

## **The Religious Dimension of Poland's Relations with its Eastern Neighbours.**

By Desmond Brennan

### **Abstract**

Religion has long played a large role in relations between Poland and its eastern neighbours. Stereotypically, Poland is seen as a monolithic defiantly Roman Catholic nation, while its eastern Slavic neighbours Ukraine and Belarus are seen as being dominated by the Moscow branch of the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith. The picture on the ground is more nuanced, and the role of religion and religious identity on the local, regional and national levels in East-Central Europe is rather more complex. Religion has a major role in deciding the allegiance and group identity of individuals and communities. The impact and salience of this role varies considerably over time.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have developed long-standing ties. Relations between the peoples of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine have been particularly close. Poles, Belarusians and Ukrainians are Slavs, speaking closely related languages. Belarusians and Ukrainians share a heritage in Kievan Rus, an early Slavic state. For much of the last millennium, most of the territory which now forms Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine was united in a loose political entity divided in two parts: the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Ukraine and Belarus first came into existence as independent states in the last century – briefly at the end of World War I, and again, more permanently, when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

The main religions in the area are Roman Catholicism (in Poland and Lithuania), Eastern Orthodox Christianity (in Ukraine and Belarus) and Greek Catholicism (in western Ukraine). The Greek Catholic (or Uniate) Church dates from the 1595 Union of Brest, under which much of the Ruthenian church broke away from the Orthodox communion and accepted the Roman Pope as spiritual leader, while retaining eastern Christian religious rites. The 1569 Polish-Lithuanian Union of Lublin eventually led to the nobility and much of the urban population throughout what later became Belarus and western Ukraine becoming Roman Catholic. In these lands, this process of Catholicisation was also, in large measure, a process of polonisation. Within a century of the union the landed class throughout the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was Polish in language and culture. Until World War II, Judaism was also an important part of the region's religious mosaic.

After being partitioned and vanishing from the map of Europe for 123 years, an independent Poland re-emerged in 1918. The post-World War I Republic of Poland, which included Vilnius, Lviv and what is now western Belarus within its borders, was a multi-ethnic state, with ethnic minorities amounting to almost a third of the population. While western and central parts of interwar Poland were predominantly Polish (with significant Jewish and German minorities in urban areas), eastern Poland was ethnically mixed. A strip running along the border with Lithuania, including Grodno and Vilnius, was predominantly Polish. After World War II this area was divided between the Lithuanian and Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republics and today is divided between Lithuania and Belarus. The area south of this as far as Brest and the Pinsk marshes had a mixed population of Belarusians, Poles, “Tutejsi” (“locals”) and Jews. This area now forms western Belarus. The people who called themselves Tutejsi were Slavs without a clearly defined sense of national identity. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, most of these people were Orthodox Christian. Further south, Volyn and eastern Galicia had Ukrainian majorities, but until the 1940s also had significant populations of Poles and Jews. Today, Volyn and eastern Galicia are in Ukraine. Volyn is predominantly Eastern Orthodox, while Ukrainian Galicia is predominantly Greek Catholic.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of generally bad relations between Poles and their neighbours, with low points reached during World War II, when ethno-religious conflicts turned bloody, particularly between (mostly Roman Catholic) Poles and (Orthodox and Greek Catholic) Ukrainians, in Volyn and Galicia. In World War II and its aftermath, borders shifted. Poland’s eastern provinces, which contained most of the country’s Orthodox and Greek Catholic populations, were annexed by the USSR. In the years after World War II most of the Polish population of these provinces was deported, mostly west into the lands taken from Germany and given to the new communist Polish state. Most of the Germans who had been living in what became Poland’s western and northern territories fled the Soviet advance or were deported to Germany in the years immediately after World War II. This shift left Poland comparatively homogeneous.

The decades of communist rule limited interaction between Poland and its eastern neighbours and kept a lid on ethnic tension. The population of communist Poland was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. The regime aimed to assimilate all remaining ethnic and religious minorities. Nonetheless, religious and ethnic minorities, though suppressed during the communist years, survived. Poland’s religious minorities today include Lutherans (mainly in

Silesia), Orthodox Christians, small communities of Muslims and Jews, and, later, newer Christian denominations/sects.

