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CATHOLICISM IN THE NEW POLAND: A RELIGION AND A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

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Polish society is divided along a number of lines; hardly unusual in any contemporary pluralistic society. The new divisions have not been adequately named. Michał Kuź, a Polish political scientist, has coined the self-explanatory terms “localists” and “internationalists” to describe perhaps the most pertinent current divide within European societies.¹ These worldview divides are also visible along political party lines. The proportions of the parties of the divide are naturally different in Poland than in countries of the old Europe. It is relatively easy to indicate which of the parties in the political landscape of the country within the localist and internationalist divide places more emphasis on patriotism.² Poles generally consider themselves European and their attitude toward the European Union remains quite positive across the board, with only a small group of genuine Eurosceptics present in the society.³ To put it in more traditional terms, in Polish society there is a small group of cosmopolitans and strong nationalists at opposite ends of the spectrum, while most citizens range somewhere in between. These divisions naturally play out at various levels in the field of religious life as well. However, to begin to understand the place of religion in Polish society, it is best to start at its most basic unit: the family.

¹ Michał Kuź, “Globalism and Localism in the Perspective of Polish Politics,” *The Warsaw Institute Review*, 27 June 2017. Retrieved: <https://warsawinstitute.org/globalism-and-localism-in-the-perspective-of-polish-politics/>.

² Kuź maps the political parties on the Polish landscape in that manner in his analysis.

³ It should be recalled the term Eurosceptic, much like populist, is fairly freely used and often enough simply acts as a label for political factions that have a different view of EU governance and organization than the mainstream: see Laure Neumayer, “Euroscepticism as a political label: The use of European Union issues in political competition in the new Member States,” *European Journal of Political Research* no. 47 (2008): 135–160.

The virtually iconic Solidarity movement of the 1980s has been called a “self-limiting” revolution.⁴ This was largely the strategy of its leadership, aware of the genuine threat of intervention by either the Polish communist regime or its Soviet overlord. John Paul II’s insistence on nonviolent resistance also played a crucial role. There is a key scene in Andrzej Wajda’s *Wałęsa: Man of Hope* (2013) that illustrates one of the less noted but essential social forces maintaining this strategy. After the August strike of the Gdańsk shipyard workers has been renewed despite the seeming initial success of negotiations kids gloves are off; and the regime’s forces are gathering for what seems to be an inevitable violent confrontation with the workers occupying the shipyard. Two workers are near the gate and discussing the turn of events. The first worker is young and unmarried. He is ready for a fight because he can no longer tolerate living under the “Russian” heel. The second is slightly older and married. He wishes that they had quit while they were ahead. Within his film Wajda seems to stress how both workers’ arguments have their validity.

The struggle of both perspectives is personified intensely in Wałęsa himself who fights for freedom and dignity but is always aware of the consequences for his family. Indeed, all his actions are shown to have consequences for his wife and family. Nevertheless in *Wałęsa* Wajda shows clearly enough that at a certain level family was a key to successful resistance. It inspired political realism not to be too rash, but also additional motivation to persevere in the fight for change.

In communist countries dominated by the Soviet Union family breakdown was generally quite widespread. For instance, Peter Hitchens has noted that during his stay as a journalist in the Soviet Union in its twilight years at the onset of the 1990s, “in mile after mile of mass-produced housing you would be hard put to find a single family untouched by divorce.”⁵ This phenomenon was likely among the sources of the demoralization of communist societies—and a problem that likely remains in post-communist ones. And it seems hardly accidental. Next to religion, the family as an institution was in quite low esteem by Communists since it made the individual family members more difficult to manipulate. In Poland the two were indeed closely interrelated; Cardinal Wyszyński who led

⁴ Aleksander Smolar, “Towards ‘Self-limiting Revolution’: Poland 1970-89,” in *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-Violent Action from Ghandi to the Present*, ed. Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 127-43.

⁵ Peter Hitchens, *Rage against God* (London: Continuum, 2010), 59-60.

the Polish Catholic Church from the Stalinist period to Solidarity had made it a primary concern to strengthen the family.⁶

Thus, one of the great services of the Church at the time was in supporting the family to the extent that the institution was likely among the most intact throughout the Soviet bloc. It was with this significantly enhanced through religion reservoir of “human capital,” to use economist Gary Becker’s term for the contribution of the family to society and its economy,⁷ that after 1989 Poles started their struggle to transform their economy from a backward centralized command economy to a market economy to become at one point, as one economist put it “Europe’s growth champion.”⁸ Obviously, a crucial role was played by the radical plan that steered the transformation, but it is could not have been as effective as it was without the hard work of millions of Poles. And undoubtedly the mutual support of spouses played a largely unnoticed lubricant to that exhausting effort. However, despite its success at one level, the stress it induced upon Polish society had enormous consequences at numerous other levels, including the religious one, and continues to have reverberations. And this goes beyond the more evident fact that the economic success was unevenly distributed, which also had political and religious consequences.

Among other matters, the initial economic uncertainty and increased mobility within Polish society were likely factors contributing to its current demographic crisis. As it deepens this phenomenon which is accompanied by a rapidly aging society will likely also hamper further economic growth. It likewise gives a partial answer to the question raised of why a predominantly Catholic society has such a low birth rate, well below replacement level. Demographer Mary Eberstadt argues a low birth rate is a key factor in restructuring the family in a manner which generates a substantial decline in religious practices.⁹ Things have not gone so far in Poland, but a clear distinction exists between the higher level of religious

⁶ Maryjane Osa, “Creating Solidarity: The Religious Foundations of the Polish Social Movement,” *East European Politics and Societies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 353. See also Bartłomiej Gaspiński, *Sacrum i codzienność: Prośby o modlitwę nadesłane do Kalwarii Zebrzydowskiej w latach 1965–1979* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2008).

⁷ Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, 3rd edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 21-23.

