

# Culture & Society

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## Poland's Uncertain Future:

### *Politicized Religion and European Integration*

Piotr H. Kosicki

On October 9, 2002, Günter Verheugen, the Commissioner for Expansion of the European Union, announced that Poland—along with the nine other countries of the so-called Laeken-10 group—had been officially selected to join the European Union in 2004.<sup>1</sup> After a decade of reforms designed to keep pace with the other Laeken-10 nations, the only barrier between Poland and EU membership was recently eliminated in a domestic referendum held on June 8, 2003, in which a majority of Polish citizens voted to join the EU.

Yet, the debate over whether Poland should join the European Union is far from over; significant moral and cultural concerns remain. Polish national identity has historically been intertwined with Catholicism, and, as a result, the sociopolitics of religion continue to shape decision-making.<sup>2</sup> Wide acceptance of the Church's place as defender of both religious and national identities has generated cleavages between the plethora of actors who define Polish Catholicism. Faced with potentially contradictory allegiances to the institutional Catholic Church, the media, political parties, and the Pope, Polish Catholics often lose sight of where religious authority ends and civil government begins.

These moral-religious concerns demand serious consideration. Even within current EU member states, skeptics argue

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that the emergence of a Leviathan super-state has spurred moral decay. Both supporters and critics of Poland's accession to the EU fear that membership might dilute the values traditionally associated with the national and religious identities of Polish society. Anti-integrationist groups go so far as to portray the European Union as an emerging amoral Orwellian entity. With the aim of separating legitimate concerns over traditional religious values from dogmatic rhetoric made under the guise of Polish Catholicism, the referendum may serve as an effective point of departure for reconsidering the role of the Church in Polish society.

### **Poland's Return to Europe: A Question of Identity.**

The collapse of the Soviet-sponsored Polish People's Republic in 1989, combined with the introduction of a pluralistic society, free-market economy, and republican body politic, generated two main interpretations of the legitimate scope of the Church's role in society. The debate over these interpretations continues to be a national stumbling block almost fifteen years later. Some Catholics believe both that the Church should provide spiritual guidance, but should avoid any discussion of sociopolitical issues—including EU accession—and that Poland should integrate into the European Union. In contrast, ultra-conservative Catholics expect the Church to speak in the name of the nation, to provide guidance in all realms of life, and to eliminate the need for individuals to consider theological and political issues themselves. Those taking this view staunchly oppose accession to the European Union on the grounds that it would interfere with the traditional role of the Church in Polish society, and cor-

rode Polish morals. The middle ground between these interpretations is a work in progress. Elzbieta Skotnicka-Illasiewicz, head sociologist for Poland's Office of the Committee for European Integration, and Hanna Suchocka, Poland's Ambassador to the Vatican, for example, argue that the Church should act as an agenda-setter by offering guidance without appearing to interfere in Polish society. Yet, their balanced judgment is a rarity even among members of the elite.<sup>3</sup>

One of the few points that pro-integrationists and anti-integrationists agree upon is that a general identity crisis plagues Polish society. Whereas pro-integrationists tend to see this crisis as a symptom of a more endemic problem in the Polish ethos, anti-integrationists describe it as a temporary "sickness" from which Poland must cure itself before it even considers moving toward sociopolitical union with other nations.<sup>4</sup> Suchocka and Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, former Secretary-General of the Polish episcopate, both chose the word "libertarianism" to represent the crisis currently afflicting Poland.<sup>5</sup> Born of an overly-zealous desire to assimilate liberalism into a culture emerging from totalitarian oppression, libertarianism has arguably created a state of affairs in which individuals feel free to act entirely according to their own will, with no consideration of the moral repercussions. Yet, this brand of individualism has broader implications—including the degradation of fundamental social rules of order and justice. Although many pro- and anti-integrationists agree that a crisis of libertarianism exists, the contrast of their proposed solutions to the problem elucidates the conflicts that may precede—and follow—EU integration.

