

The Polish Revolution and the Catholic Church 1788-1792: A Political History

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The indisputably Catholic dimension of the *Fête de la Fédération*, that patriotic thanksgiving for the first anniversary of the Revolution held in most towns and villages across France but with its focus in a specially built amphitheatre in Paris, is quite well-known; much less so are the religious celebrations held across Poland on 3 May 1792 to commemorate the first anniversary of the Polish Constitution. Though they made the best of it, there was a perception among many clergy and laity in Paris that the Catholic vestments and rituals, the copes in the colours of the tricolour worn by Talleyrand and the other celebrants, could not conceal an hubristic apostrophe to the Revolution itself coming just two days after the National Assembly had voted through the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. From this point on, patriotic and Christian ceremonies would quickly disentangle. In Poland, however, Catholicism was far more than civic window dressing for a special day of revolutionary pageantry. King Stanisław August, his brother the primate, and the papal nuncio were all involved alongside all other significant bodies in Church and state. The day was dressed up in religious ceremonial much as the king had been by Bishop Okęcki of Poznań when he first entered the Church of the Holy Cross in procession, and its high point was the laying of the foundation stone of the Church of Divine Providence, whose dedicatory name says it all. 'What human power', asked the bishop of Łuck (quoted p. 270), 'could have united the hearts of king and nation, and overcome so many prejudices? Let no insolent sceptic deny a Providential God!' It all bore witness to the triumph (however brief) of enlightened Catholicism and its compatibility with a 'revolutionary' settlement.

Richard Butterwick's is a relatively unfamiliar story. 18th-century religious historians know from the

writings of John McManners, Derek Beales, Franco Venturi and many other scholars, the stresses and strains of national Catholic Churches confronted with state reform initiatives in France, the Habsburg lands and Italy during the 1780s and 1790s. But the role of the Church and the clergy in events in Europe's largest Roman Catholic state, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, immediately before and after the publication of the Constitution of 3 May 1791 has remained more shadowy. No longer. It is Dr Butterwick's considerable achievement to insert religion four-square into what he deems the 'Polish Revolution' and thereby disclose another variant in the Europe-wide religious reform initiatives of the late 18th century. And he does so within a clear breakdown of the Commonwealth's complex confessional picture, with Orthodox Ruthenians and Uniate (Ruthenian) Catholics figuring considerably. In France, the 12 months from May 1791 witnessed internal schism within the Catholic Church because the Revolutionaries had required changes to the structures and procedures of the former First Estate without its consent being obtained; in Poland, those 12 months by contrast saw the majority of the Catholic clergy (including the Regulars), in Richard Butterwick's words, propagate and sacralize the Revolution. A marked contrast indeed. There was a measure of 'deconfessionalization' as religious minorities were brought in from the cold but there was no secularization of public life comparable to that emerging in France. In Poland, Catholicism remained the dominant public religion.

Religion, Butterwick argues, was central to the work of the Four Years' Parliament of 1788-92. The Polish clergy were represented in the Estates of the *sejm* solely by their bishops, who constituted merely a small minority within the Senate and were numerically overwhelmed by the nobility. And they felt threatened. The prevailing Polish national myth is that the clergy were part of a patriotic revival that felt comfortable with the moderate changes proposed at the *sejmiks* (or electoral assemblies) of 1788 and 1790; on the contrary, prelates and clergy, seculars and regulars alike, were fighting a rearguard action to maintain what they could of well-established rights and privileges. Like other Poles, churchmen had to adapt quickly, for 'In three and a half years of sovereignty and responsibility ... political culture evolved in "greenhouse" conditions' (pp. 16-17). To historians familiar with events in France and the Habsburg Empire, the pattern will be familiar and Butterwick is at pains to bring out usually illuminating comparisons throughout *The Polish Revolution*.

The book bustles along according to a structure that is essentially narrative and chronological. As such, it functions satisfactorily despite layers of detail that rightly require plenty of attention from the reader and yet sometimes have the effect of dulling the fast flow of events that Butterwick is at pains to emphasise. This is in no wise any sign of deficient scholarship. *The Polish Revolution* has been a decade in the making, its author has mined a remarkable collection of sources, and yet the super-abundance of material cited may have contributed to an occasional blunting of the communicative edge and a thematic masking despite all his attempts at clarity. Butterwick is extraordinarily thorough but there is a burden of detail here that takes a lot of digestion and somehow contributes to reducing the impact of his arguments.

