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CHRISTIANS AND MARXISTS IN POLAND: DIALOGUE OR CONFLICT?

by Karol H. Borowski

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Introduction

Poland, the country of many paradoxes, lately has been the focus of much international attention. Recent developments in Poland's social and political realms further increased an interest, raising crucial questions about the function of religion in societies dominated by Marxist-Leninist ideology and political systems in general, and in particular about Marxist-Christian relations.

In this article I will concentrate on the second area of issues, beginning with the following questions: 1) What has been the nature of these relations (both in functional and conflict perspectives) in modern Poland? 2) What is the current status of Christian-Marxist relations in Poland?

In order to provide comprehensive and unbiased responses, one should take into consideration not only recent statements made by Church and government, but also analyze in historical, sociopolitical, and religious terms major events which have taken place in post-World War II Poland, beginning with the effect of Yalta-Potsdam, through the various conflicts and confrontations, including the rise and development of the Solidarity phenomenon, to the current tensions as well as the systematic Church-State meetings.

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According to church officials, namely Jozef Cardinal Glemp, and the government spokesman, Jerzy Urban, "the current Christian-Marxist relationship, as expressed in Church-State relations, is positive, cooperative and promoting Poland's stability." However, recent incidents, e.g. the removal of crosses from state-controlled schools, the murder of Father Jerzy Popieluszko, according to both sides, should not harm the improving relations.

Last Spring a roundtable discussion took place at Harvard University led by Professor Jerzy Wiatr, a leading Polish Marxist and former President of the Community Central Party School in Warsaw. On that occasion, Wiatr made several updated statements regarding these relations. He stated: "1) Church-State relations in Poland have improved considerably, especially since the last visit by John Paul II. 2) There is a growing cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jaruzelski government, mainly in matters pertaining to national survival. 3) The Church's contributions towards political stabilization and economic improvements, e.g. through the Agricultural Fund, are very valuable. 4) There still remain differences and conflicts of interest, but they are being pragmatically resolved." Wiatr also admitted that the Church and some Church-related intellectual circles constitute an orderly opposition against the government.

In my comments and reply to Professor Wiatr's presentation, I made references to some major developments preceding the current Marxist-Christian relations, and I asked him the following question: "What is the nature of current Christian-Marxist relations? Is it a new NEP (New Economic Policy) or is it a new step?" He understood the question well, and even said: "You want to trap me." Thus, in his response, he referred to NEP as a phenomenon of the past, and, although indirectly, he characterized the current Church-State relations as a new step leading towards many improvements.

My own opinion on Christian-Marxist relations in Poland is moderately optimistic, cautioned, however, by experiences and observations of related developments hitherto. They allow me to state that there has been very little or even no dialogue between Marxists and Christians in post-World War II Poland. Direct and indirect confrontations and conflicts have dominated the relationship for many years. Therefore, a
A thorough review and analysis of the past 40 years is necessary and may provide substantiation for this opinion.

Christian-Marxist Relations in Post-World War II Poland: A Review

Undoubtedly, the current status of Christian-Marxist relations in Poland cannot be interpreted and understood without at least a brief glimpse at their historical origin and developments.

One fact is that Christianity has been the most significant nation-building and nation-maintaining factor from the inception of Polish statehood in 966 A.D. through today. Another fact is that throughout the post-World War II period Marxism-Leninism, as the major ideological component of the Polish political system, has been the regime's source and tool to restrict the function of Christianity in modern Poland. After World War II Poland was forced, with the approval of Western allies, into political, social, cultural, and economic changes induced by the Soviet supported resistance group, later known as the Polish Committee of National Liberation, which eventually became the base of the "temporary" Polish government. Since then, Polish society, guided by its over 1000-year Judeo-Christian tradition, has been under systematic pressures and attempts to implement Marxist-Leninist social, cultural, economic, and political ideals and models.

The Marxist-Leninist attitude towards "oppressive states, religion and their alliance" has substantially contributed to tensions, confrontations and organized attacks on religion in post-World War II Poland, especially on Roman Catholicism. Poland's Marxist-dominated political regime perceived the Roman Catholic Church as one of its major opponents. Thus, after an initial period of tactical tolerance, systematic attacks were launched against the Church, its hierarchy and members. Moreover, the Church's reluctance about Marxism-Leninism produced additional tensions.