This issue has proven to be central. If Poles have compromised their national

cohesion in an attempt to prove themselves worthy of “Western” status, as several prominent authors have argued, will EU entry only make matters worse, or will it force Poles to pull themselves together?<sup>6</sup> Answers to this question vary even among pro-integrationists. Krzysztof Zanussi, a world-renowned film director, argues that integration into the European Union will weaken Poland’s ability to preserve its heritage.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Zdzislaw Najder, former advisor to the Prime Minister of Poland, argues that the friction between Polish Catholic traditional values and the European Union’s liberal values may serve as de facto shock therapy, reforming Polish identity for the better.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, anti-integrationists like Dr. Czachorowski, an assistant professor of ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin, suggest that, if Poland is indeed sick in that it has lost its sense of self, it is best to keep Poland out of the realm of potential contamination that is the European Union.<sup>9</sup>

**Europe as a “Spiritual Community.”** The unique way in which Pope John Paul II connects Polish Catholics with each other and to Europe as a whole offers a potential solution to this impasse. During the past fifteen years, the Pope has attempted to build a European sociopolitical framework based in part on Catholicism. In doing so, the Pope has raised the rudimentary question of what value system the EU intends to use as the basis for its future policy and development—a question other European countries have persistently avoided addressing. He argues that “there will be no European union unless it is also a spiritual community.”<sup>10</sup> Such a community would reduce criticism of the European Union in Poland. If such a “community” were to develop, anti-integrationist fears of

Poland’s contamination by the purported moral looseness of the EU would evaporate, and the shock therapy suggested by Najder would be far less austere—and more effective.

Europe’s enthusiasm towards the possibility of celebrating her religious past, however, ranges from half-hearted to non-existent. Christian Democrats, especially in Germany and Spain, welcome the Pope’s support for European unification primarily for the political boost it offers them in the eyes of Catholic electorates.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Social Democrats seek to distance themselves from religious associations. Polish anti-integrationists cite the words of German President Johannes Rau, a Social Democrat, from the March 12, 2000, conference of Central and Eastern European presidents in Gniezno:

Thus we need European values unaffiliated with religious beliefs, grounded in toleration and freedom of religion, in other words, that everyone might and should have a right to his own religion, but we cannot allow for there to exist a clerical superstructure in our continent.<sup>12</sup>

To anti-integrationists, the first clause signifies the beginning of the deterioration of their Catholic values. Even Jozef Zycinski, the Archbishop of Lublin and a staunch supporter of integration, reacted strongly to Rau’s statement, arguing that it suggests that the Vatican poses a threat to the very values, such as brotherly love and social justice, that are fundamental to Catholicism.<sup>13</sup> Rau’s condemnation of “clerical superstructure” illustrates the perception among many that the European Union

intends to exclude Catholic values from any future European constitution.

These fears coalesced when, on July 3, 2002, the European Parliament (EP) passed a resolution recommending that EU member and candidate states alike relax abortion restrictions “in order to safeguard women’s reproductive health and rights.”<sup>14</sup> Polish anti-integrationists instantly seized on this statement as a portent of future EU intrusions into national social policy. Because the EU currently lacks a constitution that would

the Irish people’s final decision to ratify the Nice Treaty on October 19, 2002. Nonetheless, anti-integrationists continue to point to Ireland’s initial rejection of the Nice Treaty as a warning of the European Union’s tendency to infringe on traditional values in the name of “liberal” policy.

The Pope and pro-integrationist Catholic thinkers have been troubled as well, and argue that formal recognition of the Christian origin of brotherly love and social justice is essential to prevent two

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## Anti-integrationist groups portray the European Union as an emerging amoral Orwellian entity.

