

## The Quagmire Effect. On the Special Role of the Catholic Church in Poland

Agnieszka Graff

*There is one thing the Catholic Church has failed to learn while functioning in a democracy: that it is only one among many ideological options.*

Kinga Dunin

*Poland is a Catholic country.* Is that a truism or a statement of fact? If we really are dealing with fact—and I address certain doubts below—a variety of other, far more tangible facts then result from it, among them: an extremely restrictive antiabortion bill; the presence of Catholic religious instruction and the absence of sexual education in Polish public schools; the influence of the episcopate on laws regulating *in vitro* fertilization; the privileged status of the Committee on Church Property; the participation of Church officials in apparently secular ceremonies; finally, the inevitable voice of a priest as moral authority in public debates, particularly those related to sexual ethics and reproductive rights.

As philosopher and feminist Magdalena Środa writes, “[in] Poland, Catholicism is both more and less than a religion. More, because it is not merely a faith but a way of being and perceiving the world, a criterion for classifying others, an object of fashion, fascination, snobbery, an explicit vehicle of power and an implicit vehicle of censorship (at least self-censorship). (...) It is also less than religious faith because it is often reduced to empty rituals.” Indeed, we are so very Catholic in Poland that even most of Polish atheists turn out to be Catholic; non-believing to be sure, but practicing nonetheless. Studies show that the vast majority of Polish atheists get married in a church (71%) and baptize their children (74%). It’s a matter of atmosphere, or – as my Catholic friend explains – it is our karma. Speaking of karma, according to another interesting poll (from 2006, but probably still valid), 28% of Polish Catholics believe in... reincarnation.

*Poland is a Catholic country,* we hear whenever someone brings up the constitutional “autonomy” of Church and state. It turns out that in Poland the separation of Church and state is supposed to be a *friendly* separation. Sounds reasonable, but what exactly does it mean? Will Catholics remove crosses from the voting station in my neighborhood to recognize the separation and respect the autonomy, or should I pretend in a *friendly* manner that the crosses are not there? The term *compromise* has made a surprising career in this context, consistently used to silence dissenters: “What do you mean? You don’t want a *compromise*? You’d rather start an *ideological war*?” For years this move has served to check public debate on the consequences of the antiabortion bill. Any effort to re-open this debate was seen *a priori* as a sign of confrontational tendencies. Since 1989, the legal solutions concerning reproductive rights have been a series of “compromises” that Catholics reach with other Catholics, convinced that in this way they buttress Polishness, or normality. *Compromise* has invariably meant an act of violence and exclusion in the name of the Catholic majority.

Let us recall a few key events from the history of reproductive rights in contemporary Poland.

•1990: at the *Solidarity* Congress, the Women's Committee speaks for abortion rights. Effect: *Solidarity* authorities dissolve the Women's Committee.

•1992: a spontaneous movement for a referendum on abortion, the so-called Bujak committees (perhaps the most widespread grassroots social movement since 1989), collects well over a million signatures. Effect: the petition is ignored by the Parliament.

The sentence *Poland is a Catholic country* is not a statement of fact but a sort of a spell, a self-fulfilling prophesy sanctioning existing power relations. The conviction that *Poland is a Catholic country* is like a quagmire or swamp, sucking us all in, Catholic or not. The more we sink in it... the more we sink. We have become so accustomed to the quagmire that we don't even ask any more why the ground is so spongy, why so slippery, why the air is so heavy. It is, after all, only our familiar swamp, exuding its slightly nauseating vapors. The very air that we breathe.

Someone who says that *Poland is a Catholic country* does not describe any extra-linguistic reality and does not invite a discussion. The function of this sentence is similar to *This is a free country* when spoken in the U.S. It is not a judgment or an opinion. Rather, it is a strange mix of tautology, tease, boast or challenge, and call to battle. The sentence is an excellent example of a perlocutionary act as defined by Austin, an utterance that not only describes but also changes reality. In the case of this sentence the changes are gradual and the power of the spell grows with use. The more we repeat it, the more Poland becomes a "Catholic country." And we repeat it often: a *google* search produces 180 thousand examples.

