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*Religion as an Element of Identity
of the German Minority in the Third Republic of Poland*

Religia jako element tożsamości mniejszości niemieckiej w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej

ABSTRACT

Poland is an example of a national and ethnic structure which is inextricably linked with religion. Religion ought to be perceived as a multi-faceted phenomenon for it permeates all structures of the society. It exerts a profound influence on the functioning of families, local communities, the system of education, as well as on professional and other types of associations. Poland and its history constitute an excellent point of reference in that matter, for it has undergone a long and complex process of transformation from the country of multiculturalism to that of homogeneity. National and religious homogeneity was a rather short-lived experience because it was the outcome of the change of the country borders and expulsions of World War II. In the People's Republic of Poland any manifestation of identity or difference was received with hostility. Depending on the area of social life, various degrees of repressive policies were implemented, and national and religious minorities became one of the targets of such politics. It can be argued that it exerted a particularly strong influence on the German minority, no longer able to cultivate its cultural and ethnic identity. The situation did not change until the socio-political transformation of 1989. It was then that a service in the German language was celebrated for the first time since the end of war. The place of celebration was no less significant – it was the Annaberg, a place which both Poles and Germans hold sacred.

Key words: religion, German minority, idea of multiculturalism, Roman Catholic Church, Evangelical-Augsburg Church, Potsdam Conference, Allied Control Council, expulsions, temporariness syndrome, private homeland, native population, German People's List, pilgrimages, Christian values, language of religious practice, folk and working-class religiousness

LEGITIMIZING ROLE OF RELIGION

Religion has always constituted an important factor to influence the forming of nations and the maintaining of national awareness by minorities living in foreign countries. Those interrelations have been no different in the Polish lands. In general, it can be asserted that throughout the centuries of its development, the religious structure of the Polish population has demonstrated to approximately correspond to its national and ethnic structures. That correspondence, it needs to be mentioned, has been prone to changes influenced by particular historical periods and areas of the Polish territory, as well as by the specific situation of particular minorities.

Religion legitimizes the world in its most fundamental dimension, in its entirety – it endows the world with meaning and value, organizes its structures and hierarchies, and determines its understanding of time and space. That shapes the processes of socialization in such a way that it allows successive generations to receive the world of both culture and nature as their own natural environment. Social reality, legitimized by the tradition of many generations, is then perceived as natural and firm. It is the stability of social structures that facilitates the crystallization of an effective symbolic monopoly, a factor which only further stabilizes those structures. Religion in its multi-faceted dimension permeates all structures of the society: family, local communities, the system of education, professional and other types of associations, etc. As such, religion provides those structures with their sacred reference which reaches far beyond their social reality. It has always constituted one of the key factors to affect social awareness, for religion has played a major part in the creation of the community of belief: a community which it has then supported in its subjective and reflexive experience. Additionally, it has initiated and organized the individual and collective action rooted in the community of the commonly held values. As such, religion has exerted a considerable influence on the forming of identities of particular communities, including national minorities.

FROM MULTICULTURALISM TO HOMOGENEITY

Contemporary Poland is a homogeneous state inasmuch as nationality is concerned. According to the estimate prior to the Census conducted on 20 May 2002, national minorities comprised 1.2 to 1.6 million of the Polish citizens. However, the 2002 Census revised those figures substantially: 36,983.7 thousand people (96.74 per cent of the population) declared Polish nationality, while 471.5 thousand people declared nationality other than Polish (1.23 per cent) [Janusz 2011: 130–131]. Also the 2011 Census, in which case the respondents were allowed to indicate a double national and ethnic identity for the first time, showed the predominance of population of a homogeneous Polish national identity – declared by 35,251 thousand people, that is 91.6 per cent of the entire population [*Wyniki Narodowego Spisu Powszech-*

nego Ludności i Mieszkań 2011. Podstawowe informacje o sytuacji demograficzno-społecznej ludności Polski oraz zasobach mieszkaniowych, 2012: 17]. But even though the results of the Census should be interpreted with caution, it is nevertheless not unsubstantiated to argue that Poland is a homogeneous state as far as nationality is concerned.