⁸ Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe’s Growth Champion: Insights from the Economic Rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁹ Mary Eberstadt, *How the West really lost God: A New Theory of Secularization* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton University Press, 2013)

practices of older Poles who have experienced Communism and the younger ones who have not.¹⁰

People of the Church wonder what mistakes in pastoral care or institutional problems are causing young people to turn away from the institution. Nevertheless, however ineffective such present actions or other faults might be, assuming Eberstadt's analysis is largely correct it is doubtful more effective strategies would reverse the effects of such structural changes in Polish society to any greater extent.¹¹ Among the mechanisms of this process are: many younger Poles from smaller communities settle in larger cities in search of employment where they may lack the support of extended family and subsequently the influence of religious and family tradition declines. A mark of an as yet developing economy is the difficulty in gaining mortgages for housing by the young at the beginning of their careers, and women with children work not so much on account of feminist ideology, whatever its influence, but that few single incomes support a family. Thus young parents work long hours which affects the possibility of raising a larger number of children, even if such is their desire. As numerous new housing developments rapidly spread to the outskirts of larger municipal centers to meet the demand of a higher standard of housing for the young—even where it is possible, start up families no longer wish to reside with better off parents as they had done earlier—construction of new churches is not keeping apace, which undoubtedly has an impact on religious practice. Add to this the anonymity of larger urban centers to which a certain percentage of those single young people who move to them feel freed from traditional values, and the highly secular environments within many corporations where they might find employment, some even forwarding specific woke values.¹²

Nevertheless, the Church continues to promote family values in Polish society, among other means through religious education that has returned to the public schools; significantly, although the divorce rate increased in Poland shortly after 1989, it has by and large leveled off and remains among the lower rates in Europe and marriage is still quite popular despite the alternatives. At about three percent of domestic couples in 2019, the

¹⁰ Mirosława Grabowska, *Bóg a sprawa Polska. Poza granicami teorii sekularyzacji* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2018), 171-88.

¹¹ See, e.g. Jacek Dziedzina, "Kościół przyszłości już jest tu," *Rzeczpospolita Plus Minus*, January 27-28, 2018, 4-7.

¹² See Robert Mazurek, "Nowa Huta na Polach Wilanowa" – interview with Krzysztof Wielecki, *Gazeta Dziennik Prawna*, May 15-17, 2020, 31-32.

percentage of Poles cohabiting or in common law relationships is also low by European standards.¹³

Although the matter has yet to be studied adequately what is also quite noticeable among young couples is that intact families with children attend church services in larger number than their peers, whether or not it is primarily a concern for instilling their young with a strong moral code. Nevertheless, the unexamined question is whether young couples marrying has an effect on their religious practices. For instance, do the young who have lapsed in their earlier religious practices return to them upon marriage—after all, church weddings remain very popular, which is not the case throughout Europe. In a related matter, evidence in parts of the world suggests that the seriously religious have considerably more children than the mildly religious.¹⁴ No studies look at whether it is the case that more devout young Polish Catholics have more children than their less or non-religious peers, but it would seem to be the case—baby carriages outside or even inside of churches on Sundays are quite noticeable.

The impressive rise in wealth in the first several decades surprised the Poles themselves. Generally, since they still had far wealthier neighbors in the European Union, they had little awareness of their relatively close proximity to membership among a global elite. A journalist summed up the paradox with the question: “Perhaps we’ve become a Western European country and just haven’t realized it?”¹⁵ Nonetheless certain changes took place in how Poles perceived themselves. Early in its membership in the EU Poles were concentrated on dealing with their relatively backward economy together with its infrastructure and occupied themselves with catching up. This required a change in mentality: not the easiest task under the best of circumstances. The Communist regime they had broken away from was certainly economically behind the countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Given the ideological emphasis on science and technology within the Soviet Bloc—this was not what the regime expected. But this latter fact had comparatively little positive impact on the economy since the totalitarian regime, despite its slight let up after Stalinism passed, virtually destroyed the entrepreneurial spirit and civil society within the population, and fostered a mentality of distrust which made cooperation on a wider scale

¹³ “CBOS: Nieformalne związki coraz mniej popularne, rośnie uznanie dla modelu rodziny wielopokoleniowej,” w Polityce.pl, April 1, 2019. Retrieved: <https://wpolityce.pl/spoleczenstwo/440606-cbos-nieformalne-zwiazki-coraz-mniej-popularne>.

¹⁴ See Eric Kaufman, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth? Demography and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Artur Bartniczek, “Zachód zdobyty, kompleks pozostał,” *Rzeczpospolita Plus Minus*, July 20-21, 2019, 5.

quite difficult.¹⁶ Thus, even taking into account the inspiration of John Paul II, the emergence of Solidarity in the early 1980s seems all the more remarkable, but the crushing of the movement by the regime through Martial Law in 1981 greatly damaged that short-lived sense of deeper fraternity. Moreover, at the time of Solidarity Polish society had a strong egalitarian sensibility which the movement strengthened.¹⁷ In liberated Poland this likely contributed to the significant initial zero sum attitude toward wealth accumulation that emerged, which for not a few citizens made successful entrepreneurs seem suspect. At the onset of the transformation such suspicions were not without basis, since Communist societies were quite corrupt and it took some time during the transition for transparency in the economic field to reach higher levels.

So while regaining sovereignty in 1989 resulted in a release of enormous reserves of energy, for which intact families were initially crucial, an undercurrent of distrust remained for some time,¹⁸ and was likely still a powerful force within the society in 2004. Slowly this started to change as Poles became more confident—and honest!¹⁹ In the early period they worked much harder and spent substantially more time at work than many of their Western European neighbors who valued their shorter work weeks and lengthy holidays. Eventually building the economy was not enough. Among other things, Poles wished to gain a stronger sense of their own national identity.

Social psychologist Janusz Czapiński compared the two major phases that he distinguished in the development of Polish society after accession to the European Union to those famously described by Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs for individuals.²⁰ Czapiński's observed Poles had spent their early years in the EU dealing with their more basic needs, i.e. on advancing their sense of material well being. Once these needs had been met to a substantial degree they turned to higher ones, such as augmenting their sense of identity and self-worth. In this new ambitious tendency he also saw political consequences: during the seminal elections of 2015 the party that was more in tune with this change within the aspirations of Polish society ended up victorious. In other words, this political event was

¹⁶ For instance, Geoffrey Hosking has called the Soviet Union “the land of maximum distrust”: see chapter one in his *Trust: A History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014).

