CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE POLISH SOCIETY IN 1989-1999

Archbishop Józef Miros#aw #YCI#SKI (Archbishop of Lublin, Poland)

In the 10 year process of the evolution of post-Communist societies one can distinguish different periods in which the prevailing attitudes toward the Church passed through deep transformations. After the short time of fascinations with regained freedom, there arrived a period of disillusion between 1991 and 1994 when the Church was blamed, because the real version of free society life was different from its imagined versions. When the initial disappointment was replaced by a realistic approach, the positive appraisal of the social role of the Church increased. In a recent OBOP inquiry of October 1999, 79% of the people questioned expressed their confidence in the Church and recognised her as a moral authority. It is the highest value ever noted in a social survey after the collapse of Communism. It seems to suggest that both the Polish clergy recognises its new duties in a free society and that society itself is aware of the importance of the mission of the Church.

Post-Communist contamination of mentality

A few years ago there was a time when a Polish version of xenophobia assumed a new form of clerophobia. Priests were attacked at that time because, among other things, they were against abortion and supported teaching religion in elementary schools. To illustrate this attitude one can refer to a paper concerning the abortion debate. During this debate John Paul II, in a public statement, repeated the main ideas of *Evangelium vitae* and expressed his support for a culture of life. He was attacked in a daily paper which interpreted his statement as an interference in Polish internal affairs. To make the situation even more grotesque, the paper was originally submitted for publication in a Catholic weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny*. When the editorial board of *Tygodnik* did not qualify the text for publication, the young author decided to publish it in the*Gazeta Krakowska*, formerly the official daily newspaper of the Cracow Committee of the Communist Party. In this period of irrational aggression against the Church, two leading representatives of the Polish cultural milieu, Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Zanussi, were accused by their colleague of being Vatican spies infiltrating circles of independent originators. In the post-Communist period some relics of the Communist mentality continued, and if someone at that time defended human values and rejected moral relativism he was immediately classified as a Vatican agent.

On the other hand, it is true that certain priests contributed to anticlerical feelings at that time either by expressing publicly their political support for those parties which declared their commitment to Christian tradition or by critique of post-Communist candidates to main State offices. This situation became difficult when, among leading aggressive defenders of Christianity, several politicians appeared who earlier collaborated either with the PAX movement or with various groups supported by Communist authorities. This phenomenon was described in the *Instrumentum laboris* for the II Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Europe, where we read: "there are also in some Eastern European countries those who use religion and the Church for political and nationalistic ends". This attitude was expressed in its grotesque form by a former mayor of Moscow, when in contradistinction to Western slogans, "God yes, Church no" he declared, "Church yes, God no". In this framework, religion is reduced to a social level and the main role of the Church is to provide possible supporters in an election campaign. In the past, this attempt at political involvement of the Church was practised by the Communist Party and its ideological satellites. It is worthy to note that many former collaborators representing Catholic groups of intelligentsia now want to play the role of the only defenders of Christianity while many former dissidents, who defended human rights and dignity in the Communist era, now try to spread the Gospel of peace and freedom without aggression

and without ideological bias. This pattern has been observed not only in Poland but also in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, where many former members of the pro-Communist organisation *Pacem in terris* try to behave as a "leading force" in the contemporary Catholic Church. Their version of ideological Christianity inspires protests from those Catholics who paid the price of their commitment to the Church in the past. Consequently it yields polarisation within the Church.

Consequences of the polarisation at stake are relatively strong because, in the Communist period, Catholics in Poland practically had no experience of pluralism and their reactions to basic problems were uniform in nature. In this new social situation they must adjust to cultural pluralism without accepting doctrinal relativism. This, certainly, is a long process which of its nature brings many negative by-products. The polarisation of attitudes among Catholics in Poland became even more complicated when *Radio Maryja*, a nation-wide radio system organised by the Redemptorist Fathers, became much more involved in spreading risky politics than in spreading the Gospel. The radio attacked many honest and trustworthy Polish politicians because they did not follow the radical and simplified vision accepted by nationalists. Since a part of society regarded the radio as the Church radio station, many of them were disappointed that such a primitive form of politics was accepted by the Bishops. To explain the situation and to influence the Provincial of the Redemptorists to change radically the radio's policy, Cardinal Glemp sent an official letter to the Provincial and asked him personally to find a new balance between Christian commitment to truth and social-political programs on the radio. The Provincial reacted more diplomatically than effectively; but the very fact that the hierarchy criticised irresponsible political comments contributed to a general understanding of the difference between the Church's standpoint in social-political issues and a private version of political radicalism that was practised very often by frustrated lay people who did not pay much attention to the principles of Christian ethics.

