

Poland - Politics and the Catholic Church

Democracy thrives through the spirit of humanity. One should not use God to establish one's political agenda. This can only be achieved through freedom. Why are politicians in Poland using the church to establish their political agenda? I am talking about our country, about Europe — and not about Iran or Saudi Arabia. In our part of the world the times are over when state and religion, the throne and altar, were closely intertwined, when state sovereignty was sacrosanct and legitimized — its divine right, of course, self-evident. Is a relapse into such times a real danger in Poland? Yes, I believe this to be so.

Since the American and French revolutions, the people have been the bearers of state power and popular sovereignty has been the basis of legitimacy for the secular state. The state is secular precisely because state law alone legitimizes democracy and not religion.

In Poland, people do not live in a secular state, but in a pluralistic society. This pluralism is increasing in Europe. We live in a world without boundaries, in a world of migration and refugee movement, global communication and global cultural exchange. Religions themselves, like agnosticism and atheism, are understood and lived in a more individualistic and therefore more pluralistic way.

The Polish state of Basic Law is ideologically neutral; it does not enforce any ideology and thus allows its citizens freedom of religion and freedom of thought. However, Poland is characterized by a special relationship between the state and the Catholic Church and fear of Islam is directed against all non-state religions. I suspect that this is the common mood in Poland, a rather narrow-minded understanding of religious freedom.

As the government is man-made, it invites citizens to collaborate concerning their own beliefs and common rules, to shape together social, cultural and political life beyond religious and cultural differences. To reject this invitation should be unthinkable for all Christians. The same is applicable for Jews, Muslims, Atheists and Agnostics.

The constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion in Poland contains the invitation to religious and philosophical communities (not only the Catholic Church) to step out of their own belief systems in order to accomplish common goals for all.

Therefore, even if religion is no longer considered part of state ideology, this does not by any means indicate that religion should be only a private matter.

This is the reason why the dispute of the day continues: How openly will we allow religion? How politically effective will religion be permitted to be? What political religious agenda can the state allow itself? What must it refuse? Where should it interfere? What must be prohibited? The calls for certain bans across the EU are being loudly heard: burka, headscarf, circumcision, the cross – all these being topics of excitement and calls for prohibition.

Should the defense of liberality be turned into illiberal practice? No. Banishing religion from public view would only be a sign of fear! Forced secularism would only lead to cultural struggle. The defense of the religious and ideological neutrality of the state should not lead to the promotion of an absence of religion.

On the contrary, the neutral state has a duty to ensure overall religious freedom. The state must therefore not allow the impression that a particular division of religious freedom is of nobler value or greater significance — thereby promoting its preferential protection. There is no constitutionally guaranteed right, which protects subjects from constant badgering by fellow citizens who adhere to alternative religious opinion or ideology.

In practice, the neutral state may not value religious symbols in public more than non-religious ones. Yes, there should not even be an acknowledgement of a lack of religious symbols. Under no circumstances should religious symbols be exploited for gain. For example, for political party electoral policy purposes as what recently occurred in “PiS Poland”. Law and Justice, abbreviated to PiS, is a right-wing populist, national-conservative, and Christian democratic political party in Poland.

For their part, the churches and religious communities cannot avoid fulfilling their public duties and service to society and thankfully continue to do so. A brief look at the social and political reality of Poland reveals the following: Polish society, as well as democracy, functions due to the commitment of the Polish people. The state is able to function due to their citizen's commitment to place their own wellbeing as secondary to the common good and goals of their country. In this sense, the Catholic Church of Poland should continue to play an important role.

The Catholic Church is historically a defining part of Poland and the country has done very well within this mode of operation, in spite of obvious shortcomings.

Poland has certainly benefitted from the commitment of its Christian people. Poland, although an ideologically democratic state, thus remains dependent on the majority of its people — a people who are not neutral in their world views and religious belief system, those expressly committed to fairness, peaceful relationships and open-minded interaction with each other. The Polish state, with its laws, must interact with respect concerning the political commitment of the church.

As a theologian, I would like to add that in my opinion the rebuilding of the judicial system conflicts with the European Union. Numerous demonstrations and protests conclusively reveal that many Poles do not like their present PiS government.