Nowadays, Poland's Lutherans are mostly ethnic Poles, though some are members of the German minority. The Eastern Orthodox presence is associated with the Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian minorities. Poland's Belarusian minority lives mainly near the border with Belarus. The Ukrainian minority is scattered around Poland, with the largest numbers in northern and western Poland, where most of postwar Poland's Ukrainian minority was relocated in the late 1940s. There are several less numerous ethno-religious minorities, including Muslim Tatars (also found in Crimea and in small numbers in Lithuania and Belarus).

The link between Roman Catholicism and Polish nationalism reached a peak during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Poland and Lithuania remained strongly Roman Catholic societies throughout the years of communist rule, when the Church was a parasol under which the dissident and opposition movement was able to manoeuvre. The importance of religion in Poland is diminished today when compared with the communist period, whereas in Belarus and Ukraine there has been a religious revival in the last two decades. Organised conventional religion is no longer persecuted in the region, although certain churches are favoured in each country. In Poland and Lithuania, the Roman Catholic Church enjoys a privileged position, while in Belarus the Russian Orthodox Church has the most favoured position. In Ukraine the two main Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church are the favoured churches.

The population in most of what forms today's Lithuania is Lithuanian speaking, but the Vilnius area had a predominantly Polish-speaking population until the deportations of the late 1940s. Lithuanians are sensitive about the Polish presence in Vilnius. In the unsettled years after World War I ended, Lithuania and Poland fought a short war over the city and surrounding region. In the interwar period, Lithuania's capital Vilnius and surrounding districts were in Poland. Today, a large proportion of the population still speaks Polish and considers itself to be Polish. In some districts adjacent to Vilnius as much as 80 per cent of the population is ethnically Polish. In Vilnius city itself, about 20 per cent of the population is Polish. Since 1989, there has been conflict between Poles and Lithuanians in the Vilnius area over the language used in Roman Catholic Church services. Many ethnic Poles in the area

who had become irreligious during Soviet times embraced Catholicism as the Soviet system collapsed. The increased use of Lithuanian in church services catering mainly to Polish-speaking parishioners is one of the main grievances of Lithuania's Polish minority, which feels discriminated against by Lithuania's authorities.

In Belarus and Ukraine, the Orthodox religion has not been closely associated with national identity and independence. In both countries, a cleavage exists between those who identify more with Russia (who live mainly in the east of those states and mainly have an Eastern Orthodox Christian heritage) and those who have a greater sense of national identity (who live mainly in the capital cities and in areas close to Poland). Many of the latter have (Roman or Greek) Catholic heritage.

Most of Ukraine lies in the area traditionally dominated by Eastern Orthodox Christianity, although the westernmost part of Ukraine is predominantly Greek Catholic. Ukraine's Orthodox community is divided between a Ukrainian branch of the Moscow Russian Orthodox Church and an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate after Ukraine's independence. Galicia is the main centre of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. In most of the rest of Ukraine, Greek Catholics are heavily outnumbered by members of the Orthodox Churches. Scattered throughout the country, but mainly in the western third of Ukraine, are a few hundred thousand Roman Catholics, mainly people of Polish ethnicity or ancestry. In most of the last 200 years in the territory which became Belarus and Ukraine, being Roman Catholic usually meant being considered Polish and vice versa. Much of the Roman Catholic priesthood in Belarus and Ukraine is Polish, and the Roman Catholic Church in those countries is still often seen as being a "Polish" church.

Ukrainian nationalism is traditionally linked with the Greek Catholic Church, which was suppressed during Soviet times. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two main nationalisms competing in western Ukraine were Polish and Ukrainian/Ruthenian nationalism. As the religious dimension of the latter, the Greek Catholic Church was strongly opposed to Polish nationalism, one of whose dimensions was Roman Catholicism. An improvement in relations between the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches since 1990 is linked to the improvement in relations between Poland and Ukraine, and between Poles and Ukrainians. Today's religious divide in Ukraine is mainly between an Orthodox majority and Greek Catholic minority. The Orthodox community is divided between those

with a more pro-Russian outlook and those who are more nationalist in outlook. The Greek Catholic community is a subset of the more nationalist-orientated political formations in Ukraine. The Greek Catholic Church has moved its headquarters from Lviv to Kiev in an effort to be seen as a mainstream Ukrainian church, rather than a regional church in western Ukraine.

