

A POLISH ETHNO-RELIGION? SOME THOUGHTS ON THE BAPTISM OF POLAND AND CONTEMPORARY NATIONAL IDENTITY

Rafał Pankowski*

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to look at the baptism of Poland as a one of the elements used to built Polish national identity. The focus is on the Piast era in Polish history and the role which baptism played in incorporating Poles into latin civilisation. The articles also discusses the modern references to importance of 10th and 11th century events in building 21st century of the national identity discourse.

Keywords: *Identity, nation, religion, baptism, civilization*

* Dr hab. Rafał Pankowski, prof. CC Collegium Civitas, Collegium Civitas, rafal.pankowski@civitas.edu.pl

The baptism of Poland in 966 is commonly seen as the symbolic beginning of the Polish state and Polish history. Many facts around the baptism of Prince Mieszko's state are unclear today, but its significance as the symbolic beginning of Polish statehood remains unquestioned. The facts, however, do not need to concern us too much here. It has become a cornerstone of what was to become known as Polish identity and has determined several important aspects of its formation well into the present day.

Much energy has been invested – in terms of Polish historical scholarship and political writings – in the idea of Poland's belonging to "Latin civilization". Historically speaking, the claim cannot be taken literally if "Latin civilization" means the lands which had been conquered, or directly influenced, by the culture of the Roman Empire. The scarcely populated territory of would-be Poland never came under Roman rule and all contact with the Romans was limited to occasional trade, the proto-Polish lands providing Rome with amber and slaves. The "Latin" influence on Polish culture in fact derives from the presence and importance of the Roman Catholic Church which only began in the second half of the tenth century. Latin was of course the language of Church communication for much of the following thousand years. As the language of the Mass, it survived until the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, but today very few Poles are familiar with Latin from school or church.

Poland's place within "Latin civilization" has, however, often been emphasized in historical scholarship. One oft-quoted early-twentieth-century nationalist author, Feliks Koneczny, made it a central element of his grand narrative of Polish and world history. Koneczny championed Poland as the best example and heroic defender of "Latin civilization" which he praised as the highest achievement of humanity juxtaposed with the allegedly destructive and negative influences of "Jewish civilization" and "Byzantine civilization" (the latter, claimed Koneczny

in his long tracts, had in fact dominated Germany and much of the Protestant West, leaving Poland as a standard-bearer of the noble values of Latin civilization descending from the Roman empire) (Koneczny 2006; see also Pankowski 2009: 203).

It was, however, Abraham ben Jacob (a.k.a Ibrahim ibn Jakub) who was the first person in history to write about the country later known as Poland. His account was written in Arabic rather than Latin. Ben Jacob was a Jewish merchant who travelled in Europe in the second half of the tenth century and, as an envoy of the Cordoban caliphate, he wrote his “travelogue” in Arabic. Many standard histories of Poland still refer to Ibrahim ben Jacob as an ‘Arab traveller’ rather than a Jew (Topolski 1982: 26) – one of many instances where the involvement of Jews in Polish culture and history has been omitted from the national narrative. Further territorial expansion took place under Mieszko’s son, Bolesław Chrobry who, shortly before his death in 1025, received the Pope’s permission to crown himself as a sovereign monarch and the first king of Poland. Bolesław’s hosting of Emperor Otto III in his capital Gniezno in 1000 is considered a special moment: the Polish monarch’s entry into the “family” of European Christian rulers. The emperor is said to have addressed Bolesław as a “brother”, i.e. a sovereign ruler. Characteristically, during the period of Poland’s accession to the European Union one thousand years later, the Gniezno meeting was referred to frequently.

The term “Poland” was not common then. It took several centuries before the very name ‘Poland’ referring to a certain set of territories became fully accepted among chroniclers. Apparently, the earliest recorded mention of “Poland” (“Polonia”) is found in a Latin text written around 1003. The etymological origin of the country’s name is not clear either. It is usually interpreted as an ethnonym referring to Mieszko’s tribe, the Polans, and/or the word *pole* (field).