The Polish nobility (the *szlachta*) had the usual moderate anticlerical complaints against the clergy that one could find among their counterparts in most Catholic polities: tithes, mortmain, ecclesiastical court jurisdiction, the place of the monastic orders, monies sent to Rome etc. But by the time of the *sejmiks* of August 1788, they were articulating these grievances in an 'enlightened' idiom that Butterwick has previously examined in his essay on 'Catholicism and Enlightenment in Poland-Lithuania'.⁽¹⁾ Indeed even forthright critics of enlightened discourse found themselves adopting theological priorities that indirectly reflected the preferences of their adversaries. 'National' attention was turning to the consequences of Catherine the Great going to war again with the Ottoman Turks, and the need to bolster the army with additional funding was reflected in the instructions drawn up in the *sejmiks* that Butterwick helpfully compares and contrasts with those of the *Cahiers de doléances* produced in France the following spring. Church revenues seemed to be part of the answer to Polish dilemmas and the challenge to the primate, the unpopular Michał Poniąkowski, the king's brother, was how to manage concessions when thus confronted by majority opinion reflected in the instructions drawn up at the *sejmiks*, especially when Stanisław August had launched the slogan 'the king with the nation, the nation with the king'.

As in France, the Church was divided in the face of a series of ecclesiastical polemics, composed in 1788-9 and taking a position on both sides of the reform question. Everything, it appeared, was negotiable, including

Church property. Thus the estates of the richest bishopric, Cracow, were to be secularized to help pay for the army. As one proponent argued: 'The Church does not need estates, because it is not a live structure, and is improperly called the Church, because Christ the Lord called a gathering of the faithful the Church' (quoted p. 73). But, as compared with France, the divisions between the higher and lower clergy were less pronounced in Poland, and the Polish Church was not without spirited defenders such as Wojciech Skarszewski, who was capable of responding to anticlerical critics on their own utilitarian ground. These were not enough to forestall the clergy giving ground in the *sejm* after several disputatious sessions on taxation. By late March 1789 their deputies had conceded that the Order would pay 20 per cent of its income from lands, capital, and tithes to the state in addition to its existing fiscal commitments. And the burden would fall more proportionately on the more prosperous clerics as the poorest of the parish clergy were taken out of the tax bracket completely. Butterwick plausibly presents this outcome as the fruit of a well-planned defensive action by the bishops. Reform was proceeding at a moderate if not a comfortable pace for the Church, and churchmen were told quite bluntly that matters could have gone a lot worse for them. As Wojciech Suchodolski, envoy for Chełm, said, the clergy 'should bless the moment they were born in a free Commonwealth, that they are not under the rule of any despot, because they can look at neighbouring powers to see what happens there to the clergy' (quoted, p. 119).

Such freighted words were cold comfort. Radical attacks on the clergy continued (along with their concomitant defences) throughout 1790 and 1791 against a background of pamphleteering and periodical discussions of the 'religious question' with authors invariably wanting to make contrasts and comparisons with events in the France, the United Provinces and the Habsburg lands. As Butterwick nicely puts it, 'The currents in the Seine created waves in the Vistula' (p. 283). All could agree on this at least, that the clergy's true vocation was to act as pastors and to be the champions of the populace. There were several who demanded the seizure of ecclesiastical property and were met by no less passionate defenders such as Franciszek Salezy Jezierski who, in his *Somebody Writing from Warsaw* (February 1790) attacked the French Revolution and wittingly noted that the true face of 'our enlightened century' was revealed by the seizure of others' property (p. 144). It helped that the bishops (partly reacting to events in France) were inclined by the spring of 1790 to insist on the usefulness of the Church to the Commonwealth. By that date the outstanding problems were the power of creating new dioceses, censorship, and the proposed Orthodox bishopric or hierarchy. Nobody seems to have demanded the election of parish priests. Monastic reform came on only weeks after the French National Assembly had considered this contentious matter and moved to close down the Religious Orders. Reformers wanted to divert all the revenues of commendatory abbots and all surplus revenues of claustral abbots to the army. Somehow, that scheme faltered, indeed, the Estates later confirmed several monastic foundations – of both rites and both sexes. Butterwick argues that the relative lack of interest in ecclesiastical detail of most envoys and senators in Warsaw explains the proposals being watered down though, equally, the news of discontent and growing destabilisation coming out of France may have given deputies pause. Certainly, public opinion appears to have been less hostile than in Austria.

There is appreciable coverage of the debates leading up to the passing of the 'Cardinal Laws' in September 1790 regarding the status of the dominant Catholic faith and other, 'tolerated' faiths. It is a topic that scholars tend to neglect because of the other political issues then being agitated by 'enlightened republicans' and 'old Republicans' and Russophiles, and partly as nothing in the Cardinal Law went beyond a declaration of intent. The position of religious minorities was actually aired in an atmosphere not far short of consensus. Thus new sees and seminaries for the Ruthenian rite were popular with a wide-range of opinion that was happy to view the clergy as the principal 'enlighteners' of the populace. In this connection, given Butterwick's work on the taxonomies of Enlightenment, he might have said more on the 'enlightened' ideal of the clergy and further explored its resemblances to French and Josephinian models. These debates represented a genuine attempt to cater for religious minorities, as the request made to Protestants and Orthodox by the *sejm* to send lay and clerical delegates to Warsaw to present their ideas on reform in the autumn of 1790 showed.