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delegate normalized authority over social matters, the EP’s resolution has no binding legal implications. However, it underscores two fear-inspiring trends for “traditional” Polish Catholics: (1) a growing proclivity in EU member states toward legalizing abortion in the context of (2) increasing powers of the EU bureaucracy on sociopolitical issues. The first trend has evolved independently of any official EU action, yet the drive toward at least partial legalization of abortion has succeeded in every EU member state except Ireland.

Many Poles share the Irish concern over integration. Ireland’s initial rejection of the recently ratified Nice Treaty was due in part to fears that the treaty would enable the EU to force abortion legalization upon Ireland through a “back door.”<sup>15</sup> Neither the treaty nor the EU *acquis communautaire*, however, hints at any such possibility. Realization of the irrelevance of “back door” considerations played a large role in

potential outcomes: (1) Europe falling into denial of its common foundation of Christian values; and (2) Europe treating Christian ethical standards, such as the sinfulness of abortion and euthanasia, as subject to the “postmodern relativization of good and evil.”<sup>16</sup> In a society that values free speech, there is a fine line between postmodern relativization and juridical order. Indeed, Archbishop Zycinski, while tolerant of axiological debate, was quick to impose limits on “relativistic” discourse. In his harsh response to Rau’s statement, he argued that an EU value system truly “unaffiliated with religious beliefs” could result in a society similar to Hitler’s Third Reich.<sup>17</sup>

The Polish Catholic hope to attach a Christian foundation to the emerging EU axiology has historical roots—and is extremely important since it is a common element in both the pro- and anti-integrationist approaches.<sup>18</sup> Pro-integrationists frequently raise the issue of the “Christian inspiration” of the EU,

emphasizing the religiosity of Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi, and Konrad Adenauer, the politicians who initiated the process of European integration in 1952. Dr. Skotnicka-Illasiewicz presents the following retrospective analysis of Schuman, de Gasperi, and Adenauer's Christianity:

The societies that pushed them onto the political scene were undergoing a time of reckoning with their national consciences....All three men were Catholics, but their value systems grew out of a broader, Christian axiological formula.<sup>19</sup>

That some EU countries have moved away from the Union's Christian-inspired beginnings has brought criticism from many Polish Catholics. Bishop Pieronek, for example, expressed regret that some EU lawmakers have begun to move in the direction of "law-making that fails to take into account Christian principles," in response to the attempts to legalize abortion.<sup>20</sup> Others, such as pro-integrationists R za Thun and Zanussi, feel comfortable praising Christians of western Europe for their ability to integrate Christian values into their societies, while Polish Catholicism remains stuck in its libertarian quandary.<sup>21</sup>

Whether the EU will embrace or reject the Christian values historically embedded in European society remains uncertain. The fear of losing national sovereignty has hampered the coordination of any EU-wide social policy thus far, and may well render a fundamental statement of principles either uncodified or, if codified, relatively generic. Nevertheless, the quest of Polish elites to prevent values from being compromised in open polit-

ical debate will continue. Professor Alojzy Nowak captured the sentiment of the pro-integrationists: even if it enters as a "second-class" member state, Poland will have a far better chance of keeping axiological issues alive for all of Europe than if it were to reject EU accession.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, balancing democratic juridical processes with a respect for the Christian values that form the foundations of European culture is one of the most difficult problems confronting the European Union today.

**Conclusion.** While sharing a common theology and obedience to the Pope, Polish Catholics diverge on the extent to which they should permit religion to enter into sociopolitical discourse. Pro- and anti-integrationist elites alike encourage discussion on the refocusing of Polish Catholic identity, but disagree on the context in which discussion should take place. In the eyes of pro-integrationists, the EU will force Poland to confront itself, and such a confrontation is desirable sooner rather than later, since it will minimize the long-term confusion generated by globalization and libertarianism. On the other hand, anti-integrationists believe that Poland will not be able to correct itself through serious discussion unless it is able to set the terms of its own transformation, rather than being forced to adapt to terms imposed by the European Union.

