

## THE STATUS OF 'UNBELIEVERS' AS A GROUP IN POLISH SOCIETY

### *Introduction*

Unlike Polish society between the two world wars, which was ethnically, religiously and politically pluralist, post-war Poland is highly homogeneous. Ethnic minorities constitute no more than two per cent of the population, and the percentage of people with a non-Roman Catholic background does not exceed five (Kłoczowski 1986: 376-8). Exact data are not available, however, since neither nationality nor religion are demographic categories in Poland. Officially, there are three political parties in Poland, but the leading role of the Communist Party (or 'Polish United Workers Party') is an imperative written into the state's constitution. The official ideology, based on Marxism-Leninism, is of an anti-religious character. Atheist propaganda (the propagation of the so-called 'scientific world view') had been, at least until 1980, and in a sense continues to be, an important element of the party-controlled educational system and mass media. It has never been successful, however. The Roman Catholic Church has been and still is considered by the majority of Poles to be the guardian of the national heritage. Most teachers and most Party members are also members of this church. What is ironical is that, even among the membership of the Association for Secular Propaganda (around 140,000 in 1986), the majority, according to the estimates of some

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of its activities, believe in God and consider themselves Roman Catholics.<sup>1</sup>

What has been said above does not mean, of course, that all Poles are profoundly religious people. On the one hand, even those sociologists of religion who sympathize with the Roman Catholic Church are of the opinion that the religiosity of the Poles is superficial.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in Poland, as everywhere else, there are people who declare themselves to be unbelievers.

The percentage of unbelievers in the population of Poland changes according to various factors. According to rather superficial findings of 1977 to 1978 (i.e., just before Cardinal Wojtyła of Cracow was elected Pope), 85% of people who were interviewed in a national survey declared themselves to be believers (their denomination was not considered here), so we can say that the remaining 15% can, roughly speaking, be considered as religiously ambivalent or non-believers. In 1983, however, i.e., after the first Solidarity period and during martial law, the percentage of believers jumped up, according to the same survey data, to 91%. This increase, and the concomitant decline in the number of non-believers, affected mostly people with a university education. In 1977 to 1978, 54% of people with a university education declared themselves to be believers, whereas in 1983 their proportion equalled 87%. Among people with only an elementary, grade-school education, the increase in this period was less than three per cent (Darczewska 1986).

The dynamics of the Polish situation is quite different from that in countries where religion is not overloaded with various political and cultural functions. In recent American history, for instance, secularization means an increase 'in the percentage of Americans claiming no religious preference. While in 1957 only 2.7% of the American population said they had no religious preference (i.e. were 'nones'), in 1982 the percentage was 7.1' (Condran and Tamney 1984: 415).

Whatever the dynamics and trends, the percentage of unbelievers seems to be relatively higher in Poland. People who do not believe in God and confirm this attitude in their behaviour are considered officially to be ideal, model citizens. Despite this, there are no data available concerning the attitudes of these people. Even an analysis of the membership of the Association for Secular Propaganda would not help, for the majority of its members are in fact religious. As a consequence, this essay can only be provisional; it is not based on any hard data.

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<sup>1</sup> This association, totally controlled by the Communist Party, emerged in 1969, when the Association of Atheists and Freethinkers was forced to unite with the Association for Secular Education.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Piwowarski 1983. The Marxist sociologists are obviously of the same opinion: see, for example, Ciupak 1973.

*Unbelievers in Poland: Aggregate or Social Group?*

Secularization is not merely a phenomenon occurring since World War Two. In pre-war Poland, its manifestations could be found both in urban and in rural areas. However, secularization meant anti-clericalism rather than an increase in the number of people claiming no religious preference. The clergy were perceived by many workers as pro-managerial and by many peasants as sympathetic to the owners of large estates. Most of these workers and peasants believed in God and considered themselves good Catholics; they opposed the church hierarchy rather than religion itself. It is an interesting question whether or not today's unbelievers come from the families that were under the influence of anti-clerical ideology or, to put it another way, whether or not the fact of becoming an unbeliever is one step forward within a longer process of secularization, a process that takes place within large family structures. The answer seems to be important: if we have here a kind of inter-generational continuity, non-believers constitute a social group in a stronger sense than would be the case if this continuity is absent.

Social groups of class or ethnic character consist of families, which means that from the point of view of this larger group the family is homogeneous. This does not seem to be true of unbelievers. In the majority of cases there is a difference with regard to religious faith not only between the generation of the parents and the generation of adult children, but also, very often, between husband and wife.

