https://doi.org/10.14394/srz.15.9

UBI CARITAS...

MIROSŁAWA GRABOWSKA, *BÓG A SPRAWA POLSKA. POZA GRANICAMI TEORII SEKULARYZACJI*

Marta Bucholc
University of Warsaw
Käte Hamburger Center for Advanced Study in the Humanities
"Law as Culture," Bonn

Religiosity in Poland has become the research equivalent of a minefield. Let me explain what I mean by referring to the cover picture of Mirosława Grabowska's book *Bóg a sprawa polska* [God and the Polish cause]. In the centre of the well-known black-and-white photo taken in the Lenin Shipyard in August 1980, we see the chaplain of Solidarity, Henryk Jankowski, hearing the confession of a worker. The two are surrounded by a crowd of strikers on their knees, awaiting their turn to confess and be absolved – the simple but powerful piety of hard-working people, and the brave priest supporting them spiritually in their struggle against the common enemy. The picture once conveyed deep pathos: a sense of historical mission seemed to shine in the weary faces, the Church joined forces with the weak to face the mighty, and truth and justice had finally risen up against hypocrisy and inequity.

In the summer of 2019 the picture no longer carries the same meaning. To me, it conveys an unbearable irony. After 1980, the late prelate Jankowski was not only found to have informed on the very people whom he served as chaplain, he had also become an eponym of greed, gluttony, and pride. Soon another cardinal sin, that of lust, misdirected towards minors, was added to the list.

In addition, the simple Catholic religiosity of the working class no longer carries an emancipatory power. It contributes to the dark force fuelling hostility towards refugees as well as towards sexual, national, ethnic, and religious minorities – and in fact all minorities – and a stronghold of political support for the party directly responsible for demolishing the democratic rule of law in Poland after 2015 (see Grabowska 2018: 212ff. on the electoral behaviour of Polish Catholics). The year 2019 brought even more troubling developments. Yet while members of the clergy are found guilty of child abuse, while bribery, insider trading, and tax fraud involving the highest state and Church officials are plausibly alleged, while laws are proposed prohibiting sexual education at schools, and while the idea of effective segregation of the LGBT+ population is advocated and is gaining popular support, Polish society at large remains faithful to the Church. *Polonia semper fidelis*. It stays loyal not only to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church (whose current leader's ideas are hardly congenial to the better part of the Polish clergy and congregation) but primarily to the local, culturally embedded Polish Church, which has arguably never been closer to state power in modern history.

To enter such a research field calls for a lot of courage, and it is hard to do it right. Mirosława Grabowska, who is a professor at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw, lacks neither the nerve nor the competence to address difficult questions. The evidence on the religiosity of Polish society is bountiful. The quantitative studies conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS), which she has directed since 2008, are among the most reliable of sources. As a social scientist, Grabowska has demonstrated her ability to offer nuanced and comprehensive perspectives on Polish society in numerous works, at least one of which, *Podział postkomunistyczny* (2004) belongs to the finest achievements of Polish sociology after 1989. Moreover, even though the sociology of religion has always been one of her fortes, Grabowska is first and foremost a sociologist of politics. Like no other author, she has the necessary sensitivity and experience to analyse the interface of politics and religion in post-communist Poland, including its most recent developments.

Of course, currently no one can really keep up with Polish public life. It is a sign of that uncanny acceleration that to assess a book published in 2018 fairly we have to ask: right, but when exactly in 2018? On the other hand, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*: the Catholic religious setting is among the firmest characteristics of Polish society. It has indeed become,

as Grabowska states at least twice in her book, "a part of the Polish landscape" (2018: 210, 211), and so has its political effects. Although Grabowska studies religion rather than politics, the deep politicisation of religion in today's Poland makes her book a must-read for any student of politics in this part of the world.

Grabowska's description of the Polish religious landscape combines the past and the present in a single far-reaching outlook, which offers the reader valuable tools to understand contemporary Poland. Her book is based on a substantial load of data and offers theoretical insights in a clear and concise way. An additional merit of the book – though not, I expect, one fully intended by the author – is its capacity to give a sensation of estrangement to the anxious observer of Polish politics and social life in 2019: its argument is framed in a way which, for a number of reasons, diminishes its immediate relevance.