To better understand the issue in question, it appears necessary to discuss the historical processes which were fundamental to the origin of that state. It was the events of the mid-20th century, which have tried Europeans so bitterly, that shaped the ethnic specificity of the Polish lands. Throughout the centuries Poland was a multi-ethnic state and its citizens belonged to various national communities. Jacek Świąrski, who analyzes the idea of multiculturalism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, observes the following¹: “The pattern of multiculturalism and – more generally – the character of Polish tolerance of dissimilarity that was confirmed in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was undoubtedly based on its unique bodies of the political system. The system, even though the nobility liked to stress its democratic character, represented that of a mixed government: it integrated the elements of aristocracy and monarchy together with the element of aristocratic democracy. It was a system of balance between order and liberty (...) and of the separation of powers organized in a different way than that of the modern Montesquieu’s tripartite system – still, however, a system that was noteworthy and stable. The tolerance for the people of different denominations and the principle of multiculturalism which extended to include all nations and faiths can be ascribed to the nobility, the democratic element of the system. As it is emphasized by historians, that particular class influenced Polish tolerance the most: it was the nobility that created and maintained tolerance, but also that disseminated its principles among the plebeians. Neither during the Counter-Reformation nor afterwards did noblemen lose their lives. In that respect, tolerance of the time was of a state character. At that time it was a completely unique system in Europe (...)” [Świąrski 2010: 23–24].

Such was also the character of the Polish state which has been reborn in 1918. Out of the 32 million citizens of the state, 20.6 million constituted Poles, while the biggest national minorities included Ukrainians (5,145 thousand – 16 per cent of the population), Jews (3,133 thousand – 10 per cent), Belorussians (1,966 thousand – 6 per cent), and Germans (744 thousand – 2 per cent) [Tomaszewski 1991: 23]. German minority was then the fourth largest in Poland. More than 50 per cent of the population of German people inhabited the western provinces, i.e. the areas of Pomerania, Upper Silesia, and Greater Poland. Two thirds of the remaining members of the German minority lived in the areas that concentrated around the cities of Łódź and Warsaw.

¹ The name *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* is imprecise. It was a system which derived from the Jagiellonian idea and existed since the 15th century up until the Partitions of Poland. The period between the 15th century and the mid-17th century witnessed the heyday of the Commonwealth, 250 years of prosperity that were followed by its slow yet gradual demise.

The ethnic structure of the population of interwar Poland corresponds to the religious one: the vast majority of Poles were Roman Catholics while national minorities represented other Churches and religions. The state's politics regarding national and religious minorities was reflected in the text of the Constitutions of Poland: both the March Constitution of 1921 and the April Constitution of 1935 guaranteed civil rights and liberties to all Poles as well as the protection of rights of the national minorities [Rykała 2011: 231]. Reality, however, did not coincide with theory. That was due to the fact that the Constitution granted the Catholic Church the central position among the theoretically equal religious associations. But the religious politics in the Second Republic of Poland was deeply influenced by the tradition of the close and long-standing link between the Polish nation and the Catholic Church. As such, the politics was aimed at reinforcing and developing the foundations of the Polish statehood, and those were strongly related with Polish Catholicism. At the same time, however, they functioned as an element of the nationalist politics that affected mainly non-Catholic religious minorities. The interwar Poland's national antagonisms between the Polish majority and the numerous minorities directly reflected the rivalry for domination between the Catholic Church and other Churches and religious associations. What is more, those relations were heavily influenced by the experiences of the partition period. In their efforts to suppress Polish identity, the partitioners attempted to diminish the influence of the Catholic Church on the society, a relation that had been cemented by an enduring tradition, while simultaneously reinforcing the position of other religions on the seized territories of Poland. In the case of Prussia the imposed religion was Protestantism, in the eastern regions of the Partitions – the Orthodox Church. The authorities of the reborn Poland were fully aware of the connections between Protestants and members of the Orthodox Church with Germany and Russia. Their religious politics, therefore, was based on the potential disloyalty of those groups to the newly recovered state.