Our next important problem, particularly crucial when we discuss unbelievers as a social group, is the question of the fundamental cultural values which would distinguish this aggregate from other aggregates and be a basis for collective social behaviour. It seems to me that unbelievers, seen also from this point of view, cannot be considered a group in a strong sense of the word. The rejection of religious values, which is an attribute determining the character of this part of the population, can be a guarantee of its separateness and distinctiveness in a predominantly Roman Catholic and intolerant society only if it is combined with a matching kind of behaviour. The rejection of religious beliefs is not, however, linked with any 'positive' values that could serve as a background for collective activity, social associations etc. It is, to some extent, related to Communist ideology and political attitudes, but we must not exaggerate this connection. Moreover, the vast majority of Party members, including some activists with a university education, are religious people.

There are social problems that non-believers face in a predominantly Catholic environment, problems that might have united them. Unbelievers prefer, however, to remain invisible rather than to organize themselves.

Another question is the existence of unbelievers as a field of interaction and communication. Again, it seems to me that because of the very small number of these people, and for reasons mentioned above, they interact and communicate mostly with believers. This does not shake their identity, but it weakens the chances of a new

social group emerging.

Gathering together what has been said so far, unbelievers in Poland are an aggregate of individuals who share certain values, rather than a quasi-ethnic group, at least in Barth's sense of the term 'ethnic group' (Barth 1981: 199-200).

### *Unbelievers as Aliens*

Those non-believers who want to confirm their convictions with a matching kind of behaviour constitute in Poland an alien population. Attributes distinguishing them from the majority are of great importance in a society which stresses so much the cultural and political significance of the Roman Catholic Church (from now on, I shall ignore religious minorities). I must agree with Kwen Fee Lian (1982: 47), who says:

Members of the minority group have to operate within the limitations of the dominant ideas and social imagery that are accepted and recognized as legitimate by the dominant group. In other words, the minority group has to impose a moratorium on its own values and beliefs and operate within the context of the majority society. To do this it may have to resort to an ideology that is acceptable to the dominant society. A minority group, however, may practice its own values and beliefs which are unacceptable to the majority society so long as they are confined within the boundaries of the group. This, in turn, will serve to strengthen group boundaries.

Unbelievers in Poland operate within the context of the Catholic 'majority society'. According to the ideology of the dominant group, being a good Pole means being a member of the Roman Catholic Church, or at least believing in God. Everyone else is an alien, an alien who cannot be eliminated but who potentially can and should be transformed into a member of the dominant group. In this situation, unbelievers who manifest their own attitudes find themselves subjected to strong social control. Obviously, this control is not the same in big cities as in small villages. Also, some kinds of behaviour are under more control, others under less. Attendance at Sunday mass, especially in cities, is weakly controlled. Many believers do not attend church regularly, so unbelievers are not visible. The problem arises mostly when children go to school. There, social pressure becomes very strong, and classmates and their parents very often demand an explanation as to why some children do not attend religious classes in church. The problem becomes particularly important in villages and on the new housing estates in the big cities. In the latter, religious education in church is a kind of copy of the official schooling system. Priests have managed to obtain the lists of students of each class in the neighbouring elementary school and use them in marking attendance. Absence is highly visible. Young children of unbelievers

become victims of harassment, and many parents eventually yield to the pressure and send their children to the religious classes. A very important moment is First Communion, a kind of religious rite of passage that falls in Poland during the second grade of elementary school. This is an important event in the social life of each class group, and the children who cannot participate in it are outsiders, aliens. Again, unbelievers are forced to consider imposing a moratorium on their own values and beliefs. The next rite of passage under the strong control of the dominant group is marriage. The civil ceremony in Poland is compulsory, but even unbelievers are very often married in church under the pressure of their parents.

Funerals also indicate that unbelievers are constrained by the ideas and rules that are recognized as legitimate by the dominant group. It is almost only Communist Party leaders of different levels who have civic funerals. For most other non-believers, family pressure to organize a church ceremony is very strong. What is interesting is that in some cases a religious funeral is organized in spite of the wishes of the person who passed away and of his family. In rural areas and small towns, cemeteries are administered by parish priests. The priest cannot refuse to bury an unbeliever but demands that he participates in the ceremony, and in this way he is able to turn the occasion into a religious funeral. The family may sue the priest or move the funeral to another graveyard, but this takes a lot of time and money.