For the purpose of reviewing the Christian-Marxist relations as mainly evidenced in Church-State relations, we may distinguish six distinctive periods.

1. The 1944-48 Period

During the early years of Marxist-Leninist initiation a relatively
"peaceful and friendly coexistence" marked the relations between the new system and religion as evidenced in Church-State relations. The Roman Catholic Church—representing over 90 percent of the Polish population—continued its activities, although its economic base and social outreach programs gradually became restricted. However, no major systematic attacks on religion and Church were openly launched during this period. They occurred following the merger of the Polish Socialist Party and the Polish Workers' Party in December, 1948, which resulted in the formation of the Polish United Workers' Party. This party, a genuine Marxist-Leninist Communist party, has since attempted to dominate Polish society by trying to implement Marxist-Leninist principles and models in all spheres of social and individual lives. The Party declared its leadership as exclusive in the alleged growing class struggle; it promised successful liberation and creation of a "society free of exploitation, oppression and social conflict" (P.U.W.P. Platform). Attempts by the regime to achieve these goals, however, severely limited the basic civic and religious liberties of Polish society, thus resulting in lasting tensions and growing conflicts.

2. The 1949-56 Period

The State-Party efforts to create a socio-cultural, economic, and political system based on Marxism-Leninism resulted in conflicts between Church and State and, consequently, between the Polish society and the regime. Repressions against religion—dissolving of religious associations, stopping of non-liturgical activities, imprisonment of religious leaders, and discrimination against Church members—were perceived by the Polish society as direct attacks on its fundamental liberties and Christian tradition.

With the worsening of economic conditions and limitations of basic human rights, the growing discontent of "the working class" resulted in riots during the International Trade Fair in Poznan (June, 1956). The rebelling "proletarians," by demanding "Bread and God," for the first time in modern Poland openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the Marxist-Leninist system. This uprising revealed discrepancies between Marxist-Leninist theory and practice primarily manifest in the State-Party power elite's material and spiritual oppression of the people,
whom, they claimed, they represented as "the workers' and peasants' government."

3. The 1957-70 Period

After a short-lived cessation of governmental oppression and moderate improvements in civil and religious liberties during the early years of Gomulka's regime, conditions of the Polish society, both material and spiritual, further deteriorated. New anti-religious campaigns were launched. Thus the Church had to openly resist the State-Party's attempts at limiting its function in society. It also had to defend the society's rights to practice religion without discrimination, as guaranteed by the Constitution.

The Church's contributions to the nation's awareness of the Marxist-Leninist policy, strategy, and contradictions soon became evident in the workers' uprisings at the shipyards of Gdansk and Szczecin in 1970. The Party-State bloc first responded to these events with violence, then made a tactical change in leadership which promised improvements in the quality of life in Poland.

4. The 1971-79 Period

Initially, the regime, under the leadership of the new First Secretary Edward Gierek, promised to restore "socialism with a human face," and to provide necessary conditions for a decent and dignified life accessible to all Poles regardless of their ideological convictions.

International detente and accompanying economic and cultural exchanges during the early years of Gierek's rule provided favorable conditions for improvements. Poland's contacts with the Western Hemisphere significantly increased, thus an impression of substantial changes in the nation's cultural, social, political, and economic conditions occurred during the early 1970's. It was, however, an illusion. In reality, the quality of life and basic human rights further deteriorated. By 1976, abuses of power, increasing corruption, and economic hardships led to a wave of strikes in major industrial cities. Once again, the Party-State elite used force against the striking workers "to restore peace and order."

However, the State's violence and the increasing oppression could
not stop the growing wave of dissent. It embraced all of Poland's social strata. A committee for the defense of persecuted workers (KOR) was established by leading dissidents. Flying universities, underground publications and political cabarets were among the many factors that further inspired and promoted opposition. In factories, on farms, and in universities agitation for free, autonomous unions and associations were initiated by KOR members, dissatisfied workers, and the intelligentsia.

