

Sacralizing Nation and State and „Stopping Islamicization“

by Konrad Pędziwiatr

Abstract

The article discusses the role of the church in Poland in the context of re-Christianization and the prevention of a perceived process of Islamicization. The author argues that the alliance between church and state in Poland continues to sacralize nation and state, and portrays migrants from Islamic countries as a key threat.

The 100th anniversary of Fatima and 300 years since the coronation of the highly venerated Black Madonna of Czestochowa were celebrated in Poland on 7 October 2017 with a mass religious event called „Rosary to the Borders“.¹ This day also marked the anniversary of the Christian victory over Ottoman Turks in the sea battle of Lepanto in 1571. The last anniversary was played down by some organizers of the event and stressed by others. Lay Catholics from the organization Soli Deo Basta, who had put forward the idea of „Rosary to the Borders“, encouraged Poles to go to designated points along the country’s borders for a mass rosary prayer and thus celebrate the double (triple?) anniversary. The liturgical commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference (the central organ of the Catholic Church in Poland) gave official approval to the programme of events and encouraged the faithful to join the mass prayer and mobilized parishes to help in the planning and to offer liturgies for the participants. Numerous state companies provided financial support to the institution organizing the event.² According to the organizers, around a million Poles prayed for the „salvation of Poland, Europe and the world“. However, before the event began, some of its organizers and prospective participants spoke about other

¹For more information on the event, see the official website <http://rozaniecdogranic.pl/>.

²Lukasz Woźnicki, Państwowe spółki mecenasami „otoczenia Polski różaniem“. Ile przekazały na „Różaniec do granic“? URL: <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,22474030,panstwowe-spolki-mecenasami-otoczenia-polski-rozancem-ile.html> [31.10.2017].

goals that the prayer had, such as protecting Poland and Europe from secularization and Islamicization.

From the beginning, there was a lack of clarity about the goals of the mobilization not only among the organizers³ and participants⁴ but also among the clergy. Although the spokesperson of the Episcopal Conference stressed that the event had a purely religious character, and that it was „a manipulation“ to claim otherwise,⁵ some of the statements made by members of the Conference contradicted this. For example, the Archbishop of Kraków, Marek Jędraszewski, said that the event on the nation’s borders is a message „to other European nations so that they understand that it’s necessary to return to Christian roots so that Europe may remain Europe [...] it represents the only way to save its culture“.⁶ In his view, the only way to stop the Islamicization of Europe is through the sacralization of the nation and state, and the re-Christianization of Europe. This perception is widely held not only among a significant section of the Polish clergy, but also by lay Catholics.

At the same time, many people accused the organizers and participants of contributing to the country’s growing malcontent with regard to various ‘others’ (especially from the Middle East and Africa), and

³One of the main organizers of the event, Maciej Bodasiński, mentioned on several occasions not only general religious goals, but also such aims as protecting Poland and Europe from „Islamicization“. Polsat, Akcja Różaniec do Granic ma uchronić Polskę m.in. przed islamizacją. „Różaniec jest potężną bronią w walce ze złem“, 2017, URL: <http://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2017-09-01/akcja-rozaniec-do-granic-ma-uchronic-polske-m-in-przed-islamizacja-rozaniec-jest-potezna-bronia-w-walce-ze-zlem/>, 6 October 2017.

⁴For example, one participant interviewed by the BBC said that, by participating in the event, she was expressing her gratitude that her son had survived a car crash, but also praying for the survival of Christianity in Europe. „Islam wants to destroy Europe. [...] They want to turn us away from Christianity“. BBC, Poland holds controversial prayer day, „BBC News“, 7 October 2017, sec. Europe, URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41538260>.

⁵Paweł Rytel-Andrianik, quoted in Claire Giangravè, Catholic „Rosary to the Border“ event highlights immigration concerns in Poland, URL: <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/10/12/catholic-rosary-border-event-highlights-immigration-concerns-poland/> [12.10.2017].

⁶BBC, Poland holds controversial prayer day.

of providing symbolic support to the current right-wing government and its policy of opposing the EU relocation and resettlement scheme. These voices could be heard not only outside the Church, but also within it. The former secretary of the Episcopal Conference, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, told the Italian newspaper *Famiglia Cristiana* that „The rosary is a beautiful prayer, but the bishops did not foresee or understand in time that it could be used as an ideological weapon in the government’s propaganda. [...] The Church not noticing this amounted at the very least to very serious naivety“.⁷

The vagueness and contradictions of the statements about the goals of the Rosary to the Borders show the wider ambivalence of the Polish Catholic Church and some of its most active lay members when it comes to how they perceive „others“, and in particular Muslims. The aim of this paper is to shed light on some of the features of the involvement of Polish Catholicism in the public sphere in last years that contribute to the strengthening of the Polish fear of Muslims and Islam.