As we can see, the minority situation of unbelievers in Poland is one in which they must give up most of the ways they would otherwise prefer. It is also a situation in which the collective practice of their own values and beliefs, being unacceptable to the majority, is quite difficult. First, as has already been said, these common values and beliefs have a 'negative' character: non-believers demand the freedom not to do what they do not wish to do, not the freedom to do something in particular. Secondly, the political context is here very important. Not all unbelievers, and probably only a minority, are supporters of the Communist political system in Poland. The Communist Party claims, however, a monopoly in the representation of their interests, especially when this representation is useful in the Party's relations with the Roman Catholic Church. Unbelievers who do not consider themselves as Communists are manipulated by the ruling group and, moreover, are treated as Communists by the religious majority. Very often they prefer to keep their own beliefs and values to themselves and to give up some behavioural manifestations of these values, in order to avoid being guilty by association. Being an unbeliever does not provide an individual with any sense of belonging, nor any self-esteem. Therefore it would be difficult to attribute any 'basic group identity' to them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Cohen 1984: 1031 and Isaacs 1975: 34.

Unbelievers constitute an aggregate that is discriminated against in a cultural sense. However, in a certain sense they are, in Poland, a politically dominant collectivity. Through political arrangements, it is possible for a person known to be a believer to become Deputy Prime Minister, Deputy Speaker of Parliament, or Deputy Chairman of the Council of State. It is nearly impossible for a believer to become a regional governor, a school principal or the manager of any state-owned industrial or commercial company. These hundreds of thousands of positions (as opposed to the very few at the highest levels of the political system) are kept for those who may believe in God and even attend church on the sly, but who in public never declare their loyalty to values different from those accepted by the Communist ideological system.

### *The Heterogeneity of the Population of Unbelievers*

The homogeneity of the aggregate of unbelievers, though exaggerated by outside observers, is not particularly high. Horowitz was right when he wrote: 'What often happens...is that there is a lag in the identifications. Others at first perceive the...group as more homogeneous than it sees itself' (1975: 131).

In their 1985 article on the USA, Condran and Tamney distinguish three reasons for being an unbeliever or a religious 'none'. Two of them are described as structural, the third as cultural. They also find three types of unbelievers: 'isolated nones', 'class-based nones', and 'cultural nones' (1985: 419-22). This classification does not seem to be valid in the Polish case. Moreover, it seems necessary to suggest a classification which takes into account different degrees of the intensity and consistency of the phenomenon.

The vast majority of Polish unbelievers are people from families in which Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and other religious traditions have been or still are relatively strong. In a situation in which religion is an extremely important social and cultural phenomenon, and the Roman Catholic Church a powerful political organization, everybody is acquainted at least with this particular religious tradition. In my view, if the 'isolated nones', those who are isolated from or out of touch with religious institutions and so have no religious preference, do exist at all in Poland, their number must be very small. For the reasons mentioned above, when discussing the population of unbelievers we also have to take into account not only philosophical convictions, but also attitudes towards religious tradition, social behaviour that is related to religious values and beliefs, and the choice available between political loyalties.

Our first category, rather hypothetical, might be labelled the core of the population of unbelievers. This core consists of people who do not have, nor continue to observe, any family religious traditions, and who have no religious needs or interests. They do not participate in any kind of activity connected with religious

institutions: they do not marry in church, do not baptize their children, and organize Christmas and Easter in a totally secular way. Religion does not exist for them. This category of unbelievers must be very small: for people who do not live in special enclaves or niches, the external pressure is strong enough for them to become at least interested in religion. However, some such enclaves do exist in Poland. Party activists at the highest levels live in separate buildings and even city quarters, meet only people of their own sort, and educate their children in special schools. At the opposite pole the lumpenproletariat may be a social base of this type of unbeliever.

Our second category, probably larger but still quite small, are the anti-religious hardliners. Whatever their family traditions, they have a very active and negative attitude towards religion and are sometimes called 'personal enemies of the Lord'. Obviously, they do not marry in church, do not baptize their children, and do not allow their religious education in church. They do not observe Christmas and Easter and decorate what is called by other people the Christmas tree only after Christmas and before New Year's Eve. Activists (but not necessarily rank-and-file members) of the Association for Secular Propaganda are recruited from this category. Among these people there is a relatively strong 'group identity' based on their negative attitude towards religion. Similarly to the first category, this one is located to some extent on the periphery of Polish society. Out of necessity, its members meet socially mostly with other members of the same category. If they do not belong to the very small group forming the highest, central Party apparatus, they educate their children in regular institutions and often fall into conflict with the dominant group of the faithful. In the political context of the Polish situation, where overt criticism of religion itself and of religious institutions is very closely identified with official propaganda, it is probable that people who are engaged in this kind of activity are supporters of the current political system.