The Roman Catholic Church played a particularly important role in these events by providing inspiration and guidance. Cardinal Wyszynski was personally involved in fostering campaigns for human rights and dignity, especially when governmental abuses and various kinds of oppression were evident. The Church's organization and communication network helped to raise the people's awareness of their violated human rights. Several pastoral letters criticizing unjust governmental policies, concerning issues such as introducing a constitutional amendment subordinating Poland to the Soviet Union, abortion, family policy, working conditions in mines and in factories, education, and so forth, were published.

Meanwhile, Poland's new generation, raised and educated under Marxist-Leninist supremacy, started to seriously question the status quo and scrutinize the government's policy in fulfilling constitutional rights and other promises. The surfacing of the discrepancy between the nation's and the State-Party elite's standards of life was shocking, thereby leading to a lasting discreditation of the Marxist-Leninist system, particularly by the youth.

5. The 1980-81 Period

On July 1, 1980, the Polish Party-State announced an increase in food prices, thus finding itself on the road to the largest eruption of protest in postwar Poland. During the summer of 1980, the Solidarity phenomenon became manifest. Beginning with a strike by the Lublin Railroad and Ursus Tractor Company workers, the ranks of the strikers grew, and virtually included the entire nation.

In response, the State-Party elite initially stood by its price rises, but later made a steady retreat under multiplying demands for compensatory wage increases and improvements in working conditions.
Throughout this tumultuous period, the workers themselves showed self-discipline, keeping their multiplying strikes non-violent. Meanwhile, the police undertook mainly repressive measures directed against KOR activists.

In the course of the summer the diverse strikers' demands, with KOR and the Church serving as the contact centers for various strike committees, escalated from wage issues to labor reform and, finally, to political, social, cultural, and religious demands. By mid-August the Gdansk Inter-Factory Committee, headed Lech Walesa, was created to coordinate nationwide strike activities and to represent all strikers in negotiations with the government.9

The Party-State, faced with spiraling labor unrest, had lost its contest and was left with no option but to negotiate labor peace with the "proletarians." On August 31, 1980, the government capitulated to the workers' major demands by signing the Gdansk Agreement, a document consisting of major concessions towards the democratization of Poland.10

All these events further awakened a genuine national consciousness, fostering protest and initiating a trend for complete renewal. A variety of social and political ideas thus emerged offering opportunities for open critique and confrontation with Marxist-Leninist ideology and practice.

Further negotiations and struggles with the government led to the legally recognized registration of Solidarity as an independent trade union. Solidarity membership reached ten million by November 10, 1980. During this period, under Solidarity's leadership and through the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church, Poles obtained many democratic concessions, such as the right to criticize public officials and evaluate them, a shorter work week, less restricted travel abroad, promised participation in decision-making, and so forth.

The Solidarity movement appeared to be successful; however, in the summer of 1981 Solidarity, overwhelmed by the rapid growth of its organization, began to lose control of its destiny. Furthermore, internal leadership factions and outside infiltrations gradually weakened the movement. In addition, the deterioration of the Polish economy, the demands from Western banks, the rapid decline of the standard of living, and increasing Soviet pressure led to the imposition of martial law on
December 13, 1981. The great dialogue initiated by Solidarity was killed.

6. The 1982-Present Period

Eventually, the democratic concessions obtained through Solidarity's efforts were suspended and later revoked. The split between the nation and the regime has since deepened. The Solidarity movement went underground, claiming it will continue to act until all basic needs of the Polish society are satisfied and the discrepancy between Marxist-Leninist theory and State-Party policies are eliminated.

The Church's assistance to Polish society, both material and spiritual, has been indispensable and of great importance, especially during the imposition of martial law and after the delegalizing of Solidarity. However, its efforts in mediating between the divided groups thus far have produced virtually no results.

After imposing martial law, Poland's regime did not respect most previously made concessions and promises. Furthermore, dialogue and democratic procedures have since been ignored and even violated. The State-Party attitudes and policies have made the Church's attempts at bridging the nation's split even more difficult by creating new tensions and conflicts. Thus it should be noted that Polish society, especially the youth (over 60 percent of Poland's population is under age 30), has lost its trust and confidence in the Marxist-Leninist regime. Despite governmental vigilance it supports restoration of Solidarity's ideals: democratic political principles, Judeo-Christian ethical principles, and Poland's best historical traditions.

