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## THE CATHOLIC NATION: RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND THE NARRATIVES OF POLISH HISTORY

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Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński once observed that “nowhere else is the union of Church and nation as strong as in Poland” (Kubik 113). In Poland, religious identity and national identity seem inextricably intertwined. At least 85% of the population declares some affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church, and Poles often evoke Catholicism to describe who they are (“European” or “Western”) and who they are not (Orthodox/Russian, Protestant/German, Jewish, or “Eastern”). While language may tie the Poles to other Slavs, religion gives them a mark of distinction which they are quick to cite whenever lumped together with “Eastern Europe.” Even as secular an author as Jan Józef Lipski evoked Christianity to affirm Poland’s status as a “Western” nation. “The formation of our culture,” he wrote, “was produced by a synthesis with Christianity, adopted from the West in the tenth century, and the percolation of the renaissance, the enlightenment, and romanticism” (Lipski in *Between East and West* 52–53). It is almost universally accepted, in English as well as Polish language texts, that Catholicism in Poland “is a question of national identity” (Bernhard 136). Indeed, it virtually goes without saying that any discussion of identity in Poland must include a consideration of Catholicism.

But precisely because this does so often go without saying—or more specifically, because it goes without explicit argumentation—it can be hard to perceive the many aspects of Poland’s present and past that are silenced by equating “Polish” and “Catholic.” The Church is deeply rooted in Poland, but the linkage between Catholicism and an articulated ethnic identity—not to mention a politicized understanding of national belonging—is more tenuous than is usually assumed. The *Polak-Katolik* identity does not rest on the unobjectionable recognition that there are a lot of Catholics in Poland and that the Church has long been a powerful institution there; rather, it is supported by a deeply ingrained but highly exclusionary telling of national history. In fact, many in the Church consider Catholicism’s formal demographic strength to be illusory, concealing pervasive religious indifference

and secularism. In the words of Father Mieczysław Nowak, “no statistic can render precisely the question of faith. . . . For a large percentage of the Poles, faith is only a stereotypical mindset, a tradition, an extremely superficial declaration” (Nowak in M. Ł.). Of course, one can also find in the Polish and Polish-American press romantic portraits of a population unwavering in its faith and its traditional practices, virtually untouched by the pernicious influences of secular modernity (see, for example, Meloche), but Nowak’s tone of pessimism is far more common. For many Catholics, the indissoluble bond between faith and nation represents an ideal that is all too far removed from the actually-existing Poland, where believers feel themselves to be under siege by the amorphous dangers of modern culture, if not by a specific anti-Christian conspiracy. Bishop Adam Lepa, for example, has lamented the growing acceptance of a “new model” of what it means to be Polish, a “secular, leftist, libertarian” model spread by “manipulation (brainwashing), pornography, and advertising.” This is not, for Bishop Lepa, merely an alternative approach to national identity: it constitutes a rejection of the nation as such. The international media and the cosmopolitan intelligentsia, he charges, propagate “apathy towards the question of national identity, ignorance of Polish history, [and] a dulled sense of national honor” (Lepa in *Na przelomie stuleci* 557–74). For Bishop Lepa and other Catholics, the link between religion and nation depends neither on the actual state of subjective identity nor on the beliefs and behavior of the majority. The “Catholic nation” must reside in both an idealized past and a dreamed-of future, but not (to the chagrin of the clergy) in today’s secular, liberal, decadent world.