Our third category are people who are unbelievers but at the same time interested in religion as a complex social phenomenon. Whatever their family traditions they do not attend church and are often subject to strong condemnation on the part of their family and social milieu. In this respect they do not differ from the second category. This category of open-minded unbelievers does not consist, however, of 'personal enemies of the Lord'. Its members appreciate the various social, political and cultural functions of religion and of religious organizations. Quite often they know much more about these problems than the average religious person. They solemnly observe Christmas, Easter etc., but stress their national and cultural, not their religious character. If invited, they participate as guests or witnesses in the religious ceremonies of their friends and relatives, because socially they meet both with other unbelievers, and with religious people who do not mind this kind of relationship. Their values are not, therefore, a boundary limiting interactions and communication. At the same time, they have a relatively clear self-consciousness as unbelievers.

Two additional problems are connected with this category. First, there is the problem of family consistency. Whereas it was hardly possible for a person belonging to the other two categories to marry someone declaring him- or herself a believer, in this case it is possible, provided that both parties are tolerant enough. The second problem is of a political character. The political options of members of this category may be different, but others identify them, very often unfairly, with supporters of the Communist régime.

Our fourth category could be labelled opportunistic unbelievers. This category is quite large and constitutes the vast majority of the whole category of unbelievers in Poland. Declaring themselves to be unbelievers, they behave none the less like Catholics. They are interested, though not necessarily very profoundly, in religion and its cultural, social and political functions in contemporary Poland. Under pressure from their family and social milieu they marry in church and baptize their children. When children go to school, these parents also send them to the religious classes in church. Three types of justification for this behaviour are presented particularly willingly: a) that children should know everything, including the religious traditions of the nation; b) that it is a precaution against alienation within the class group; and c) that it is a precaution against harassment on the part of priest-ridden public opinion. This kind of unbeliever observes Christmas, Easter etc. in a religious way. Socially, they meet people of different orientations, and again, the fact that they declare themselves unbelievers does not determine their interaction and communication with other people.

Family consistency and political context are quite significant for this category too. It very often happens that one spouse is an unbeliever while the other is religious or ambivalent yet under the strong influence of Catholic relatives or social milieu. The usual way of accommodation in Poland is for the unbeliever to give up his or her values or at least preferred behaviour and to conform to the customs of the stronger party, which is backed by a powerful church organization and national tradition. The second problem is political choice, which is not obvious at all. We find in this category some people who sympathize with the political opposition and engage in religious activities only to show that they prefer the Catholic Church to the ruling party. This kind of behaviour has become particularly visible since 1980 and has become the source of many jokes. We also find in this category some people who are not interested in politics, though others are Party activists. They may criticize church and religion in public and in private, but under the influence of their wives and parents - and 'just in case' - they marry in church, accept the religious education of their children etc. Some of them marry in church not in the town or city where they live but elsewhere, sometimes quite far away. In this way their career is not endangered, and the church is also satisfied. This kind of behaviour is also the source of many jokes.

### *Conclusions*

The possibility of classifying unbelievers into four types, and the discussion offered above, indicate that the boundaries of this aggregate are not clear, that they determine social interaction and communication to a very limited degree, and that it is unlikely that this Polish minority population will transform itself into a group of a quasi-ethnic character, with explicit, manifest interests and group identity. It seems to me that sociologists and anthropologists are right when they say that what really count are not convictions, beliefs and values in themselves, but rather those which are or can become translated into social actions that confirm them. The most important question is, therefore, why this kind of activity does not occur and why it probably will not occur in Poland in the immediate future. Following Dahrendorf, we might say that what is lacking in the present case are the political conditions of group organization (1972: 186-7).

Processes of secularization will probably continue in Poland. The growth in the proportion of unbelievers in the population may be one of its aspects. This aggregate is growing, if very slowly and not without complications, and is very heterogeneous. Parts of it are under the strong influence of the Communist Party, parts are to some extent - at least in their behaviour - controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, those who feel endangered by the intolerance of the dominant religious group would probably seek a kind of organization that could defend and represent their interests. The institutional system in Poland is not pluralistic, however. The two actors that dominate the political scene, the Communist Party and the Roman Catholic Church, would strongly oppose any such organization. From the point of view of the Party, such an organization (the Association for Secular Propaganda) already exists, and a new organization out of its control would be intolerable. For the Church, even one is too much.

The democratic transformation of the Polish political system will have to entail the political strengthening of the believing majority. The Party would lose a large part of the political community and would not like to lose another part, one treated by both the Communists and their opponents as legitimately their own. So long as the unbelieving aggregate is politically heterogeneous and the majority intolerant, this aggregate will probably not turn into a social group with a strong group identity manifested in overt activities.

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