This debate illustrates the imperative for open discussion in a country where the threads of religion and nationality have been tangled by history. The legitimate concerns buried within politicized religious rhetoric may emerge if the Episcopate provides guidance without interfering in politics, and initiates a broad, propaganda-free discussion

encompassing all of the various elements of Polish Catholicism. By demonstrating its ability to offer cohesive guidance while remaining open, the Church may be able to de-mystify rhetoric, bridge cleavages, and reforge its own role in Polish society.

**Author's Note:** The basis for the analysis in this paper is a small portion of extensive material collected in thirteen interviews with Poles in the fields of politics, the clergy, academia, the media, and the fine arts, to whom I wish to convey my respect and gratitude for

participating in this research. As the interviews were conducted in Polish, all quotations are in the author's translation. It should be noted that these individuals come from the elite and are in some sense unrepresentative of the Polish population as a whole, given their greater levels of education, income, contextual information, and sociopolitical involvement. However, they represent respected authorities in the respective areas of Polish Catholicism and Polish EU entry.

This article would not have been possible without the efforts of Mrs. Lidia Kosk, Dr. Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka, Mr. Andrzej J. Kosicki, and Professor Norman Naimark, as well as the generosity of Stanford University.

## NOTES

1 The Laeken-10 group consists of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

2 Norman Davies documents the intertwining of Polish national and Catholic identities in *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). The topic has also been the subject of recent research by Brian Porter (see "The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and the Narratives of Polish History," *Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2).

3 Elzbieta Skotnicka-Illasiewicz, interview by author, 3 September 2002. Hanna Suchocka, interview by author, 28 August 2002.

4 Marek Czachorowski, interview by author, 6 September 2002.

5 Tadeusz Pieronek, interview by author, 2 September 2002. Also, Suchocka, interview by author, 28 August 2002.

6 Marek A. Cichocki, interview by author, 23 August 2002.

7 Krzysztof Zanussi, interview by author, 29 August 2002.

8 Zdzislaw Najder, interview by author, 4 September 2002.

9 Marek Czachorowski, interview by author, 6 September 2002.

10 John Paul II, Speech in Gniezno, 3 June 1997. Reprinted in Henryk J. Muszynski, *A Spiritual Europe* (Europa Duchą), 7.

11 Jonathan Chaplin, "Christian Theories of Democracy" (1998). Accessible at: <http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/1998/chaplin.pdf>, 8.

12 Johannes Rau, quoted in *Diary of the Senate of the Republic of Poland*, April 2001. Accessible at: <http://www.senat.gov.pl/k4/dok/diar/61/6101.htm>.

13 J zef Zycinski, interview by author, 6 September 2002.

14 Anne E.M. Van Lancker, European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities: Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (6 June 2002). Accessible at: <http://www2.europarl.eu.int/>.

15 Brigid Laffan, "The Nice Treaty: The Irish Vote," *Notre Europe* (Research and Policy Group, July 2001), 7.

16 Adam Boniecki, interview by author, 2 September 2002.

17 J zef Zycinski, interview by author, 6 September 2002.

18 "Axiology" is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the theory of value." The word found its way into each of the author's interviews. Individuals used it to convey a variety of context-dependent meanings that illustrate the paradox underlying any attempt to define the influence of religion on sociopolitical decision-making. The values that guide Catholicism's influence are both an historically-established component of the Polish national ethos and an ambiguous matrix of emotional and spiritual propensities that manifests itself differently depending on the regime in power and the contemporary cultural spirit.

19 Elzbieta Skotnicka-Illasiewicz, *Return Path or Road to the Unknown? Poles' European Dilemmas* (Warszawa: Centrum Europejskie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1998), 33.

20 Tadeusz Pieronek, interview by author, 2 September 2002.

21 Krzysztof Zanussi, interview by author, 29 August 2002. Also, R za Thun, interview by author, 3 September 2002.

22 Alojzy Z. Nowak, interview by author, 9 September 2002.