¹⁷ Andrzej Friszke, *Rewolucja Solidarności 1980–1981* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2014), 10.

¹⁸ Piotr Sztompka, “Trust and Emerging Democracy: Lessons from Poland,” *International Sociology* 11, no. 1 (1996): 37-62.

¹⁹ See Michał Łuczewski, “W każdej chwili możemy zamienić się rolami,” *Rzeczpospolita Plus Minus*, July 20-21, 2019, 8.

²⁰ Janusz Czapiński, “Państwo w ruinie, a Polacy szczęśliwi,” *Rzeczpospolita Plus Minus*, October 10, 2018, 36-37.

a democratic response to a very understandable national urge; nevertheless, it was at this point Poland's more complex relationship with the EU effectively began.

The Law and Justice party, that in Czapinski's opinion read the deeper desires of a decisive portion of the Polish electorate—as the news agencies in Poland and abroad endlessly reported—was soon in conflict with the EU's European Commission on a number of fronts. No matter how one understands what happened then and later or whatever turns it will take in the long run, the honeymoon between the Polish nation-state and the European Union was over. It also became evident soon after with the subsequent Brexit referendum and the election of the populist government in Italy in 2018, as well as a number of further developments, the problem was broader than simply one between the EU and a couple of seemingly rogue states in East Central Europe—Hungary often preceded and was paired with Poland in reports.²¹ Indeed, for a number of pundits and analysts outside of Europe the reason for this dissonance and “voter rebellion” lay in the fact that the Eurocratic super-state wannabe was and is somehow deeply out of touch with large sectors of the populations within the European national communities. If charges of populism in a derogatory sense were frequently leveled at the apparently recalcitrant nation-states, countercharges of imperialism have been tossed back at the EU. Israeli scholar Yoram Hazony, for one, puts it bluntly. “Transnationalism and pooled sovereignty are not,” he acerbically claims, “a brilliant new discovery in political theory. They are simply a return to Europe's imperial past.”²²

And so some have claimed, that the fact that Poland is trying to maintain a greater control over its sovereignty—regained at such a tremendous cost in the not so distant past—is among the underlying sources of its various trials with the European Union. This may indeed be the case at least to some extent, but it is currently difficult to state with full certainty. Indeed, an aversion to unilateral commands—at least from abroad—became stronger as Poles became more self-confident, which was part of the problem with the centralized imposition of immigrant quotas by Brussels without any public debate.²³ Although the issue has a humanitarian aspect to it there seems to more beneath the surface somewhat in line with the above.

²¹ Cf. James Kirchick, *The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 64-5.

²² Cf. e.g. Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 153.

²³ For a discussion of the immigrant crisis in the EU after Angela Merkel's unilateral actions, see Kirchick, *The End of Europe*, 113, passim.

Moreover, there are those who regard that at some level implicit within the issue—in the broader context—of the waves that Polish membership in the EU has been making of late among Eurocrats is reaction to the seriousness with which a large percentage of Poles take their religion. There is among European elites a relatively widespread belief that religion does more harm than good.²⁴ If this is true, it is not without meaning that the Law and Justice Party, the political party in question was known for forwarding a religious worldview.²⁵ Naturally, in the earlier phases of European integration this would not have been a problem. For the Founding fathers of European integration religion was fundamental. Among them, Robert Schuman stated in no uncertain terms: “we are called to bethink ourselves of the Christian basics of Europe by forming a democratic model of governance which through reconciliation develops into a ‘community of peoples’ in freedom, equality, solidarity and peace which is deeply rooted in Christian basic values.”²⁶ As late as 2011 a president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, spoke of a “Europe of values,” in which for him “Catholicism, or rather Christianity more generally, played a major role.”²⁷

However, even before the first decade of the twenty first century expired such an opinion was strongly contested, as demonstrated by the fiasco concerning the effort to include Christianity as one of the foundations of European tradition in the introduction to the projected Constitution in 2005. Moreover, despite their support for Christianity, the Founding Fathers of European integration had deep reservations concerning the value of the nation-state, whether or not that nation-state held Christian values dear or not. Since nationalism was allegedly responsible for the tragedy of WWII, almost everything connected with it was suspect.²⁸ If anything this suspicion has increased over intervening time. So by 2015 when the above rupture between the EU and Poland was initiated, European

²⁴ See Rupert Shortt, *Does Religion Do More Harm Than Good?* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2019).

²⁵ Not so far removed from the Polish case, Frank Furedi makes the claim on how the religion of Viktor Orbán upset Eurocrats and is partly responsible for their interfering in the internal politics of the country. See Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 11-14. This does not mean that the Polish and Hungarian governments were fully innocent of charges laid against them, but they were not the only perpetrators of abuse of power, as—to give just one example—the vehement violence with which French President Macron quelled the largely peaceful Yellow Vest movement, which the Eurocrats condoned.

²⁶ Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars*, 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See Vincent Della Sala, ‘Europe’s Odyssey?: Political Myth and the European Union,’ *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 3 (2016): 532-33.

intellectuals could speak disparagingly of Poland and Hungary's allegedly "Christian national" vision of Fortress Europe.²⁹

Although the link between Christianity and nation in Poland is certainly not uniform at the level of ordinary citizens, it is nevertheless considerable,³⁰ and generally one can describe the link as quite positive and not closed in on itself in the sense of solely pertaining to Catholicism. This is evidenced by the passage from the nation's constitution of 1997:

Having regard for the existence and future of our homeland, which recovered the possibility of a sovereign and democratic determination of its fate in 1989, we, the Polish nation – all citizens of the Republic, both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty, as well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values as arising from other sources, equal in rights and obligations towards the common good—Poland, beholden to our ancestors for their labors, their struggle for independence achieved at great sacrifice, for our culture rooted in the Christian heritage of the Nation and universal human values³¹

Nevertheless, although as is evident here the constitution does not directly favor the Catholic Church, the institution's historical services to Polish society, especially during the Communist period are recognized in practice. Mirosława Grabowska calls the relationship between the Catholic Church and state as that of an "endorsed" church.³² An informal favoritism exists and the Catholic Church plays a key role in the civil religion of the state. One time Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek, a Lutheran, joked that when he served in his official function he spent more time attending Catholic masses than those of his own church.