When Pope John Paul II visited his homeland in 1979, he proclaimed that “without Christ it is impossible to understand the history of Poland” (John Paul II 28). On one level this is sound advice: the rituals of the Church have punctuated the calendar of the Polish peasantry for centuries, the bishops have long enjoyed positions of enormous power, and Catholic iconography has always provided an aesthetic vocabulary for art, music, and popular culture. On a day-to-day basis, Catholic practices (making the sign of the cross, honoring religious holidays, attending Sunday mass) allowed peasants to distinguish themselves from their Protestant, Orthodox, Uniate, and Jewish neighbors. But none of this captures the significance of the Pope’s claim. On one level he was appealing to a deeper theology by claiming for Christ a central role in the existence of all mankind, but for his Warsaw audience he offered a more specific point of reference. “It is impossible, without Christ,” he elaborated, “to understand and appraise the contribution of the Polish nation to the development of man and his humanity in the past, and its contribution today.” John Paul II was evoking an understanding of history that gives meaning to Poland’s past by making the nation dependent upon the Church (as the receptacle for *true* national identity) and by making the Church dependent upon the nation (as the eastern bastion of the

faith). The Catholic narrative of Polish history is far more than a recognition that Roman Catholicism was and is important in Poland: it is an ideologically loaded conceptual framework that gives specific meaning to the past and helps determine what is remembered and what is forgotten. The political and pedagogical implications of this approach were suggested in this 1981 proclamation by the Solidarity movement:

Because it was Christianity that brought us into our wider motherland, Europe; because for a thousand years Christianity has in a large degree been shaping the content of our culture; since in the most tragic moments of our nation it was the Church that was our main support; since our ethics are predominantly Christian; since, finally, Catholicism is the living faith of the majority of Poles, we deem it necessary that an honest and comprehensive presentation of the role of the Church in the history of Poland and of the world have an adequate place in national education. (Kubik 252)

The French scholar Patrick Michel captured this sense of historical continuity when he argued that the Catholic iconography of the Solidarity movement “takes us right back to the baptism of Mieszko in AD 966, through the Swedish wars of the seventeenth century . . . to the [modern] affirmation of a national identity” (Michel 43). However, this “honest and comprehensive” history silences as much as it reveals. There has been a great deal of religious diversity in Poland over the centuries, and advocates of the Catholic narrative of Polish history must perform some delicate rhetorical maneuvers in order to sustain their story against the threat of dissident voices and alternative ways of ascribing meaning to the past.

The first challenge to Catholicism’s hegemony over Polish history arises during any discussion of the Reformation. Calvinism spread rapidly in Poland during the sixteenth century, further complicating the country’s already heterogeneous blend of Catholics, Jews, Eastern Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, and even Muslims. By mid century the Protestants enjoyed a majority in the Polish senate, and in 1572 the assembled nobles of the Polish Republic issued a declaration promising “that we who are divided by faith will keep peace among ourselves, and not shed blood on account of differences in faith or church.” Membership in the community of the Polish nobility was thus opened to diversity, with Calvinists and Catholics alike recognized as compatriots. Poland earned a reputation in sixteenth-century Europe as a land where religious indifference made Catholicism vulnerable, but where official tolerance made it impossible for Protestantism to institutionalize its successes (*For Your Freedom and Ours* 131–33; Tazbir 1966 35–60). Proponents of the Catholic narrative of Polish history cannot simply deny this era of pluralism and tolerance, but they can appropriate and domesticate the dangerous suggestion that Poland might not have always been such a Catholic nation. A common approach is to recognize that the Polish *state* may have been tolerant of non-Catholics, but that the *nation* was always faithful. In this way the presence of Protestants, Jews, and others in

the sixteenth-century Polish Republic can be recognized without implying that such people were actually Polish. Zygmunt Komorowski's presentation is typical:

Already in the fourteenth century we created a state which — for all its imperfections — stood in the center of Europe, throughout the four centuries up to the partitions, as the first voluntary collection of people of diverse backgrounds, of different faiths and languages. That became a tradition among us. The voluntary union — in the name of the ideal of Christian love for one's neighbor and the freedom of conscience — attracted to Polish culture not only Lithuanians, Belorussians, Ukrainians, and Armenians, but also the local Germans (former enemies) and Tartars. (Komorowski in *Miasto i kultura* 27)

