

## Article

# The Relationship between Religion and National Culture in Poland in Light of John Paul II's Philosophical and Theological Reflections

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**Abstract:** Many historians and politicians acknowledge that John Paul II, along with other world-leaders of the 1980s brought about the destruction of European Communism. One could also say that connection between religion and culture inspired Poles to refuse co-operation with the Communism. According to Karol Wojtyła it is impossible without Christianity to understand the history of the Polish nation and culture. Being the son of Polish nation which has been condemned to death several times, by its neighbors, but which has survived and kept national identity, Pope John Paul II understood very well the important role of religion and culture. On the basis of his experience Slavic Pope laid out a vision for relationship between Christianity and culture as the 'priority' of the civilization of love. He pointed out a number of reasons for this, which will be presented in this article. First, religion does not exist in vacuum, but in a certain context. Second, religion played a decisive role in the construction of States and nations. Third, Christianity is a creator of culture in its very foundation, and deep transformation of culture starts when Christianity and culture are linked together. Fourth, Christianity is incomplete if it is not lived out in a culture. Fifth, Polish culture and society has been deeply animated by religious piety. Sixth, culture provides a medium for dialogue between believers and nonbelievers. Seventh, the goal of the engagement of culture in accordance with Christianity is the creating of a civilization of love, which enables the human being to live freely in the truth. The research aim of this article is to present the strong relationship between Christianity and national culture in Poland, to identify the core of the Polish national culture, the ways Polish culture has been growing and communicating in connection with Roman Catholicism in the light of Pope John Paul II's teaching.

**Keywords:** Christianity; culture; Poland; John Paul II



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## 1. Introduction

Religions are strongly embedded in a particular historical, social and cultural context. At the same time, cultures are profoundly marked by the religious traditions that inspired their development (Maritain 2008). Sometimes, they are set apart as two distinct dimensions in philosophical and theological reflections. In this article, we would like to bring them together and reflect upon their dynamic and changing interrelatedness in the context of Poland in light of John Paul II's philosophical and theological reflections.

Throughout this paper, 'culture' will be used to signify different meanings. In the first place, it refers to refinement and civilization, to a stage of development of a people or a nation at a given time. For anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists, culture is the core of intense research, that offers the most precious elements for understanding the life of people throughout history. Culture also encompasses rites, rituals, traditions, symbols, values, norms and beliefs that permeate the society or nation (Sullivan 2021; Crawford and

[Rossiter 2006](#)). In terms of the topic of this article, we have to note that ‘culture’ is also a major issue in relation to religion and formation processes.

The main concern of this study is to take a closer look at the way in which religion (particularly Christianity) interacts with culture in the case of Poland. The importance of the relationship between religion and culture has become even more significant today, with increasing cultural and religious conflict. We especially intend to explore the relationship between religion and national culture in Poland in light of John Paul II’s philosophical and theological reflections. This topic covers a vast area, so we will focus on and develop particular aspects in our paper. Since current main stream publications in the English language show Polish national culture in a very negative light, which is probably due to a lack of good knowledge of Polish history, culture and language, it is extremely important to refer to the teaching of Pope John Paul II and outline his approach to this issue.

## 2. The Components of the European Heritage

It is impossible to understand Polish national culture and its relationship with religion without reference to modern Europe. Multi-cultural contacts in Europe are inherent to human communities interacting with each other and sharing their ethnic, cultural and religious traditions as well as their social, ideological, political, economic, and financial interests and ambitions. Despite the unifying power of Christianity, Europe represents a very diversified, multi-cultural and multi-denominational reality. Over the centuries, Europeans learned how to live with diversity and conflicting sensitivities. However, this achievement has demanded a great deal of intellectual, juridical and political work. Many wars were fought in order to deal with cultural and religious identities in Europe. It has been a long, demanding and complex learning process to find pathways that allow for diversity in a peaceful, respectful and constructive way ([Lombaerts 2011](#)). From the 15th century, with European colonial expansion, Western Europeans were convinced that their culture should be the norm worldwide and that non-Europeans had to be educated into the European mentality, and forced to absorb European culture, religion, and even its languages. It was only gradually and through very painful confrontations that Europeans learned to recognize the unique value of other cultures ([Triandafyllidou 2011](#)). Western European colonialism has not only influenced the treatment of people from other continents, but it has also impacted the treatment of Central and Eastern Europeans ([Osewska 2015](#)). Unfortunately, the implicit colonial mentality of Western Europe (especially Germany and France) as a ‘hidden agenda’ is still applied to Central and Eastern European countries. This is best seen in the way that the European Union applies different rules to Germany and France compared to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia or Slovenia. What is accepted in Germany is rejected by the European Union in Poland; for example, Poland is accused of politicizing the selection of judges. In Poland, the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), which decides on the selection of judges, is made up of as many as 17 judges out of 25 members. So, in Poland, it is the judges who have a decisive influence on the selection of judges. In Germany, by contrast, the Judicial Selection Commission (Richterwahlausschuss) may even be composed entirely of politicians ([Biuro Komunikacji i Promocji Ministerstwo Sprawiedliwości 2020](#)). EU projects in Brussels are only considered in many languages of the so-called Old European Union but not in the languages of Central and Eastern European Countries. Central and Eastern Europeans learn Western languages (English, German, French, Spanish, and Italian) and their culture, but do Western Europeans learn Central and Eastern languages? Do they know the history and culture of Albania, Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Romania? Do they know that Germany have not paid reparations to Poland for the destruction of Polish cities, industry and agriculture, the plundering of national heritage (works of art), the murder of approximately six million Polish citizens and stealing Polish and Ukrainian children with German features? Did the representatives of Western Europe apologize for the betrayal of Poland after the Second World War and its subjection to Soviet Russia ([Garlicki 2005](#))? As the President of the Institute of National Remembrance explains:

“As a result of the Soviet policy and the concessions of the Allies towards Stalin at the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, Poland was not independent, and did not regain all its territory. Its citizens were subjected to the totalitarian enslavement under the rule of the puppet communist government fully dependent on Moscow. Poland was the only of the Allies whose fate was sealed this way.” (Szarek 2020)

There are still many issues to be resolved in Europe that require the historical memory of all nations to be taken into account.

Growing awareness of the importance of respect for human rights in Europe, of the recognition of the equal value of all human beings of whatever ethnic origin, cultural or religious tradition, forced the EU to adjust institutional services to a new kind of cultural and religious diversity. At the same time, exchanges with cultures and societies from outside the EU invite the ‘old continent’ to integrate ‘the migrants’ (Lombaerts 2011). But, even as Europe is shifting to a different kind of multi-cultural and multi-religious reality, Western Europe still regards the former ‘Iron Curtain’ countries with deep suspicion. In this context, it is easy to forget that the leaders of Western Europe brought this fate upon Central and Eastern Europe by signing secret protocols and giving up these countries as demanded by Stalin, thereby creating the very problem that they are seeking to solve (Roszkowski 2004).

Today, the tension between religion and culture is a key characteristic of the European project (Hanesová 2016). Today’s Europeans have to deal with a different kind of heterogeneity: radically different cultures and a different way of imagining a cultural and religious universe. There is conflict between protecting cultural, political and religious boundaries on the one hand and integrating new cultural and religious practices on the other (Osewska 2020).

Within the European context, the situation differs considerably from country to country. The hegemony of the culture of Western Europe is being challenged in many areas. Herman Lombaerts identified two strategies by which differences can be dealt with. According to the first strategy, conflicts are disputed and settled through violence and domination. People take justice into their own hands and fight for their rights. In such a view, the person is ignored; and the winner in these conflicts will tend to be the more powerful country. The second strategy is when differences are managed through the clarification of principles of equivalence of people and issues, and then the dispute is resolved in agreement with respect to all the parties involved (Lombaerts 2011).

### 3. The Attempt to Understand Polish Culture and Identity

The culture of Poland is the result of its geography (located in the center of Europe between the Western and Eastern cultures) and its distinct historical evolution (Węclawowicz 1996). Polish culture forms an important part of Western civilization, with significant contributions to philosophy, theology, sciences, politics, art, music and literature (Osewska 2018). Western Christianity, in the form of the Roman Catholic Church and its organizational structure, was adopted along with the Latin alphabet within a territory of Poland in 966. This unique Polish character developed as a result of its geography at the confluence of various European regions, and the Slavic sense of honor and identity (Modrzejewski 2021). Considering both factors, it is theorized that ethnic Poles and the other Lechites are the combination of descendants of West Slavs and people indigenous to the region including tribes, which were gradually Polonized. Over time, Polish culture has been profoundly influenced by its interweaving ties with Slavic, German, Hungarian and Latin influences and to a lesser extent by the Byzantine and Ottoman cultures as well as in continual dialog with the many other ethnic groups and minorities living in Poland. Poles have traditionally been seen as hospitable to intellectuals and artists from abroad and eager to follow cultural and artistic trends popular in other countries (Davies 2005). The period when Poland was clearly recognized in Europe and played a very important role was during the Jagiellonian dynasty (1386–1572). The Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, formerly known as the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a strong bi-

federation and 'gentry democracy' (Davies 2001). The political intrigues set up by neighbors led to collapse of this union and initiated a process of weakening the position of Poland in Europe, with the final result being loss of independence for 123 years. It is interesting to note that in the 19th and 20th centuries, Poles focused on cultural advancement over political and economic activity (Garlicki 2005).