Such politics is justifiable to certain degree as it can be argued it was influenced by the historical experience as well as certain natural processes. But the situation was far more complex in the case of the German minority. Not all of the German people who lived in Poland at that time were Protestants: many of those people, especially in Silesia, were of Catholic faith. Nevertheless, it was that region of the country that was marked by an ongoing conflict in the interwar period as a substantial part of the German minority in Silesia did not resign itself to the region's separation from Germany. That is why the minority strove to preserve their own national and cultural identity, a fact that was not without significance to its relations with the Church and its ministry. Clearly, the German minority was not eager to accept the loss of the privileged position which it had previously held in the Reich. According to Jarosław Macała, the leaders of the minority treated Catholic faith as a means to integrate their communities but also to strengthen the German language in Silesia. As a result, the Silesian clergy became the object of slander [Macała 1999: 149]. Generally speaking, however, the Silesian clergy respected the rights of the German minority. The Church

wanted to preserve the traditional regional bond between the inhabitants of Silesia of both nations, and so it was the common faith, unaffected by political or nationalistic turbulence, that was believed to form the strongest link. That attitude also served the need of appeasing national antagonisms in the region which were initiated by the Silesian Uprisings and the Upper Silesia plebiscite.

Therefore, the Church attempted to resolve national tensions by invoking the universalism of Christian values and by highlighting regional bonds. Also, the Silesian traditional bond was regarded as a the common ground on which both Germans and Poles could be brought together by the Roman Catholic Church. However, the 1931 Census revealed that churches conducted more German services than it was dictated by statistical necessity, an issue which initiated a lot of public discussion. One of the factors which undoubtedly contributed to that state was the fact that German parishioners were usually affluent and their material support was of considerable significance to the functioning of the Church. It was then only in face of the mounting political tension, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, that on 29 June 1939 the Bishop of Katowice Stanisław Adamski issued a decree which suspended for an unlimited period all services celebrated in the German language. On the very same day the Archbishopric of Breslau (the Archdiocese of Breslau comprised the part of Upper Silesia which was under German jurisdiction) abolished the use of the Polish language by the clergy. It is then apparent that in face of the approaching war, the tension between national factors and religious relations continued to heighten. German occupation authorities demanded services in national groups to be introduced. They also drastically reduced the quantity of services conducted in Polish, a situation made only worse by the fact that those services were also subject to harsh restrictions of time and place.

During World War II, German authorities treated religion, together with the Church – its institutionalized manifestation – as an instrument for radical legitimization of the new social order which was imposed by the use of political violence and severe criminal sanctions. Crucially, it has to be emphasized that it was not the aim of the fascist regime to build a new Catholic Church that would be characterized by national purity. Instead, they treated the effacement of the old religious structures merely as another step in creating a new society and a new man of national socialism, a man that would be “freed” from the burden of religion [Świątkiewicz 1993: 60–62].

The end of World War II greatly altered the geopolitical situation of the European countries, and Poland was no exception. One of the most momentous changes which affected the country was the decision made at the Potsdam Conference which established the Oder–Neisse Line as the Polish western border. As a result, in spite of the fact that 7,494 thousand Germans evacuated or fled in face of the approaching front, a few million German people were now living within the borders of Poland [Nitschke 2000: 60]. The future of those who did not leave had already been ordained by the Allies, who decided the German population be removed from the newly established Polish territory. That decision was motivated by the contemporary standpoint

which assumed that resettlements of the population constituted the “lesser evil” in comparison with sexual abuse and other atrocities which were bound to occur should the relocation be not implemented. The standpoint was supported by a great number of people even though the dramatic European experiences proved that resettlements ought to be treated as a necessary evil, a solution that should not be adopted any more often than it is dictated by an absolute necessity. But it was not only the humanitarian reasons that argued against them, as mass relocations of the population turned out to constitute only an illusory means of preventing national tensions. Itself a product of nationalism, resettlements became a force which facilitated the development of this attitude in its most extreme and anti-democratic form.

The advocates of national resettlements connected with the change of the state borders did not apparently realize that losing one’s roots, an inevitable cost of such actions, only further contributed to the intensification of nationalistic tendencies. Great masses of the population were removed from their environment and deprived of those numerous bonds that give a sense of security and help to define one’s place in the world – as a result, the only bond those people retained was that with their nation. The resettlements can be argued to have emphasized the significance of national identity which may have been previously overshadowed by identities based on reference to local, professional, or political communities.