Among those impressed by the preamble, the orthodox Jewish constitutional lawyer Joseph Weiler—a great admirer of JP II—held it up as a model while he criticized Christians in Europe for not having fought hard enough to have the Christian contribution to European heritage included in the projected constitutional preamble, regardless of the fact that the constitution itself was rejected.³³ Indeed, he even coined the term Christophobia for the negative attitude of European elites to their Christian heritage. In an interview given several years later to a Catholic journal in Poland he insisted that when similar occasions arise Polish

²⁹ Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars*, 56.

³⁰ See Krzysztof Kosela, *Polak i katolik. Splątana tożsamość* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2003).

³¹ Quoted in Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 200-1.

³² Grabowska, *Bóg a sprawa Polska*, 200.

³³ Joseph Weiler presents his arguments in a book published in French and then translated into Polish as: *Chrześcijańska Europa : konstytucyjny imperializm czy wielkokulturowość?* Trans. Wojciech Michler (Poznań: W drodze, 2003). Some of the arguments are repeated in Weiler, "A Christian Europe? Europe and Christianity: Rules of Commitment," *European View* no. 6 (2007): 143-150.

politicians have the responsibility to remind other European politicians of the Christian heritage of the continent, among other things, because he insisted “the European Union cannot be an ethical community if it loses its memory of what was good and what was bad. A new Europe that has lost its memory cannot be taken seriously.”³⁴

At the other terminus of Polish society, albeit to a lesser extent than most other EU countries, a more radical secularism has not completely passed by the country, and this naturally cannot be fully blamed on the EU. For instance, some groups wish to ban religious education from public schools: formerly considered by a broad consensus of Poles as a sign of liberty after the downfall of the Communist regime, since the latter had banned it.³⁵ The consumer society together with the mores that it fosters which accompany the free market economy likewise has its impact, if perhaps not as radical. However, all things considered Polish Catholics and Christians do not need to resort to the “Benedict option” just yet,³⁶ that is, Poland is not a post-Christian country where Christians must adopt a defensive survival strategy—but the example of Ireland where religion played a similar role and the speed of its reversal from a religious heartland to secular stronghold demonstrates nothing can be certain.

Not surprisingly similar culture wars to those in other western countries are taking place in Poland, and this has left few fields of Polish life untouched. Also unsurprisingly religion is one of the seminal fields of conflict. Some have noted a curious symmetry between extreme ends of opposing sides. Sociologist Ireneusz Krzemiński points out that despite the invectives they hurled at each other, both the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* and its right-wing religious opposite, Radio Maryja, propagate “a clear black-and-white schema of the reality they present.”³⁷

³⁴ Andrzej Godlewski, “Przedmurze chrześcijaństwa” (an interview with Joseph Weiler), *Gość Niedzielny*, June 5, 2011, 28.

³⁵ Religious education in public schools is confessional, but any faith community can provide it to their members where such a need exists. Although overall this concerns a small population, some communities have sizeable Protestant or Orthodox Christian minorities which conduct these classes at schools. The Jewish community is so small that religious education is rather carried out extramurally. Moreover, for non-religious students there is the option of an alternative ethics class: see Christopher Garbowski, *Religious Life in Poland: History, Diversity and Modern Issues* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 217.

³⁶ Cf. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York, NY: Sentinel, 2017). *The Benedict Option* has been translated into Polish. During a visit to Poland in 2019 the author expressed his shock at the state of religion in the country, which he expected to be considerably stronger.

³⁷ Ireneusz Krzemiński, *Czego nas uczy Radio Maryja?* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie I Profesjonalne, 2009), 129.

Nevertheless patriotism is a significant force in Polish life and a reflection of national pride,³⁸ despite the numerous complexes that still exist within the broader society or at its different levels. Almost two thirds of Poles favorably acknowledge the relationship between Christianity and national identity, which is not as high as in some of the European Orthodox Christian countries, both inside and outside the EU—even in the case of Greece, where religious practice is considerably lower than in Poland.³⁹ But it is higher than that throughout those countries further to the West—only Portugal comes close.⁴⁰ Yet Poland is by no means an isolated island of a singular religious and national identity; the country is the site of what has been termed nested identities⁴¹: both a European and Polish identity; a religious and secular identity coexist for much of the population, even if the weight of that coexistence varies. However, it is obvious the EU is undergoing a period of multiple crises, with roots in the Euro crisis of 2008 and the migrant crisis of 2015, neither of which have been fully resolved and now seem endemic.⁴² Not to mention the open question of the future of the EU after Brexit or the coronavirus pandemic. However, the overall crisis is less obvious for a society which despite its economic and democratic successes is still catching up to wealthier European nations and is thus less critical of their model of life, at times taken in by its remaining glitter.

And Poles still lead most other Europeans in religious indicators, especially among larger nations. Almost ninety percent believe in God, while nearly forty percent regularly attend mass. As mentioned above, the John Paul II generation, as the older generation in Poland might be called, is still strongly attached to religious practices. This is true enough even among well educated Poles. This leads to what elsewhere might be considered hybrid identities. For instance, it would not be so difficult to meet a senior professor at a university who is both a feminist and a practicing Catholic. This should not be all that surprising given

³⁸ Citing a major survey Konrad Bocian reports that patriotism and attachment to their country received the second highest rating among things that Poles were proud of: see Bocian, “Z czego dumni są Polacy?” badania.net, December 6, 2010, retrieved from: <http://badania.net/z-czego-dumni-sa-polacy/>

³⁹ See Philip Barker, *Religious Nationalism in Modern Europe: If God be for us* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 143-80.

⁴⁰ See Douglas Todd, “When Nationalism Becomes a Key to Fighting Oppression,” *The Vancouver Sun*, updated July 7, 2019, retrieved: <https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-when-nationalism-comes-key-to-fighting-oppression>

⁴¹ Anna Triandafyllidou and Ruby Gropas, *What is Europe?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 127.

⁴² Just a couple of examples of books that present this pessimistic view: James Kirchick, *The End of Europe*, cited above, or Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

that John Paul II supported what might be called a Catholic feminism,⁴³ and there are conscious Catholic feminists along the lines of Mary Ann Glendon, but their readership is quite limited, and so the connection in most cases is likely more spontaneous. What this means is that religion is not always simply following traditional patterns and has been adapted where necessary to contemporary life in Poland, not to mention to a greater extent individualized. One might add this was also the case to some extent under communism, where deep religiosity was combined with a curiosity and knowledge about the world. For instance, during a concert Joan Baez gave at the Catholic University of Lublin after she had visited Lech Wałęsa in Gdańsk in 1985, the singer joked at how a group of young Franciscan monks she spoke with “had dropped their rosaries” upon hearing that she would be meeting Mark Knopfler after she left Poland.⁴⁴

Conversely, religious practice is not only declining among younger Poles, but signs of aversion are increasing. In surveys of public opinion there is a general acceptance of religious education in schools. But it is school-aged Poles themselves who are turning away from it. Notably, in large cities with a population exceeding half-million residents over half of the school aged children have resigned from religion classes. Even in the country side the number is slightly over twenty percent.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, if religious practice has decreased among younger Poles, under the new circumstances religion has to a larger extent become a matter of personal choice rather than received tradition, and perhaps unsurprisingly a deeper religiosity of a significant percentage of these Poles is also evident. This is evidenced in their greater involvement in various movements and parish groups.⁴⁶ On the one hand there is a more liberal trend among some of them, most prominently in the circle of young Catholics that publish the journal *Kontakt*, who are more openly critical of developments within the institutional Church. However, that hardly means that more conservative Catholics from this generation—perhaps even a more significant group—are blind to problems within the Church. Tomasz Terlikowski, for instance, in his book *The Sins of the Church* of 2010 was among the earliest Catholics to

⁴³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "A Pro-Woman Pope," *Christianity Today*, April 27, 1998, retrieved: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/april27/8t5073.html>

⁴⁴ The author was in attendance at that concert. Mark Knopfler was the lead guitarist of the popular group Dire Straits.

⁴⁵ See Antoni Głowacki, “Religijność młodzieży,” in *Opinie i diagnozy*, no 38, Młodzież 2016, ed. M. Grabowska, M. Gwiazda, Warszawa: CBOS 2017, 143-164.

⁴⁶ Dziejzina, “Kościół przyszłości już jest tu,” 4-7.

warn Church leaders about the need to deal effectively with the problem of pedophilia within the clergy.⁴⁷

Religion still seems to be an important factor in shaping national identity for these young Catholics, but this is also to a great extent an independently thought out response to a venerable tradition. For the Catholics from the Political Theology group – which is both the name of their website and annual journal – Catholicism is both a source of deep principles and of openness to others who abide by them whatever their religious beliefs. In the introduction to the issue of their journal celebrating the one thousand and fiftieth anniversary of the baptism of Poland the editors firmly claim: “No state can be the ruler of the consciences of its citizens, otherwise it destroys the relationship of politics to the transcendent.”⁴⁸ They also assert the prophetic nature of the Church in relation to the state.

Coinciding with the above problems with the EU Commission, Poland has received considerable bad press in recent years, partially reflecting negative partisan views within the country that are more in tune with media values abroad. At times these external criticisms do bear elements that should force Poles to confront uncomfortable truths, but often enough they represent biased generalizations that feed the sense a growing number in the country have that double standards are applied toward them, i.e. Poland is treated as peripheral to the continent’s center with little attempt to understand it.

Some external critics support this intuition. British sociologist Frank Furedi, author of *Populism and the European Culture Wars* (2017), complained in a piece published in an online journal, “In debates on things like Brexit or the status of Eastern European states like Hungary and Poland, it is frequently assumed that the EU represents the European ideal, politically and morally.”⁴⁹ In his book he claims the “EU oligarchy,” with its “illiberal liberalism,” as he puts it, “has lost sight of the need to affirm the common good and prefers to deal with different identity groups than with individual citizens.” At the heart of the cultural wars that have permeated the relationship between the EU elite from Eastern European societies, Furedi claims, there exists a cultural insecurity on the part of an institution that rejects historically derived moral norms. Along this line, “It is worth noting that for cosmopolitan EU-philes, constitutional references to God and Christianity represent

⁴⁷ Tomasz Terlikowski, *Grzechy Kościoła. Teraz w Polsce* (Warszawa: Demart, 2010)

⁴⁸ Marek Cichoński and Dariusz Karłowicz, “Galeria Polaków,” *Teologia Polityczna*, no. 9 (2016), 9.

⁴⁹ Furedi, “Why I wrote a radical democratic defence of populism,” *Spiked-Online*, August 22, 2017, np. <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/why-i-wrote-a-radical-democratic-defence-of-populism/20231#.WeodLLjNTRK>

something of a cultural crime.”⁵⁰ It has been argued the secular state—which the EU represents—cannot in itself affect the religiosity of its subjects and that culture is the element that has a stronger influence on religious practice.⁵¹ This may be so, but in its present form those responsible for EU governance predominantly represent a particular type of secular culture that augments its impact.

The above has a relevance to the newest version of the complex public attitude toward religion in Poland and the renewed appearance of the phenomenon of anticlericalism. On the one hand, because of the comparatively strong presence of religion in Poland an anticlerical backlash is a natural development and historically has long accompanied religious life in the country, much as it had in other European societies. It might reasonably be claimed that it was through the necessity of confronting a common foe under Communism that a truce in this phenomenon occurred. However, just as religious life in the country differs considerably from earlier periods, anticlericalism also has a modern expression. Some argue the re-emergence of anticlericalism is rooted in the overreach of the Catholic Church in the early years after 1989.⁵² Whatever substance such argumentation carries, the phenomenon is no doubt partly borrowed from EU-phile elites whose views and the cultural stance they represent have influenced many in Poland, augmented by the latter’s own cultural complexes wherein it would seem they wish to appear more European than the Europeans—typically of so many neophytes.

Arguably, anti-clericalism can have a purgative effect, indicating matters that should be dealt with within the Church. In other words, it is not necessarily against religion. However, one of the turning points in anti-clericalism in post-1989 Poland occurred after the catastrophe in 2010 where the President Lech Kaczyński and his wife together with a plane load full of guests crashed near Smoleńsk on their way to honor those Polish officers who were executed in Katyń by the Soviets during World War II and buried anonymously in a mass grave. After large demonstrations in Warsaw in honor of the victims by the religious community that supported the president, counter demonstrations took place that included a vulgar anti-clericalism, for instance brandishing crosses constructed of beer cans.⁵³ From that juncture in time, albeit vulgar anti-clericalism did occur earlier, it became increasingly fashionable and quite political at times.

⁵⁰ Furedi, *Culture Wars*, 99.

⁵¹ Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century*, 99-101.

⁵² Robert E. Alvis, *White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 252.

⁵³ Grabowska, *Bóg a sprawa Polska*, 216-7.

Thus, one thing that often enough accompanies contemporary anticlericalism—in line with the common conviction among elites that religion does more harm than good—is a strident anti-Catholicism. In his book from 2003 historian Philip Jenkins, who has studied the modern version of the phenomenon in the United States, has called it “the last acceptable prejudice.”⁵⁴ It would seem the prejudice has found a new home in Poland. On the grounds of existing laws in Poland confirmed by the Court of Justice of the European Union it is against the law to offend people’s religious sensibilities in the country.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, instances of offending religious feelings have multiplied after 2010, not to mention assaults on clergy. Moreover, in practice the law is rarely upheld. On one of the rare occasions when the police actually held a person for questioning after she had posted a profane version of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa in the city of Płock in central Poland, the matter even made the international news.⁵⁶ In an opinion piece, Michał Szułdryński, an editor at one of the more respected dailies in the country, aptly summarized the social and moral import of the incident:

Respect for religious feelings does not result from religious beliefs, but purely humanistic feelings for another person. Since something is sacred for him or her, then I will honor this, even if it is not necessarily so for me. When we speak of tolerance, it is good to sometimes remember that believers, Catholics, also deserve respect and tolerance.”⁵⁷

In general anticlericalism in its modern expression can partly be seen as exposing old divisions within Polish society itself that to a greater extent were less pronounced under the communist system and have now posed new problems. Polish society has a strong division between the city and the countryside, which at least in part currently coincides with the division of “localists” and “internationalists.” Different complexes have arisen or strengthened on both sides of the barricades.⁵⁸ Since the countryside and small urban centers are considerably more religious, while major media outlets are concentrated in the larger

⁵⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2003).

⁵⁵ The law pertains to the religious sensibilities of all denominations and faith communities. See Wojciech Janyga, *Przestępstw obrazy uczuć religijnych w polskim prawie karnym w świetle współczesnego pojmowanie wolności sumienia i wyznania* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2010).

⁵⁶ Christian Davies, “Woman arrested in Poland over posters of Virgin Mary with rainbow halo,” *The Guardian*, May 6, 2019, retrieved: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/06/woman-arrested-poland-posters-virgin-mary-rainbow-halo-plock>

⁵⁷ Michał Szułdryński, “Madonna z aureola? Jednak obraża,” *Rzeczpospolita*, May 8, 2019, A6.

⁵⁸ For a presentation of various Polish complexes, see Adam Leszczyński, *No dno po prostu jest Polska. Dlaczego Polacy tak bardzo nie lubią swojego kraju i innych Polaków* (Warszawa: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal, 2017), 233-54. The author argues Poles are simultaneously proud and ashamed of their country.

cities, where younger Poles are comparatively quite liberal, the narrative concerning the backward folk religiosity is one-sidedly forwarded on the outside. This despite the fact that some of these highly religious areas, like for instance in the southeast of the country, are among the most richly endowed with social capital in the country.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, both sides provide enough negative cases to reinforce the stereotypes concerning each other. The situation is becoming more complicated in that much as in numerous countries of Europe a right-wing tendency among the young males has developed that is only loosely or not at all connected to religion, with views earlier related to the extreme religious right, such as anti-Semitism.⁶⁰

Mirosława Grabowska has pointed out Polish religiosity is not fully connected to religious orthodoxy, and likely never was.⁶¹ In part, this simply confirms the intuition that lived religion rarely fully fits confessional religion with its teachings and injunctions. This is attested to more drastically during the migrant crisis initiated in 2015 by the Church support of migrant exiles settling in some manner in the country while the Polish population was largely against it. Earlier on there was a similar problem after the early transition period to a free market economy was accompanied by an unprecedented increase in the crime level in the country and as a result a sizeable portion of Polish Catholics supported the death penalty. This is all the more noteworthy since at the time the greatest authority among Poles, John Paul II, was strongly against it.

On the other hand, Grabowska defends the numerous holiday rituals and customs of Polish religiosity that sociologists have frequently cited as proof of the superficial nature of folk religion that permeates lived religion in the country.⁶² Not only social scientists hold such opinions about the holidays and the customs attached to them. In a film from 2018 entitled *Silent Night*,⁶³ a young adult who is working abroad, a common phenomenon after Polish accession to the EU, returns to his home in a village for Christmas Eve, a special time for Poles.⁶⁴ In many ways it is a film chalked full of negative clichés: the family is full of

⁵⁹ For a discussion of religion and social capital in Poland, see Garbowski, *Religious Life In Poland*, 131-37.

⁶⁰ Cf. Piotr Wójcik, "Kościół nie jest wrogiem lewicy," *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, June 7-9, 2019, A12.

⁶¹ Mirosława Grabowska, "Polskie społeczeństwo nie jest postsekularne," *Teologia Polityczna Co Tydzień* no. 158, April 8, 2019; retrieved <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/mirosława-grabowska-polskie-społeczenstwo-nie-jest-postsekularne-1>

⁶² A number of these opinions concerning the alleged superficiality of Polish folk religion by social scientists are listed in Agata Bisko, *Polska dla średniozaawansowanych. Współczesna polskość codzienna*. (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 360-62.

⁶³ *Cicha noc* (2018), directed by Piotr Domalewski, production company: Canal+ Polska.

⁶⁴ For a description of the major religious holidays and their customs, see Bisko, *Polska dla średniozaawansowanych*, 282-92.

tensions—ostensibly “only turning out well on photographs”—whereas Poles are generally happy with their families. Conflicts are more likely in larger cities, where among other things the divorce rate is considerably higher than in the countryside. Unsurprisingly, religion is portrayed as superficial, whereas for Grabowska, “participation in these—even conventional—holiday customs constitutes a certain value and has a religious meaning.”⁶⁵

And as far as the relationship of popular religion to the teaching of John Paul II is concerned, Catholic political philosophers Dariusz Karłowicz and Marek Cichocki have agreed that while at times it does not live up to the expectations the Polish pope expressed toward his countrymen, in some ways it succeeds at its own level better than that of the elite Catholics that voice criticisms of popular religion, but who have not come up with any outstanding work that comprehensively explains his teaching and thought. This is all the more important, they argue, since for Poles: “To think about John Paul II is to discover one’s self, which is obviously neither straightforward not simple, but is undoubtedly one of the most important philosophical tasks.”⁶⁶

Such opinions are important since popular religion alongside the ostensibly mass religious practice of so many is often knocked. It must be remembered, however, it was a key for getting Poles through the extremely difficult period of their history under the domination of the communist totalitarian regime: as suggested above, even playing a role in the Solidarity movement that led their liberation. Moreover, in a transformed fashion in urban centers it continues to play an important role in the religiosity of older Poles: currently a significantly larger part of the population with the demographic crisis decreasing the number of young. Folk religion can blend with an informal civil religion at times that is also not restricted to rural areas. This is most visible at cemeteries during All Saints Day, when Poles visit their nearest and dearest departed in great numbers. However, apart from those with whom the visitors have personal ties, it would seem the greatest attention is paid by them on that holiday to the graves and monuments of those who gave their lives for their country in WWII. In a cemetery in Lublin, for instance, at one end there is a monument over a mass grave to those killed by the Nazis at the castle prison during the course of the war, at the other end a monument to Polish officers killed by the Soviet NKVD at Katyń, a number of whom came from Lublin: both sites have a large number of candles spontaneously lit by visitors at their base.

⁶⁵ Grabowska, “Polskie społeczeństwo nie jest postsekularne.”

⁶⁶ Dariusz Karłowicz and Marek Cichocki, “Jan Paweł II w krainie liliputów,” *Teologia Polityczna*, 1 April 2020, retrieved from: <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/jan-pawel-ii-w-krainie-liliputow>

What is more, many visitors light candles on the graves of the Red Army soldiers who died in the vicinity of Lublin during their fight with the Nazis in 1944. This also says a good deal about the different layers of historical memory in the city residents. For decades a monument to the Red Army stood in a square in the middle of the city, erected by the Communist regime ostensibly to commemorate the “liberation” of Poles by a totalitarian state that while driving away the Germans violently imposed its own criminal regime.⁶⁷ Once that regime was overthrown in 1989, it was not long before the offensive monument was removed. But this celebration of sovereignty regained did not mean the people of Lublin were ungrateful to the ordinary Soviet soldiers that lost their lives in the war, and that is the honor granted them in the cemetery, where many of them lie, when the candles are lit. On the public square malicious imperial politics regarding historical memory was dealt with; at the cemetery the common denominator of all history is acknowledged.

Moreover, even people involved in marketing for retailers note the conservative and religious nature of Polish society. In an opinion piece for a major daily newspaper a pair of marketing consultants admitted that while society is changing, it does nonetheless maintain recognizable traditional characteristics regardless of how well to do its members happen to be: “The affirmation of the local community, attachment to religion, traditional social roles continue to be important and will likely be so for some time for a large part of Polish society.”⁶⁸ It is obvious from this, those hard working families among whom most of the early entrepreneurs and employees were derived did not turn their backs on religion once they helped their country stand on its feet economically. How long this will be the case is another matter, since the long-term consumption of imported and internalized popular culture cannot but additionally affect attitudes toward religion.

The institutional Church has had its own crisis of authority of late related to the problem of paedophilia within its clergy. When the crisis initially broke out a decade earlier it seemed the Polish Church got off relatively lightly, but there were those who felt that the matter had largely been swept under the rug and no real measures were employed to solve the problem.⁶⁹ The seminal year was 2019. Surveys in May of 2019 indicated a large drop in

⁶⁷ Quite significant is the fact that once the Red Army liberated the surviving prisoners from the Maidanek Nazi concentration camp close to Lublin, the NKVD soon used the vacated camp for political prisoners, mainly from the Polish Home Army and Peasant Battalions: see Robert Kuwałek, “Concentration Camps and Death Camps as Memorial Sites to Jewish Victims or Mutual Jewish Martyrdom Sites,” in *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944-2010*, ed. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 568-9, n. 4.

⁶⁸ Igor Janke and Tomasz Karoń, “Polska jest tradycyjna,” *Rzeczpospolita*, July 10, 2019, A6.

⁶⁹ Alvis, *White Eagle, Black Madonna*, 270-1.

the authority of the Church in Polish society after a drastic documentary on the topic was aired on YouTube and attracted millions of viewers.⁷⁰ The bishops quickly issued a contrite pastoral letter condemning the acts of sexual abuse of children by priests after this event.⁷¹ Political scientist Jarosław Flis claims statistically the problem is no greater in the Church than in other institutions dealing with the young and society at large, but the institution can lose a great deal of its authority within Polish society if it does not deal effectively with the problem.⁷²

On the other hand, besides the state itself the Catholic Church is the largest organization in Poland helping the needy. According to a report released by the Catholic Information Agency (KAI) in 2018, within the framework of the Church there are over eight hundred charitable institutions in the country which reach approximately three million beneficiaries. That is above and beyond those agencies that serve at the parish level, where, among other services, over twenty thousand volunteers are engaged in the parish councils of Caritas, which also function at several thousand schools. These are essentially at the beck and call of a substantial portion of Polish society. Not to mention the cultural centers that many of these parishes constitute, where they are often the only such centers in peripheral areas of cities or in smaller urban centers or villages.⁷³ Moreover, when the Coronavirus pandemic struck Poland during Lent in 2020, while the churches were largely closed to the faithful by government decree to maintain the social distancing campaign, those faithful along with church organizations like Caritas were involved in a tremendous voluntary campaign to help those in need, not to mention buy food for those in isolation and medical equipment for the hospitals.⁷⁴