The Hebrew name of the country, Polin, is related to a legend according to which God told Jews travelling through East European forests to “po lin” (“rest here”). Undoubtedly, the first Jews who arrived to “Polin” in the early period of state formation, played a role in that process, not least through their place in the new economic-political order, for example as coin minters. Some coins issued under Piast monarchs bore Hebrew letters.

Even more symbolically, the valuable coronation sword of Polish kings (“Szczerbiec”), which is said to have belonged to Bolesław I, bore a Hebrew inscription (in Latin letters), too, which indicates it may well have been a gift from the monarch’s Jewish subjects and partners. According to Marcin Kornak, the maker of the sword may have been a Christian who was versed in Jewish and Arabic symbolism: the meaning of the Hebrew sentence suggests a Kaballic, mystic significance and the sword was in fact produced in the thirteenth century as a symbol of gratitude to Piast Prince Bolesław the Pious for the groundbreaking 1243 Statute of Kalisz, which gave Jews unprecedented personal protection and communal autonomy. The sword was first used in a coronation ceremony of Bolesław’s son, Władysław the Elbow-high (Łokietek) in 1320 and retained the ceremonial function right until the very last coronation of a Polish king, in 1764. In the nineteenth century it was kept in the Tsar’s Hermitage collection in St. Petersburg and returned by the revolutionary Soviet authorities to Poland in 1928. Today, it is considered one of the most precious national symbols preserved in the former royal castle of Kraków (Wawel).

Ironically, in the late 1920s the Szczerbiec (or, to be precise, its particular miniature image with a white-red stripe) became used by the anti-Semitic fascist-style nationalist right. It was adapted as an emblem by the Greater Poland Camp (Obóz Wielkiej Polski, OWP) and later by other similar groups such as the National-Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR). After 1989, Szczerbiec is again a recognizable element

of far-Right symbolism, which has led to its official banning from Polish and European football stadiums by the European Football Federation (UEFA). The symbolic contradictions in the cultural and political significance of Szczerbiec, Marcin Kornak correctly observes, constitute one of the most ironic cases in the history of nationalist imagery (Kornak 2011).

Jewish presence in Poland was well documented already in the tenth century. The process of Jewish settlement intensified subsequently as a result of migration after crusades, persecutions and expulsions from other (especially Western) European countries. For example, in the late eleventh century there was a wave of Jewish settlers who had been expelled from Czechia. After many centuries of Jewish presence in Poland, and many decades of post-Holocaust emptiness, the Hebrew word “Polin” has been brought to the general public’s consciousness as the name of the newly built (and hugely popular, although sometimes controversial) Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

The baptism represented a radical breakthrough, a rupture with the past of which little is known. The Christianization of Poland generally followed the top-down mode, described by Marcei Kosman as typical in the Middle Ages (in contrast to a more gradual pattern predominant in late Antiquity): it was based on ‘a decision made by the ruler to dispose of the old beliefs and on his cooperation with the church in the act of christianization’ (Kosman 1992: 22). Not surprisingly, Mieszko is usually depicted holding a cross in his hand (*Ibidem*: 35). Although the ruler’s decision signified a radical change in official ideology, on the level of the populace the new religion could not take root immediately. Kosman notes a more nuanced picture that emerged in late twentieth century historiography: “Previous generations of historians, as well as some recent ones (up until the celebrations of the millennium in 1966) identified the baptism of the monarch with the Christianization of the country; nevertheless, since the interwar period the other view has

increasingly become shared by historians who see the processes of Christianization as time-consuming and complex, lasting at least two centuries” (*Ibidem*: 36).

Mieszko’s historic decision leading to the 966 baptism of Poland in the Roman Catholic rite, as we have noted, is commonly invested with great symbolic significance. The first institutions of a new social order were established, and coins were issued by Mieszko as a symbol of sovereign power. Today, Mieszko’s image – based on the one imagined by the nineteenth-century patriotic painter Jan Matejko – is known to most Polish people from its depiction on the most popular bank note (10 złoty). The note’s reverse includes a picture of Mieszko’s denar, the first “national” currency issued in Poland (according to medievalist Henryk Samsonowicz, Mieszko’s coins were minted by Jews, but this fact, like the origin of the Szczerbiec sword remains largely unknown to the general public) (Kornak 2011).