Polish identity was built on the basis of shared culture, literature, visual art, music and Christianity. Faith was strongly linked with the national identity in Poland, where most of the neighbors and most of the enemies were of a different religion or at least of a different Christian denomination (Tatars, Turks, Germans, and Russians). Polish nationalism developed against a state rather than within the state. Opposition to the oppressive state was a strong component of the national identity, glorified in the core works of the national culture, as a patriotic act. In Poland, the Roman Catholic Church contributed to this by constructing symbolic meanings which would strengthen patriotism and culture with a Christian sense (Weigel 2004). But culture and religion are not limited only to intellectual cultivation. The cognitive processes are also assigned to other human acts, such as desires, emotions, free will and creativity. Especially during the 19th century, when Poland did not exist on the map of Europe, the Roman Catholic Church played a very important role in the construction of the national identity as a leading force of patriotic attempts to remove foreign domination, and as a provider of free space for expression of Polish intellectual, moral and artistic activities. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland created a coherent, holistic and symbolic model that strongly linked Catholicism with Polishness and was viewed by most Poles as the main agent of Polish nationalism and national identity (Mach 2007). At the same time, while integrating Poles against their national enemies, the Church also created a strong attachment to Christianity. The absence of the Polish national state in the 19th century, when Polish nationalism was constructed, resulted in the Polish national identity being created on the basis of religion strongly connected with culture.

During the German occupation and latter communist period in Poland, Catholicism was generally perceived as an anti-state force and the Catholic Church was viewed as an organization countering Nazism and Communism. Within Central and Eastern Europe, under Soviet control, Poland was the most difficult and resistive takeover exemplified in the upheavals of 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, 1980/81, and 1988/89 (Węclawowicz 1996). The Roman Catholic Church in Poland opposed the official atheism, secularization of all segments of society, as well as the elimination of religious traditions (attendance at Mass, prayers, rituals, Catholic chapels, pilgrimages, processions, religious songs, signs and symbols). The Church was also against the changes in the legal system planned by the communists, the nationalization of the economy, the introduction of a one-party system and issues concerning Polish family life such as the divorce law, the legalization of abortion, and the prohibition to engage in religious practices. Communism was seen as a totally alien element, incompatible with anything that was the essence of the tradition and identity of Poland (Mach 2007).

The reality of social relations was obviously not so simple, with many ambiguities, conflicting interests and tensions. In particular, religious beliefs and practices differed from popular, peasant religiosity to individual beliefs. However, both state authorities and the anti-communist opposition, including the Roman Catholic Church, created a very powerful image of a unified nation (Topidi 2019). In the symbolic model of the political world, as constructed by the communist state, the nation was united in its progress towards socialism, under the leadership of the communist party. The anti-communist opposition constructed a model in which the nation was united against the communist state. During the Soviet domination, the Roman Catholic Church was the defender of Polish national identity, supported the spiritual strength of the nation and devised a specific theology of *nation*. These convictions, no doubt, are responsible for strong ideological protection against Communism, recognizable in popular mass attendance, in the parish catechesis, in pilgrimages, in official religious ceremonies, in the numerous vocations to the priesthood

and religious life. This helps to explain the strong feelings of Poles in wanting religious values to be recognized in the European Constitution (Lombaerts and Osewska 2004). Since Catholicism has been the essence of Polishness for many centuries, the Roman Catholic Church became the national institution and Christianity became a core element of the nation's identity. What is important to understand is that the Christian monopoly and the strong connection with culture is not a usurpation, but the logical consequence of the historical development of the unity of the nation and its religion. Polish culture is born out of pain and fear of total destruction (Bartnik 1999). Therefore, calling Polish people in European Parliament 'Fascist' and 'NeoNazis' means insulting Poles who attended the March for Independence Day carrying flags and other symbols (Tompson 2017).

The election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope in 1978 strengthened this role of Polish culture and Christianity (Kraszewski 2012). The Pope was a living proof that even under communist domination, a society led by Christian values could prepare a personality whose independence, integrity, intellect and moral strength made him a suitable candidate for papacy. In 2004, the opening of the borders of Poland to the European Union resulted, among other issues, in free exchange of ideas, symbols and cultural meaning (Stala 2015). Unfortunately, this exchange was not symmetrical. After a long time under Soviet oppression, Poland was hungry for European culture to overcome the long isolation and to satisfy curiosity, as well as to realize the ideal of freedom. But many Western ideas were not compatible with the Polish culture and Christianity, so the Church objected against their popularization. This new situation was a huge challenge for the Church and Polish society (Czubiński 2002). The pastoral care and methods used by the Church in the Communist past are not good enough for the present time, so the most urgent mission is to recognize 'the signs of time' and to communicate the Gospel message in a new way. Modern Poles need spaces, new forms of expression and language connected with their experiences.

#### 4. The Importance of Polish National Culture

Today, after much sociopolitical transformation, Poland is a developed country that retains Polish traditions, culture and religion. Karol Wojtyła described this closeness and bond between the phenomenon of Christianity and the Polish national culture as a 'single ray'—going in the same direction (Kołodziejczyk 2000). There is no doubt that great Polish literature (C. K. Norwid, A. Mickiewicz, and J. Słowacki) and the popularization of the views of Polish philosophers have strengthened the national feeling in Poland and abroad, and significantly influenced the religiousness of Poles. No wonder then that John Paul II proclaimed to the whole world that this national culture strongly lined with religion helped the Polish nation survive the loss of political and economic independence. In his address to a meeting of UNESCO leaders in 1980, John Paul II said:

I am the son of a nation which has lived the greatest experiences of history, which its neighbors have condemned to death several times, but which has survived and remained itself. It has kept its identity, and it has kept, in spite of partitions and foreign occupations, its national sovereignty, not by relying on the resources of physical power, but solely by relying on its culture. This culture turned out in the circumstance to be more powerful than all other forces (John Paul II 1980).

This was very often the case when the Pope mentioned his homeland especially at the beginning of his pontificate. With the example of Poland, John Paul II wanted to illustrate his thesis that culture constitutes the identity and sovereignty of a nation. John Paul II was strongly aware of the value of the Polish national culture, which he repeatedly reminded people of:

Culture is first and foremost the common good of the nation. Polish culture is the good on which the spiritual life of the Polish people is based. It sets us apart as a nation. It has stood for us throughout history. It is more important than material strength. It is even more important than political borders. It is a well-known fact that the Polish nation went through a hard ordeal of losing its independence,

which lasted for over a hundred years, and yet, in the midst of this ordeal, it remained itself. It remained spiritually independent because it had its own culture. More still. My dear friends, we know that during the most tragic period, the period of the partitions, the Polish nation greatly enriched and deepened its culture, as only by creating culture can it be preserved (John Paul II 1979a).

John Paul II had seen the danger that young Poles were becoming the instrument of manipulation, control, or even social annihilation. For this reason, the identity of Polish youth should be elaborated in relation to categories that qualify their vital awareness, especially the search for meaning, space, abstract thinking, responsibility, and pride of belonging to Christ and to the Polish nation. His support to the younger generation in understanding their national heritage was so important to him that, while speaking to Polish youth in 1983 during his second Polish pilgrimage, he said:

I feel responsible for this great common heritage, whose name is Poland. It is a name that defines us all. It is a name that obliges us all. It is a name that costs us all money. Maybe sometimes we envy the French, Germans or Americans that their name is not associated with such a cost of history, that they are much more easily free, while our Polish freedom costs so much. I will not, my dears, make a comparative analysis. I will only say that what costs is precisely what constitutes value. And you cannot be truly free without an honest and profound attitude to values. Let us not wish for a Poland that would cost us nothing. Instead, let us be watchful of everything that constitutes the authentic heritage of generations, striving to enrich that heritage. A nation is first of all rich in people. Rich in people. Rich in youth! Rich in everyone who is vigilant in the name of truth, which gives shape to love (John Paul II 1983).

In his Address to Young People at Gniezno, John Paul II again reiterated the importance of the cultural capital. He described culture as an 'expression of human' and a 'confirmation of humanity', and a 'common good of the nation'. Moreover, he argued that:

From the outset, Polish culture has had very clear Christian traits. It is no coincidence that the first monument testifying to this culture is the Bogurodzica. Baptism, which the generations of our compatriots received throughout the millennium, not only introduced them to the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, not only made them God's children by grace, but also found a constantly rich resonance in the history of thought, artistic creation, poetry, music, drama, plastic arts, painting and sculpture (John Paul II 1979a).

Later, in his book which was published in 2005 under the title *Memory and Identity*, John Paul II spoke about what he saw as the building blocks of Polish culture and the achievements of Polish culture during the period of the partitions in the 19th century. The Slavic Pope started with the following observation:

It is well known that the nineteenth century marked a high point in Polish culture. Never before had the Polish nation produced writers of such genius as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Zygmunt Krasiński, or Cyprian Norwid. Polish music had never before reached such heights as in the works of Fryderyk Chopin, Stanislaw Moniuszko and other composers . . . the same can be said of painting and sculpture . . . It must be said that this same period of extraordinary cultural maturity during the nineteenth century fortified the Poles for the great struggle which led the nation to regain its independence. After having been struck off the map of Europe, Poland reappeared in 1918 and has remained there ever since. Not even the insane storm of hate unleashed from East and West between 1939 and 1945 could destroy it (John Paul II 2005, p. 67).

Having again made the point that Polish independence is linked to Poland's cultural capital, and following the pattern of his Victory Square Address, John Paul II then linked the Polish cultural capital to Poland's Christocentric and Marian spiritual capital. Christianity

creates this humanistic character of this culture. It makes it so deeply and authentically human that a culture truly worthy of a human being must be connected with values and norms (John Paul II 1979a). According to John Paul II, the most important debate was/is being played on the level of metaphysical significance and the mystery of the person, because the evil of postmodern times consists of a kind of degradation of the fundamental uniqueness of each person. This disintegration must be opposed by a kind of *recapitulation* of the mystery of the person strongly connected with Christianity. In John Paul II's view of secularized Europe, Poles should give a testimony of their deep faith, confirming that European culture has its origins in Greco-Latin civilization and Christianity, so that the reference to Jesus Christ is the natural consequence of their European roots.

### 5. True Culture Is Strongly Linked with Religion

The Slavic Pope often referred to the understanding of culture by using the term 'true' culture, which is a form of life oriented towards the truth, a life striving to shape humanity—one's own and others'—in accordance with concepts of the 'truth'. In the teaching of the Church concerning culture, the term 'true culture' does not appear in the sense introduced by John Paul II. The Pope from Poland explained in many places the sense of culture, bringing closer its positive and negative understanding. Just a reminder of a few significant reflections:

Without a transcendent perspective, without a sense of transcending visible reality, every culture remains a pitiful fragment, like the tower of Babel. One cannot build a culture while ignoring or stubbornly rejecting what cult is—respect, reverence. An uncultured human being and an uncultured nation are a human being and a nation without respect for themselves, for their neighbour, for the world, for God (John Paul II 1990).

John Paul II, having had significant experiences from the time of the German and Soviet occupation of Poland, strongly reported that a life without culture means a life without depth, without mystery, without spirit. In an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, John Paul II contrasted true culture with a 'torn' culture that threatens the modern world and human being. He said:

Modern culture makes necessary a constant effort to synthesize data and integrate knowledge. It is true that the successes of science that we are witnessing are the result of the specialisation of the search. However, if this is not balanced by a reflexion aimed at showing the interconnectedness of the various fields of knowledge, there is a great risk of the formation of a *torn culture*, which would in fact be the negation of true culture. For culture is not conceivable without humanism and wisdom. True culture must therefore be a complete culture, based on wisdom and humanism (John Paul II 1992).

Polish theologian and media expert, Witold Kawecki points out that:

High culture is also not favoured by the following phenomena of modern times. We live in a world of so-called cultural relativism and a general reluctance to value and evaluate cultures (all cultures are considered equally good and cannot be hierarchised). There is a strong tendency under the influence of postmodernism to detach cultures from the criteria of moral goodness, beauty, depth, and other spiritual values, and to associate them only with the categories of difference, diversity, 'novelty', originality (Kawecki 2011).

Whilst underlining the importance of culture, John Paul II, would often note that culture without universal values is not really culture. Pope John Paul II had demonstrated that true culture is strongly linked with religion (Liberski 2011). The history of Poland is for him a very good example that Christianity itself is culture creating. The Polish national heritage is a powerful example of the creation of a national culture and identity with the formation of the human being, society and the whole nation according to the message of

Jesus Christ rooted in a concrete culture. Following in the steps of his predecessors, Pope John Paul II strongly advocated the Christian influence on culture. The Polish national culture created according to the evangelical message was so important to him that it formed the central theme of his Victory Square address in Warsaw during his first pilgrimage to Poland as Pope, on 2 June 1979. In this speech, he stated that:

The history of the nation deserves to be adequately appraised in the light of its contribution *to the development of man and humanity*, to intellect, heart and conscience. This is the deepest stream of culture. It is culture's firmest support, its core, its strength . . . *It is . . . impossible without Christ to understand the history of the Polish nation*—this great thousand-year-old community—that is so profoundly decisive for me and each one of us. If we reject this key to understanding our nation, we lay ourselves open to a substantial misunderstanding. We no longer understand ourselves. It is impossible without Christ to understand this nation with its past so full of splendour and also of terrible difficulties. It is impossible to understand this city, Warsaw, the capital of Poland, that undertook in 1944 an unequal battle against the aggressor, a battle in which it was abandoned by the allied powers, a battle in which it was buried under its own ruins—if it is not remembered that under those same ruins there was also the statue of Christ the Saviour with his cross in front of the church at Krakowskie Przedmiescie. It is impossible to understand the history of Poland from Stanislaw in Skalka to Maximilian Kolbe at Oswiecim unless we apply to them that same single *fundamental criterion* that is called Jesus Christ (John Paul II 1979b).

According to Pope John Paul II, culture is the proper way of human existence and, at the same time, a confirmation of humanity. That is why, the Slavic Pope often recalled that in order to regain their lost independence, Poles created a culture that was even more enriched in terms of content and spiritual depth. The professional and patriotic creation of national culture is always a guarantee of its historical continuity, and is the basis of its survival and preservation for the future. If culture is to be preserved, it must be created uninterruptedly. The culture of a nation is characterized by an open and constantly renewed search for truth and identity in every generation.

For Pope John Paul II, “true culture” is always open to values and religion. A culture without a uniform set of universal values such as truth, goodness, beauty, faith, and freedom is not a true culture. Thanks to universal values, individual cultures permeate and enrich one another. Culture gains in value only when it begins to serve universal values. According to the Slavic Pope, Christianity values human attitudes which foster a “true culture” and rejects models which do not accept the role of the human in terms of prudent initiative and freedom (Weigel 2004). A culture properly understood unites individuals, nations and states. That is why a good relationship between religion and “true culture” supports the culture of individual nations.

In the beginning of his pontificate, and also in the second half, Pope John Paul II continued to develop the topic of the relationship between religion and national culture. According to him, the driving force of history is not politics or economy but culture. John Paul II's role in the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, between 1989 and 1991, proved beyond doubt that religious convictions can still influence the course of history, and that societies and nations are transformed not by revolution, but through education and culture. Thus, at the end of the 1990s, John Paul II proceeded to put his original views into practice. This manifested itself in the attempt to re-evangelize the countries of Western Europe and to guarantee the foundations of freedom for the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in the attempt to restore freedom to enslaved nations through thoughtful dialogue.

## 6. Dialogue between Religion and Culture

As a young bishop, Karol Wojtyła took part in the Second Vatican Council (from 1962 to 1965) and made contributions to two influential documents: the *Decree on Religious Freedom*

(*Dignitatis humanae*) and the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et spes*). Polish theologian Karol Klauza emphasized that Wojtyła participated in the work of the commission editing the final version of *Gaudium et spes* and it is thanks to him that the document acquired a profound anthropology (Klauza 2012). According to Wojtyła's integral anthropology, the human being remains a spiritual and material coexistence. As a psychosomatic being, a person fulfils oneself through physicality and mental life, and the unity and identity of the personal "I" are constituted by elements which are correlated with each other (Klauza 2012). From the beginning, Pope John Paul II opposed the temptations of dualist anthropology, defending the truth about the Divine origins of not only the spiritual but also the physical plane of the human being, because the human being is the only being whom God wished only for itself and, revaluated by Incarnation, manifests the greatest concentration of the quality of the created being and sanctity. Every person, remaining a unique being, discovers both the natural bonds to others and responsibilities towards culture (Borutka 2020). The person will not become fully complete without the presence of other people, religion and culture.

*Gaudium et spes* defines culture as "everything by which human perfects and develops the manifold gifts of spirit and body, strives by means of knowledge and work to bring the world under his power, and by progress in manners and in the various institutions makes social life more human" (*Gaudium et spes* 2002, 53). Thanks to Wojtyła, the Council proposes a personalistic and, at the same time, social and historical vision of culture that defines new forms of human life. The supreme goal of culture is the human being—the historical, concrete person created in the image and likeness of the Creator (Klauza 2012). According to the Council, faith, which is born of the manifold forms of revelation, remains the dynamizing factor of culture; in this way, the Church influences the richness of human culture (*Gaudium et spes* 2002, 58).

The recognition of many aspects of the Council are evident in Karol Wojtyła's work, such as anthropological (cf. *Gaudium et spes* 2002, 59), historical, ethnological, social (cf. *Gaudium et spes* 2002, 53), institutional and artistic (*Gaudium et spes* 2002, 59). The achievements of the material and spiritual culture of all generations create a heritage that determines the identity of societies (cf. *ibid.*, 53). Therefore, in his teaching, Pope John Paul II applied the interpretation of the foundation of culture, the personalistic principle of the (self) transcendence of the person through truth towards freedom. It cannot be otherwise, since culture is created through the cult of values historically accumulated in the person, in families and nations.

"Fidelity to the roots means, above all, the ability to build an organic bond between the eternal values that have proven themselves so many times in history and the challenges of the modern world, between faith and culture, between the Gospel and life". Understood in this way, fidelity to the foundations of culture is threatened by ideologies and attitudes characterized by agnostics phenomenalism and a superficial understanding of basic cultural categories such as truth, goodness and beauty (*Gaudium et spes* 2002, 57).

Such attitudes are favored by the economization of culture and the accompanying appropriation of the space of local cultures through the uniformization of standards, dehumanization of cultural relations and the tendency to constant decadence—from the level of spiritual culture to the culture of urbanization (Klauza 2012). John Paul II supports the idea that the Church is not bound to any particular culture in an exclusively inseparable way, but carries out her mission within different cultures. The Church's contribution to these cultures is the richness and power of the Good News proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Although his Incarnation took place in a particular time and place, the message is open to all generations, cultures and all the environments of human communities. The history of the Church is eloquent proof of this. The faithful are called to participate actively in cultural life. In practice, this involves striving to legally guarantee access to cultural goods. The Church should take care of people who create culture, inspire their creativity, establish schools and academies, but also of people and institutions whose activities are connected with the means of social communication. For the first time in the history of the

Councils, media culture gained a separate document, the Decree on the Means of Social Communication *Inter mirifica*, which referred positively to their role and vocation in the field of human culture. Towards the end of the Council, media issues were revisited and significant practical additions were made to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Klauza 2012).

In order to ensure the constant and competent implementation of the Second Vatican Council's guidelines on culture, John Paul II established the Pontifical Council for Culture. Among other things, it pursues the following objectives: it takes initiatives to bring evangelization and contemporary culture closer together; it shows the pastoral concern of the Church to overcome the rift between the Gospel and cultures; it collaborates with universities and historical, philosophical, scientific, artistic and intellectual organizations in order to multiply common initiatives; it contributes to the initiatives of international organizations on culture, philosophy of science, anthropology; it monitors the development of policies and actions of individual states in the field of culture. Following John Paul II's indications, the Pontifical Council for Culture states:

“Culture only exists through man, by man and for man. It is the whole of human activity, human intelligence and emotions, the human quest for meaning, human customs and ethics. Culture is so natural to man that human nature can only be revealed through culture. In a pastoral approach to culture, what is at stake is for human beings to be restored in fullness to having been created «in the image and likeness of God» (Gn 1:26), tearing them away from the anthropocentric temptation of considering themselves independent from the Creator. Therefore, and this observation is crucial to a pastoral approach to culture, «it must certainly be admitted that man always exists in a particular culture, but it must also be admitted that man is not exhaustively defined by that same culture. Moreover, the very progress of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which transcends those cultures. This 'something' is precisely human nature: this nature is itself the measure of culture and the condition of ensuring that man does not become prisoner of any of his cultures, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being» (*Veritatis Splendor* 53). In its essential relation to truth and good, culture cannot only spring from the experience of needs, centres of interest or basic requirements.” (*The Pontifical Council for Culture* 1999)

For John Paul II, cultures are fed by the communication of values. A human being is both the child and the parent of the culture in which they are immersed, so they bring their unfailing openness to mystery and their boundless desire for knowledge. Lying deep in culture, they are open towards fulfilment, so culture itself has an intrinsic capacity to receive divine Revelation. According to the Slavic Pope, Christians bring to every culture the truth of God, which he reveals in the history and culture of a people. This means that no one culture can ever become the criterion of judgment, much less the ultimate criterion of truth with regard to God's Revelation. The Gospel is not opposed to any culture; on the contrary, the message which the faithful bring to cultures is a genuine liberation from all the disorders caused by sin and is, at the same time, a call to the fullness of truth, so cultures are prompted to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel's truth (cf. *Fides et Ratio* 71).