Speech acts create reality, calling to life communicative contexts that make them legible. *We live in a Catholic country* is a master act in this respect. I-the Catholic declare that I feel at home here. I also suggest that you-the Catholic are also Polish. I call on the interlocutor's loyalty, I build a sense of community and put others in their place. Clearly, they don't belong here. Polish Catholicism is like the horseness of a horse; like the tomatoness of tomato soup. How does one make broth? From meat and vegetables. What is Catholicism? The faith of the Polish people. What is Poland? Why, it is a Catholic country. But what are we really talking about? Does "country" mean Polish society, the state or the nation? As numerous studies show, Polish society does not share many of the opinions of the Catholic Church, and generally does not perceive the Church as an authority on moral issues. According to the Constitution, the Polish state is secular. And the Nation? Yes, the Nation seems to be the key here, but the Nation is not something I dare discuss. Not just yet. We may ask further: does "Catholicism" refer to faith? Tradition and custom? Political influence of a certain institution? All of this reeks of lack of precision. But it is the swampy ambiguity that is the force behind our sentence. *Bubble, bubble, Poland is a Catholic country*, whispers the swamp. *Bubble, bubble, if you don't like it, get out. Bubble, bubble, you don't get it? Then you're not one of us.*

I suppose you wish to know to whom the swamp bubbles. Well, it bubbles to everyone, of course, but to women somewhat more than to men, it seems. Why? Because the Church is particularly interested in matters pertaining to human sexuality and fertility, and these, in both physiological and cultural terms, constitute a sphere in which women bear more

responsibility and are more vulnerable to pain and loss. That is why I think that the atheist Church weddings and baptisms are – how shall I put it? – the product of how women deal with the Church. It is similar with the mass participation of children of atheists in religion classes in schools (theoretically optional, but in practice hard to avoid). Here is how I think it works. To be excluded, to be different, to be stigmatized is a source of suffering, for children more than for adults. The very possibility of a child's suffering is automatically the source of worry for the mom. Mothers tend to worry more than fathers. Mothers feel more guilt, if for no other reason than because they are held accountable more than fathers are. It is no accident that Internet debates about whether atheists should baptize their children are frequented by women more than by men. These are not philosophical dilemmas, but practical and emotional troubles, resulting from deeply felt concern that one's child might get hurt, from the worry that one won't be a good enough mother. Do questions of ideology and freedom of conviction matter in comparison? Clearly not. Here is a sample of such reasoning:

„I would like my son to have a future choice of what he wants to believe in, and not to serve as a boost to Church statistics from the first days of his life. The family will disapprove, but that is what I want. But... these are my wishes. And the child? Won't he feel left out as the only kid who does not go to holy communion? (...) At school, won't he feel as if he is worse than other kids? But is this reason enough to baptize the child and invite the priest to visit our home, for the child's sake?”

I don't believe women are “naturally conservative.” I would rather see this as involuntary conformity to which they are compelled by cultural pressure. Various things must be done against one's own desires, “for the good of the child.” Another dimension of this pressure is the Church's power to shame, to create what used to be called a woman's “disgrace.” Church teaching theoretically applies to the entire sphere of moral values, but somehow we hear the bishops making judgments about apparent “wrongdoings” in intimate and family life and not about injustice and harm done in the economic sphere, not to mention cruelty to animals. The Church is interested in sex and reproduction more than in other aspects of human life. From the feminist perspective this means simply that it is interested in controlling women. Church power and authority in this sphere—in which, let it be added, clergymen can by definition have no experience—are enormous.

The power of the Church is akin to the power of the patriarch in a traditional family. Other family members may quietly disagree, but no one dares to contradict him openly. The father passes judgment, condemns, criticizes and delivers endless speeches in a tone of omniscience and thinly veiled resentment. The others, even if they ultimately refuse to be bullied, judged or bored to tears, are nonetheless forced to listen to daddy's diatribes. Priests perform a similar function in the Polish media. During the recent public debate on legislation concerning infertility treatment, the bishops played the role of experts. In the summer of 2009, priests, and only priests, debated the ethical dimension of the conflict between the surrogate mother who decided to keep the child and the couple who had hired her. The plight of Agata, a 14-year-old girl who struggled for an abortion in 2008, or the story of Alicja Tysiąc, who successfully sued Poland in Strasburg after she was denied a legal abortion in 2001– the ethics of such stories are discussed by the clergy in the supposedly secular public sphere.