In order to understand the importance of the Polish Catholic Church in shaping the views of Poles on a range of subjects including Muslims and Islam, we need to be aware that Poland is a country where around 90% of people belong to the Catholic Church, with slightly less than half of these regularly participating in religious services. Thus, the Church’s influence in the country goes far beyond the religious sphere.⁸ The Church’s position in today’s Poland is anchored not only historically and culturally, but also legally, as the Church is the only religious institution whose relations with the state are regulated by an international treaty or concordat.⁹ Through its teachings both

⁷Alberto. Bobbio, La Chiesa polacca su una strada pericolosa, sostiene il Governo e dimentica il Papa, URL: <http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/la-chiesa-polacca-su-una-strada-pericolosa-parla-mons-pieronek.aspx> [31.10.2017].

⁸Janusz Czapiński and Tomasz Panek, Diagnoza społeczna 2015, Rada Monitoringu Społecznego, Warszawa 2015; GUS, Struktura narodowo-etniczna, językowa i wyznaniowa ludności Polski, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa 2015.

⁹Krzysztof Wroczyński, Konkordat, Oficyna Wydawnicza Elita-Lex, Gorzów Wielkopolski 1996.

within and outside the state educational system¹⁰, the Church plays an important role in regulating various matters traditionally linked to the private sphere, and therefore has a significant impact on the shape and content of public debates.

As public opinion polls show, these extra-religious roles that the Church plays are accepted by most of society. For instance, a study conducted by CBOS in 2013 showed that 80% (or more) of Poles did not object to the participation of clergy in ceremonies related to state holidays, and accepted Catholic crosses in secular public buildings, religious lessons in public schools, and the religious nature of military oaths. Furthermore, almost 75% did not see anything wrong in the participation of priests in television programmes, and 61% gave the clergy the right to speak publicly on spiritual and moral issues. The fact that a large majority of Poles did not want the clergy to tell them whom they should vote for (only 15% said that they did) clearly shows the limits to the Church’s influence in the public sphere.¹¹ Nonetheless, social research shows that the Church is an institution that has a great impact on public debates in Poland – not only spiritual, moral and philosophical debates, but also legal, economic and political.

One example of the Church’s impact on the content of public debates in Poland is the ban on large-scale Sunday shopping. Theoretically, this issue is an economic one and does not directly relate to religious life. Nonetheless, the clergy became one of the initiators of a discussion on the issue, and successfully lobbied for new regulations in this domain. The position of individual priests and bishops on this matter was significantly strengthened when the Polish Episcopal Conference officially stated that it supported the ban on Sunday shopping.¹² The authors of the new legal regulations in this domain

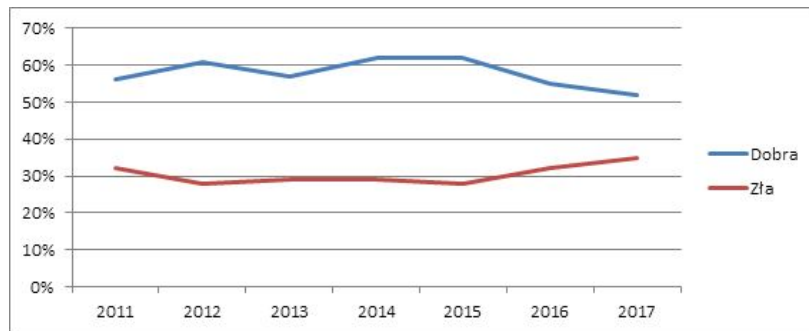
¹⁰Religious education was re-introduced in state schools in 1990.

¹¹CBOS, Religia i kościół w przestrzeni publicznej, komunikat z badań BS/170/2013, Warszawa 2013, p. 2.

¹²Jakub Mikulski, Episkopat popiera projekt ustawy za ograniczeniem handlu w niedziele, URL: <http://www.rp.pl/Kosciol/170319568-Episkopat-popiera-projekt-ustawy-za-ograniczeniem-handlu-w-niedziele.html#ap-1> [11.05.2017].

frequently referred to the Church's position and the social teachings of the Catholic Church as arguments in the political debate, thereby prioritizing religious over economic arguments. In doing so, they were well aware of surveys that showed that 60% of Poles had a positive attitude to the reforms in this domain.¹³

The Catholic Church is also one of the most trusted institutions in the country and the one that receives the highest social evaluation rates for its activism. In recent studies, 52% of respondents viewed the Church's activism in 2017 positively, and 35% viewed it negatively. Although the Church's evaluations are quite stable in this regard (see Graph 1 below), we may notice that in 2015 there began a temporary decline in the positive evaluations of the Church's activism and an increase in the number of people who see this activism in a negative light.¹⁴



Graph 1. Social evaluation of the Polish Catholic Church's activism between 2011 and 2017. (CBOS 2017). Legend: In blue - positive evaluations and in red – negative evaluations

¹³Beata Roguska, Zakaz handlu w niedzielę, in: Komunikat z badań 134 (2016), p. 3.