The principal reason is already explained in the subtitle: "Beyond secularisation theory." Of course, Poland has ever been a problematic case for secularisation theorists: a post-communist society in the middle of Europe, which not only failed to secularise under communism, but has also resisted the allegedly secularising impact of capitalism, modernisation, and the rising living standard and human development indices. Even if we regard secularisation theory – which has been heavily criticised for some decades now – as a supreme proof of the secular West's blind narcissism and wishful thinking, it remains as influential as the West itself. So it is fully plausible to use the problem of religion in Poland as a test of secularisation theory, to which Grabowska takes a "critical and polemical, but not negative and hostile" attitude (2018: 132). Her review of the development of the secularisation hypothesis and then its critique is a very informative and comprehensive summary of a voluminous corpus of knowledge. But delving into the flaws of secularisation theory involves a noble temptation which, I believe, Grabowska simply could not resist. Secularisation theory depicts religion as doomed by modernisation – bulldozed by the global trend. If we also take into consideration that socially weaker groups are consistently more religious, and that the global North is less religious than the global South, the inevitable result is that by questioning secularisation theory we somehow end up on the side of religion. This in turn makes us probably less willing to address its less agreeable features. Unless, of course, we endorse the view that religion as such is an utterly disagreeable phenomenon, which in turn would push us more towards the defence of secularisation theory, on the sound principle that disagreeable social phe-

nomena are largely eliminated in societies where people live more agreeable lives.

Clearly, Grabowska is not an enemy of religion. For example, she frequently uses the phrase "to push religion out of the public sphere" (*wypychać religię z życia publicznego*), but I have not found one single instance of her describing the opposite situation as "pushing religion into the public sphere." One reason may be the relatively small significance given to the distinction between religiosity and the Church throughout the book. For Grabowska, religiosity is a social phenomenon which is not coextensive with Church membership but relates to it both in its practical and cognitive dimensions (an assumption which, to my mind, is utterly unproblematic in a society where any book about religion ends up being a book about Catholicism, for purely statistical reasons). A large part of Grabowska's theorising in the book pertains to macro-level Church–state relations, and her historical discourses are written from that vantage point, too. On the other hand, the analyses of Polish religiosity highlight its micro-sociological and subjective aspects, and often thematise the tension between religious experience and institutional religion. This duality allows the author to characterise the (macro-)political effects of religion as distinct from their intimate and personal causes. Thus, Grabowska seems to overlook what is wrong about a good thing.

Grabowska's remarkable historical sensitivity may be one additional factor at play here. Let us look at Chapter 2, which discusses relations between church and state. The author begins with a very informative depiction of the historical development of the relationship between church and state in two paradigmatic cases, the United States and France, offering a useful typology of church–state relations (Grabowska 2018: 107). What I find particularly commendable here is her appreciation of the role of individuals in history, including individual leaders of religions and states: she avoids the fallacy of agentless agency, which is so common in contemporary sociology. In a rich, comparative overview she describes a variety of solutions to the problem that in biblical terms involves separating what is God's from what is Caesar's. She examines the legal settings, historical path dependencies, and cultural contexts in which various religions and religious institutions operate in the world. This part is largely a summary of secondary literature, supported by extensive references, but it is a comprehensive and clear one. It is no wonder that it shares some of the deficits of the sources: a number of societies seem to fall out of the frame, including those with a major presence of non-axial ethnic religions (notwithstand-

ing their official and organisational status), those with a large segment of religions operating without any church-like institutionalisation, and those with a significant presence of Islam (with two exceptions, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are cited as examples of theocracies). As the book is about Poland, these omissions are not to be held against the author. Still, the reader is prompted to ask if some new insights could be obtained by positioning Poland against a less familiar backdrop, or if the conceptualisations of church–state relations could be more embedded in the connected histories of the global world.