The expulsion of Germans from Poland was grounded in the decisions made at the Potsdam Conference and based on the plan adopted by the Allied Control Council for Germany. Analysis of the above-mentioned documents clearly indicates that the expulsion of Germans from Poland formed a part of the politics regarding the German minority in the states of Central Europe. Chapter XIII of the Potsdam Declaration states the following: “The conference reached the following agreement on the removal of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary: The three Governments having considered the question in all its aspects, recognize that the transfer to Germany of German populations, or elements thereof, remaining in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, will have to be undertaken. They agree that any transfers that take place should be effected in an orderly and humane manner” [*The Potsdam Declaration*]. The final shape of the expulsion was established by the Allied Control Council, which decided on 20 November 1945 that 2 million Germans were to be transferred to the Soviet occupation zone, while the remaining 1.5 million of the German population – to the Allied occupation zone [Lippóczy, Walichnowski 1982: 58]. The processes of removal were scheduled to begin in December 1945 and to finish in July 1946. Estimated numbers of Germans to be transferred were included in a detailed schedule.

However, the processes of expulsion from Poland lasted up until 1949, much longer than originally expected. The processes can be distinguished into three periods which took place in the year 1945, between 1946–1947, and between 1948–1949. The periods differed in both the degree of preparation as well as the number of people removed. The most controversial transfers, however, were those which took place prior to the

Conference, that is before the official decision was made. The removal of the greatest number of Germans took place in the 1946–1947 period. But even though the processes of expulsions were completed in 1949, a small German community remained within the new borders of Poland. Those people inhabited predominantly the western and northern provinces of the country. Their precise number is difficult to estimate but Polish historians generally agree that it was between 125 and 160 thousand people [Banasiak 1968: 222, Brożek 1965: 24, Korbel 1986: 102]. As a result of those politics Poland became a nationally homogeneous state.

Even though they retained their “private homelands” (“Heimat”), the Germans who remained in the country lost the sense of security. Also the sense of familiarity and emotional bonds were substantially weakened. Therefore, their situation was no less difficult than that of the transferred people, as all were forced to build their “private homelands” anew [Ossowski 1967: 210]. As one of the displaced people reminisces: “You can neither invent nor imagine your homeland. It is a place rooted in reality. But it is not to say that it exists beyond our consciousness. Homeland requires conscious thoughts, subjective decisions. If I want any town, any landscape, any background to my life’s events to become my homeland, I myself need to regard it as such: *Yes, this is my homeland!*” [Henkys 1997: 100].

Therefore, the people who were forced to leave their homeland and those who for various reasons had to stay all found themselves in a compulsory situation. Both groups experienced a “syndrome of temporariness,” a fairly common phenomenon in postwar Europe. Many people were disorientated and felt that postwar repair activities were conducted in a provisional and disorderly manner. In fact, many even suspected that another global conflict was imminent.

That, however, did not influence the fact that an almost complete removal of Germans altered the religious structure of the Third Reich’s eastern provinces which were now part of Poland. A decidedly Protestant character of those regions became more heterogeneous, if not predominantly Catholic, an outcome of the influx of Polish settlers. The new border that divided Poland and Germany was not only a political border, but a national and a religious one as well.

UNIFICATION POLITICS

The authorities of the People’s Republic of Poland adopted the policy that can be described as repressive towards religion since one of its main components was to establish an administrative apparatus that would keep the Churches and other religious associations under surveillance, but also that would allow the administration to influence their functioning and character.

The situation was additionally made worse by the stereotypes held by the Polish society. One of the factors that influenced the perception of certain religious minorities was the fact that they were often arbitrarily associated with particular national

or ethnic minorities. Such was the initial situation of the congregation and the clergy of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. That disadvantageous state, which was only further reinforced by a widely held conviction that every evangelical was German, had its damaging consequence on the assets of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church. It was not uncommon at that time to seize evangelical churches and adapt them for the needs of Catholic parishes, a practice that was purportedly justified by the fact that most of the members of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church were Germans, a substantial majority of whom had already been removed from the Polish lands. Such events occurred again in 1980. Catholics forcefully seized a church in Gawrzyjałki, an unused church building in Baranów, and a group of local Catholic parishioners led by their priest seized another evangelical church in Sychowo. Similar was the situation of the churches in Stare Miasto and Rozogi. According to Rozogi's local pastor, Jerzy Otello, it was the Warmian Curia, which had been displaying such tendencies for years, that was responsible for the seizure of the evangelical property. The Bishop of Warmia eventually issued an official apology in connection with those events [Madajczyk 2001: 319].

