

4-1996

Established Religion vs. New Religions: Social Perception and Legal Consequences

Halina Grzymala-Moszcznska

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grzymala-Moszcznska, Halina (1996) "Established Religion vs. New Religions: Social Perception and Legal Consequences," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol16/iss2/5>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

ESTABLISHED RELIGION VS. NEW RELIGIONS: SOCIAL PERCEPTION AND LEGAL CONSEQUENCES

HALINE GRZYMALA-MOSZCZYNSKA

Any analysis of the role of religion in the societies in Eastern and Central Europe requires understanding the fact that the societies are in the complex process of transformation. This transformation has resulted in the dislocation of various religious groups and bodies from the places they occupied in the social fabric. The transformation might even be described as a cultural shock deeply influencing all strata of the society (DeMarinis, Grzymala-Moszczyńska 1994).

These changes towards democratization create the necessity to redefine relationships between the State and various churches, between churches themselves and between churches and their members.

One aspect of the process of the political and social transformation might be described as the arrival of new actors on the religious stage, the appearance of new religions in the social milieu.

At this point defining what we mean by "established" or "new religion" is necessary. In the Polish context the established religion means exclusively Roman-Catholicism. However, strangely enough a new religion does not mean just New Religious Movements, but also all other religious denominations and groups other than Roman Catholicism no matter how long they were present in the Polish context. In many respects the situation seems to reflect the analysis of new religious movements conducted by Werblowsky (1982) which described various levels of relative novelty. The category of new religious movements functions in the social consciousness in Poland as a generic term for all non Roman Catholic religious groups. The majority of Poles identify not only various Buddhist groups, the Hare Krishna Movement or the Unification Church which were established in Poland in the late 1970's but also Christian Orthodox and Muslims--present in Poland since 14 century, Protestant Churches (Lutheran, Calvinist--present since 16 century, Baptists or Adventists present since 19 century, and Pentacostals and Methodists present since 1920.

This inadequate social perception can be probably interpreted as a result of two factors: 1. In the communist propaganda period it was stressed very clearly that Poles from a nation that was homogenous in ethnic terms. The presence of minorities was not recognized. Existing differences were dismissed and given little importance. Such an ideologically motivated propaganda was just the extrapolation of the general political rules which were governing propaganda in all countries of the communist block and were aiming to create an impression that all people from communist block created one, uniform category contrasted with the category of people from capitalist countries. Although this uniformity has been largely imposed on the social perception from outside it has largely penetrated the national consciousness. All features which did not comply with the existing standards have been heavily stigmatized and uniformity became a positive value.

With respect to national religiosity the Roman Catholic Church strongly endorsed the view that Polish people have been chosen to transfer true religion into the next millennium. Real Polish culture has been portrayed as a religious one i.e. as connected with Roman Catholicism.

At the same time the Polish culture has been contrasted with amoral and pagan western culture. Religious diversity of the West has been presented as a group of various heresies. The Church teaching as strengthen the social conviction that the Roman Catholic Church in Poland was superior to all other forms of religion. To be Catholic was presented not only a religious but also as a patriotic duty. For many members of the Church their membership has played a role in the political opposition towards the communist regime. All confessions which differed from Catholicism have been identified by the Church as wrong and not truly religious. To a great extent their presence in the country was ignored. Only after 1989 have many ethnic and religious minorities started to voice their problems and demanded recognition of their rights and presence in the country. Many members of the larger society are now discovering the existence of these minorities.

A second factor which influences how Polish society is blind to religious confessions other than Roman Catholicism stems from the blending Catholicism into the national stereotype. To be a Pole means to be a Roman Catholic. In contrary to be a Pole and to be at the same time an Orthodox, a Protestant or a Moonie means in the social context "to be a Pole in spite of being an Orthodox, a Protestant or a Moonie" or actually to be a lesser Pole because of the non-Polish religious confession. In the social context all religions except Roman-Catholicism are both new and alien and they are characterized as outsiders of the society. Research (Nowicka 1993) conducted in the samples of the Polish members of the Lutheran and Orthodox Church in Warsaw demonstrated that in fact these minorities feel not only their minority status vis a vis the Catholic majority but also they perceive themselves as a helpless, discriminated and endangered group. At the same time, they compensate their negative emotions by stressing positive features of their own denominations.

The situation helps create a lot of strength and positive virtues among their members. Their feeling of helplessness comes from the fact that they are more likely to be objects of various regulations concerning social life rather than subjects in control of their own legal situation. They perceive their own participation in the discussion of religious matters in Poland only as welcomed if they voice their support for the opinions of Roman Catholicism. In other situation they see themselves as passive receivers of decisions which are made by the powerful Roman Catholic Church. The representatives of both confessions feel discriminated not only in a social sense but also in respect to their professional carrier. Their endangered feelings stem from the fear of potential being assimilated as a group into the Catholic majority, because in case of mixed marriages the Roman Catholic Church requires that children will be educated in the Catholic religion. In the long run the policy would result in diminishing numbers of the young Lutherans or Orthodox. In addition the children of religious minorities feel that they would risk personal injury if they disclose their religious denomination to their schoolmates in a primary school. The situation seems to be less drastic in the secondary school (age 15-19), although still difficult. The reason for this hidden intolerance seems to be that the majority of people in Poland equate the notion of being Catholic with being a honest and valuable member of the society. By the 1970s social psychologists researching the characteristics of the socially accepted person have found that overtly displayed Catholicism determines to a great extent the sympathy and lack of social distance one feels towards a person (Madrzycki 1980).