Bolesław Chrobry’s coin known as “Princes Poloniae”, besides its primary economic function, is important symbolically in the forging of the future national identity on two counts. First, it employed the word “Poland”, simultaneously or even before the first chroniclers. Secondly, it is said to contain the first historic depiction of the eagle as the Polish national symbol. In fact, in the words of archaeologist Wojciech Kalwat, we are dealing with a ‘real ornithological enigma’, is it an eagle, a dove, a cock or a peacock? To an untrained eye it looks like a hen (Kalwat 2015).

Strictly speaking, of course, there was no such thing as “Roman Catholicism” (in the current sense of the term) back in the tenth century, it did not exist as a recognizable label of the most significant confession within Christianity. Up till then Christianity had been a broadly unified (not uniform) religious notion, even though it allowed multi-polar authority. The first major split within Christendom – between the Roman Papacy and Byzantine Orthodoxy – did not become permanently institutionalized until later in the Middle Ages. Till then they co-existed as

parallel rather than openly rival rites. The closure of Greek churches in Italy in 1053 and of the Latin churches in Byzantium next year – and even more importantly, the mutual excommunications – were among the big steps towards a formal split which became a fully-fledged schism over the next centuries. Arguably, the revocation of the mutual excommunications in 1965 was just about 900 years too late to avoid a split which, among others, had a major impact on the course of Polish history. All this was not known to anybody in the tenth century in the lands that later became known as Poland.

Therefore, it would not be fully correct to say “Poland” became “Roman Catholic” in 966. The baptism of Mieszko’s state signified an entry into the Christian world – an event which had a revolutionary impact way beyond religion, in the realms of politics, law, society, and – broadly speaking – civilization. The gate into Christianity for the young Slavic principality appeared through Mieszko’s marriage with the Czech princess Dobrava. The Czech lands had become Christianised several decades before.

Mieszko’s choice seems to have had a major historic significance, with long-lasting repercussions until the present day. First, he accepted baptism from the Latin church – and thus, a long-term cultural association – with the “Western” rather than “Eastern” version of Christianity. Polish identity has been shaped by its geographical location at the crossroads of the European “West” and “East”. To be sure, being at the crossroads of Western and Eastern European influences from the outset has given Poland its permanent place in the “heart of Europe.” Arguably, it also accounted for its cultural originality: ‘Christianity drew Poland into the orbit of Latin civilization, and the character of her history was determined by the native-Slavonic pedigree’ (Wierzbicki 1984: 283). In the words of Włodzimierz Smoleński: “The Polish nation was saved from annihilation by its unique Slavonic-Latin individuality” (Smoleński 1919: 83).

Unlike its neighbouring Eastern Slavonic territory known as Rus', Poland did not become a part of the cultural space dominated by the Byzantine form of Christianity (currently known as Eastern Orthodoxy). The mighty state of Kiev Rus' was baptized in the Eastern Orthodox rite almost simultaneously, in 988 – but it should be noted it had been influenced by the Byzantine church for some time already, Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius had translated the Bible into the Eastern Slavonic language a century before the formal baptism of Rus'. The cultural consequences of that period for Poland's neighbours Ukraine, Belarus, Russia – not least the usage of the Cyrillic alphabet – are very much alive until today.

Byzantine influence had a certain impact on the future territory of Poland, too. As Maria Janion demonstrates, a baptism of Poland through the Eastern Orthodox Christendom was not unthinkable, on the contrary seemed a very likely – and attractive – option. According to some non-orthodox accounts (with a small “o”), some provinces of what later became Mieszko's land in fact *had already been baptized* in the Eastern rite before 966. This speculation – even if not fully proved – should serve as a reminder of Poland's long-standing relationship with Eastern Orthodox culture(s), but it cannot overshadow the major fact: Mieszko's strategic decision of 966 meant Poland's integration into the Western sphere of cultural and civilizational influence. An emphasis on this observation has been a common feature of Polish historiography and popular self-image. Arguably, the further from 966, the more pronounced it became. Over the centuries, focusing on the East-West dichotomy/opposition has become an important feature of the way Poles tend to perceive their role in history. Poland has often come to see itself as a bulwark of “Western” (or “Latin”) civilization against a threatening “East”.