The privileged position of the Church as a dispenser of values is rarely discussed in

mainstream public debate. Nonetheless, in recent years, particularly after the death of Pope John Paul II, a certain gap has appeared, a crack through which one may voice open criticism of the Church without being associated with the infamous Jerzy Urban. This gap lends itself to a naïve and melancholy narrative about boundless gratitude, disappointed hopes and profound mourning. The gratitude concerns the Church's position as an ally of the democratic opposition, a refuge to dissidents and mainstay of Polishness in the dark times of communism. The disappointed hopes are mentioned in relation to the Church's recent turn to the right. Here the name of Tadeusz Rydzyk, the founder and director of Radio Maryja, is mentioned with ritual disgust. Finally, the declaration of mourning after the death of John Paul II allows those who criticize the Church, even if they are non-believers, to situate themselves safely on the side of the Church, after all. Let us hear a model version of this narrative. Here is Adam Michnik:

“My hopes that the Polish Church would become the Church of the Gospel more than an institution were not fulfilled. Today I feel anticlerical temptation more than I feel like making the effort to understand. I try to restrain that temptation for reasons of political opportunism and general cowardice, but it lingers within me. When I read the majority of the writings identify themselves as Catholic, I experience estrangement and anxiety. I never had these feelings when, for years, I read «Tygodnik Powszechny,» «Więź,» «Znak» and John Paul II's encyclicals. Something has changed. Adam Szostkiewicz wrote an article for «Polityka» in which he invented the term «de-Wojtylization of Polish Catholicism. There is something to it, I believe. (...) I consider the present state of Polish Catholicism a regression from the tone proposed by John Paul II, Tischner, Turowicz and Mazowiecki. (...) We feel the loss of John Paul II.”

Obviously, I agree with Michnik that the Church has moved to the right. Yet I am not satisfied with his tale of the Church that came to love democracy and pluralism in the times of communism and later supported the new democracy, only to degenerate into neo-nationalism with the death of the Pope. An entire decade is missing from this story and that decade is of crucial significance from the perspective of the history of women's rights. What is missing are the efforts of the Church to limit women's rights, women's efforts to oppose those limitations, and the submissiveness of all subsequent governments to the pressure of the bishops. Let us recall the facts once again. 1990: the *Solidarity* Congress dissolves the Women's Committee for its refusal to accept the Church-defined position on women's rights with humility. 1992: a referendum on abortion rights fails to take place despite massive public demand. We may also retrace our steps back to the beginning of the eighties. It is then that the first anti-abortion campaign of the Church took place: exhibitions of photographs of mutilated fetuses set up in churches, widespread circulation of the film *Silent Scream*, organization of pro-life marches. All that began in the times of the first *Solidarity* movement. And one more date, 2002: The Hundred Women's Letter to the European Parliament. It contained a sobering assessment of the relation between women, Church and state in the context of the approaching referendum on Poland's accession to the European Union. Let me quote one key passage: “Behind the scenes of Polish integration with the European Union, a barter of women's rights is taking place, disguised with the characteristic biased use of language (...)”.