The June, 1983, visit of John Paul II to his native country provided unquestionable proof of the Church's commitment in assisting the Polish nation struggling against oppression, including the Marxist-Leninist State-Party elite. The relationship between religion and Marxism-Leninism as evidenced in Church-State relations following the Pope's visit became less tense, thus allowing for a dialogue seemingly of benefit to the nation.

The lifting of martial law on July 22, 1983, after 19 months, provided some improvements in Polish conditions. Nevertheless, new regulations brought the opposition under even tighter control, and the economy has not yet recovered.
According to numerous reports from various sources, the situation in Poland has not changed. On the contrary, tensions remain high. Some Solidarity activists are still imprisoned and treated as common criminals. Sympathizers and supporters of Solidarity ideals, including churchmen, are being harrassed. Mysterious disappearances and deaths of opposition members are taking place. Police surveillance and brutality has increased. The regime even gave to Cardinal Glemp a list of clergy, including bishops, charged with "activities detrimental to the renewal process and improving Church-State relations." Furthermore, the regime threatened to charge them with anti-state crimes, if Cardinal Glemp continued to tolerate their activities. Those directly under his jurisdiction were reprimanded or transferred to other assignments; others, especially members of religious orders, were "fraternally reminded" by Cardinal Glemp to cease their political involvement.

In addition to the remaining tensions, the promised social, political, and economic reforms have not yet taken place. Periodical price increases for the necessities of daily living, worsening of the quality of life, and continuous repressive policies further prove either the regime's inability to improve Poland's situation or its return to pre-Solidarity harmful routines.

It is important to note the serious efforts undertaken by both Church and State to create a new status coexistendi through establishing permanent diplomatic relations and a Concordat. It might be possible that, by the time this article is printed, either or both goals will be achieved. However, the question remains: Will they promote genuine Christian-Marxist relations and provide the Polish nation with a better environment for the practice of human rights and dignity?

**Claims for Attempting Christian-Marxist Dialogue**

Before drawing conclusions from the above review of empirical encounters between Christians and Marxists in Poland, let us once again look into the many claims of attempted and/or actual dialogue between the both sides.

First the PAX Movement, with Boleslaw Piasecki, publicized as a new "patriotic line" tried--especially in the 1950's--to create impressions of a Christian-Marxist dialogue, both in theory and practice. However,
its unquestionable ties with the Communist rulers and questionable dissemination of information regarding the Church and Christianity soon led to the discovery of its detrimental function both in Poland and abroad. Another group associated with PAX, known as "patriotic priests," comprised of corruptible elements of the clergy, also failed in initiating a real dialogue.

Znak and its various outlets has neither been able to create nor promote a genuine dialogue, although Janusz Zablocki, one of "pseudo-Znak's" current leaders (ODIS faction), has tried to foster a dialogue since the mid-1970s. His series of articles—discussions with Mieczyslaw Rakowski and other leading Marxists—is considered by some political scientists as important steps in Christian-Marxist relations; but one swallow does not mean that Spring has arrived! However, Znak, through its publications and club activities, has contributed to the growing Christian awareness among Polish intelligentsia (KIK). Znak has also constituted a symbolic parliamentary opposition since 1957.

Here I should mention the various Christian non-Catholic churches. Because of their close governmental supervision and financial dependency, they have made a contribution to initiate or foster real Christian-Marxist dialogue. Moreover, on several occasions, e.g. in 1965 and 1982 they gave the government strong support in its attacks against the Roman Catholic Church when in 1965 the Roman Catholic Church sent a letter of reconciliation to West Germany, and in 1982 it supported the ideas of Solidarity. In both cases the Ecumenical Council and individual non-Catholic churches issued pastoral letters in support of the government and published strong articles against their Roman Catholic counterparts. The Front of National Unity and other similar organizations (recently substituted by PRON) fostered by the Government have also been failures in matters of dialogue. Their non-representation and biased actions have not gained great support from the Polish society.