A dislike for evangelicals made many of them change their faith. Such was the situation especially in Masuria where evangelicals comprised a considerable percentage of the population. There even were reported cases when the representatives of the state administration attempted to convince the Masurians that by receiving Polish citizenship they automatically changed their faith. That was driven by the common conviction that to be Polish was to be Catholic. For that reason, the religious life of the Evangelical-Augsburg congregation had to be often concealed from the public. That, however, was exceedingly difficult due to the acute clergy shortage since clergymen were the first to be expelled from the Polish territory. This is reflected by the statistical data regarding the situation of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church in Silesia. Until the spring of 1948, 250 pastors, 150 lectors, and 1,000 deaconesses worked in 700 Silesian Evangelical-Augsburg communities. Those numbers were severely reduced by the fall of that same year to 4 pastors, 80 lectors, and 40 deaconesses [Nitschke 2000: 128–129].

The conviction which gained popularity in the early years of the People's Republic of Poland was fundamentally flawed – after all, just as the fact of being an evangelical did not necessarily entail German nationality or identity, so did members of the Orthodox Church include other nations than Russians, Belorussians, or Ukrainians [Rykała 2011: 245]. But it is justified to argue that the situation suited the authorities of the state. The limitation of the activity of many religious associations by the supervision exercised by religious administration and security apparatus was soon accepted by the society.

That situation resulted primarily from the lack of knowledge regarding geographical, political, and social conditions which influenced the spread of different faiths. It is, therefore, erroneous to equate them with national and ethnic minorities. This applies, among others, to evangelicals, who were commonly associated with

German nationality or origin. Nowadays the claim is substantiated by the 2002 and 2011 Census results. There exists a connection between the Evangelical-Augsburg Church and the German minority, but it is a highly limited one. Three main factors can be observed to have had the greatest impact on the common practice to associate evangelicals with Germans. First of all, the fact that the branch of Protestantism that is represented by this Church originated in Germany. It then traveled to Poland, particularly to the target areas of German colonization, together with the supporters of the Reformation. Secondly, the rapid expansion of Lutheranism took place in the areas which were annexed by the Protestant Prussia in the period of the partitions. Finally, the migrations of German settlers to the Kingdom of Poland who laid foundations for the industrial development of the region. Despite a considerable social variety, they were united by the common faith, Protestantism, and one of its branches – Lutheranism [Rykała 2011: 318].

Almost all Germans left Poland after World War II as a result of evacuation, flight, expulsion, and voluntary migration. That state is reflected in the reports of the Social and Administrative Department of Ministry of Interior which estimated the number of Germans to be 12 thousand in 1967 [Mironowicz 2000: 229]. But it is possible that they also left Poland in the course of the subsequent migration waves which took place in the 1970s and the 1980s, and after 1989. The core of the German minority in Poland is nowadays formed by Silesians, Kashubians, Warmiaks, and Masurians – autochthonous population that has inhabited the territories of contemporary western and northern Poland for generations. What is characteristic of the population is its multifarious identity: for example, one can be a Polish or a German Silesian, or only a Silesian, a Pole or a German. Silesian or Masurian identities are equally shaped by the “localness,” that is the factor of belonging to Silesia or Masuria, as it is influenced by the fact of being Polish or German. It can be argued that those cultural elements are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. But in the societies which are nationally homogeneous such a condition is regarded as an anomaly.

The decisions of the victorious empires resulted in the inclusion of the general territory inhabited by Silesians, Kashubians, Warmiaks, and Masurians into Poland. Those people were again forced to choose their national status, for it was required they declared Polish nationality. Some of the often dramatic choices they were faced with were connected, among others, with the processes of verification and national rehabilitation which were conducted in the second half of the 1940s, with the later declarations made for the purposes of the actions of joining families after 1956, as well as with the issues of their belonging of the German minority. Similar mechanism was in operation during World War II – it put Kashubians, Silesians, and Masurians, who were citizens of the Second Republic of Poland, under pressure to sign the German People’s List (*Deutsche Volksliste*) [Olejnik 2003: 136–142]. The overriding objective of both Polish and German politics regarding native population was to win them to either side. Those who cultivated their cultural and ethnic identities were perceived as separatists who demonstrated aversion, if not hostility, towards their national state.

