, and the Polish pope who, in fact, accompanied an entire generation.

The Polish Church has the potential to take a hand in the societal development of the country and furnish its own impulses, a potential that should not be ignored as civil society develops. José Casanowa perceives a development taking place in Poland that is unknown in Western Europe – an 'amalgam of societal modernization and widespread religiousness among the population'. Dirk Lenschen even goes so far as to prophesy that any attempt to build a civil society and consolidate democracy and free market economy in Poland is bound to fail without the involvement of the Catholic Church.

So the Church is confronted by a challenge. In meeting that challenge, it should respect existing differences between society and the Church, and it should seek a dialogue with the societal and political spheres. After all,

overcoming the rifts and friend-foe polarities of the communist era is especially important in Poland. The Polish Church has a very good chance indeed of using the Christian image of man to remind people of their common moral convictions. Alfons Nossol, the Archbishop of Oppole, is campaigning for 'critical sympathy' towards democracy as the only humane form of political life, saying that it is incumbent on the Church to learn how to live 'with differentiated and divided loyalties' and to dispense with 'doctrinaire self-righteousness and dogmatic arrogance'. It is important for the Church to bridge the internal rift between national integrators and open dialogue seekers among the Polish Catholics. The process of building a vibrant civil society in Poland is far from over. The evolution of a civil culture based on democratic values takes time. In the process, the Church plays a crucial role as a civil-society power.