The rhetorical ploy in this passage is subtle but powerful. “We” are the Poles, defining “our” culture according to “Christian” ideals of tolerance and love. Diversity is thus acknowledged, but tamed. “Poland” was not fragmented by ethnic and religious diversity; instead, the tolerant Polish nation was generous enough to welcome aliens into its midst, with the expectation that these foreigners would eventually accept Polish (Christian) culture. Bohdan Cywiński, one of the most respected Catholic writers in Poland today, offers a similar story. While he recognizes the importance of the Reformation in Poland, he still insists that the country's pre-partition “historical experience” was “almost entirely Catholic,” and that the Church was “the element supporting the entire Polish edifice.” To incorporate the Reformation into this image, Cywiński emphasizes that Protestantism was limited to the nobility and the townsmen, while “both society and the state remained Catholic” (Cywiński 47–48). By implication, those who joined the Protestant movement did not belong (or by converting, had renounced) Polish “society.” This rhetorical maneuver need not be a conscious tactic: the Catholic narrative of Polish history has penetrated beneath the level of explicit argumentation to the realm of reflexive linguistic practice. Even Janusz Tazbir, a secular historian who has published over twenty books on Protestantism and religious tolerance, called a collection of his essays “Protestantism in Poland” rather than “Polish Protestantism,” while giving another recent volume the subtitle “Studies from the History of the Polish Counterreformation” (Tazbir 1987; Tazbir 1993). Apparently it has become difficult to apply the adjective “Polish” to a noun like “Protestant.” Religious diversity can exist *in* the nation, but it cannot be *of* the nation.

During the Counterreformation, the Church worked to construct a new Catholic narrative of Poland's past and present — to both eliminate religious diversity in the present and to write Protestantism out of Polish history. In 1658 we see the first expulsion of non-Catholics — the members of the “Polish Brethren” denomination — from the Polish Republic, and a decade later it became a crime for Catholics to convert to other faiths. In 1673 the *sejm* made it impossible for non-Catholics to be ennobled, in 1716 a decree banned the construction of non-Catholic houses of worship, and

three decrees from 1718, 1736, and 1764 established religious tests for all deputies to the *sejm* and all employees of the state administration. None of this, however, can be categorized as compulsion within the Catholic narrative of Polish history, because the story's coherence depends on a religious identity that is natural, not constructed or — worse — politically enforced. In the words of Jerzy Kłoczowski, “the cause of the collapse of Protestantism was not force; rather, today we are inclined to see this [as a result of] the attraction of a vital and renewed Catholicism” (*Chrześcijaństwo w Polsce* 88). The active construction of Protestantism by its initial adherents, along with its active destruction by the Catholics, are both sacrificed in favor of a deterministic story in which the nation briefly strays, but ultimately returns (as it must) to the Church. More complicated tales — with appropriate attention to the multifaceted struggles between Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans, and the Polish Brethren — are rarely heard (see Wilczek for an ambiguous exception).

Soon after the Catholic Church reestablished itself in Poland, the Enlightenment introduced some new complexity. While never as aggressively anticlerical as some French contemporaries may have wished, the Polish Enlightenment did strive to “modernize” both the Polish state and the Polish population, in accordance with new sociopolitical models that many conservatives perceived as unacceptably secular. The clerical monopoly over education was weakened, the reading public delighted in a long list of anticlerical satires, the lifestyles of the elites grew ever more secular, and the Church had to defend itself against attacks from Enlightenment political theorists. The historian Jerzy Skowronek has even described a “crisis of religious life and ties to the Church in Polish society” in the late eighteenth century (Skowronek in *Na przelomie stuleci* 117). Catholic historians have a ready response to the suggestion that the Polish Enlightenment eroded the bond between Church and nation: they point to the fact that many of the leading writers and politicians of the era were ordained. Hanna Dylągowa, for example, writes, “specific to the Polish enlightenment was the participation of the parish and monastic Catholic clergy. Many intellectuals in cassocks were [among] the creators of the great intellectual revolution that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. One might almost speak of the primacy of the clergy in political, social, and scholarly life” (*Chrześcijaństwo w Polsce* 649–50). Poland's Catholicity is thus preserved, but only at the cost of welcoming some extraordinarily heterodox intellectuals back into the fold. While it is true that prominent figures like Father Hugo Kołłątaj, Father Stanisław Staszic, and Bishop Ignacy Krasicki were central to the Polish Enlightenment, it is hard to label their work “Catholic.” Indeed, all three authors published (perhaps paradoxically) anticlerical works.