The politics of the People's Republic of Poland regarding the Western Borderlands in the post-war period was grounded on erroneous assumptions. The notion of national unity was employed instrumentally. In consequence, there was no room for the regional and ethnic identities of the native population, identities which had been formed in the course of many diverse historical processes, and which had been cultivated by those people for years. It is, therefore, justified to characterize the state politics regarding those regions as indicative of colonization. The native population of the Western and Northern Borderlands was subject to assimilation processes which in fact deprived those people, to a greater extent than Poles, of the possibility of expressing their needs and group interests. The situation further contributed to the fact that a considerable part of that population was rendered unable to define and shape their sense of belonging to the Polish nation. It is that part which now constitutes the core of the German minority in Poland.

The process of forming that minority was, therefore, an exceptionally complex one. As most of the "ethnic" Germans had already left the country [Osękowski 1994: 138], the core of the minority was formed by the so-called native population, a condition which was not without relevance to the structure of the religious affiliation of those people, for they were mostly of Roman Catholic faith. That appears to apply particularly to the inhabitants of the Opole region.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY OF THE GERMAN MINORITY

Census data suggests that at the beginning of the 21st century a substantial majority of German population in Poland was concentrated in Opole Province: 104,399 of its citizens declared membership of the German minority. By comparison, the membership was declared by 30,531 people in Silesia Province and 4,311 people in Warmia-Masuria Province. The total number of people who declared German nationality amounted to 152,897 [Janusz 2011: 132]. According to the results of the 2011 Census, 109 thousand people declared German nationality. It is rather interesting to observe that both censuses demonstrate a certain growth in the sense of ethnic identity among particular communities in Poland, even though in most cases it is accompanied with the acknowledgement of the Polish national identity as well. The national and ethnic identity that is presently declared by the greatest number of people – 817 thousand – is the Silesian identity. Similar was the case in 2002, although the number did not then exceed 173 thousand. The main reason behind the decrease in numbers of the German minority members is the fact that a great number of Silesians living in the Opole region, who declared German identity in the first census, now embrace the Silesian identity. Until recently, it was the German minority that conducted some of the most thriving organizational activity in the Silesian Opole region. However, that situation has changed since the previous census with the reactivation of the Silesian Autonomy Movement (*Ruch Autonomii Śląska*), often

associated with Upper Silesia – an industrial region which belonged to Poland in the interwar period, and the emergence of the newly founded Association of People of Silesian Nationality (*Stowarzyszenie Osób Narodowości Śląskiej*) [Sakson 2012: 1–2]. It needs to be emphasized that there exists a distinct rivalry between the German minority and the social movements advocating the Silesian identity. The members of the German minority in Silesia do not support the actions of Silesians – indeed, quite frequently they actually undermine their efforts to obtain the status of a national and ethnic minority, to officially acknowledge their language as a regional language, or to otherwise promote their autonomy.

But while it is without difficulties that one's national identity can be established, it is much more complex to indicate one's confessional membership, a task made even more challenging in the case of Germans. As Andrzej Rykała points out, approximate information regarding the ethnic identity of the members of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church can be obtained by comparing the distribution of evangelical parishes with the areas of the greatest density of the German population. Such a comparison indicates that, especially in Masuria, the density of the distribution of evangelical parishes corresponded to the areas inhabited by the German population. That situation was reflected in geographical and political conditions which influenced the development of Protestantism in the former East Prussia. Analysis of the above connections makes it well-founded to argue that the native population of Masuria, which constituted the ethnic foundations of the German minority in Poland, was predominantly of evangelical faith. But the number of Masurians systematically decreased only to reach a mere 10–15 thousand people at the beginning of the 1980s. Not all of them thought of themselves as German, and so Germans constituted a fairly small minority in the area. Many of the region's villages were inhabited only by single Masurian families, in other cases Masurians comprised only 5–10 per cent of the local community. As a consequence of the migration waves of the 1980s, the structure of the German minority changed again and it now primarily consisted of people who inhabited villages and small towns, those whose education was below average, women, and the elderly [Madajczyk 2001: 318].