¹⁴CBOS, Ocena instytucji publicznych, in: Komunikat z badań nr 32(2017), p. 6.

One explanation for the declining positive social evaluations of the work of the Church in Poland may be related to its increasing politicization over the last few years and its increasing alliance with the right-wing government that came to power in 2015. The Polish Catholic Church is politically divided, with its more open, centrist and pro-European elements frequently sympathizing with the former ruling party, the centre-right Civic Platform, while its more conservative and anti-EU elements tending to support the right-wing Law and Justice Party.¹⁵ The Party's rise to power significantly strengthened the latter elements. The new ruling party has „repaid“ the Church for its silent support of a wide range of reforms introduced under the slogan of „good change“ by banning Sunday shopping, suspending in-vitro programmes, limiting access to medical contraception, eliminating sexual education from school curricula, and giving the Church more influence in the state-owned media and in the new school curricula.¹⁶

The Church has benefitted from this new political alliance as many of its ideas and suggestions either were implemented immediately or are being prepared for implementation by the governing party (e.g. further restrictions on abortion). At the same time, the Church's more aggressive intrusion into various spheres of life in alliance with the Law and Justice Party is clearly viewed by a growing number of Poles as transgressing the limits of its socially acceptable influence.

The new alliance between some elements of the Church and the government has also significantly intensified the processes of sacralization of nation and state.¹⁷ As Michał Buchowski notes, there is a

¹⁵For more on the conservative part of the Church that is often associated with the social movement formed around the radio station Mary, see K. Pędziwiatr, Church and State Relations in Poland with a Special Focus on the Radio Station Mary, in: Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in the Post-Communist Countries, ed. by D. Westerlund and G. Simons, Ashgate, London 2015, pp. 163-178.

¹⁶This is related to the reform of the system of primary and secondary education. See, for example, Bukowiecka-Janik, Świecka szkoła to mit. Podręcznik do polskiego przypomina katechizm | MamaDu.pl, 13 September 2018, URL: <https://mamadu.pl/138713,swiecka-szkola-to-mit-podrecznik-do-polskiego-przypomina-katechizm>, 19 September 2018.

¹⁷It is important to stress that this process has a very long history; see, for exam-

strong intertwining of Catholicism and nationalism in Poland: there are crosses in almost every school and in many other public spaces, religious classes in state schools, numerous religious monuments, the presentation of national heroes as religious martyrs, religiously motivated laws on abortion.¹⁸ In these processes of mixing Catholicism and nationalism, the Polish nation is constructed as a hybrid of the sacred and the profane. In a new political context (locally and globally), a profane nation/state is converted into a holy body of a nation/state that is endangered not only by cultural, but also (and above all) by religious, Others. Within this context, Islam and Muslims have been constructed as the most significant threat to the nation and the state. The figure of a refugee has been constructed to embody Muslims and Islam.¹⁹ Thus, opposition to the EU's proposed relocation and resettlement scheme from the end of 2015 gained a new religious dimension. Politicians of the ruling party, backed by their media outlets, have repeated the narrative that opposing (Muslim) refugees from the Middle East and Africa equates to saying „no“ to the Islamicization of Europe and to supposedly its inevitable side effects in the form of terrorist attacks.

These views found many sympathizers among the conservative and anti-European elements of the Polish Catholic Church. Numerous bishops representing this section of the Church expressed not only reservations concerning accepting refugees from the Muslim world, but also strong objections – thereby challenging directions from the Holy See. In the most extreme version, a young charismatic Catholic

ple, Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, Krakow 2006; Michał Łuczewski, *Odwieczny naród. Polak i katolik w Żmijęj*, Toruń 2012.

¹⁸Michał Buchowski, *Making Anthropology Matter in the Heyday of Islamophobia and the 'Refugee Crisis': The Case of Poland*, in: *Český lid*, 103 (2016), p. 51-67.