All of the aforementioned moments are of secondary importance, because

the focal point of the Catholic narrative of Polish history is the era of the partitions. Chrypiński refers to the “religious sanction accorded the fight for independence,” and claims that “the traditional bond between the Church and the Polish people was further strengthened during the nineteenth-century struggles for national liberation and social justice” (Chrypiński in *Catholicism and Politics* 125). On one level, the “religious sanction” described by Chrypiński is familiar to all students of nationalism, in Poland and elsewhere. As Carlton Hayes argued almost forty years ago, modern nationalism has always been grounded in a religious sensibility, and even the most secularized nationalists mimic traditional ritual practices and theological formulas (Hayes 164–76). For George Mosse, modern nationalism is best understood as a “civic religion” with its own “fully worked-out liturgy,” capable of determining “how people saw the world and their place in it” (Mosse 1–2). On a certain level of abstraction, therefore, every study of modern nationalism must take into account the role of religion, whether in terms of the institutional support given to national movements by organized churches, or the symbolic vocabulary appropriated by nationalist politicians. But the Catholic narrative of Polish history makes a stronger claim, asserting for the Church, as an institution, a key role in the preservation of national identity and in the struggle for independence. Ewa Jabłońska-Deptuła emphasizes the Church’s ability to use the Polish language in its services and to sustain traditional folk practices. She believes that since many national customs were rooted in Christian worship, their endurance “would not have been possible, were it not for the support they received from the Church” (Jabłońska-Deptuła 1987 84). Michael Bernhard demonstrates how pervasive this approach has become, even outside of Poland. During the nineteenth century, he writes, “the Church was often the only institution that had a Polish character. Thus Polish national consciousness came to be strongly tied to a Catholic religious identity” (Bernhard 136). This may seem self-evident: Poland was partitioned and occupied primarily by Orthodox Russia and Protestant Prussia, so religion may seem to be a natural locus of identity. Indeed, there can be no doubt that the Church, which remained comparatively free of russification or germanization, was an important site for the enactment of ethnicity. Thanks to Bismarck’s linkage of Catholicism and Polishness during the *Kulturkampf*, the nationalist credentials of the Church seem well established (see Trzeciakowski).

Nonetheless, here too the Catholic narrative must confront some troublesome complications. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Church distanced itself from the “patriotic” cause, eventually becoming one of the few indigenous bastions of loyalism in partitioned Poland. Early in the century, the Church was constantly in conflict with liberal elites in Warsaw, and the reliably conservative authorities in Petersburg and Berlin often proved more amiable. For example, during the heated debates over the

legalization of divorce in the 1820s, the Church appealed to the Tsar to overturn the actions of secular Polish politicians (Ziółek in *Na przelocie stuleci* 107–16). Only a handful of priests supported the uprising against Russian rule in 1830, and they acted in defiance of the hierarchy's strong condemnation of the rebellion. The attitude of the Vatican was made clear in 1832, with the publication of Pope Gregory XVI's encyclical, *Cum Primum*. As the Pontiff put it, "we are taught most clearly that the obedience which men are obliged to render to the authorities established by God is an absolute precept which no one can violate." The Tsar of Russia, the Pope insisted, was a "legitimate prince," and the Poles owed him their submission (Gregory XVI in *Papal Encyclicals* 233–34). In 1863, when Polish nationalists once again revolted, the Church was only somewhat more supportive. Perhaps as many as 15% of the parish clergy acknowledged the rebels as the legitimate national government, but as an institution the Church urged the rebels to lay down their arms and accept Russian rule (Jabłońska-Deptuła and Skarbek in *Chrześcijaństwo w Polsce* 441, 445). After the 1863 uprising, the Church's loyalism was reinforced by a reluctance to provoke the increasingly repressive occupation regime. The russification measures of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s pushed some priests into the arms of the nationalist opposition, but far more reacted by withdrawing to a narrowly-delineated understanding of their spiritual duties.