A dense network of evangelical parishes, which corresponded to the increased density of the German population, was also characteristic of the Silesia region. It has to be noted, however, that the region exhibited a regional variety in the form of a certain regularity: the more people declared German nationality, the less parishes of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church there were in that area. That partially confirms the earlier claim that a substantial part of the people who identified with the German minority was of Roman Catholic faith [Rykała 2011: 321], an opinion expressed also by Piotr Madajczyk. According to him, the congregation of the Silesian Evangelical Church was no greater than 5 thousand people. Additionally, only 20–30 per cent of them were born in that region and the remaining part of the congregation was recruited from the immigrant population [Madajczyk 2001: 319].

That is why account should be taken of the specificity of Silesian religiousness. It was traditionally folk and working-class religiousness which did not promote in its institutionalized forms any social distance between the clergy and the laypeople. That was due to the fact that many of the clergymen were of the working-class or peasant background, but also because there existed a network of close material and organizational relations between laypeople and clergymen within parishes.

Traditional Silesian religiousness was inextricably linked with the family customs and culture. The German minority can be observed to preserve traditional family customs which are also grounded in religious values. Those are mostly exhibited in a traditional way of celebrating Christmas and Easter, but also in other forms of folk religiousness, such as taking active part in May Masses and rosary services. Inasmuch as the religion-influenced family customs are concerned, the importance of regional traditions in Silesia, which stem from the historical conditions of forming regional bonds, outweigh those connected with ethnic identity. In that respect, regional identity plays a more important role in defining the principles of preserving customs than the factors of ethnic self-identification.

That is best demonstrated by the specific character of the pilgrimages to the Annaberg (St Anne's hill). For many generations, pilgrims spoke both Polish and German, and the social distance between the groups was so vast that disputes on the ground of national issues were bound to occur. For that reason, the Franciscans, who took care of the Annaberg, received in 1861 the bishop's consent to split the dates of celebrating church fairs for the both groups of pilgrims. The only occasion for the Polish and German people to celebrate together at the Annaberg was the holiday of the patron saint [Wróblewski 2007: 106].

One of the features of the Silesian culture is a high degree of religiousness of the region's citizens. That is also the case of the citizens who associate their cultural identity with the German nation. The processes which shaped the culture of Silesia were grounded in Christian values but also in various principles, not always Christian, of introducing them into the social reality. Religion, as a significant factor to influence the specificity of regional culture, also affected the processes of crystallizing national structures. It was in religious values and churches as religious institutions that various ethnic groups in Silesia sought for the support for their national aspirations. They also perceived them as the source and meaning of legitimization of the social order structures which they created.

For that reason, account should be taken of one of the most significant elements of ethnic identity (as analyzed from the standpoint of the religious issues), that is the language of religious practice. The right to religious worship in one's own language, i.e. the language of one's ethnic group, is one of the most fundamental human rights and religious liberties. The first service in the German language after the end of war, an event that was followed by other masses being celebrated in German, was conducted at the Annaberg on 4 June 1989. The person who was highly instrumental in making that happen was Alfons Nossol, the then Archbishop of Opole [Wróblewski 2007: 109].

That issue is of prime importance for the German minority, since no fewer than 196,841 people declared in the 2002 Census they used the German language at home [Janusz 2011: 133]. This coincides with the results of Wojciech Świątkiewicz's research which he conducted in Upper Silesia. He states that 90 per cent of the respondents declared the willingness to participate in worship and services celebrated in German. Moreover, the research shows that a substantial majority of the respondents (89 per cent) possessed prayer books in German, while 39 per cent of them stressed the fact that those were prewar publications. By comparison, less people own the Bible in that language – 53 per cent of the respondents declared they did not possess it. It is worth noting that the research revealed that only 20 per cent of the respondents prayed in German, an interesting observation given that as many as 94 per cent of them declared to know the language. The people who prayed in the German language were mostly the elderly who acquired that habit in their childhood. More than a third prayed in both Polish and German, but the people who prayed only in Polish constituted the largest group of the respondents (41 per cent). Despite its significance, the language of religious practice cannot be regarded as a direct indicator of ethnic identification [Świątkiewicz 1993: 64].