¹⁹Konrad Pędziwiatr, Agnieszka Legut, *Polish Governments on the European Strategies of Dealing with Migration Crisis. (Polskie rządy wobec unijnej strategii na rzecz przeciwdziałania kryzysowi migracyjnemu)*, in: Konstanty A. Wojtaszczyk / Jolanta Szymańska (eds.), *Refugees in Europe (Uchodźcy w Europie - uwarunkowania, istota, następstwa.)*, Warsaw 2016; Agnieszka Legut, Pędziwiatr, K. *Sekurytyzacja migracji w polityce polskiej a zmiana postaw Polaków wobec uchodźców*, in: *Sami swoi? Wielokulturowość we współczesnej Europie*, ed by. R. Jończy, Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, Gliwice-Opole 2018, pp. 41–51.

priest, Jacek Międlar, claimed in 2015 and 2016 that the threat of Islamicization was imminent. He was suspended by his religious order (Zgromadzenie Księży Misjonarzy) for spreading openly antisemitic and Islamophobic views, and then announced his departure from the order in September 2016. He became a symbol of the marriage of the most extreme elements of Polish Catholicism and far-right movements (Wszepolacy and ONR), and especially so after leading a Holy Mass and delivering a sermon in Białystok Cathedral in which he supported the far-right organisation ONR.²⁰ During the nationalist rally on Independence Day (11 November) in 2015, he addressed the crowd by saying:

„Dearly beloved, we're not afraid of the peaceful Muslims, but they're a minority. We're afraid of fundamentalism. We do not want violence, we do not want aggression in the name of Allah [...] We must oppose it. We do not want the hatred that is in the Quran, but we want the love and truth of the Gospel. We want to fight with the sword of love and truth, to which Saint Paul the Apostle calls us in the sixth chapter [of the Epistle] to the Ephesians [6:14-17]. The Gospel, and not the Quran!!! The Gospel, and not the Quran!!!!“²¹

Research that I have carried in religious seminaries (including the one attended by Międlar, n=162) shows that fear of the Muslim other is quite widespread among future Polish priests. Their views on Muslims, refugees and the social diversity resulting from migration are much more in line with the views of most Poles (very apprehensive) and with the current political establishment than they are with the Pope's position and the messages of the Holy See. My research has also shown that future Polish priests are characterized by high levels of fear of the other (in particular, the Muslim other) and xenophobia, as well as by little tolerance for widely understood ethno-religious

²⁰Konrad Pędziwiatr, *Islamophobia in Poland: National Report 2016*, in: Farid Hafez / Enes Bayrakli (eds.), *European Islamophobia Report 2016*, Istanbul 2017, pp. 411–443.

²¹Jacek Międlar, quoted by E. Haris, *Pope says welcoming refugees keeps us safe from terrorism*, 17 September 2016, URL: <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2016/09/17/pope-says-welcoming-refugees-keeps-us-safe-terrorism/>.

diversity.²²

The new alliance between the Church and state in Poland continues to sacralize nation and state, and to portray migrants from the Muslim world as a key threat to the nation and state. One key moment in this process occurred during the Independence Day rally organized under the banner „We Want God“ on 11 November 2017. As one of the organizers explained to the media, they had chosen the theme to „invoke the fighting church“ and to „portray Catholicism not as a faith of the weak but as a faith of strong people“.²³ This latest episode in the sacralization of nation and state also overlapped with the manifestation of sympathy for xenophobic or white-supremacist ideas among participants in the rally co-organized by the far-right organizations National-Radical Camp (ONR), the National Movement (RN), and the All Polish Youth (MW), which traced their roots back to antisemitic groups that had been active before the Second World War. One banner read, „White Europe of brotherly nations“.²⁴ When asked by journalists about this and many other xenophobic banners carried during the march, the then Minister of Interior Affairs, Mariusz Błaszczak, said that he „had not seen them“,²⁵ thereby trivializing the hate speech and legitimizing xenophobia once again.

²²For details, see K. Pędziwiatr, The Catholic Church in Poland on Muslims and Islam in the context of the migration crisis and ISIS terrorist attacks, in: *Patterns of Prejudice*, 52 (2018) 5, doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2018.1495376.

²³Rafał Zakrzewski, Jak PiS z Kościołem żyje, URL: <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,22553381,jak-pis-z-kościołem-żyje.html> [31.10.2017].

²⁴DW / Poland Independence Day: Thousands take part in far-right rally, URL: <http://www.dw.com/en/poland-independence-day-thousands-take-part-in-far-right-rally/a-41343896> [11.11.2017].

²⁵Mariusz Błaszczak, podsumował Marsz Niepodległości 2017, URL: <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,22634437,dziennikarz-zadaje-blaszczakowi-niewygodne-pytania-ten-zaczyna.html> [28.11.2017].