According to the standards of the era, the baptism of the young Slavic principality went beyond religion in the strict sense. In fact, it amounted to a thorough reorganization of the whole social order. In other words,

the baptism meant a massive transfer of know-how in terms of constructing state administrative and other structures. The rather one-sided West-East transfer has become a pattern in the history of Poland and East-Central Europe. The “mimetic” model of Europeanization has often been pondered – and sometimes criticized – in the centuries to come.

At the time, the original Roman Empire had not existed for half a century. In the meantime, a new, Germanic power centre emerged to the west of the porous borders of the Mieszko state. The German emperors gradually conquered and violently Christianized the Western Slavonic principalities in the territories known today as the East German *länder*. Despite the manifest evidence of such German power, Mieszko decided to marry a Czech princess, Dobrawa, and accept baptism from the fellow Slavic principality of Czechia rather than from the powerful neighbouring German Emperor. The Czech preacher Wojciech (Adalbert) became a key religious figure in Mieszko’s country and later patron saint of Poland.

The standard Polish historiographical narrative concerning Mieszko’s strategic choice and his preference for a “non-German solution” should be perhaps supplemented by a more nuanced understanding of state sovereignty in the Middle Ages. As Paweł Kowal notes, “Mieszko I accepted baptism in 966 through the Czechs, but in all probability under the auspices of the diocese of Regensburg which was dependent on the power of Otto I the Great. For a part of his lands [Mieszko] paid tribute levy to the emperor” (Kowal 2009).

The commitment to Western values and the simultaneous search for a “third way” between the rival political and cultural pressures of Germany in the West and the Eastern Orthodox (Russian) world in the East was to become a frequent challenge for Polish leaders and other creators of Polish identity. The year 966 is frequently referred to as a symbol of the mutual symbiosis or, rather, an allegedly unbreakable bond between Polishness and Roman Catholicism. In 1966, there was a general

consensus that the year marked a thousand years of Polish history, which had started precisely at that moment. Remarkably, there was also some tension between the Catholic church, which – somewhat predictably – emphasized the national-religious aspects of the millenary and the then Communist-dominated government which tried to focus exclusively on the political continuity of the thousand-years’ history of the nation while marginalizing the role of the church. The high-profile celebrations included a government initiative to build a thousand schools to celebrate one thousand years of Polish statehood. In the end, the symbolic conflict led to rival celebrations organized by the church and by the state. Arguably, despite all the official pressures attempting to limit the scale of its operation, it was the church that benefited more from the 1966 celebrations in symbolic terms – and it managed to further instil the already well-established idea of the essential unity between religious and national identity in the minds of the Polish people.

“Tylko pod krzyżem, tylko pod tym znakiem / Polska jest Polską, a Polak Polakiem” – “Only under the Cross, only under this sign, Poland will be Poland, and the Pole will be Polish”, the short verse, wrongly attributed to the nineteenth-century Polish poetic giant Adam Mickiewicz, has been often quoted to stress the close relationship between Polishness and Christianity (usually understood as Roman Catholicism). The first commonly recognized anthem of Poland – *Bogurodzica*, created in the late 13th century – was a Polish-language hymn to the Mother of God. It has remained an important reference for both national and religious identity ever since (Pankowski 2009: 95). The intertwining of Polish identity with Roman Catholicism is often stressed to the detriment of indigenous Slavic pre-Christian beliefs, Eastern Orthodoxy, Western Protestantism, Tatar and Turkish Islam, liberal and Marxist atheism. Nevertheless, all these faiths and philosophies have also left their mark on Polish identity in the course of history.

The relationship between state and religious power was not always harmonious during the Piast period. One example is the spectacular chasm between King Bolesław III Śmiały (the Brave) and the Kraków bishop Stanisław in 1079. As a result Stanisław was murdered on the king's orders and his body dismembered. Bolesław, however, was deprived of the throne and forced to flee. Bishop Stanisław was made a saint and the patron of Poland, but until today historians disagree on the rights and wrongs on both sides of the conflict. The national political debate on the correct relationship between church and state continues in the twenty first century.