Both religious minority groups feel endangered because people confuse the categories of nationality and religiosity. The Orthodox are equated with Russians; The Lutherans with

Germans. They feel that they can never be real Poles. Consequently members of non-Roman Catholic Church religious denomination stress their Polish roots and contribution of members of their church to the Polish culture.

Cognitive anthropology (Levi-Straus, 1968) has demonstrated that in different societies certain features are perceived only in physical sense and some other features are perceived both physically and processed intellectually. They are features of crucial importance in the given society. Certainly in Poland religious confession belongs to the features which are processed very consciously and one's religion is used to classify a person as an alien and outsider or as an insider in the society. Members of non-Roman Catholic religious denomination perceive their position as outsiders confronted with painful and humiliating decisions stimulated by Roman Catholic Church (i.e., in respect to demands of Catholic education of children from mixed marriages and compulsory religious instruction at public schools). The position to which they aspire, but feel that they are not likely to achieve could be described as a position of being an insider in spite of being different.

Let us look now at how the social situation reflects the painful emotions experienced by non-Catholics. First, we will analyze the legal regulations concerning the Church-State relationship. The current regulation for the Church-State relationship was voted in the Parliament in 1989. According to this regulation various religious bodies could claim their previously owned property from the State. (The property of religious denominations had been nationalized in 1954). A general estimate of the claims numbered close to six thousand cases. In fact, there have been no more than three thousand claims. Only cases brought by the Roman-Catholic Church have been decided on by the joint Government-Church Commission. All other religious bodies have had to rely on the decision-making power of the Polish Prime Minister. No joint commissions have been created for setting their claims.

Legal regulations concerning the relationship between the State and various religious bodies are presently at the beginning stage of their development. In 1994, regulations concerning the relationship between the Lutheran Church and the State have been finalized. The regulations concerning relation between the State and Methodists, Baptists, Adventists, Old Catholics Polish Catholics, Old Believers, Pentacostals, and Jewish congregations are at the very initial stage of development. The only religious group besides the Roman Catholic Church which has developed regulations with the Polish State is a the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Parliamentary debate concerning its status has demonstrated strong objection towards a tendency to follow the rule of symmetry i.e. an attempt to create an equal legal status for the Roman Catholic Church and all other religious bodies. It became very clear that the rule of symmetry should not be applied. From the very beginning the rule of equal rights for all Churches has been questioned. It is clear that all religious bodies will not have an equal chances to regain their property.

In spite of the privileged legal position it holds, Roman-Catholic Church in Poland seems to be in very serious danger. Legal success in regaining its lost properties and introducing compulsory religious instructions into schools, creates many negative reactions among members of the society. Many people perceive that the way it has been accomplished is both arrogant and largely illegal. Many buildings given back to the Church has been occupied by hospitals and orphanages. These institutions were forced to move to often much worse locations or to close down. In addition religious instruction conducted by unprepared priests who are quite often ridiculed by school children creates lots of negative emotions.

But the more serious danger in which the Roman-Catholic Church is likely to be caught is the polarization process of the society. Psychological research (Skarzynska 1994) conducted on representative group of Polish youth aged 18-20 show that the respondents could be classified into two distinct clusters winners (12%) and losers (40%). The winners see their future as a promising one, perceive themselves as well prepared for the professional career, and likely to find an interesting job. There are no unemployed members of their families. The losers who see their chances on the job market as very slim perceive themselves as a poorly prepared for the professional career, some members of their families are already unemployed. The winners more often declare themselves as non-believers, respectively losers see themselves as believers. Given the political and economic changes present in Poland as well as in other post-Communist countries, has already resulted in sharp polarization of the society. If a growing part of the society which locates itself on the losers' side, starts to use religion as an explaining argument for opposing the democratic changes of the society this presents a real danger. These elements of society will use the role of religion as mechanism for creating division between "us" and "them", and as an excuse for opposing changes toward a more open society.

Bibliography

DeMarinis, V. Grzymala-Moszczynska, H. (1994). "The Nature and Role of Religion and Religious experience in Psychological Cross--Cultural Adjustment." *Social Compass* (in press).

Levi-Strauss, C. (1968). *Mysl nieoswojona*. Warsaw: PWN.

Madrzycki, T. (1980). Wplyw postaw wobec religii na spostrzeganie cech osobowych i kontakty społeczne. *Zeszyty Nsukowe. Wydziału Humanistycznego-Psychologia*. vol.3. Gdansk: Wydawnictwa Naukowe Uniwersytetu Gdanskiego. (Influence of the attitudes towards religion on perception of the individual and social contacts).

Nowicka, E. (1993). Samopoczucie mniejszosci wyznaniowych w Polsce: Z baden nad luteranami i prawoslawnymi w Warszawie. In I. Borowik, A. Szyjewski (eds.). *Religie i koscioly w spoleczenstwach postkomunistycznych*. Krakow: Zakład wydawniczy Nomos". page 213-223. (How religious minorities feel in Poland: From research on Lutherans and Christian Orthodox in Warsaw).

Skarzynske, K.(1994). Troche w prawo, trodhe w lewo. *Polityka* 29, 25. (A little bit to the right, a little bit to the left).

Warblowsky, Z. (1982). Religions New and Not So New: Fragments of An Agenda. In E. Barker (ed.) *New Religious Movements: A Prospective for Understanding Society*. New York: The Edwin Miller Press. page 32-46.