

Polish Student Theatre and the Church

JEFFREY C. GOLDFARB

By international standards Catholicism in Poland is conservative and it has not encouraged theological innovations. As Jerzy Turowicz, the editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny* (a relatively independent weekly Catholic lay journal), has observed :

The average Pole has a deep sense of attachment and fidelity to his faith and Church characterized by traditionalism and sentimentalism. Unfortunately we (Poles) have failed to develop a more rational approach to our faith. With few exceptions we have never had in Poland – in the past or in more recent times – great theologians. Neither have we produced heretics.¹

There has been no attempt in Poland to synthesize the worldview of Marxism with Catholicism (as in Latin America). Instead, even those who seek accommodation between the Church and the Party in practical matters, emphasise strongly the fundamental incompatibility of the two worldviews.² In spite of this antagonism, and perhaps even because of it, the Church and its traditions are unusually strong.

Although Poland is officially communist, it is still very much a Catholic nation. Around 90 per cent of Poles are members of the Roman Catholic Church, though it is not clear what exactly constitutes a member.³ Research conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences indicates that a significant portion of this percentage are practising Catholics.⁴ It was found that from 28 per cent to 40 per cent of those in old urban areas, inhabited by long established workers, regularly attend Sunday mass; from 40 per cent to 55 per cent of those in new urban areas, where the majority of workers are of recent peasant background, regularly attend; and from 60 per cent to 84 per cent of those in rural areas regularly attend.

Given this strong commitment to Catholicism, attempts by the Party to suppress the Church and its activities have completely failed, arousing hostility towards the new order and the Party. As Jan Szczepanski, a leading Polish sociologist and member of Parliament, has observed :

The miscalculated effort of the government to break the power of the Church by undermining religious feelings through open atheistic propaganda only succeeded, of course, in strengthening the religiosity and the attachment of the masses to the Church.⁵

Accordingly, in recent years efforts have been made by the political authorities to avoid direct attacks on religion and church institutions. Conflict between the State and Church has arisen over the boundary between religion and politics,⁶ but this probably cannot be avoided as long as the political authorities continue to advocate a strong commitment to Marxist ideology as an essential basis for the socialist order.⁷

The outcome of church-state conflicts has shown the limitations of each institution. Despite the overt antagonism of the church hierarchy towards the communist direction and control of post-war Poland, the Party has been able to maintain its dominant political position. Thus the church hierarchy's attempts to create a viable Christian Democratic Party after the war failed and its support of the Peasants' Party's political manoeuvrings in the immediate years after the war also ended in failure. Similarly, the Party's attempts to limit religious activities largely failed. For example, government regulations established in 1961 to register catechetical centres have been frequently ignored by the parishes so that the enforcement of these regulations has had to be quite irregular, and even by 1970 a large number of these centres remained unregulated and unregistered.⁸

Nevertheless, despite real limitations, the strength of the Church has had consequences outside the realm of religion: for example, it has promoted cultural diversity. The Church has accomplished this in a variety of ways,⁹ including the direct support of cultural alternatives. An intriguing case in point is the support given by the Church to two Polish student theatres, the Plastic Theatre at the Catholic University of Lublin and the Theatre Misterium of Wrocław.

Polish student theatre has provided an important channel for cultural expression in Poland since the Polish dock workers' strikes in 1970 and the subsequent fall of the Gomułka regime. In this theatre major social, political and religious issues have been explored, often with the help of aesthetic innovations.¹⁰ One of the most innovating of the student theatres is the Plastic Theatre at the Catholic University of Lublin, and unlike other student theatres it is supported exclusively by the Catholic University and not by the Socialist Polish Student Organization (SPSO). It is a theatre of distinctive qualities. No words are spoken: drama is created directly through colour, movement and space. The actor speaks no lines; he simply moves theatre sets and wears masks and costumes.