However important, charitable and cultural work is not the primary mission of the Church in Poland. One way of gauging the importance of its religious mission that we have barely touched upon is through observing what happens when it is absent or effete. In his book *The Strange Death of Europe* of 2017 Douglas Murray expresses surprise at the degree

⁷⁰ Ben Sixmith, "Outraged Poles Turn Against Clergy Amid Church Abuse Scandal," *The American Conservative*, June 4, 2019, retrieved: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/outraged-poles-turn-against-clergy-amid-sex-abuse-scandal/>

⁷¹ See: "Polish bishops pledge greater sensitivity for abuse victims," *Catholic News Agency*, May 24, 2019, retrieved: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/polish-bishops-pledge-greater-sensitivity-for-abuse-victims-15025>

⁷² Jarosław Flis, "Od działań polskiego Kościoła zależy, czy uratuje autorytet," *Do Rzeczy*, May 15, 2019, retrieved: <https://dorzeczy.pl/102694/Flis-Od-dzialan-polskiego-Kosciola-zalezy-czy-uratuje-autorytet.html>

⁷³ Marcin Jakimowicz, "Raport o stanie Kościoła nad Wisłą," *Gość Niedzielny*, 16 December 2018, 4-5.

⁷⁴ Zespół wPolityce.pl, "Kościół walczy ze skutkami pandemii," *wPolityce.pl*, 30 March 2020, retrieved: <https://wpolityce.pl/kosciol/493528-kosciol-walczy-ze-skutkami-pandemii-pomagaja-wolontariusze>

that Europeans, especially the elites, hate themselves. Moreover, he detects a palpable sense of ennui in the continent: the sense that “life in modern liberal democracies is to some extent thin or shallow and that life in modern Western Europe in particular has lost its sense of purpose.”⁷⁵ Nor in Murray’s view does the largely reductionist message of science offer much hope, while contemporary high art offers little inspiration. Not religious himself, Murray complains that most European Christian churches do not particularly help the situation since they have lost confidence in their own message and their religion has largely been reduced to a form of “left-wing politics, diversity action and social welfare projects.”⁷⁶ And so unsurprisingly they have either lost or have difficulty keeping their flocks. Murray is essentially describing what has variously been called Christianity Lite or what sociologist of religion Christian Smith has termed “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” which consists of a watered down religion that in the worst instance means “Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious faith.”⁷⁷ In other words, the various Christian Churches have largely engaged so much effort in accommodating themselves to the times that they have little of their own to provide when the times themselves are the problem. What Murray adds is the observation of a perceptive non-Christian that confirms the phenomenon, while pointing out Europeans are not buying it. They are abandoning the Churches, but nothing has effectively replaced the hole that has been left where previously meaning was created: a fact that he bemoans. In a word, this persuasive intuitive analysis implies Europe has lost its heart if not quite yet its soul and religion in its current state is not part of the solution.

Historian Norman Davies has called Poland “the heart of Europe.”⁷⁸ Neither Europe nor the “heart” are in particularly great shape at present. On top of Murray’s diagnosis part of what ails both is undoubtedly the inordinate focus on the autonomous self on the part of so many people, feeding an often radical individualism. A healthy individualism promotes openness and creativity, among other qualities. However, as Charles Taylor has observed, “the dark side of individualism is a centring on the self, which flattens and narrows our lives,

⁷⁵ Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 258. A complimentary analysis to this aspect of European elite self-hatred can be found in Pascal Bruckner’s *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁷⁶ Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe*, 264.

⁷⁷ Christian Smith quoted by Ron Dreher, see Dreher, “Commentary,” in Mary Eberstadt, *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2019), 118.

⁷⁸ Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland's Present* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)

makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others and society.”⁷⁹ In Poland on its current scale it is a fairly new obsession that has largely but not solely arrived with EU membership. The accompanying axiological model tends to reduce relations between people to questions of power, often girded in ideological attire, and thus is effectively detrimental to matters like the spirit of dialogue, despite the lip service the latter is given. Similarly, the insistence of honoring the “other” and accepting difference are often accompanied by denigrating the neighbor whose worldview does not correspond with one’s own, while at the personal level relationships are more fragile with a corresponding effect on community. And can it be a coincidence that when so many Polish youth are giving up religion they seem at a loss to find greater meaning in the expanding consumer society as is evidenced most starkly by the climbing suicide rate among them.

The political tribalism on the one hand and the lost sense of purpose Murray intuitively in Europe on the other suggest the continued presence—possibly even intensification—of the existential vacuum which Viktor E. Frankl has indicated as a problem within modern societies, which consequently seek compensatory pseudo-values at various levels and resort to baser instincts when its members cannot find fuller meaning.⁸⁰ At this point it is worth recalling John Paul II’s observation from his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* where he asserted: “Forgetfulness of God has led to the abandonment of man”⁸¹ The claim was made in 2003 just before Poland entered the European Union and as such could also be read as a warning of what the national community would be up against.

We might look at it another way. Frankl was among the earliest moral psychologists that pointed to religion as a deep source of meaning and self-transcendence for the individual.⁸² However, Frankl claimed belief in vertical transcendence contributed to but was not a necessity for horizontal self-transcendence; in light of what John Paul claims and what perceptive commentators have observed, it could be added that while that might be true at the individual level in the long run at the societal level vertical transcendence seems quite hard to replace. Can the voice of religion, most powerfully represented by the Catholic Church in Poland, which historically has guided Poles through their greater and lesser trials,

⁷⁹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4.

⁸⁰ See Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, revised edition (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).

⁸¹ Quoted in George Weigel, *The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself & Challenged the Modern World to Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 213.

⁸² For a further discussion of the importance of religion for self-transcendence, i.e. an outer directed self, and a cure for an existential vacuum, see Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997).

continue to direct enough of them toward a self-transcendent communitarian self, so vital to promoting the common good and so necessary for that “heart” to continue beating within the country, so that Poland can indeed also serve Europe, whether as its heart or not. It is impossible to definitively answer that question, but this is the challenge the country’s religious leaders face, and woe be to the national community if they fail.

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