As a result of all this, even sympathetic scholars like Hanna Dylągowa recognize that there were not very many "fervent Christians" among patriotic activists in the nineteenth century (*Na przelocie stuleci* 392). One of the few explicitly Catholic authors to earn a place in the patriotic literary canon, Zygmunt Krasiński, agonized over the contradictions between his national ideals and his Catholic faith, and kept some of his work secret lest it undermine his pious credentials. There were enough references to "the spirit" and "God" in the writings of authors like Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki to allow for selective appropriation by those who would later try to ascribe a Christian mentality to the nineteenth-century national movement, but one need only survey the actual texts from the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s to see the chasm that separated the major writers of those years from even the most heterodox Catholic theologians (Walicki 1982 and 1983). Perhaps even more important was the willingness of most nineteenth-century patriotic activists to accept non-Christians into the national fold. As Jan Btoński has argued, for the romantic nationalists of the early and mid nineteenth century, the Jews in particular "constituted an essential part of Polish society" (Btoński 59; see also Porter chapter 1).

On a more quotidian level, religion was far less important to "national survival" in the nineteenth century than is usually assumed. Even during the worst years of denationalization, the Church was never the *only* space within which Poles could express and cultivate the myths, customs, or



practices of their ethnicity. For the literate, newspapers, magazines, and books continued to appear, and many of them (particularly during the 1860s and 1870s, when positivism dominated much of the press) were liberal and anti-clerical. Village councils were never successfully russified, ensuring that peasants would have access to a Polish-language public sphere (albeit one with little real power). Plays and operas in Polish were available to both urban and rural residents, and the stage became an important site for both propagating and defining national identity. Commercial life in most of Poland remained Polish, with the exception of the stringent rules banning Polish shop-signs in what is today Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. In other words, most Poles did not have to depend on the Church to sustain either a politicized or de-politicized Polish identity in the nineteenth century.

Father Adrien Boudou, a French Jesuit historian who specialized in Polish-Vatican relations, articulated what has become a common approach among Polish scholars. “Gregory XVI loved Poland and suffered over her misfortunes,” Boudou argued, but felt powerless to help (Boudou 194). In this way one can incorporate the Vatican’s ambivalence into the Catholic narrative of Polish history, but it is more difficult to contend with the stance of the local hierarchy. In a recent homily, Józef Cardinal Glemp, the current Primate of the Church in Poland, took the significant step of publicly apologizing for the loyalism of the nineteenth-century bishops. “I recognize as a weakness,” he said, “the fear of the tsar displayed by several of my honored predecessors in the service of the Warsaw Archdiocese.” However, Cardinal Glemp immediately retreated, excusing this fear by referring to the oppressiveness of the tsarist regime (Glemp). The Catholic publicist Bohdan Cywiński has been more decisive, acknowledging the ambiguity of the Church’s role in the nineteenth century and giving due attention to the importance of the “lay intelligentsia.” He even calls *Cum Primum* “a mistake,” and criticizes the Polish bishops for their loyalism. Nonetheless, he goes on to claim that “the Church became in the peasant world the basic force for the development of national consciousness,” and he insists that throughout the era of the partitions “the Catholic Church demonstrated its solidarity with society.” Cywiński believes that “the society of the faithful was at the same time the society of the nation, in which all manifestations of the life of ideas were dominated by one thought: the recovery of sovereign political existence. That society remained fundamentally, unfailingly faithful to the Church. . . .” Cywiński’s move is thus familiar: he simply defines all non-Catholics as “strata” or “elements” on the margins of an “unfailingly faithful” Catholic “society.” His image of the nineteenth-century world is one divided between “peasant-Christians” and “lay intellectuals,” with the former given credit for the recovery of “sovereign political existence” and the latter, ultimately, silenced (Cywiński 45–84).

In the early years of the twentieth century, the debates between those who defined the nation as essentially and necessarily Catholic and those who refused to do so grew increasingly heated (Grott; Lipski; Wilk 377–405). At the center of this dispute was the so-called “Jewish Question,” which was in many ways a quintessentially Polish question: would the nation be multiethnic or homogeneous? During these years the slogan of “*Polak-Katolik*” took on an even darker hue, as it was appropriated by the anti-Semites of the radical right in their campaign to deny the Jews a secure place within Poland. Tragically, in the 1920s and 1930s many Catholics embraced this rhetoric, and several prominent Church publications propagated a message of intolerance and exclusion (see Modras). The Polish-Catholic equation, which had previously focused on Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy, became a vehicle for a vicious anti-Semitism. Although the religious foundation of this hatred acted as a check on its most violent consequences (as pointed out by Błoński 46–47), the legacy of the Church’s alliance with the racist right has never been entirely erased — or even confronted.

After World War II the whole question of Poland’s religious diversity (or lack thereof) seemed to become a moot point: the post-war boundaries were drawn so as to exclude almost all Lithuanians, Belorussians, and Ukrainians, the Germans were forcibly expelled, and most of the Jews perished in the Holocaust. But Bogdan Szajkowski misses the point when he writes, “the move of the Polish borders some 500 kilometers westwards meant that for the first time in Polish history, and uniquely in Eastern Europe, the Polish nation was religiously and ethnically homogeneous” (Szajkowski 2). In the minds of many Poles today, as I have tried to demonstrate in this essay, the Polish nation had *always* been religiously and ethnically homogeneous, even though a great number of “aliens” or “minorities” had lived within the boundaries of the Polish state. After World War II those aliens were gone, and it became easier than ever to promote the Catholic narrative described here. At long last, sociology and survey data could come to the aid of history. But statistics, as I suggested at the start of this essay, have never been enough. During and after the communist era, the claim that the Church embodied the national spirit rested on a historical narrative as much as on any demographic data about religious belief or practice. Juxtaposed against the often vulgar attempts by communist publicists to write Catholicism out of Polish history altogether (see, for example, Królik; Markiewicz; Mystek), we find increasingly assertive claims by Catholic publicists that Catholicism virtually defines the nation. This historical imagery has penetrated today’s political rhetoric, arising prominently during the debates over Poland’s 1997 constitution. Marian Krzaklewski, one of Poland’s leading Catholic politicians, protested what he considered an excessively secular draft text. “A national compromise would be possible,” he declared, “if everyone would

recognize that there are facts in Polish history which are not open to interpretation. One of these facts is this: that Poland was always based both in its system of values, as well as, later, in its constitutional legislation, on Christian values, which were simultaneously positively directed towards people of differing views, convictions, beliefs, and towards different nationalities” (Krzaklewski 1997). Once again we see an image of Poland as tolerant of diversity, but nonetheless “Christian” in its essence. The “people of differing views” would be legally protected in Krzaklewski’s vision of a future Poland (one might say “tolerated,” in the old sense of this term), but they would never find a place in his story about Poland’s national history.

The point of this essay has not been to belittle the significance of the Church in Poland’s past or present. My claim is both more modest and, simultaneously, more far-reaching. Catholicism is and always has been important in Poland, and John Paul II was right to tell us that no understanding of Poland is complete without a consideration of this element of the national tradition. But the Catholic narrative of Polish history that I have critiqued in this essay — one which exiles non-Catholics and anticlericals from Poland’s story — offers us a picture that is equally incomplete and misleading. And it is this narrative, rather than the demography of contemporary Polish society, that ultimately sustains the identity of the *Polak-Katolik* today.

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