The creator of this special theatrical world is Leszek Madzik. Madzik's childhood fascination with Russian icons has influenced the form of the

painted figures used in the theatre. His experience of the American "Bread and Puppets Theatre" at the 1969 International Theatre Festival in Wrocław has influenced his use of masks and inspired Madzik to explore the possibilities of this sort of theatre. Nevertheless, the creation of the Plastic Theatre is entirely his own. Pictures of Op Art foetuses, surrealist puppets with skeleton heads, and Eastern Orthodox depictions of Christ are some of the images which appear in this theatre. Extremely hot colours are used at one moment and then only shades of grey. Movement brings these expressions together in a fantastic manner which has its own dreamlike logic. Emotional drama is created through tempo, harmony and dissonance of visual expressions like sound in a musical score. The movement of central figures creates a simple story line. To accentuate the whole effect of the play Stanislaw Dabek composes atonal music to supplement the drama of the graphic expression.

The theatre at the Catholic University has created five productions. In the early ones a text was used, though it had a minor role; images were not as well formed and the use of space was still relatively simple. Madzik was not completely responsible for the group's first work, *Ecco Homo*: he wrote the text and designed the set, but he did not direct the play. Thereafter he took over the leadership. In the first work the stage was conventional and space was used sparingly. In the works that followed the performance space grew so that now the audience sits on the stage while the action takes place in the rest of the Catholic University's auditorium. The movement of images and the use of light and colour have become the basic elements of the drama. The goal of these productions has been to communicate religious and moral feelings.

The unusual aesthetic and religious qualities of Madzik's work are supported by the unique position of the Catholic University of Lublin as an institution. The University is the only independent Catholic University in socialist Europe, and as the students say, "the only Christian university between Berlin and Peking". It receives no financial support from the government and its classes are free of Party and government control. It is financed by Sunday collections in the churches all over Poland and through the support of Poles living abroad. A special atmosphere pervades the university grounds: to leave the street and enter the grounds will bring you into a different world. The ideas and beliefs expressed and exchanged at this university are fundamentally different from those in other Polish universities. The motives of students and teachers for working there are unusual in a communist society: the primary motives are deep religious commitments and sometimes overtly anti-Marxist views, a desire to be more free in doing research and in expressing beliefs. In this unusual environment the Plastic Theatre has produced its distinctive works.

The Plastic Theatre is unique in that it is the one theatre in the student

theatre movement which is supported exclusively by the Church, the "other" central institution in Polish society. There is only one other student theatre in Poland which receives support from the Catholic Church, the Theatre Misterium of Wroclaw. It is supported chiefly by the Socialist Polish Student Organization (SPSO), but in addition the Church provides the group with its theatre. The most interesting aspect of this group is its location in the basement of a 15th century church. With the dirt floor and the musty smell of old brick, the group creates a "theatre of mystery" with a religious spirit. At the time of my research (1973-74), Misterium had produced two plays, both adaptations of contemporary Polish literature. The first, *Brama Raju (The Gates of Heaven)*, adapted from a novelette by Jerzy Andrzejewski, was about the contagiousness of love, love for man and for God. The second, *versuchte Pferde/Zarozone Konie (Diseased Horses)*, adapted from a collection of short stories by Tadeusz Borowski, was about Auschwitz. It presented a frightening view of man's nature as manifested in the camps, that is, of man as cannibal.

The productions of Misterium were not as aesthetically exciting as the Plastic Theatre's work. Both plays imitated Grotowski's "Poor Theatre", but lacked its fundamental force. Using a simplified theatrical form both plays presented important moral themes, but neither was formally successful.