On the other side, Marxists intellectuals, including L. Kolakowski, A. Schaff, H. Kubiak, A. Nowicki, J. Wiatr, and others, have been for a long time among direct or indirect promoters of anti-Christian campaigns, such as removal of non-Marxist professors (Ajdakiewicz), restrictions on social sciences and humanities, imposition of Marxist philosophy, and establishment of anti-religious organizations. Thus, their claims for
fostering indifference towards or even dialogue between Christians and Marxists should be considered as methodological distortions or reflections on their current attitudes. Then, one may ask: What about Adam Michnik and Jan Strzelecki? Briefly, their activities and written works have been important for the Polish opposition. However, they have neither represented the mainstream of Polish Marxists nor the State-Party regime.

Conclusion

Therefore, the analysis of actual relations between Christians and Marxists in Poland, the popular perception of dialogue between both parties, and the expectations of the Polish society for genuine relations respecting ideological differences without prejudice and discrimination, led me to conclude that there has not been a real Christian-Marxist dialogue in Poland. Dialogue should be neither a theoretical discourse nor a staged tactical show, but a genuine attempt to respectfully bridge ideologies, providing peaceful solutions to problems and situations.

My opinion is further substantiated by other respected authors who, after analyzing both the theory and the practice of these relations, concluded: "Unfortunately, according to my opinion, there was no dialogue. The situation of Christianity has resembled the situation of the imprisoned Socrates... There is no dialogue and there can't be any dialogue where the contesting parties do not enjoy real freedom... Maybe the time has come to reverse this paradox? [written during Solidarity's peak]. Maybe we are the country in which the practice of reversing tragic paradoxes will precede theory."16

The Polish case, by providing a host of encounters between Christians and Marxists, is certainly a great lesson to all. The diverse ideological premises, the unjust distribution of social rewards, the numerous internal and external pressures have led to frequent prejudice, tension, and confrontation, particularly detrimental to the Polish nation. Furthermore, the State-Party regime has not been interested in initiating and fostering a genuine dialogue but rather has used Soviet-modeled strategy in its relation with Christians. However, the reported seemingly improving relations between both sides appear to promise a better future for the struggling Polish society. But, taking into serious consideration the past experiences, the question asked at
the beginning of this essay: "What is the nature of the current relations between Christians and Marxists in Poland; is it a new step or is it another NEP?" remains to be answered in the future. Perhaps the next generation will provide an adequate answer. Thus, I hope Walesa's words, "Today is our defeat but tomorrow will be our victory," will become true not only for the Polish nation but for all who are and will enter a genuine Christian-Marxist dialogue in order to build a more just and peaceful world.

REFERENCES

1 These statements, made by Government and Church spokesmen, were repeated on several occasions, e.g. during the Glemp's visit to Brazil and the January Party Conference in Warsaw. See also Thomas E. Bird, "The New Turn in Church-State Relations in Poland." Journal of Church and State 24:1, Winter, 1982.

2 In February, 1984, students at the Agricultural Trade School in Mietne demonstrated to protest the removal of crucifixes from the classrooms. This incident ignited nationwide tension, thus after one month of implementing various tactics, a compromise was reached. Students are allowed to maintain crucifixes in the library, dormitories, as well as display them on classroom desks or wear them. (The Boston Globe, 4/7/84: 1, 4).

3 Jerzy Wiatr is also a former vice-president of the International Political Science Association. He published several of his works in Western countries, openly displaying his Marxist identity, e.g. The State of Sociology in Eastern Europe Today. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1971.


An account of youth protests is provided by Karol H. Borowski in Kontestacja Młodzieży na Zachodzie i Je Ekwiwalent w Polsce [Youth protest movements in the Western Hemisphere and its equivalent in Poland] (Lublin: KUL, 1972).


The Gdansk agreement between the Government and Solidarity, signed on August 31, 1980, included vital responses to the strikers' 21 demands. A similar agreement was also signed in Jastrzebie (Silesia), coal mining center.


Andrzej Micewski's Katolische Gruppierungen in Polen [Catholic organizations in Poland] (Munich: Keiser Verlag, 1978) provides extensive information on major Christian groups including Pax, Caritas, and Patriotic Priests.

Janusz Zablocki, "W interesu dialoga i wspóździelania" [In the interest of dialogue and cooperation], Polityka 16. April 22, 1978.