“Gazeta Wyborcza” has recently published a new edition of Michnik’s 1976 *Kościół Lewica Dialog* [The Church, the Left, Dialogue]. From today’s perspective, the book constitutes a fascinating record of Michnik’s – and more broadly the secular, left-wing opposition community’s – fascination with the Church. Time and again Michnik cuts himself off from the legacy of the pre-war critic of the Church, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński and promotes “a dialogue with Christianity” as an “anti-totalitarian encounter”. He empathizes with the spiritual transformations of his lay friends, who were searching for “inner harmony” in “transcendence”. He dreams of an alliance between “the lay and the Catholic left.” This is not my story. I grew up in the eighties as a child of two atheists, sympathizers of the opposition, who signed me up for religion classes because that seemed easier, because it me shielded against anti-Semitism, and because it emphasized their oppositional stance in relation to the political system of the time. What the Church had to offer to a teenager in this period was not so much inner peace and transcendence as nationalist rapture in a pro-life setting. When I returned home excited after a screening of *The Silent Screem*, armed with slogans about the sanctity of “conceived life,” my mother handed me a battered copy of Boy-Żeleński’s book on the horrors of illegal abortion in interwar Poland. After the initial shock, it downed on me that *Piekło kobiet* [Women’s Hell] was not only a highly reasonable text, but one that may soon be timely.

I cannot find myself in Michnik’s story about de-Wojtylization – the loss of the spirit of John Paul II – and about gratitude, betrayed hopes and mourning for the late Pope. I did not cry when the Pope died. And if I also did not wear the “I didn’t cry when the Pope died” tee-shirt, it’s only because I am cautious by nature. After all, in the area crucial to me as a woman and feminist—reproductive rights and sexual ethics—the Church remains faithful to John Paul II: adamant and adamantly hostile to women. Such was its position in the times of Boy-Żeleński, in the times of communism, in the times of the first *Solidarity* movement, in mid-nineties... and so it remains today. The problem is that women’s rights have never been an important topic in Michnik’s thinking. They don’t even play the role of a minor motif in his narrative about Poland, the lay left, and his own struggles with History and the Absolute. Cornered, Michnik will at best crack a joke (as he does in the interview quoted above) that during a debate in “Gazeta Wyborcza” “feminists took his pants off via the head” accusing him of being an agent of the Church. But clearly, he doesn’t take our reprimands seriously. We do not count. We don’t even appear in the footnotes. The transaction that we consider a breach of the rules of democracy, a sign of meanness and a cruelty – frankly, that transaction was from his point of view quite a good deal. Representatives of the former democratic opposition handed over to the Church a woman’s right to choose in return for the bishops’ support for Poland’s accession to the European Union. As feminist writer Kazimiera Szczuka ironically observes in the film *Podziemne państwo kobiet* [Women’s Underground State], women’s rights in return for a YES in the referendum was not, to the former dissidents, a high price to pay.

The Church, considered *a priori* the mainstay of Polishness, the keeper of tradition, demanded that women’s rights be taken away from them. So they were taken away. Why? To quote a well-known song: so that Poland could be Poland. The deal is done. We are now a member state of the European Union. And the sign of our sovereignty as a “Catholic country” (carefully negotiated and recorded in a special clause of the accession treaty) is the compliance of our authorities with the will of the Church. The Church has no intention of giving back the once executed toll; it has entrenched itself in its privileged position. Its

power is not waning, but growing. Reproductive rights continue to atrophy: today we don't even discuss the possibility of making abortion legal again; we desperately speculate on how to oppose the proposal of a ban on *in vitro* fertilization.

It is time to define the swamp, to name its contents. The quagmire whose fumes we breathe is a blend of politicized Catholicism and national identity, an identity assumed to be homogenous and unchangeable. It is an ideological attitude uncritically adopted from the eighties, the time of struggle with the totalitarian system. It is ideological in the sense that it proposes a coherent image of social reality which it simultaneously legitimizes, in the sense that it is a set of opinions held collectively rather than individually. Most of all, it is ideological because it cannot be verified, and yet it regulates collective behavior. The precepts of this ideology are rarely formulated explicitly; instead, what is offered is an insipid, swampy, empty rhetoric, a peculiar sort of newspeak. It overflows with words and phrases such as friendship, compromise, centuries-long tradition and great achievements of the Church in the struggle with totalitarianism.