The theoretical sections discussing church–state relations are but an introduction to the close-up of Poland, which begins with the third chapter. Again, a rich, thorough, concise timeline leads the reader to what could be described as the "miracle of uniformity": Poland's population, which was religiously, linguistically, and ethnically heterogeneous before 1939, became almost homogenous, with over 91% being Catholics, whose faith, unshaken by communist propaganda, increased with the "good conjuncture" in the late 1970s (Grabowska 2018: 126) and when a Pole was elected to the Holy See in 1978.

The part of Grabowska's book that focuses on Poland reads like a story about a different country than the one we know from the daily news. As a result, it counteracts prejudice and prevents hasty interpretations, thus fulfilling the proper function of quantitative data analysis, which, rather than confirm what we hold to be true, should confront us with the Durkheimian *sui generis*, which can only be observed indirectly. In this sense, Grabowska's writing balances the more radical outcries in academia and beyond by showing a more benign picture of religion in contemporary Poland. Still, her choice of problems and research questions downplays the political effects of religiosity.

Let us consider Grabowska's treatment of a problem that can by no means be called benign: the anti-Semitism of Polish Catholics. Even though Chapter 4, which tackles this sore issue, is a reprise of an unpublished paper written in 1990 based on research conducted in the second half of the 1980s, it still offers precious insights into Polish anti-Semitism as well as the likely roots of the xenophobic aura detectable in twenty-first-century Poland (see Bilewicz et al. 2012). Grabowska remarks that the interest of this chapter is greatly augmented by the debate on the "Polish Holocaust law" adopted by Poland's parliament in 2018 (see Bucholc & Komornik 2019). Indeed, due to this short-lived legislation the question "Why do Polish Catholics hate the Jews?" – which Brian Porter-Szűcs once

called "a stupid" question to which we can only try to find a "reasoned answer" – has not ceased to reverberate in the world (see Porter-Szűcs 2014). In the 1980s, Grabowska's team sought a reasoned answer by interviewing Catholics representing "ordinary" and "new" variants of Catholic religiosity (the latter were operationalised as an affiliation with a group favouring religious renewal within the Church), as well as non-believers. The resulting picture of the "Jewish question in the Polish ethos" is far from coherent, yet the anti-Semitic bias of traditional religiosity is clearly evidenced by one of the findings: the non-believers turned out to be the least likely to have anti-Semitic sentiments, which is partly explained by the prevalence of members of the intelligentsia in the group. This finding would probably stand in 2019, too. Hence it might be expected that the political impact of religiously rooted anti-Semitism should be analysed, at least in light of the "Holocaust law" debate. Incidentally, the problem of anti-Semitism does not resurface in the fifth chapter, where Grabowska discusses the influence of religion on various spheres of social life.

This is the part where the religiosity of contemporary Polish society is characterised longitudinally, split by generations, which is a very enlightening way to present these data, allowing the reader fully to appreciate their rate of change (or, more often than not, the absence of change). As a methodologist, Grabowska is aware of the limitations of survey data in studies of religion and points them out to the reader with fairness. However, she also argues that there is *no better* empirical foundation for speaking of the religiousness of a society as a whole. She then proceeds to discuss the findings regarding the main components of religiosity, such as declarations of faith and church attendance, and concludes the chapter with a discussion of the impact of religion on morality and, last but not least, politics.

The findings are hardly surprising (Grabowska 2018: 171–188). The CBOS results for the period 1992–2018 analysed by Grabowska show a deeply religious society, with over 90% of believers throughout the period and a slowly rising share of non-believers, never exceeding 7%. Even though Poles are becoming less religious as time goes by, the steady drop in declarations of faith is negligible. Large-city dwellers and younger people are more prone to disbelief than the population in general, but the differences between age cohorts are small, with the exception of the youngest adults, who are the only ones declaring lack of religious faith, in over 17% of cases. Other socio-demographic factors, like education, also correlate with religiosity, but the relationship is weak. What Grabowska dubs a "crawling process of secularisation" is more conspicuous in the declarations of

