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**POLAND AS CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT: THEOLOGY AND ECONOMICS IN  
TRANSITION FROM THE COMMUNIST TO THE POST-COMMUNIST ERA**

by **Halina Grzymala-Moszczynska**

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An analysis of the changes which are taking place in Poland could be most efficiently understood in the context of cross-cultural transition from one political and economic system to another. The first system--the Communist one--belongs to the period 1945-1989 while the second--Post-Communist--to the period from 1989 until now.

Examining the broad scope of political, social, and economic differences in the daily life of Polish citizens during these two periods, the case can be made for understanding the Communist to Post-Communist transition as a cross-cultural one. The Communist period has been dominated by an inefficient command economy, with equally little income for everyone, and with equal access to poor health care and educational systems.

The Post-Communist period brought extreme polarization in terms of income levels. It has created a base for unequal access to better health care and educational options: private health clinics, private medical consultants, and private schools. The scope of the changes and a very short time of transition between the two periods seem to justify the analogy not only to cross-cultural transition but even to cross-cultural experiences. Rapid cross-cultural experiences create a cultural shock. The situation of Polish society seems to require an explanation in terms of cultural shock described by Oberg (1960) who specified the following dimensions of cultural shock:<sup>1</sup>

1. Feeling of helplessness and ineffectiveness in dealing with a new culture.
2. Sense of being uprooted, confusion of roles, values, and feelings.
3. The strain involved in the increase of efforts of adaptation.
4. Mutual rejection of newcomers by traditional culture and rejection of old traditional

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<sup>1</sup>K.Oberg, "Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments," Practical Anthropology, 1960, No. 7, pp. 177-182.

culture by newcomers with attendant feelings of discomfort, disgust, and anxiety.

Oberg's factors will be used here as the tools for a psychological analysis of the social situation in which the economic changes in Poland are taking place and in which a theological response of the Catholic Church towards these changes should be examined. One of the most debilitating aspects of the problems created by the rapid transition between the two systems is the fear which stimulates in many people a state of the learned helplessness. This is the state which could be described by the first of Oberg's factors: the psychological term 'learned helplessness' describes an attitude of the person who believes that nothing can be done by him/her to improve an unfavorable and unbearable situation.

Such a perception of the situation causes very low self-esteem and eventually might lead toward depression. In Poland this syndrome is getting gradually more conspicuous. It is caused first of all by fear of losing a job paired with the strong conviction that nothing can be done to prevent it.

Because of the very massive structural changes in the Polish economy many professions which traditionally enjoyed a high prestige have become worthless almost overnight (example: coal miners, steel mill workers). Those people became confronted with the situation that their previous skills and education become totally irrelevant and offered them no chance to look for the new jobs. This is the situation described by the second of Oberg's factors as an experience of the confusion of roles, values, and emotions.

A very dramatic indicator of the psychological situation of deep distress could be the increasing trends of suicides (from 3,657 cases for all of 1989 to 3,000 cases in the first six months of 1993). Along the same line are the increased level of alcoholism, drug abuse, and family violence. A particularly high rate of social pathology prevails in regions of mass-unemployment. Particularly endangered by unemployment are older people, especially males over fifty. What really aggravates the situation is the fact that many people (in the research conducted by group of psychologists from Wroclaw University which constituted fifty per cent of the sample) agree that the chances in the work market would increase if they were to get new qualifications. However, they refuse such an alternative.<sup>2</sup> The reason for that refusal is their conviction--inherited after period of Communist command economy with virtually no unemployment--that this is the government's obligation to supply their citizens with jobs. It is not the citizens' role to look for a job by themselves and try to adapt to the demands of the market.

At this point one should pose a well-justified question as to why the adaptation process

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<sup>2</sup>Because of the fact that all sources are exclusively in Polish, readers are invited to contact the author directly for further information relating to the research projects. Halina Grzymala-Moszczyńska, Jagiellonian University, Institute for the Science of Religion, Karmelicka Street 34, 31-128 Krakow, Poland.

to the demands of the market goes so incredibly slowly, why the learning process on the social level is so inefficient. As to the possible answer to that question, let us analyze the general educational situation in the country. Seventy per cent of the population has only a primary education i.e. eight years of schooling. Even more alarming are the results of the research conducted by Professor Zbigniew Kwiecinski from Poznan University who has found that thirty people out one hundred are so-called functional illiterates. They know the alphabet but they do not understand texts. These results are confirmed by mass-media research which proved that seventy-five per cent of the national sample does not understand basic terms used by the press and TV. They also never read any books. Such a situation brings a very large portion of the population towards functional separation from information available in the surrounding world unless this world gets translated into concrete, linear terms, which at the same moment does not create any base for further personal development. It does not open a path for permanent education and prevents one from finding new perspectives. In Oberg's terms the situation of being confronted with incomprehensible language (third factor) pertaining to the surrounding reality creates considerable strain and distress. Such a strain usually accompanies adaptation to linguistically new language, but since in Poland terms pertaining to the new economic reality and to a political sphere of life especially related to election campaigns are totally inaccessible for the majority of the population, one can speak of a new language being used in Poland with all of the resulting stress that this invokes. As the consequence of the restricted access to the language in operation one can also see the limitation of chances for further restructuring of one's own qualifications and job's profile.