In his important book, *Krytyka solidarnościowego rozumu* [A critique of *Solidarity's* reason], Sergiusz Kowalski has described the shaping of the categories and assumptions which determined the thinking of the first *Solidarity* and which were later never questioned. The category of "the majority" was central for this way of thinking and experiencing the world, majority perceived as a type of monolithic force resisting the totalitarian power. The word "democracy" was repeated like a mantra in this period, which was formative for the future, free Poland. However, the model of the world which accompanied the struggle for democracy was far from pluralistic. References were frequently made to an ideal majority, to the Nation, which opposes communism. The world was divided into US and THEM. All that was "truly Polish," authentic, "ours," was defined in opposition to the socialist state perceived as artificial and unnatural. THEY were the soulless, dishonest system. WE had the truth, WE represented the Nation. Ties with the past were crucial to this perception of the world and Catholicism provided the medium linking *Solidarity's* present with the pre-socialist olden days. Thus the unquestioned authority of the Catholic Church was solidified.

In the context of the early eighties the claim that *Poland is a Catholic country* was a challenge thrown at the oppressive system. In a liberal democracy, however, the same words have an entirely different meaning: they are a denial of democratic pluralism made from a neo-nationalist position. In this new context it would be fitting to state clearly what one means by "country", but no one – with the sole exception of the extreme right – says this openly. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to quote a classic of Polish nationalist-Catholic thought, whose words offer an honest and clear assessment of the ingredients of the Polish quagmire in its pre-war version:

„The Polish state is a Catholic state. This is not merely due to the fact that the majority of the population is Catholic, or that it is Catholic in such and such proportion. Our position is that it is a Catholic state to the full extent of the term's meaning because it is a national state, and our nation is a Catholic nation. Such a position brings with it serious consequences. Namely, it entails that state laws should guarantee freedom to all religious creeds, but the ruling religion, the one whose principles are respected by the state's legislation, is the Catholic religion, and the Catholic Church represents the religious side in all state functions.”

These words were written in 1927. Yet, I am convinced that they describe relations between the Church and the state in today's Poland; the present *status quo* is admittedly a watered-down version of the pre-war national-democratic ideal, but the ingredients are the same. It is no accident that the monument of Roman Dmowski – the author of the above quotation – has for several years stood in a major square in Warsaw. And it is no that accident that *Nasi Okupanci* [Our Occupants], a work about the power of the church by Boy-Żeleński, recently re-issued by the leftist think-tank *Krytyka Polityczna*, reads very much like a commentary on present day issues (and not just thanks to the witty comments in its margins penned by Kazimiera Szczuka). *Bubble bubble*, my dear compatriots, *Poland is a Catholic country*. And Boy-Żeleński is no longer among us.

When I begin to feel suffocated by vapors rising from our quagmire, or when I begin to hear its bubbling in my own thoughts, I return to an excellent essay by Kinga Dunin, published in 2002 but still, sadly, relevant. Its title is “Czarny ford i dwugłowe ciele, czyli Polak idzie do Unii” [The Black Ford and the Two-headed Calf, or: a Polishman on his way to the EU]. With her characteristic ironic wit, Dunin managed to capture a state of affairs, which, if you stop to think about it, is quite astonishing: on the one hand, the omnipresence and all but omnipotence of the Church in Polish public life; on the other hand – utter silence about this fact on the part of enlightened liberals, participants of the public debate (which is often a debate about the sorry state of public debate). Dunin strives to name and describe that which I call the quagmire effect. She writes about “the sacred fear that comes over people who wish to be considered decent and reasonable, whenever they are called on to speak on matters which an unwritten agreement has somehow placed within the power of the Church.” She also considers the symbolic function of the Church, respected by all, which results in “a readiness to declare one’s assent to the Church view in all matters labeled as >moral issues<.” The power of Dunin’s piece lays in the ease with which she asks the fundamental questions that nobody dares to ask in Poland. What is the place of Church discourse in a pluralistic society? What function can be played in a public debate by an institution that possesses, in its own view, an absolute monopoly on truth, truth coming from God? Why is it that bishops speak on behalf of the Nation as a whole? Dunin goes on to ask, somewhat irreverently, about the relationship between the said Nation and the actual people who happen to live in Poland: “Which group and whose interests does the Church represent? (...) On whose behalf is it speaking? All those who have been baptized? Those who put coins in the basket during Sunday mass? Or does it speak for the Church as an institution? The Church hierarchy? Could it be that it is taking care of its own economic interests? No, that cannot be the case. The Church is beyond all suspicion....”

