Religious Developments in Poland in 1994

Bill Yoder

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol14/iss6/5
RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS IN POLAND IN 1994

by Bill Yoder

PROSELYTISM IN KINDERGARTEN?

When harmonizing, the Polish Lutheran synod sounds like a male choir. Less than ten percent of its members are women. Several Lutheran women in Poland are engaged in pastoral work, but the road for them towards ordination remains long. In Europe, however, this remains a middle-of-the-road position. Polish Lutheranism is located between conservative Polish Catholicism and the liberal Protestantism of Western Europe.

This more tolerant stance makes Lutheranism appealing to disenchanted Catholics. Barbara Engholc-Narzynska, Director of the Polish Bible Society, maintained: "My Catholic friends say that maybe they should become Protestants because we are more open and democratic. We had twenty-five or twenty-six converts in my Lutheran parish last year. Mixed marriages have always decimated our ranks, but now Catholics are converting to Protestantism!"

Evangelical statements on abortion contrast strongly with Catholic ones. Mischievous Polish media enjoy putting Protestant declarations against those of the Polish Episcopate. "Abortion should be dealt with by church discipline, not by means of penal law," insisted Bogdan Tranda, Pastor of Warsaw's Reformed congregation.

Two years ago, Protestants lived in fear of a totally Catholic society. Therefore, last October's election results brought a loud sigh of relief. The parties most loyal to the Episcopate were roundly defeated and forced out of Parliament. Free, Catholic voters have succeeded where the atheistic state failed. They have shown the Catholic hierarchy the limits of its popular appeal. Laws prohibiting abortion and requiring the media to spread "Christian values" now appear as relics of a defeated ruling coalition.

Author Piotr Szczypiorski believes election results have proven mass rejection of a confessional state. "The Poles have long struggled for freedom, and now they finally possess it," he wrote. "They are defending this freedom vehemently, almost angrily. Anyone who will again try to limit human and civil rights is bound to lose the confidence of society."

Last July, when the winds were still favorable, a concordat was signed between the Vatican and the former government. But neither house of Parliament has ratified this agreement;
opponents believe it gives the Catholic church unfair advantage and power. Understandably, the Episcopate wants the agreement passed before the political climate turns even colder.

"Our society has become pluralistic," Andrzej Wojtowicz, Director of the Polish Ecumenical Council, explained. "This causes the Catholic hierarchy major grief." According to a German magazine, though ninety percent of the Polish population is Catholic, no more than ten percent of Warsaw's population still attends Mass regularly.

PROTESTANT-CATHOLIC DISPUTES

Few concrete Protestant-Catholic disputes remain. Nearly all Catholic takeovers of Lutheran-owned churches have been resolved. Protestant religious instruction now enjoys the same legal status as the Catholic one, but the conflict survives on the kindergarten level, where Protestants lack teachers. "How are we to tell small children that they should not venerate the pictures of Mary as their friends do?" Wojtowicz asked. "There is a real danger of proselytism in kindergarten." Catholics have not agreed to an ecumenical form of religious instruction for this age group.

Only the Roman Catholic church is entitled to a concordat; each of the remaining churches will need to negotiate its own agreement with the state. Jan Szarek, the Lutherans' leading bishop, explained: "The concordat, an international agreement, can only be accepted by Parliament in the form agreed to by the Vatican and the Polish government. Our own church laws though can be changed by the state without prior consultation with us. That's discrimination."

Minor snubs still blemish ecumenical relations. The Protestant churches were not invited to services commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. "Apparently, the sacrifices and blood of Poland's many non-Catholic heroes don't count," complained Bishop Szarek in his report to the Warsaw synod in April.

Nevertheless, a religious war is clearly not in the offing. Nearly all Poles are amused by Russian rightist Vladimir Zhirinovsky's efforts to create a pan-Slavic nation. "That's an Orthodox concept," Andrzej Wojtowicz explained. "Protestant religious instruction now enjoys the same legal status as the Catholic one, but the conflict survives on the kindergarten level, where Protestants lack teachers. "How are we to tell small children that they should not venerate the pictures of Mary as their friends do?" Wojtowicz asked. "There is a real danger of proselytism in kindergarten." Catholics have not agreed to an ecumenical form of religious instruction for this age group.

PIETISTS AND TRADITIONALISTS STRUGGLE

Polish Lutherans are witnessing a struggle between mission-minded pietists and traditionalists. In the south-central region of Cieszyn and Bielsko-Biała, the area in which most of Poland's eighty thousand Lutherans live, Lutheran pietists cooperating with the so-called free
churches have diluted their commitment to historic Lutheran doctrines such as infant baptism. As a result, the multi-denominational, Lutheran-led "Foundation for Life and Mission" has lost the right to manage the annual evangelistic week held in a tent at Dziegielow (near Cieszyn) this year.

A similar struggle is apparent within the "Silesian Evangelical Church" across the border in the new Czech Republic. There, a pietistic group called "Mission" ousted the ruling bishop, Vilem Stonawski, in 1991. Stonawski, sixty-five, a traditionalist, is also accused of close collaboration with the past Communist state.

When voted out of office by the Silesian synod, parts of three congregations remained loyal to the deposed bishop. As a result, three churches are still held by Stonawski's followers. Church headquarters in Cesky Tesin were transferred to the official leadership by replacing locks in an early-morning operation under police surveillance. The adjacent parsonage and church remain in Stonawski's possession. "We have the legal right to do so," insisted the new Bishop, Vladislav Volny, forty-four, "but we do not want to create more bad blood by forcing our way into these buildings."

"I have the traditionalists behind me, and that's the true majority," countered ex-Bishop Stonawski. But the Hungarian Tibor Goeroeg, the Lutheran World Federation's Secretary for Europe, insists that "only three of the church's twenty-one pastors continue to support Stonawski."

A new Lutheran church headed by the deposed Bishop may be in the offing. If ten thousand Czech citizens sign a petition being circulated by Stonawski, he will be allowed to register a second Lutheran denomination. This Stonawski-led denomination would undoubtedly have less than ten thousand members. Initially formed after World War I as a Polish denomination within Czechoslovakia, the "Silesian Evangelical Church" presently numbers forty seven thousand members.