Research data demonstrates quite convincingly that people with primary education are not able to re-qualify again as soon as they are forty. In the Polish population it means that the majority of employees fall into this category since only six persons among one hundred has an academic education and twenty in one hundred a secondary education( i.e. after eight years of primary school additional four years of gymnasium or vocational school). Such an educational deficit creates a mentality which could be described at best as passive and anti-individualistic, with no initiative, oriented to receiving external commands, and feeling quite at home with populist language.

The response of Roman Catholic Church towards the new economic situation and towards introducing capitalistic mechanisms in Poland should be seen against the social situation described above. In contemporary Poland there are no existing realistic experiences with capitalism. One can find an uncritical apology of contemporary Western capitalism or panicky fear against it. There is little first-hand experience available. People visiting the West encounter a developed capitalism; people remembering the inter-war period in Poland remember capitalism of the twenties and thirties. But nobody was really exposed to

contemporary capitalism within the Polish context. The current economic system in Poland can be called the system of primitive accumulation, the earliest phase of the capitalist system. Very often people who use the same term 'capitalism' are in fact talking about very different things, arguing from completely different frames of references. It causes the situation in which using Oberg's fourth factor again, one can speak about mutual rejection of newcomers by the traditional culture i.e. rejection of those who are likely to endorse free market economy by traditionalists who are fearful of capitalism and, conversely, the rejection of traditional methods by newcomers. Newcomers view traditionalists as those being responsible for Poland's slow economic recovery, preventing the country from further progress.

Generally speaking the reaction of the Roman Catholic Church towards the changes which are taking place in Poland seem to be based on the two papal encyclicals, "Centessimus Annus" and "Laborem Excernses." The reaction indicates that the market economy in general is getting the approval. This happens first of all because it is based on personal freedom and secondly because it supports human creativity and ability for cooperation. In that respect, capitalism does not create any problems, and it should be possible to combine it with the social teachings of Roman Catholic Church.

At the same time, however, papal encyclicals left no doubts that some problems of capitalism should be voiced quite clearly. How one can stimulate the social energy to bring to Poland economic mechanisms which will stimulate development of more creative individuals, prepared for the challenges which economic freedom poses--these are the most eminent problems on that agenda.

The actual situation creates for the Church many challenges on the practical level such as how parishes could be converted into the real centers for helping those who are most needy. What are the means for influencing the social policy of the government toward the radical market economy? One of the problems officially addressed by Church-oriented media is the placement of efficient managers in charge of plants and companies instead of selling whole plants to Western capitalists. Privatization of the industry is generally opposed by the Church while systems of managerial responsibility are being endorsed. It is also proposed that industrial giants like the steel-mill factory in Krakow should be converted into groups of smaller independent units more flexible than huge plants.

At the same time Roman Catholic Church is taking a very uncompromising stand towards unemployment. It considers unemployment as an ultimate evil, particularly when the planned, structural, permanent unemployment becomes a means for rectifying the country's economy. Because of that the Church is setting up help for unemployed people as one of its primary goals. It is suggested that not only financial help should be offered to people who are loosing their jobs (particularly families with many children) but more important is the creation of new jobs and helping find already existing ones. Several conferences of Polish

bishops promoted these goals. On the level of the dioceses they are starting committees for helping unemployed people. They not only help financially but are also teaching people important but totally unknown skills for majority of Poles, such as skills in how to write curriculum vitae, how one should act during an interview with prospective employer, where to look for job offers, and how to start one's own enterprise.

At the same time it is stressed by the Church and the government alike that there is no going back to the previous economic system and no alternative for a market-oriented economy. Because of that even the new government, which might be considered as a leftist one, is getting support from the Church. The Farmers Fraction which has formed an alliance with the post-Communist Social-Democrats is seen as a mediator between the radical demands of market economy and the Church's interpretation of economic laws.

A final remark: language mirrors our perception and mediates our action. Because of that it is interesting to mention one more research result on media language. Respondents have been asked what is the worst word from a list of words covering various negative deeds and situation. The result was striking. No word got a more negative evaluation than unemployment.

This brings us back towards first part of my analysis. Among the costs which society has to pay during the process of transformation from one political system to another, fears connected to losing jobs and the lack of skills to find the new ones seem to be most expensive. It also explains why the Roman Catholic Church in Poland is setting this issue on its official agenda. By doing so the Church tries to help people to overcome the difficulties created by the cultural shock of the transitional period.