One of the most evident changes in Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council was the emphasis on the personalism and recognition of the signs of time (Stala 2012). The Polish Pope, having a good philosophical and theological background, had far surpassed the ideas of the Second Vatican Council. He connected the dignity and salvation of a human being with Jesus Christ, underlining that salvation is not only an individual matter, but rather a community one. If a human being cannot fully understand himself without Jesus Christ, the same has to be applied to the Polish nation. Christianity is the key to understanding the great and fundamental reality of a nation which had lived according to three values: God, honor and homeland. Not only can Christ not be excluded from the

history of the Polish nation, but the identity and culture of Poland cannot be understood without Christ. Throughout the painful history of Poland, the understanding of the specific identity and culture was a reminder of a crucial issue (Kawecki 2008). Conflicts, wars, and the emergence of a new type of occupation challenged the Polish nation to search for solutions, the most important being the Christianization of Polish culture. But the historically adjusted formulations of the relationship between Christianity and the national culture needed further clarification and re-interpretation of the original references. The new challenges push the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Polish intellectuals to foster a search for an adequate response with references to the spirit of John Paul II's teaching.

According to John Paul II, religion and culture are two fundamental dimensions of human life, which meet on the way and are united in the ultimate goal of human fulfilment. Religion is therefore the most culture-creating element, in the sense that it is most focused on the human, their development, and their fulfilment, and thus is most concerned with the complete well-being of the person. Thanks to religion, culture achieves its vertical, eschatological dimension. It becomes a road and a gate leading to eternity. One can speak, therefore, of a synthesis of religion and culture, of revelation and culture, since religion seeks to make cultural endeavors the path to human fulfilment—to holiness. However, the mutual relations between religion and other areas of culture should not be imagined unilaterally or statically. The fundamental role of religion is to provide the ultimate rationale for the life of the person, who, through reason and will, is oriented towards the infinite and the Absolute.

This type of dialogue assumes that culture and religion are interdependent but, at the same time, mutually conditioned, though they do not identify with each other. The "world" of the person makes religion and culture meet. When the meeting does not take place, culture without religion becomes dehumanized, and religion without culture is exposed to ahistoricity, abstractness and fideism. Religion is necessary for culture because of its cognitive and axiological functions; in Revelation, God has revealed to the person the essential truth concerning his life—his supernatural destiny, life understood as a relational and dialogical existence, both with God and with the world. Religion is the source of a personalistic understanding of culture, because it affirms the person understood in a transcendental context (Weigel 2004). It may be concluded that religion is the substance of culture, and culture a specific form of religion, actualizing the possibilities of the human spirit. For Pope John Paul II, this assumption leads to the statement that true culture is essentially religious. What is important is that the dialogue between religion and culture should continue and grow in depth and scope. In the process, we must overcome every regressive tendency to a unilateral reductionism, to fear, and to self-imposed isolation. What is critically important is that each discipline should continue to enrich, nourish and challenge the other to be more fully what it can be and to contribute to our vision of who we are and who we are becoming. Since the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II has spoken of "this type of dialogue", which will make it possible to reach contemporary culture with the Gospel message. The relationship between religion and national culture in Poland was for Slavic Pope a good example of enriching dialogue that supports both Christianity and national culture.

## 7. Conclusions

It should be emphasized that the concept of the relationship between culture and religion according to Pope John Paul II has far surpassed documents of the Second Vatican Council. We are able to see the development of the conciliar anthropology of culture, which can be put into a scheme: human beings create culture, need culture and create themselves through culture. At the same time, a human being is exposed to various dangers from culture, or in fact anti-culture, but this becomes proof that authentic culture must open itself to transcendence. It is only here that the freedom, dignity and truth about the human being and the truth about the nation are fully revealed. Pope John Paul II demonstrated that Christianity itself is culture creating and Polish national culture is a powerful example

of the creation of a national culture and identity with the formation of the human being, society and the whole nation according to the evangelical message rooted in a concrete culture. Polish national culture is characterized above all by its spiritual power, which reveals in human beings the natural tendency to seek the meaning of life, and the nation's search for identity. According to the Slavic Pope, true culture is essentially linked with religion, because it leads the human being and nation to God, and shapes them according to the idea of God living in a given culture. Redemption and salvation happen in the concrete history of humanity rooted in the history of the nation, which is not mythological, but real. The guarantor of these events is the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man.

The Pope laid out a vision for the relationship between Christianity and culture as the 'priority' of the civilization of love. He pointed out a number of reasons for this. Religion does not exist in a vacuum, but in a certain context. Religion played a decisive role in the construction of states and nations. Christianity is a creator of culture in its very foundation, and a deep transformation of culture starts when Christianity and culture are linked together. Christianity is incomplete if it is not lived out in a culture, and Polish culture and society has been deeply animated by religious piety. Culture provides a medium for dialogue between believers and non-believers, while the goal of the engagement of culture in accordance with Christianity is the creation of a civilization of love, which enables the human being to live freely in the truth.

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