Trivialisation of evil and the search for reconciliation

The perspective of the Great Jubilee 2000 brings into focus the important issue of social reconciliation between former supporters of the Communist regime and those who suffered persecution under that regime. There were some attempts at inspiring a search for new social unity when many ordinary members of the Communist party acknowledged their fault and recognised the moral evil of the totalitarian system. Unfortunately, their practice was not followed by high party functionaries, who consistently try to trivialise the moral aspect of the violation of human rights under Communism. In their approach, nobody should be blamed for totalitarian practices and nobody is morally responsible for inhuman elements contained in the Leninist version of Marxism.

This lack of moral responsibility seems to be a large-scale phenomenon among former Party activists, even beyond the ex-Communist block. The most shocking examples are found in comments in which even genocide is regarded as a trivial and ordinary attribute of contemporary culture. After publishing *Le livre noir du communisme*, which suggests that a total of 85 million people died as victims of Communism, a representative of the Communist daily *L'Humanité*commented on French TV that inspite of all the painful experiences of the past, the beauty of Communist ideals cannot be called into question. In his comment on this remark, Alain Besançon makes the point that after Auschwitz one can no longer be a Nazi and defend the racist anthropology of *Übermensch*, but one can still be a Marxist after Kolyma and Soviet labour camps. This radical asymmetry in approaching ideologically justified genocide raises important axiological problems for any intellectual evaluation of tragedies that took place in our epoch.

To overcome these relics of the post-Communist mentality and to bring moral categories into our evaluation of the totalitarian systems of the past, the Conference of Polish Bishops in 1994 published a pastoral letter about the importance of dialogue and tolerance in the process of the construction of democratic society. Its plea for reconciliation based on truth expressed in general recognition of the moral evil contained in Communism was ignored by influential Party activists. In the radically new social situation, former critics of Kautsky

now preach his social democratic philosophy and, in the spirit of postmodern rhetoric, they try to replace moral values by pragmatic rules. Such an attitude is easily accepted by those social circles in which success, consumers' axiology and practical materialism are appreciated more than any version of ideological relics or of profound axiological reflection.

Pragmatism instead of ideology

Though dialectical materialism has collapsed, practical materialism dominates many post-Communist countries. It is no longer imposed by force, but its relative independence of ideological centres even fosters the attitude in which people behave as if there were no God. Consumerism, as an effect of secularisation, has already penetrated the Eastern part of the European continent. Some countries in this area suffer from a most primitive version of capitalism that is supported by a mafia-like organisation, seriously threatening public life. Many former Marxists have radically changed their ideological background and now express their support for a postmodern critique of modernity. It is hard to find in their arguments either logical consistency or rational justification. They just preach freedom without defining what freedom means for them. The Church reminds us that this kind of liberation rhetoric was already practised by the Nazis when at the entrance to the concentration camp in Auschwitz they placed the inscription: *Arbeit macht frei*. The same practice was adopted also by Stalin's collaborators when, in the popular songs of the period of the worst Stalinist persecutions, the Soviet Union was praised as the freest country in the world. After passing through such painful experiences we should determine the hierarchy of values basic for free society and we cannot end in an optimistic conviction that pragmatic regulations characteristic of liberal democracy would bring an automatic solution to difficult moral issues important for our society.

The social teaching of the Polish Church proclaims the basic truth contained in papal encyclicals, and specifically in what *Centesimus annus* says on democracy. It emphasises that stable democratic institutions cannot function in a society which rejects moral values and reduces its attention to purely pragmatic principles accepted by a majority in democratic voting. Being realistic we should not expect that in such a society everyone will approve juridical regulations without being convinced that they are morally sound and rationally justified. Accordingly, it seems that a system of oppression must be introduced into such a society to guarantee the social acceptance of the imposed juridical regulations. Since rational arguments have been discredited by supporters of this form of pragmatism, one could use only rhetoric or propaganda in order to justify these regulations. As a result, in this version of liberal pragmatism rational arguments are replaced by propaganda persuasion and the axiological foundations of democracy by an effective system of repression. This type of social system could easily result in a form of pragmatic totalitarianism. A police state will emerge in this framework as a result of uncritical liberal pragmatism. The argument that its principles were accepted in a democratic choice has no special value since one cannot show that the accepted principles were either objectively true or morally just. Accordingly, the belief that we can eliminate from our culture all elements which are fundamental to our intellectual tradition seems as optimistic as the Leninist claim that Marxism opens a radically new epoch in the history of humankind and that it brings a completely new anthropology in which the human person is no longer subjected to the alienating processes characteristic of bourgeois society. Certainly, Marxism influenced the new mentality of the so called *homo sovieticus*. This mentality, however, is considered to be a pathological consequence of absurd social-political conditions rather than a breakthrough achievement in anthropology. Looking for new forms of social pathologies can be an attractive accomplishment only for those bored intellectuals who have never paid attention to the dramatic events of our century in which the dignity of the human person was subordinated to ideological schemes, devoid of rational justification. After the unique experience of two totalitarian systems experienced by Europe in the 20th century, one can expect that the advocates of new social experiments will look for their supporters in America and Africa rather than in Europe. When we eliminate rationality and moral responsibility from our intellectual discourse there is always a risk that sharp discussions free of social control could result in conflicts

similar to that between the*Tutsi* and *Hutu*. Consistently, in a purely pragmatic society without axiological and moral foundations we could expect either sharp social conflicts or a superficial existence, in which Mickey Mouse or Tarzan would provide postmodern standards of life free of moral dilemmas, intellectual yearning and philosophical reflection. It may happen that such patterns of existence will be attractive for those intellectuals who prefer political correctness to truth. There was a time when many minds were attracted by Nazi anthropology, the Stalinist rhetoric of universal liberation or the Maoist vision of cultural revolution. We know the price paid by humankind for this type of irresponsible fascination. When facing the new threats present in our culture, which is undergoing deep changes, we have to look for a new form of intellectual solidarity in order to overcome the deep identity crisis where Tarzan is regarded as an exemplary model of the human species.

This formation of the hierarchy of values with an underlying Christian anthropology could be easily interpreted as a sophisticated theoretical enterprise when many people suffer because of unemployment, new economic reforms or lack of adjustment to the new principles of free society. Such a reflection seems to be necessary in a society to situate social expectations in a new vista, free of utopian illusion. In the *Instrumentum laboris* of the recent Synod, we find this general description of the situation in post-Communist countries: "The effects of Communism with its hollow anthropology and its ethical principles was not given due consideration. As a result, some unsuspectingly concluded that with the fall of Communism all would, almost automatically, be changed for the better. Others thought that democracy would spontaneously bring riches and prosperity and that freedom would permit a flow of goods from the West to all consumers, guaranteeing work for everyone and causing economic prosperity".

The dialogue between faith and culture in a new context

On the basis of cultural transformations over the last 10 years in Poland, we can formulate certain general conclusions concerning the most appropriate Christian approach to this dialogue. They are:

1. In the evolving cultural milieu there are groups which would like to react aggressively to the mission of the Church. Christian centres should never respond in the same style. They are obliged to preach the Gospel of truth and charity, regardless of the aggression they face.

2. Attempts at combining the Christian message with politics seem to be always but a short-term enterprise. The Church may appraise the axiological factors in particular political programs. She should never, however, identify her teaching with the ideological message of one party.

3. In the new social situation there is a special challenge; nationalist parties would like to use the Church by emphasising the traditional and national elements in her teaching and ignoring the universal values contained in basic Christian doctrine.

4. Both in reflection concerning the moral evil of the totalitarian system of the past and in assessment of new social-cultural phenomena, an essential role is played by axiological and ethical factors. This domain of moral responsibility creates a chance for discussion between Christian and non-Christian centres. Human dignity and moral responsibility constitute the basis for intellectual co-operation and for inspiring discussions. Between a naive vision of free society and the postmodern rejection of moral values, the Church in Poland tries to continue her mission by considering the message of John Paul II expressed during his seven pilgrimages to his homeland and to preach the Gospel of hope in new social-cultural situation. Many critics of the Polish model of religious life claimed that there would be a radical breakdown of this model after the collapse of Communism. In their opinion people’s religious life in Poland was inspired rather by political opposition to the Communist government than by Gospel principles. Ten years after the fall of Communism we can recognise such predictions as definitely false. There is no manifest decline in

sociological description of religious life. The number of priestly vocations is as high as it was 10 years ago. Thus, instead of preaching easy pessimism, we try to face the new challenges and to contribute to building a new European society overcoming barriers and conflicts in the spirit of solidarity.