Butterwick makes much use of the instructions of 1790 which, he contends, 'offer historians an exceptional

insight into the political culture of the *szlachta*. Continuity outweighed change' (p. 233). Not that the *sejmiks* of October 1790 ceased to air grievances against the clergy, many reviving favoured reformist ploys that had been considered over the previous 18 months in the *sejm*. Their instructions were the prelude to the final negotiation of the new constitution between December 1790 and April 1791. The debates that ended in municipal offices being opened to all urban citizens and urban citizenship being opened to all Christians except serfs are clearly summarised. At last, the Constitution of 3 May 1791 was ready for promulgation. There was all-round relief at every level of clerical opinion. Many bishops issued pastoral letters in its support and there were numerous festivities through the summer in which the new Constitution was celebrated and sacralized. The country on the whole was delighted that, as Ignacy Witoszyński, canon of Kamieniec said in a sermon, 'our *Revolution* differs from other countries' *revolutions*, and God will take it as his own work, take it under His care and defence, and will bless us' (quoted p. 258). There was even (the forlorn) hope that Pius VI would extend the hand of blessing.

Further reforms to the Catholic Church in Poland seemed possible during the year after 3 May 1791 and there was much discussion in various quarters of the forms it might take. But even while the celebrations continued, a cloud was being cast by news of the continuing lurch to extremism in France, a toxic presence confirmed by the return from his travels in western Europe of the primate Michał Poniatowski. He came from Paris to Warsaw in the autumn of 1791 ready in Burkean style (the two men had met in England) to lament the 'follies and misfortunes to which the *philosophes* have reduced the whole of France' (quoted p. 283). Polish opinion was polarized with the king determined to show the neighbouring courts that Poland was not, in contrast to France, a hotbed of Jacobinism. That spin sat somewhat uneasily while moderate reform continued in the *sejm*, not least the approval in May 1792 of an autonomous Orthodox hierarchy despite opposition from the nuncio and some of the Catholic bishops. The former warned that their bishop in Poland could be a Russian agent fomenting rebellion – most of the clergy and *szlachta* only reluctantly acquiesced. In fact, attempts to reform further the Catholic clergy of both rites failed in January and May 1792, a sign that religious reorganisation was running out of steam (and had been since late 1790); the radicalisation of the French Revolution was acting as a brake on the radical agenda in Poland. The Polish Revolution had managed – just - to do without its own version of the Civil Constitution, and had produced a package that was more low-key, consultative, and indeed conservative.

The religious reforms in Poland lasted less time than the Civil Constitution and the creation of a parliamentary monarchy in 1791 in both France and Poland was also ephemeral, the latter being swept away in both cases by invasion from the east in 1792, eventually repelled in the case of France, not so for the Poles with the Partitions of 1793 and 1795. Stanisław August would not have been entirely surprised at so much unravelling so speedily for, as Butterwick reminds us, he was 'Ever conscious of the parallels between himself and Louis XVI, [and] perhaps saw his brother in the role of the count of Artois' (p. 130). Butterwick's reflective conclusion provides a stimulating finale to this distinguished book that so capably and constructively builds on the achievement of his thematic biography of Stanisław August, *Poland's Last King and English Culture*.⁽²⁾ It rests on a massive, multinational archival strength, while other primary sources include parliamentary speeches, pamphlets, unpublished treatises, and sermons. His coverage of these four crucial years is comprehensive and broad with the key role of Ferdinando Saluzzo, the Papal nuncio, constantly before us. The latter's abilities in holding the line between the Polish episcopate, members of the *sejm*, and the Holy See following the law *Fund for the Army* are carefully charted. If the ever-present risk of rupture and schism to which France fell victim was avoided in the Commonwealth it owed a great deal to him. However, throughout the book the complex international context can be quite hard to establish. Russia and Prussia were ever watchful of events within the Commonwealth with their ambassadors vying for influence, for instance, each lining up their own preferred candidates for the see of Cracow, Poland's richest, in the spring of 1789. Butterwick examines the contest for patronage minutely, and yet readers may struggle to get a sense of the larger picture, here as elsewhere. His is, essentially, an inward looking history of Poland-Lithuania, and a reader may easily lose sight of the intrinsic riskiness of the Commonwealth's throwing off Russian hegemony in constructing its Constitution. And one might have wished for a rather longer reconstruction of the reform environment with only three pages (pp. 57-9) given over to configuration of the 'Public' in Revolutionary Warsaw. But these minor considerations in no sense

detract from Richard Butterwick's major accomplishment in confirming that the religious dimension of the Polish Revolution was, in its way, no less than that pertaining in France and no less significant in shaping its outcome.

Notes

1. Richard Butterwick, 'Catholicism and Enlightenment in Poland-Lithuania', in *A Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe*, ed. Ulrich L. Lehner and Michael Printy (Leiden, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Idem, *Poland's Last King and English Culture: Stanisław August Poniatowski, 1732-1798* (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author thanks Professor Aston for his generous review, which he is pleased to accept.

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