

A LESSON IN CIVICS

Barto Pielak, form teacher and deputy principal at Bednarska Independent High School in Warsaw, interviews Rev. Michał Jabłoński, pastor of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Warsaw.

On the 4th of June we celebrated the 32nd anniversary of the fall of communism in Poland. Is the new Poland a success?

As a Polish citizen I appreciate the freedom of moving around the world, open access to information and education, the freedom of speech. But as an Evangelical, a representative of a church that believes that the state should be secular, I'm not happy with the current situation. I'm not happy that we live in a country where the word "citizen" means something different than it should. I feel rather an alien in my own country—as a citizen who does not see civil society on an everyday basis and as an Evangelical who does not recognize at all many terms used by the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, because they have been politicized.

Have you thought why it was so easy to divide our society and to distort its civic side?

The lack of rudimentary historical, cultural and civic education is a serious problem. People who don't know the basics of Polish history and culture are the leading voices in the country. They introduce standards that have nothing to do with the standards of a united Europe. Listening to current ministers, observing the changing historical narrative and the attempt to change the list of required readings at schools, I believe young people to be in a disastrous situation—if they don't have parents who can do it, who else will tell them the true story? That there are no cursed and not cursed, that we are not a chosen nation—who will tell them that today?

What significance for education in Poland does teaching religion in schools have?

As an Evangelical I claim that the Polish state failed when it signed the concordat with the Vatican, allowing religion to enter the schools. And it is not only about the sheer fact of religion as a subject at school, but also about the quality of the lessons. In countries under the influence of Protestantism, teaching religion also has a civic dimension. I am not sure if this is the instructional strategy practised in Polish schools.

Is there a space for progress in the church, for the reinterpretation of convictions?

The church should be and act in the society, here and now. My church has "reformed" in its name. Progress is innate to its existence. It does not entrench itself in dogmatism, because it functions in society. One hundred years ago, for example, in Protestant churches one could clearly hear that homosexuality



was a sin. Today Evangelical theology says that this cannot be undeniably claimed. This is going outside of the dogmatic ghetto. The aim of the church is to accompany a person and to create a space for asking questions. The church should be in constant flux. When it stops moving it becomes a museum.

How to explain that 90% of Poles declare that they are Roman Catholic, but at the same time the vast majority of them reject the teachings of their own church when it comes to issues such as abortion, birth control, in vitro, and premarital sex?

Observance of the rules prescribed by a particular church is a kind of religiosity, but not an expression of faith. A believer considers their whole life, relationships with other people and the whole of creation in the context of their own relations to God and not in the context of a set of rules of a particular church. God exists beyond all religious labels.

Let us assume that religious people, even if they participate in the life of their church by the power of tradition, also experience some spirituality. How to bring together their loose approach towards issues such as abortion, contraception or divorce and their doggedness towards LGBT+ people?

They simply do not think about their situation. They do not even consider that a man can be in love with another man or a woman with another woman. It does not affect them in any way, so they pay no real attention to it. Meanwhile, abortion, IVF or divorce affects them or their relatives. It is sad but



common to stigmatize people for being non-heteronormative: it does not matter who you are, the goodness you bring, the goals you achieve. If you are gay or lesbian, you live in sin and will go to hell.

You need the Bible to find the values which you will guide you in your life: “Love God and love your neighbour”—these two are fundamental. However, if you need the Bible to kill someone’s spirit, their freedom, their desire to live life to the full and to love, then you act against this commandment, “Love God and love your neighbour.” The Holy Scripture is a record of the development of human thought, a history of moving from exclusion expressed by the conviction that “God has chosen me but has not chosen you,” to the inclusive awareness of God being the Father and Creator of all mankind.

The Bible condemns homosexual relationships in a few verses, concerning men, but not women.

That is correct. In a patriarchal social context, in older religious texts a woman has less value than an ox or a horse. When you read the Scripture in its historical, sociological and linguistic context, you will notice that the concept of homosexuality does not exist in the biblical perspective. These fragments relate to male sexual intercourse. Why is it so condemned, by God supposedly? One of the reasons was reproduction. Two men are unable to bring fruit from their loins. It is also crucial to underline that male sexual intercourse cannot be a harm if there is no room for supremacy, namely rape. If the fundamental rule in the Bible is “Love God and love your neighbour,” then sexual intercourse in which one man shows supremacy towards the other is the evil. Such is the latest theological conviction.

As we are discussing God and the Bible in this way, aren't we cutting ourselves off from the Christian roots of Europe? Aren't we citizens of the civilization of death?

There is no root in Europe. We need to remember that Christianity originated from Judaism, and appeared in the Middle East in the times of the Roman Empire, which was built on the achievements of Ancient Greece and Egypt. You cannot read the Bible from the Polish perspective only. The Christian perspective is neither fundamental nor dominant in the melting pot of culture and spirituality found in Europe. There is no such thing as the civilization of death. Its so-called symptoms, such as euthanasia, abortion or homosexuality, have always existed. Are we really supposed to believe that they are an invention of our times?

Let us return to Poland. Can the conservative revolution be a success? Is there demand for it in our country?

There is always demand for it. In each age people feel insecure if they do not find a simple answer to every question or if they forced to find it by themselves. Instant answers ease anxiety. However, it is possible that some people will begin to inquire if their son or daughter fits into the frame created by simple answers. Rejection and condemnation of a person due to their non-heteronormativity contradicts the biblical message and the values which can be found in the Scripture. Would God really detest the idea that two people of the same sex love each other, share passion and long to live together?



Why do you support Rainbow Friday?

I would like to tell the young people who discover their non-heteronormative identity not to fear or feel alone. I want them to know that God isn't focused on procreation only. He does wish them to ground their life on three pillars: life, love and liberty.

In April this year the Netherlands celebrated the 20th anniversary of LGBTQ+ marriages. Is it possible at all to establish such a law in Poland?

As long as there's a union of throne and altar, arising not from love, but from reason, or better said, from cool calculation, it will not be established. Nor will churches in Poland, because the internal law of each church in our country is submitted to the constitution of the Republic of Poland, which states that

marriage is a union between a man and a woman. I personally believe that marriage is based on love above all, so if two persons declare publicly that they are in love with each other and want to spend their lives together in love and respect, then I think that marriage has been entered into in the eyes of God.

Are Protestant churches in Poland prepared to bless such couples, in the context of the existing legal norms?

I cannot speak on behalf of Protestant churches in Poland. I can say though that I am ready to do so.

There are almost two million non-heteronormative citizens in Poland, with its population of 38 million. What would you like to say to them?

Two million... the whole city of Warsaw, or the cities of Kraków, Łódź and Poznań combined.... First of all, I am really sorry for you. And I don't mean an act of grief: you're in a terrible situation, and I just assert it. No, I have a real sense of your sorrow, because I know what it feels like to be a minority, to think in a different way, to be a heretic, to be treated as the odd, strange, worse one. Keep your consciousness pure, strengthen it and remember you are never alone. Do not allow the spirit of life, love and liberty in you to be quenched.



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