

What was the role of religious symbols in the 'Solidarity' movement after August 1980?

The being of the culture underlies in symbols, i.e. in meanings and values which are being assigned to humans' behaviour and their products. Symbols are the signposts of the culture, rooted in its past, they are making areas saturated with meanings and values. They are also an expression of social emotions. In a culture symbols are taking a special place. "A culture is a system of signs which is used for interpersonal communication"¹ - wrote Umberto Eco.

The Roman Catholic Church played, without a doubt, a significant role in the process of creation of Solidarity. „For centuries Roman Catholicism has been an important part of the Polish national identity, and the Church has been a symbol of freedom and opposition to foreign oppressors.”² In the Polish history the Church repeatedly played the role of the guard of the national awareness. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate the role of religious symbols, in a social movement of Solidarity after its birth in August of 1980. This work is too limited to explore all aspects of religious symbols. However, I would like to pay attention to a few of them. At first, I will begin with a short analysis of connections between the Solidarity movement and the Roman Catholic Church and then I will continue to show a different fields of social life at which religious symbols turned up.

“The Church is deeply rooted among the Polish people, especially among the peasants and the vast majority of the Polish workers are first generation working class, sons and daughters of peasants.”³ From the moment of the takeover in 1948 by communists until the creation of Solidarity in 1980 the Church was the only independent centre in the social life. The social teachings of Church became an alternative to Marxism ideology. In the first period of legal existence of the Solidarity, the Roman-Catholic discourse regained all cultural authority it had lost earlier to the discourse of the Party-state.⁴ The Church became the most important moral authority on which relied both; believers and non believers. All oppositional groups recognized Catholic Christianity as the highest moral authority and constructed their discourses on its foundation.⁵ In the society controlled by any regime the man does not have

¹ U. Eco, *Pejzaż semiotyczny*. Warszawa 1972.

² M. W. Eberts. The Roman Catholic Church and democracy in Poland, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 50, No.5 (Jul., 1998) p. 818

³ R. C. Monticone, *The Catholic Church in communist Poland 1945-1985, Forty years of Church-State Relations*, New York, 1986, p.112

⁴ J. Kubik, Who Done It: Workers, Intellectuals, or Someone Else? Controversy over Solidarity's Origins and Social Composition, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 3. (Jun., 1994), p. 456

⁵ J. Kubik, *The Power of symbols against the symbols of Power*, Pennsylvania 1994, p. 103

the right to expressing his thoughts free since he is always limited by some ideology. The Church, as an institution, and Solidarity, as a social movement, shared a common denominator: the fight for the right to expressing views free, and primarily the right to exist. As Max Scheler observe: "Only the freedom of the act of faith, in contrast to the purely fact-bound (*sachgebunden*) act of the understanding, makes possible the evidence of faith and its 'rock-solid' certitude"⁶ "Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński once observed that "nowhere else is the union of Church and nation as strong as in Poland."⁷ In 1981 'Solidarity' movement declared:

Because it was Christianity that brought us into our wider motherland, Europe; because for a thousand years Christianity has in large degree been shaping the content of our culture; since in the most tragic moments of our nation it was the Church that was our main support; since our ethics are predominantly Christian; since, finally, Catholicism is the living faith of the majority of Poles, we deem it necessary that an honest and comprehensive presentation of the role of the Church in the history of Poland and of the world have an adequate place in national education.⁸

One can discuss the attitude of the Church or its superior's reactions in the face of tension situations but one can not contradict its presence and its influence on the Polish history, particularly in the time of People's Republic.

As M. Bernhard noticed, Catholicism in Poland "is a question of national identity."⁹ In the 19th century, during the partitions of Poland, the Roman Catholic Church became the only place where it was possible to express the Polish national identity. The Polish Church was different because it was "formed in times of the lack of national country as an opponent power to foreigners and solidarity in its own national bounds. In conditions of the communist system it was natural that the church was not only a moral help against the ideology and power imposed on the country but also a free place in a powerless nation."¹⁰ From such point of view, religious practises and symbols connected with them played the significant role in the Solidarity movement. Religious identity and national identity seem inextricably intertwined.¹¹

⁶ M. Scheller in: T. A. Gooch, *The Epistemic Status of Value-Cognition in Max Scheler's Philosophy of Religion*, *Journal for Cultural and Religious theory*.