Most Belarusians belong, at least nominally, to the Russian Orthodox Church, although there is a large Roman Catholic minority in the west of Belarus, and a much smaller Greek Catholic community. During Soviet times, both Catholic churches, but especially the Greek Catholic Church, were suppressed. The Greek Catholic Church was driven underground, but today a small Greek Catholic community has been revived, based mainly among the Poleszuk community in the south west of the country.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Catholicism in the territory that today forms Belarus was identified strongly with Polishness. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a significant percentage of the people of what is now western Belarus were of Polish ethnicity. Most of the Polish population was deported during and after World War II, although some, mainly rural and less educated, Poles were left behind. Belarusian nationalists tend to describe Catholics in Belarus today as being polonised Belarusians, much as Poles in Lithuania are described by Lithuanian nationalists as polonised Lithuanians.

Relations between Poland and Belarus today are worse than relations between Poland and any of its other neighbours. Official Belarusian and Russian media often portray the Belarusian opposition as being a “Polish” or Polish-influenced movement led by Roman Catholics of Polish background and/or sympathies. For example, in the run-up to the last presidential elections in Belarus, Russian media wrongly described the main opposition candidate, Aleksander Milenkevich, as a Roman Catholic. He is an Orthodox Christian.

The Orthodox Church has long had an unfavourable stance towards Belarusian nationalism and the democratic opposition. Most native Russian-speakers (a group which tends to favour closer relations with Russia) in Belarus belong, at least nominally, to the Orthodox Church. The church hierarchy has a mutually beneficial relationship with President Aleksander Lukashenko’s regime. While clamping down on Belarusians’ freedoms in most other areas, Lukashenko’s regime has been careful to permit religious freedom for the country’s main

denominations. For example, one of the positive things that has happened in Belarus since the collapse of the Soviet Union is that church buildings long neglected and abused have been renovated to become centrepieces of more attractive town and city centres. The religious toleration extends to the less favoured Roman Catholic Church, provided it stays well clear of political discourse. However, the regime continues to paint (or taint) the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus with “Polishness”, despite the fact that in the last two decades the church in the country has undergone “Belarusianisation”.

While it is true that the Polish minority of Belarus is largely Roman Catholic, most Catholics living in Belarus today speak Belarusian as their first language and consider themselves to be Belarusian, rather than Polish. About 17 per cent of residents of Belarus are Roman Catholic, whereas the Polish minority amounts to only about 4 per cent of the population of Belarus, according to official figures. Over the last 20 years, hundreds of Polish priests have been sent to Belarus and Ukraine to cater to the Roman Catholic populations in those countries, but an increasing proportion of Roman Catholic priests in Belarus are Belarusians rather than Poles. Older Roman Catholics, particularly in rural areas near the border with Lithuania, tend to regard themselves as Polish and consider the Slavic dialect they speak to be Polish. Their urbanised grandchildren tend to see themselves as Belarusian and regard Belarusian as their first language. Often, Belarusian national feeling is most strongly held among Belarusian Roman Catholics. Some elements of the church in Belarus are being increasingly identified with a modern version of Belarusian nationalism which sees Russia and russification as being the main threat to the continued existence of a distinct Belarusian nation.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, over the past 20 years, religion has probably become a less important aspect of relations between Poland and its eastern neighbours, largely as a result of the westernisation and secularisation of Poland and Lithuania and the gradual decoupling of the attributes of “Polishness” and the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus and Ukraine. The Roman Catholic Church in Belarus is still associated with both the country’s Polish minority, but also with part of the opposition movement. The Roman Catholic Church, and, potentially, the Greek Catholic Churches, could play a role in strengthening ties between Poland and its eastern neighbours.