

Hierarchy and Pluralism. Living Religious Difference in Catholic Poland

Published: 21.01.2016

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This review was first published as: Brian Porter-Szucs. Review of Pasieka, Agnieszka, Hierarchy and Pluralism: Living Religious Difference in Catholic Poland. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

Agnieszka Pasieka's work on religious diversity in Poland circles around one fundamental claim: that tolerance and pluralism are not alternatives to cultural hierarchies but *constitutive* of those hierarchies. Poles often evoke an idealized multicultural past, in which Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, Protestants, and even Muslims coexisted peacefully and happily within a decentralized republic that protected their freedoms. The most cited examples of this toleration come from the Polish-Lithuanian Republic—the state that was destroyed by the partitions at the end of the eighteenth century—but the so-called Second Republic of 1918-39 is also invoked. Józef Piłsudski, whose military-backed regime prevented the radical Right from rising to power in the interwar years, is typically described as a guarantor of equal rights even in the face of growing discrimination, ethnic conflict, and cultural antagonism. The post-World War II Polish state, with its new boundaries designed to ensure a nearly homogeneous Catholic and Polish-speaking population, appears as an anomaly in this story.

That tale is not entirely wrong, but it is undeniably exaggerated. Pasieka, however, does not try to dismantle the picture of historical diversity. Instead, in an attempt to examine how that diversity actually works (and perhaps worked) in practice, she has found one of the few places in Poland where it continued to thrive. The small community in southwestern Poland that she calls "Rozstaje" (to maintain its anonymity) is about two-thirds Roman Catholic and polonophone, with the remaining third consisting of Łemkos (Greek Catholics with a language that is very closely related to Ukrainian), along with some Eastern Orthodox and Protestants. On a day-to-day basis, Pasieka shows, these groups get along surprisingly well. A superficial glance at a town like this would seem to verify the old picture of multicultural harmony. But this coexistence, she argues, can be sustained only because of clearly understood hierarchies between the groups and only insofar as the hegemonic position of Catholicism is maintained. Perhaps paradoxically, it is precisely *through* hierarchy that pluralism becomes possible.

The people of Rozstaje are generous and neighborly when it comes to interpersonal relations, even to the point of respecting each other's holy days and building close friendships across community lines. The town is able to

tout its multiculturalism as a draw for tourists, who can see in Rozstaje what the lost Second Republic might have been like. But when a seemingly trivial proposal emerged to relabel the "Welcome to Rozstaje" road sign in two languages, a firestorm erupted. Anger from the Catholic majority and fear and disillusionment among the various minorities burst to the surface. During a town meeting to discuss the proposal, one person shouted that the Łemko should "go home to Ukraine" if they were not satisfied with life in Poland, and the idea of changing the sign was defeated. This episode exemplifies the contradictory forces of ethnic coexistence in rural Poland: an almost idyllic quotidian harmony on the one hand, combined with staunchly defended forms of subordination and exclusion on the other. As Pasięka argues, this is not really a contradiction at all, because it is the tacit understanding of how the different communities of Rozstaje relate to each other within a structure of power and authority that allows individuals to navigate the town's social space with the confidence needed for friendship. Any suggestion that those structures might be tottering, and that true equality between Catholics and non-Catholics might be recognized in practice (as well as in unenforced constitutional theory), brings out disorientation and confusion that quickly translates into anger.

Although buttressed by an erudite methodological framework and argued with sophistication and nuance, Pasięka's book is accessible and even quite eloquent. It is one of those rare academic books that is actually a pleasure to read. Her fieldwork involved a long residence in Rozstaje, marked by countless social engagements and interactions with members of all the town's groups. That allows her to sprinkle her text with intriguing anecdotes and observations, which she weaves together skillfully with scholarly analysis and interpretation. The impact of this book should be self-evident: it not only helps us understand more fully the role of Catholicism in modern Poland (a role that looks very different in the large cities where most academic observers spend their time), but also provides some tentative insights into what things must have been like before World War II created the ethnically, religiously, and religiously monolithic space that we see today. It has always been hard to reconcile tales of pogroms and hostility with individual stories of gracious coexistence and toleration, and a lot of ink has been spilled trying to establish that one or the other picture is a misrepresentation. Pasięka allows us to see that *both* are correct, but that they are incomplete without the other. As she concisely puts it, Poland is characterized by "hierarchy that is inscribed in pluralism" (p. 8). For those who long for multicultural equality and the empowerment of minorities, this is a pessimistic argument. Similarly, those who would describe conflict and sharp lines of exclusion as the inevitable result of diversity will also be challenged by Pasięka's claims. In other words, her work compels people with a wide variety of ideological agendas to reassess the foundation of their claims. One upshot of this is that her book is likely to upset a lot of people, but only in the way that the most innovative analysis *should* push us all to reassess our views. I cannot recall another book about Poland from the past decade that has achieved this goal with such eloquence and with such solid argumentation.



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