The close relationship between the national and religious identity was reinforced over the following centuries, especially during numerous wars, e.g. in the course of the seventeenth century, when Poland's military opponents were either non-Catholic (Swedes, Russians, Cossacks) or non-Christian (Tatars, Turks). In the nineteenth century two out of three occupying powers (Prussia, Russia) were not Catholic. Nazi Germany oppressed the Catholic church in Poland and the Soviet-imposed Communist government until 1989 was avowedly atheist. All those factors contributed to the stereotype of the Pole-Catholic. The unity between Polish identity and Catholicism peaked even further during the time of Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II) as the Polish-born Roman Catholic Pope between 1987-2005. He repeatedly referred to Mieszko's baptism himself, e.g. in his seminal book *Memory and identity* he wrote about the Millennium of Poland's Baptism in these terms: "Talking about the baptism, we don't just mean the sacrament of Christian initiation received by the first historic ruler of Poland, but also the event which has been decisive for the emergence of the nation" (Jan Paweł II 2005: 80-81).

The supposed unity between the Polish identity and Catholicism begun by the baptism back in the tenth century has been reaffirmed by the country's leading contemporary conservative politician Jarosław

Kaczyński as recently as 2015. During that year's parliamentary campaign, he declared in a publicized major speech at the Catholic pilgrimage site of Częstochowa:

“There is no moral teaching in Poland other than the one professed by the [Roman Catholic] Church. Even if some people have doubts as non-believers but are Polish patriots, they have to accept it – they have to accept there is no Poland without the Church, there is no Poland without this foundation which has lasted for more than one thousand years” (asz//gak 2015).

Kaczyński's statement clearly echoes the memorable words coined by the ideologue of modern Polish ethno-nationalism, Roman Dmowski, in the 1920s: “Catholicism is not an addition to Polishness, colouring it in some way, but is a part of its essence, in large measure it defines its essence. The attempt to separate Catholicism from Polishness, to separate the nation from religion and from the Church, is a destruction of the very essence of the nation” (Dmowski 1927). Can a national identity be equated with a particular religious commitment? The case of Poland has produced a variety of answers. In this context, it is interesting to quote the view of Polish-Jewish intellectual Paweł Śpiewak: “Just like it is difficult to understand Polish culture without an operational knowledge of Catholicism, it is impossible to understand Jewishness without Judaism” (Paziński, Śpiewak 2015).

In some versions of the well-known formulation “Polish-Catholic” (Polak-katolik), the Christian faith is almost reduced to an identity marker, a type of ethno-religion. Nevertheless, the symbiosis between Polish and Catholic identity has never been complete, and it has become increasingly problematic since the death of the Polish Pope, John Paul II, in 2005.

References

Dmowski R. (2002), *Kościół, naród i państwo* (1927), Dom Wydawniczy Ostoja, Krzeszowice

Jan Paweł II (2005), *Pamięć i tożsamość*, Znak, Kraków.

asz//gak (2015), *Kaczyński na Jasnej Górze: nie ma Polski bez Kościoła, bez jego tradycji*, <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/jaroslav-kaczynski-nie-ma-polski-bez-kosciola,559532.html>

Kalwat W. (2015), *Historia czytana z monet*, <http://www.wilanow-palac.art.pl/galeria/13830/8/foto/2>

Konecny F. (2006), *O cywilizację łacińską*, Wydawnictwo Ostoja, Krzeszowice

Kornak M. (2011), *Wyszczerbiona historia Po-Lan-Yah*, „Nigdy więcej” nr 19

Kosman M. (1992), *Od chrztu do chrystianizacji. Polska – Ruś – Litwa*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa

Kowal P. (2009), *Cienie Piastów*, „Nowa Europa Wschodnia” nr 6

Pankowski R. (2009), *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots*, Routledge, London

Paziński P., Śpiewak P. (2015), *Żydowska Polska Akademia Nauk*, „Midrasz” nr 3

Smoleński W. (1919), *Naród polski w walce o byt. Zarys historyczny*, M. Arct, Warszawa

Topolski J. (1982), *Zarys dziejów Polski*, Interpress, Warszawa

Wierzbicki A. (1984), *Wschód-Zachód w koncepcjach dziejów Polski. Z dziejów polskiej myśli historycznej w dobie porozbiorowej*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa