

Poland: a nation divided

The homeland of John Paul II is rightly proud of its place in the history of Communism's downfall, but, as the new Pope prepares to visit, it is split over the direction the country should take today

When Pope Benedict XVI arrives in Poland, the birthplace of his predecessor, on 25 May, he will not find a country at peace with itself. There are divisions over the direction the country has taken since 1989, and over the kind of capitalism successive governments have embraced. While the key role of John Paul II in the overthrow of Communist rule is widely acknowledged, the perceived alignment of the Church with the neo-liberal, free-market ideology that has prevailed in ruling circles in recent years, and the attempt to co-opt the late pope on this side of the argument is much more contentious.

The controversy highlights the Church's inability to confront issues of poverty and exclusion in Poland, where the free-market system which supplanted Marxism has generated opportunities for the rich, while leaving the majority of the population poor and disillusioned. Seventeen years after the collapse of Communist rule, the consequences of this sin of omission are becoming clear.

New statistics, published at the end of April, put church membership at 96 per cent of the population, with 28,546 priests, 23,304 nuns and 14,418 professional catechists at work in Poland's 11,000 parishes and pastoral centres; 320,000 pupils studying at its 1,726 Catholic schools and colleges; and 8,230 students, a third of Europe's total, preparing for the priesthood at its 86 seminaries.

But there is much here in Poland that contradicts the vision of an ethical society contained in John Paul II's encyclicals. Unemployment has run at over 18 per cent for the past decade, and stands at 40 per cent among the young. Rates of taxation are among the highest in the industrialised world. Crime, police brutality and hooliganism are among the worst in Europe. The country is rated the European Union's most corrupt by Transparency International, and one of the worst for business by the World Bank. In an early May survey by Ernst and Young, twice as many company employees as in the rest of Europe admitted to cheating, while 28 per cent of Polish firms said it was "normal" to entertain clients with strippers and call girls.

With the state widely distrusted after the collapse of Communist rule, academic specialists and media commentators took the side of private entrepreneurship, and defended

the rights of businesses and corporations against those of employees and organised labour. At first the neo-liberal model appeared to be vindicated in terms of Poland's economic achievements, which included currency convertibility, low inflation and a substantial rise in exports. Yet the country's economic successes merit more careful qualification today. Its forecast 2006 growth of 4.4 per cent is much lower than in neighbouring Lithuania or the Czech Republic, while foreign investment and GDP per head are below the East European average.

Since joining the European Union in May 2004, Poland has become a country of emigration again, with 700,000 Poles leaving for Britain and Ireland, and hundreds of thousands more poised to follow as other EU countries open their labour markets.

While professing an "option for the poor", the Polish Church has done remarkably little to challenge the current orthodoxy. With 277 hospitals and clinics, 267 centres for the elderly and handicapped, 538 orphanages and children's homes, 1,820 family shelters and 1,426 special care foundations, the Church can point to an extensive charity network. But while these have eased the symptoms of current injustices, they have done nothing to tackle their causes. No occasion is lost to condemn past Communist assaults on human dignity. But in the new-look, laissez-faire Poland, new threats to human dignity have encountered a hard-hearted response.

Some Poles point to a lack of leadership. Yet the explanations appear to be more complex. In the 1990s, some Catholic intellectuals admitted finding John Paul II's appeals to social conscience hard to understand, assuming human rights problems had been resolved with the advent of "freedom". Since then, they have been written out of the script in favour of more liberal interpretations of his social teaching.

During his last homecoming in 2002, the Pope urged that the "hearts of the prosperous" be opened to "the needs of the poor and suffering". "Enable the unemployed to find an employer, help those who are poverty-stricken find a home," John Paul II prayed at the Marian sanctuary of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska. Yet if John Paul II saw a reasonable role for government in protecting the weakest



Workers erect a wooden cross on the altar that will be used for Pope Benedict XVI's Mass in Warsaw (Photo: CNS)

and poorest, this aspect of his legacy has, in practice, been ignored.

In a recent *Polityka* commentary, the writer Adam Szostkiewicz cited Washington DC's American Enterprise Institute (AEI) as an example of the foreign free-market lobbies which had gained "significant opinion-forming friends and collaborators" in the Polish Church. It was to this quarter that some Catholics turned for answers after Communist rule, in their search for a system that combined religious faith with private enterprise and capital accumulation. The head of Poland's Dominicans, Fr Maciej Zieba, studied at the AEI with other colleagues in the 1990s, and has acted as local public relations chief, with Archbishop Jozef Zycinski of Lublin, for US thinkers such as Michael Novak, George Weigel and Richard Neuhaus.

The Americans have sponsored courses and study programmes on the "Free Society" for Catholics in Poland, concentrating on John Paul II's 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*. Their influence has been extensive. One leading Catholic journalist, Tomasz Wiscicki, lauded Novak as "a kind of prophet" for combining liberal capitalism with Catholic orthodoxy. Some Poles think the US lobby influenced the Church largely by default when there was little other accessible material available. "I'm afraid these people read only

half the Pope's theses. All papal encyclicals have to be studied as a compendium – we can't understand *Centesimus Annus* unless we also read *Laborem Exercens*, with its heavy emphasis on the rights of the poor and disadvantaged," commented one Catholic writer.

Despite this, neo-liberal thinking has gained steady acceptance in the Polish Church. When the anniversary of John Paul II's death was marked by nationwide commemorations last month, Poland's Bishops' Conference called on Catholics to "live according to the Gospel", while "caring for others, especially the powerless, the weak, the poor and those needing our solidarity".

In a late April survey by the CBOS agency jobs and material conditions were listed highest among "aims and aspirations" with families and children rated among the lowest. When Poland's Law and Justice party (PIS) won last September's elections, a coalition with its main centre-Right rival, the Civic Platform (PO), would have been good for the country, by merging PIS's constituency among the poor with the PO's Westernising, pro-business stance. That the coalition failed, despite protracted negotiations, was a sign of deep divisions in Polish politics, where unrepresentative middle-class elites have shared the benefits of democracy among themselves.

Professor Tomasz Weclawski, a member of the Church's International Theological Commission, thinks efforts are being made to resist an open debate within the Polish Church, which could lead to an honest confronting of problems. "Certain questions cannot even be asked since they appear to challenge or infringe the prevailing order," Professor Weclawski told the Church's Social Week at the end of April. "Ideas, interests and positions have become more important than people. Church members have stopped talking in their own name, and now speak in the name of the institution, concealing their own personal responsibility."

"If social life is to be organised according to the principle of love, then everything should be done – of course, in the framework of a deeply understood social justice – to ensure co-operation between individuals and groups takes supreme place over competition," Karol Wojtyla wrote as a young priest in his now largely forgotten *Catholic Social Ethics*. The fact that that work rejected "socialist totalitarianism" and "individualistic liberalism" in equal measure, could go a long way to explaining why so many refuse to acknowledge it today.

The Polish bishops have urged Catholics to prepare for Benedict XVI's pilgrimage by "strengthening unity and transparency in the Church". Catholics will be hoping Benedict XVI breaks through the stifling atmosphere of his predecessor's homeland and encourages the exchange of views now so badly needed.

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RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

'The writer stands on the outskirts of faith, seeming capable only of irony'



I was in New York last month for a gathering of writers – nearly 150 from 33 countries. Our host was PEN America – an association dedicated to freedom of literary expression worldwide. Authors were invited to consider "Faith and Reason". The brochure for the conference indicated that the sponsors were interested in discussing, among other topics, reason run amok: "Amoral technologies as fearsome as any religion's inferno".

There was little said about the excesses of reason in any panel discussion I heard. It was religion that was described as the menace by panellists throughout the proceedings, specifically the religious fanaticism of the desert faiths.

In addition to Salman Rushdie, PEN America's outgoing chairman, several writers of considerable reputation were advertised as in attendance: Margaret Atwood, Orhan Pamuk, Chinua Achebe. None of them did I meet. I did meet a Pakistani novelist and a Nigerian novelist; several Brazilians, all writers of fiction; a non-fictional Syrian; an Israeli poet; several Russians; and others. I was struck by how many writers, born in the Third World, in the dusty, holy city of "we", now live in Melbourne or Toronto or London or Madrid or New York – cities where the "I" is published and prized and remaindered.

In front of an audience and a live microphone, writers at international conferences are in an unequal competition with one another and with circumstance. Not all speak the host-lingo with the same ease or play. So the conversation at PEN America was rigged. The woman from Turkey (who now lives in Berlin) had always to pause for her scrupulous English echo.

The week passed; the weather was the finest spring weather; the city seemed peerless. The panel on religion and postmodernism blurred into a panel on European multiculturalism, which melted (in my mouth) into a panel on dual citizenship. During the week there was scant mention of faith. When religion was invoked, it was as dark raiment, shackle, neurosis – a threat to the writer's

freedom. I met only one writer who claims to have any religious faith. I got into a public argument with my friend "Irish", who would carry on in theatrical Hibernian fashion about the glories of blasphemy.

When I remarked to one of the conference organisers how few writers there were in attendance who claimed religion in their lives, much less in their writings, the organiser replied: "You cannot guess how hard we tried." She mentioned a writer from the Middle East who is so forthrightly religious he could not obtain a United States visa. To speak of our gathering, therefore, as multicultural is inaccurate. Most writers who inhabit the world of international letters belong to a monoculture of agnosticism.

I have always thought and felt no subject was inherently more interesting to the human race than religion. The sophisticated men and women at the PEN conference, however, seemed – perhaps I misinterpreted – utterly uninterested in religion and unsophisticated in their consideration of it. In another century, the writer, however apostate, stood close enough to the religious imagery, vocabulary, and custom of his nation or culture to be able to summon faith or ridicule it; to live within or without it at the same moment. In our century, the writer stands on the outskirts of faith, seeming capable only of irony – not even true irony. Where there is no enduring faith, irony simply dissipates. Skulls cannot smirk.

My friend "Irish" and I will have lunch later this week, and I look forward to it. We will laugh, gossip, and remark on the wine in a Saturday sort of way. That's fine. No mention of a crucifix. In ancient cultures (including the Christian Brothers High School in California, in the 1960s), writers were considered to be allied with what I will call "Unreason" – a system of knowing, not in opposition to Reason; a separate grace. Literature was interested in transcendence, in mystery, in the miraculous, in the interpretation of emotion, which is a voice of the Paraclete.

I don't know if that voice was present at the PEN conference in New York City; maybe it was and I missed it. But to my eye, the conference seemed a convocation as dark-minded as any I have ever imagined from photographs I have seen of semicircles of men, in large rooms, in grey cities, in grey countries.

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