religious practices: the share of regular practitioners has decreased while that of non-practitioners has risen. At the same time, non-regular practitioners account for 40%, and non-practitioners for 25%, of the large-city population. In the dimension of religious practices, secularisation is definitely accelerating, including intergenerationally, especially in the youngest cohorts. Moreover, respondents turn out to be increasingly selective in terms of their religious practices and beliefs, and feel free to drop some of the official teachings of the Catholic Church, which Grabowska connects with the social context of religious rites and traditions. Practices that are embedded in family life, are customary, or are simply more pleasant seem to resist oblivion better than theological principals, which have not been familiarised.

In opposition to the uneventful general picture of Polish religiosity, the subchapter on the socio-cultural influence of religion (Grabowska 2018: 188ff.) is extremely thought-provoking and illustrates the difficulty of setting the moral and the political apart in today's Poland.

As far as politics is concerned, Grabowska dedicates only two pages to the question and refers the reader to her many previous works on the subject, including the recent and comprehensive chapter "Religiosity, the Catholic Church, and Politics in Poland" (2017). In as much as I sympathise with this choice, I find the omission a drawback of her work. Another decision which seems understandable yet somehow unfortunate is the choice of electoral behaviour as the key indicator of political attitudes. The section on politics deals with electoral preferences as a function of religiosity, and as a result, the time span of analysis shifts: while the data on religiosity in general include the most recent polls (conducted during the first four months of 2018), the research on political views and choices covers the period between 1989 and 2015 (the date of the last general election before the publication of the book). However, the year 2015 has become a very significant caesura in Poland's recent political history, and electoral preferences hardly exhaust its meaning. The Law and Justice party's whole first term in power (the party won a majority in the parliament again in 2019) has been marked by an *entente cordiale* of Church and state, and some quantitative examination of this relationship would be in place in a section on religion and politics. The mere fact that no elections took place between 2015 and 2018 should not, in my opinion, discourage the author from including other types of evidence covering the period.

Such a reductionist and election-centred understanding of politics is not entirely convincing given that Grabowska's discussion of religion and

morality is far more politically loaded than the section on politics: a number of stances on moral issues, including contraception, euthanasia and abortion, which have become global hallmarks of Catholicism, are also pivotal political matters in Poland (as elsewhere). Today, the list calls for an inclusion of further points, which fall within the domain of Catholic sexual and reproductive morality and for which Grabowska's analysis, focusing on the statutory regulation of abortion, offers no explanatory tools. A whole range of phenomena is related to this morality: doctors refusing to conduct legal abortions in state hospitals, pharmacists declining to sell medically prescribed contraceptives, politicians reluctant to subsidise in vitro fertilisation, proponents of "LGBT-free zones," Church spokespersons publicly equating homosexuality with paedophilia, and hooligans throwing stones at gay activists. The exemplary cases of criminal prosecution for offence of religious feelings on account of LGBT+-related images (see Davies 2019) have demonstrated that the Catholic ethos is a public matter and a challenge to state politics. The wave of accusations against child molesters in the Church has led to a reaction in the form of an "anti-sexualisation" campaign, which is supposed to protect children and youth from premature sex by preventing them from having any reasonable education about sexuality. Such cases are just as indicative of religion's impact on Polish life as the abortion law. They strongly suggest that the salience of sexual and reproductive morality in the Polish Catholic ethos cannot be reduced to the pro-life–pro-choice dilemma stated in juristic terms. Although some of these matters emerged or culminated only after the book's publication, their cultural foundations have been a part of the Polish landscape for decades.

The Polish Catholic ethos cannot be reduced to faith, church attendance, rites, and celebrations. Polish Catholicism is a worldview, and a worldview is a political matter: the stake is the definition of Polishness as much as that of Catholicism, which entails political actions involving Church agency on various levels of ecclesial organisation.