⁷ J.Kubik, *The Power of symbols...*, p.113

⁸ In: J. Kubik, *The Power of symbols ...*, p. 252

⁹ M. H Bernhard, *The Origins of Democratization in Poland: Workers, Intellectuals, and Oppositional Politics, 1976 – 1980*, New York 1993, p.136

¹⁰ Internet source

¹¹B.Porter, *The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and the Narratives of Polish History*, *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 2. (Summer, 2001), p. 289

Although the Church had an important position, one should emphasize that, without doubt, it was a secular movement. Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Solidarity, described the link between movement and religion:

“It is true, that among the Union’s Symbols, those of the Catholic religion are especially prominent. This reflects the great respect which our society, most of whose members are Catholics, has for the moral authority of the Church. But the Union itself, as a social movement, is secular. It acknowledges Christian values [...] but it is not politically related to the Church nor does it consider the Catholic social doctrine to be its program.”¹²

After the first period of the legal existence of "Solidarity" on 12 of December 1981 a martial law was forced. “The movement lost, as a result of de-legalization of Solidarity and curtailment of the freedom of expression, space for social action and communication.”¹³ Mass media and communication were assumed by the authority. The radio and television stopped broadcasting programmes and General Wojciech Jaruzelski announced the introduction of martial law. From the beginning of imposition of martial law, the Church expressed its reservation. The Archbishop Józef Glemp “called upon the people not to oppose the authorities, for this could lead to bloodshed.”¹⁴ In the period of the martial law, the Roman Catholic Church was particularly close with members of Solidarity as well as with its leaders. "Intervention on the behalf of detained become the daily life in the life of bishops suffragan’s.”¹⁵

In the conditions of the lack of the possibility to express free thoughts and freedom of speech, members of Solidarity created a system of unofficial distribution of forbidden materials. “In late 1981, immediately after martial law was imposed in Poland, activist began producing series of unofficial stamps under the name of outlawed Solidarity union.”¹⁶ Stamps and postcards were opposed to the official propaganda. They were using symbols intelligible to the entire society in order to ridicule and to undermine the authority of the power, to express one's dissatisfaction but also to express one's hope and faith for future. Amongst images used

¹² C. Cviic: *The Church. Poland: Genesis of a Revolution*. New York, 1983. p.106

¹³ G.Bakuniak, K. Nowak, *The Creation of a Collective Identity in a Social Movement: The Case of "Solidarność" in Poland*, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 3. (May, 1987), p. 427

¹⁴ R. C. Monticone, p. 134

¹⁵ J. Żaryn, *Kościół w pierwszych tygodniach stanu wojennego*, full text available at: http://www.ksmradio.com/cgi-bin/tematy/viewnews.cgi?newsid1166054873_24238,

¹⁶ K. S. Evans, *The Argument of Images: Historical Representation in Solidarity Underground Postage, 1981-87*, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 19, No. 4, *Imagining Identities: Nation, Culture, and the Past*. (Nov.,1992), p. 749

* Until then the Roman Catholic Church fortified its position and comparatively stabilized it

by the underground, postage religious symbols played a significant role. In those images, Solidarity accorded itself authority by using visual emblems of Polish nationalism, the trade union movement, and Polish Catholicism. Such authority was based on a number of factors, including the mobilization of religious images in a society where the church was independent*.¹⁷ A reference to Christ rising from the dead was a frequent topic. In this way they were handing over very distinct information about the fight against the regime. A card with an image of a black cross with the Polish flag hanging in the vertical position with the signature 'we will be resurrected' is one example (see appendix nr 1, 2,3).