An interesting pastoral initiative, which was introduced in 1991 in the diocese of Essen, deserves a mention at this point. That area has been a traditional point of destination for people in search of both work and a homeland. Apart from the traditional pastoral services for the Polish communities, which in many cases had lived in Germany for generations but still regarded themselves as Polish, a new form of pastoral work was introduced for the “Polish-speaking Germans,” as they were officially called. It was a German institution which, apart from providing traditional pastoral services, was also aimed at facilitating full integration of the Polish-speaking Germans with the German nation. One of such institutions exists to this day at the St Peter and Paul Church in Bochum. Services are celebrated in Polish and German alternately, and bilingual prayer books are available at the church [Świątkiewicz 1993: 64]. It is assumed, however, that the use of the Polish language in the services will gradually diminish. Arguably, that example clearly demonstrates that the language of religious practice cannot be regarded as a reliable indicator of national identification.

The contemporary processes of restoring the German cultural identity are a consequence of the erroneous social, economic, cultural, and national politics adopted by the Polish authorities after World War II. On the other hand, they are greatly facilitated by a broadly defined political, economic, and cultural support of the German state which it provides for the German people inhabiting the Polish lands, mainly for the population of Silesia. It is also well-founded to propose a hypothesis that the processes of restoring the German cultural identity are to a considerable extent autonomous and independent of the Church structures.

The reconstruction of the German identity has predominantly been grounded in the processes of preserving social memory by the eldest generation, a generation which has been most involved in supporting the activities of the German minority

movement in Poland. Traditional forms of celebrating have been revived – various festivities and old forms of coffee get-together at which a ring-shaped cake is served and people sing the “Heimatsmelodie,” touching songs of the prewar era which help to cement the community. That domination of elements which draw from the past reinforces the identification of the eldest generation of Silesians. At the same time, however, it does not constitute an attractive offer for the next generations who do not participate in the forming of the German identity. Those are mostly young people whose deficiencies in linguistic competence severely restrict their access to the German culture. Moreover, the lack of an interesting political offer contributes to a gradual decline in support for the German minority movement among Silesians [Berlińska 1999: 338–339].

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, it can be argued that the democratic transformation in Poland initiated the process of secularization of the society. Religion had previously constituted an illusory enclave of freedom, an important source of its significance. It is an all-European tendency. Religion is still an important factor to affect ethnic and national identification, but it does no longer constitute the key element of the national identification of those nations which have stable national states. Such is also the current situation of Poland. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that it affects the perception of religion by the German minority in Poland. Also the influence of the politics regarding national and religious minorities, which has been in operation for over half a century, should not be underestimated. It has been a common practice to stifle work ethics and national and cultural identity, as well as to show disrespect towards identities based on ethnic and religious diversity. That diversity was not an advantage but a problem for the Polish governments of the time. The turn of the 1980s and the 1990s witnessed a substantial change in that matter. The German issue was no longer subject to manipulation, a fact which had a beneficial effect on the perception of the German minority by the society. One of the less known symbols of those changes was the fact that during the 1995 celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, both the German and the Polish authorities, for the first time in history, together paid a floral tribute in two places in Łambinowice – those were to commemorate the prisoners of war and the victims of the postwar labor camp for the German population. That act made Łambinowice lose its power as a symbol which had antagonized Poles and Germans for decades [Madajczyk, Berlińska 2008: 583].

It is not surprising that the younger generations try to redefine Poland as a state and as a homeland. The 1990s saw a trend to show no interest in history and traditional principles of patriotism, but there also existed an opposing movement, one which emphasized the values grounded in the nation and religion. Undoubtedly, the act of Poland joining the European Union gradually calmed many disputes and conflicts.

In that respect, the significance of religion achieved a certain state of consensus, especially among regional communities such as the German minority, people who still believe that religion constitutes an important element of their community. The period of struggle and strife against adversity is over. Germans and their characteristic features became widely accepted. As it is stated by Archbishop Alfons Nossol, who was the Archbishop of Opole from 1977 to 2009: “we have regained the gift of complete civil freedom”. The role of religion, therefore, is not to divide but to unite. “Christian tolerance – Archbishop Nossol argues further – is not enough. Brothers and sisters do not merely tolerate each another, they also accept each other in their diversity and difference. Acceptance should lead towards authentic cooperation and common initiative: not only common worship but also common action. And then there is yet another step to be taken: from cooperation towards a common testimony of faith, so that the world can believe” [Zyzik, Ogiolda 2007: 240].

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