To the naked eye, the Catholic ethos in today's Poland appears to be Church-oriented, exclusivist, and aggressively political. Although this kind of ethos is not the ethos of all Polish Catholics, it is the culturally dominant and politically influential version. It is disturbing that the questions to which Grabowska pays a lot of attention in her deeply humanistic argument – the value of religious motifs in the greatest achievements of Polish culture and language, the historical role of the Church as a supporter of national independence, as well as a defender of human rights and political

freedoms – no longer resonate authentically in the Polish public sphere. The non-exclusivist and emancipatory heritage of the Church in Poland may have been irreparably lost.

But some of the universal, less locally anchored aspects of religion have been lost too, as also transpires in Grabowska's narrative: the depth of the experience of faith and its inexpressibility, the inaccessibility of the core of the religious experience to any standardised cognitive devices, the personal and intimate side of religion, which can be a progressive, moderate, universalist, and humanistic political force. Even though these aspects of religious ethos are an important part of the author's vision, they are hard to spot in her evidence-based tale. The more sublime facets of religion do not matter much in the big picture of how God relates to the Polish cause today, as God has been zoomed out.

Bóg a sprawa polska is, in fact, a book about the demise of the ethos of the Catholic intelligentsia in Poland: a requiem for a form of religiosity that seems most congenial to the author and that once enabled Polish Catholicism to stand genuinely on the side of the weak. She writes that "the Church sometimes must be a sign of resistance, but it must also practise *caritas*." Is it resistance to be on the side of the big battalions? Is it *caritas* to hit the Other on the cheek as a preventive measure? Grabowska's book is a reservoir of data and a toolbox full of useful concepts. It is well ordered and accessible, offered to the reader generously, and never overburdened with extravagant conceptualisations or esoteric theorising. And yet the general picture of Polish religiosity that this work produces is no longer of this world. The book's cover gave a sense of irony to the writer of these words – reading it induced nostalgia.

Bibliography:

/// Bilewicz M., Winiewski M., Radzik Z. 2012. "Antisemitism in Current Poland: Psychological, Religious and Historical Aspects," *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism*, vol. 4, pp. 801–820.

/// Bucholc M., Komornik M. 2019. "The Polish 'Holocaust Law' Revisited: The Devastating Effects of Prejudice-Mongering," *Cultures of History Forum*, 19.02.2019, https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/politics/poland/the-polish-holocaust-law-revisited-the-devastating-effects-of-prejudice-mongering/.

/// Davies C. 2019. "Woman Arrested in Poland over Posters of Virgin Mary with Rainbow Halo," *Guardian*, 6.05.2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/06/woman-arrested-poland-posters-virgin-mary-rainbow-halo-plock, accessed 30.08.2019.

/// Grabowska M. 2004. *Podział postkomunistyczny. Społeczne podstawy polityki w Polsce po 1989 roku*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.

/// Grabowska M. 2017. "Religiosity, the Catholic Church, and Politics in Poland," [in:] *Religion, Politics, and Values in Poland*, eds. S.P. Ramet, I. Borowik, Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 257–288.

/// Grabowska M. 2018. *Bóg a sprawa polska. Poza granicami teorii sekularyzacji*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.

/// Porter-Szűcs B. 2014. "Why Do Polish Catholics Hate the Jews? A Reasoned Answer to a Stupid Question," [in:] *Antisemitism in an Era of Transition: Continuities and Impact in Post-Communist Poland and Hungary*, eds. F. Guesnet, G. Jones, Peter Lang, pp. 29–50.

/// Marta Bucholc – professor of sociology at Käte-Hamburger-Kolleg "Recht als Kultur" of Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. She obtained her habilitation (2014) and her PhD (2006) in sociology at the University of Warsaw. She graduated in sociology, philosophy and law at the University of Warsaw. Her research focus is history of social theory, sociology of law and sociology of knowledge. Her recent books include *Sociology in Poland: To Be Continued?* (2016), *Global Community of Self-Defense* (2015), and *Samotność długodystansowca* (2013). She translated several books into Polish, including *The Sociological Imagination* by Charles Wright Mills, *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas and *Le Temps de Tribus* by Michel Maffesoli.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1874-2024

Email: bucholcm@is.uw.edu.pl