I have recently come across another striking text – one whose author captures the quagmire as it drowns the minds of my own associates and friends – Polish feminists. Anna Dzierzgowska writes about a visit that feminist activists – organizers of the Polish Women’s Congress – paid to the archbishop Nycz. She comments on this peculiar event as follows:

“...a visit with the archbishop, an invitation extended to a priest (even the wisest of priests) to comment on some weighty matter – each action of this kind strengthens the general belief that no public debate in Poland can possibly take place without the voice of the Catholic Church. When we insist on getting the opinion of the Church on some political issue, we in fact legitimize the right of the Church to express political opinions. And so we remain stuck in the vicious circle, conserving with our own

actions the situation the much-missed Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński once called the occupation of Poland.”

My sentiments precisely. I call the vicious circle a quagmire, but the intention seems the same.

What I refer to as “quagmire” is not so much the Church discourse as such, as the general readiness to accept it as a primary point of reference on axiological issues, a readiness also of those who in fact do not agree with the Church standpoint. The practice of collective nodding is punctuated with declarations of love and respect for John Paul II, as well as statements of heart-felt grief after his death. Everyone seems to be taking part in these social rituals – from toddlers in kindergartens to soccer fans. I have recently come across a declaration of respect and sympathy for John Paul II in a review of a book described as a postmodern porn novel, apparently a breakthrough in erotic literature. The reviewer informs us first, that the work is “the blog of the mysterious Arundati (...) a de Sade in skirt and stockings”. Next we are told that the bold provocateur “likes JP II” for “his passion and fidelity (...) and for his wise patriotism,” as well as for his ability to familiarize us with “old age, sickness, dying (...)”. At this point my initial urge to sneak a peek at such sinful reading material suddenly evaporates. Perhaps this reaction is a sign of intolerance – after all everyone, including a postmodernist and self-professed creator of scandals, has the right to “like JP II”. What troubles me, however, is that the tributes to the Polish Pope are not carefully considered declarations of belief, but are habitual, simply part of the way things are said and done. Such are the boundaries of what comes to mind – including the mind of a woman porn-writer. The Church discourse does not speak *to* Polish people, it speaks *through* them, often against their own better judgment.

This is particularly painful to watch in the case of women, because what the Church has to say about our bodies and aspirations is so often at odds with our feelings and desires. When I hear a young girl defend the woman’s right to abortion slip into Church language with the term “conceived life,” I hear the quagmire sucking. When infertile women on an Internet forum speak of the guilt they feel and the sense of sin they experience as they prepare themselves for yet another round of IVF in hope of a longed-for baby – I know the quagmire is bubbling viciously. When I hear that the organizers of the Women’s Congress paid the archbishop a friendly visit on my behalf, I think to myself in resignation – well, it’s a quagmire, after all.

The media are delivering a peculiar bit of news just now: compulsory funerals for fetuses are being performed in state hospitals, paid for by the state, and without securing the consent of the patients who miscarried. In the city of Kielce alone, there have been 29 such ceremonies (six of them requested by the parents). I read, rubbing my eyes in disbelief, the description of a fetus-burial without the presence of parents. “There is a tiny coffin with first name and last name on it, and the date of death, and the tiny bodies are usually locked inside, in jars or other containers, and there is a priest who performs the sprinkling with holy water, as well as my employees – explains Dariusz Toborek, the director of communal cemeteries in Kielce.” I reread this description to make sure that I understood correctly. Outside my window the wind is blowing, but if you listen carefully, you might hear the quagmire’s bubbling: *Poland is a Catholic country. Poland is a Catholic country. Poland is a Catholic country.*

Translation by **Krystyna Mazur & Agnieszka Graff**, with thanks to **Regina Graff** for final touches

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\* *This essay was written within the Project of the Heinrich Böll Foundation Regional Office in Warsaw "Religion, Politics and Gender".*

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