In the underground postage they were also producing cards and postage stamps on the occasion of religious holidays, Christmas and Easter, with wishes of near freeing or simply support for the detained people and their families. Also images of persons closely bound up with 'Solidarity' and with the Church appeared on the cards. One example is an image of Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Solidarity with the Holy Father, John Paul the Second.(see appendix nr.4) Although stamps and cards did not have a formal character, they were a marvellous method of circulating the information. Profits on their sale were allotted for the activity of the union as well as for helping repressed families.

The birth of 'Solidarity', besides the political and social changes, also brought changes into the Polish culture. Hopes and expectations were also expressed in art. The iconography of most of them was based on signs existing in the universal awareness and symbols, religious among them.¹⁸ They were the expression of rebellion and the resistance towards the regime trying to introduce the "artificial culture" which had no support in history and tradition. Symbole religijne stały się formą okazania swojego sprzeciwu. Wearing the cross, the image of the Our Lady of Częstochowa identified people not only as representatives of religious faith but also it expressed the resistance against the government propaganda.

The Roman Catholic Church was involved in action of supporting "Solidarity" during the martial law on a huge scale. Priests were present amongst striking and during mass anniversary meetings. The Church gave shelter to people searched by secret police, brought help and uplift repressed and their families. Religious symbols became the expression of the public support and rebellion against the power. Participants of frequent strikes, hunger

¹⁷ K.S Evans, p. 750

¹⁸ J. Brukwicki in: http://www.culture.pl/pl/culture/artykuly/wy_wy_plakaty_solidarnosci_jablkowscy_warszawa

marches and demonstrations identified themselves and were supported through religious symbols.

The support given by the Church for trade union activists' was essential for Solidarity. During December strikes priests were already present with the priestly service in the strikers' workplaces. People sought by the secret police found the refuge in churches. In many churches, before and after the church services, underground magazines, and leaflets were being distributed. Small, parish rooms were used as the safe places for the Solidarity activists' meetings. Many priests were closely connected with the Solidarity. Wyjątkową postacią był ksiądz Jerzy Popiełuszko. He became involved into the financial and spiritual help of workers. His brave sermons, which openly criticized the authority, caused that he had become the spiritual leader of the Solidarity. Father Popiełuszko became the object of frequent propaganda attacks and press communist authorities (especially Jerzy Urban¹⁹, writing under a pseudonym Jan Rem, which named his sermons shows of hatred)

On 19 of October 1984 on the way back from Bydgoszcz to Warsaw, he was kidnapped and murdered by members of Ministry of Internal Matters (MSW). The manslaughter and revealing the truth about it evoked shock and social indignation. The funeral on the 3 of November 1984 gathered thousands of people together and was transformed into a great demonstration. He was buried on the land of the parish church of St Stanisław Kostka in Warsaw, where he was a priest. This grave became the purpose of frequent pilgrimages and formal visits (On 14 June 1987 r. Pope John Paul II) The figure of the priest Jerzy Popiełuszko became a symbol of the indomitability and the sacrifice for million of Polish people in the period of the communist regime.

For years of the repression, the communist regime did not manage to eliminate the Roman Catholic Church and its symbols from the social life of citizens. For the Church, on another hand, the most essential issue was to give Solidarity the character of Christian face, in the sphere of the symbolism as well as platform content. All the most important events were crowned with religious celebrations. The Christian tradition was too deeply rooted in Polish society to eliminate it from social life. The working class, who the new system was supposed to rely on, came from the peasantry, most connected with the religion. The Church was the

¹⁹ From August 1981 to April 1989, Jerzy Urban was a government spokesperson.

only alternative institution to the communist party. The faith became the symbol of the fight for the independence and patriotism. In such historic context it was a natural thing for Solidarity to adopt religious symbols. Solidarity, being a secular society movement rather than a religious move, certainly was able to unite believers and non believers in her ranks. One symbol united them: the freedom and the right to express thoughts on the public forum.

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