That Misterium is supported both by the Church, and by a student organization which is itself supported by the State and Party, is a small concrete testimony to the nature of church-state relations. The relations are far from perfect. It took a private audience with the bishop of Wroclaw to gain permission to use the church basement as a theatre. At first the basement was provided free of charge, but when the Polish Student Organization was officially transformed into the *Socialist* Polish Student Organization (SPSO), payment of rent was demanded by the church officials. The implication of the change in name of the student organization was at the time of my research unclear (1973-74 was the first year of the existence of the SPSO). Polish students are concerned with the possible negative implications; the Church, as shown by the treatment of Theatre Misterium, is also concerned. Yet, relations seem still to hold the promise of improvement. Although SPSO does not have a chapter on the campus of the Catholic University of Lublin (as a result of a ballot taken by the Catholic University students when the organization became explicitly socialist), the SPSO sponsored the Plastic Theatre in 1974 to travel to West Germany and to present its work to a German student organization. This was the first organized student representation of the Catholic University of Lublin in the west since the founding of the Polish People's Republic. Thus, the accommodation evident in recent years between the two central Polish institutions, the Party and the Church, has promoted

international contact, showing the world another side of contemporary Poland's social and cultural life.

¹ J. Turowicz, "The Changing Catholicism in Poland", in *Gierek's Poland*, ed. A. Bromke and J. Strong, New York, Praeger, 1973, p. 151.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴ T. Jaroszewski, "Dynamika praktyk religijnych i postaw swiatopogladowych w Polsce w swietle badan socjologicznych", *Kultura i Spoleczenstwo*, March 1966, pp. 133-149.

⁵ J. Szczepanski, *Polish Society*, New York, Random House, 1970, p. 166.

⁶ S. Staron, "The State and The Church", in *Gierek's Poland*, ed. A. Bromke and J. Strong, New York, Praeger, 1973, p. 161.

⁷ J. Szczepanski, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁸ S. Staron, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁹ See J. Goldfarb, "The Sociological Implications of Polish Student Theatre", Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1977.

¹⁰ See, J. Goldfarb, "Student Theatre in Poland", *Survey* 22, Spring 1976.

THE WORLD TODAY

The monthly journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs provides the general reader with up-to-date and authoritative information on current world problems.

Recent issues include:

Paul Wilkinson

Terrorism: the international response

Martin Nicholson

The new Soviet Constitution: a political analysis

Anthony Delius

South African alternatives

R. V. R. Chandrasekhara Rao

The Janata Government and the Soviet connexion

Gebhard Schweigler

Carter's détente policy: change or continuity?

Annual subscription
(including postage):

UK £7

US \$20 (by accelerated surface mail)

Elsewhere £9

Orders may be sent to booksellers and newsagents, or to the
Oxford University Press, Press Road, Neasden, London NW10 0DD
(Tel. 01-450 8080)



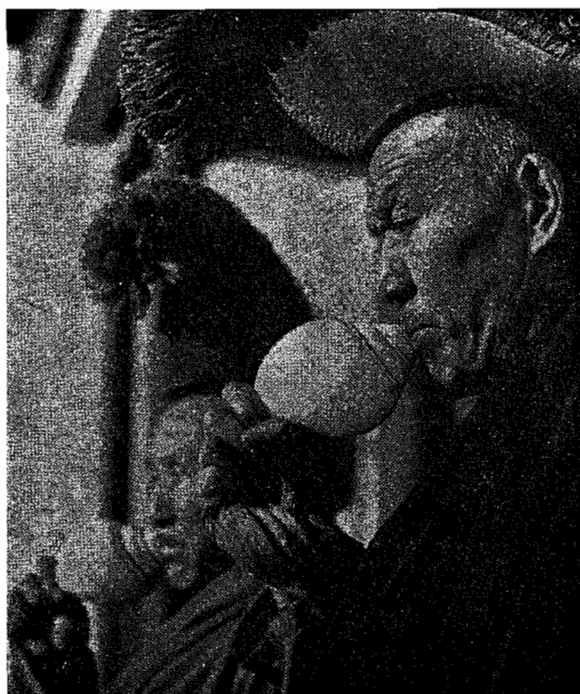
Scenes from student theatre productions in Poland. Polish student theatre has explored major social, political and religious issues (see article pp. 4-8).



Buryat Buddhists welcome a guest before a Buddhist temple. (See interview pp. 12-16).



A Buddhist believer in Buryatia worships outside a temple.



Buddhist lamas in Buryatia.