

Rhetoric in religion

Retoryka w religii

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REAKCJE | REACTIONS

GRZEGORZ OMELAN
UNIVERSITY OF OPOLE
g.omelan@op.pl

The Church of England as an Example of Democratization of a Religious Organization

Kościół Anglii jako przykład demokratyzacji organizacji religijnej

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GRZEGORZ OMELAN
 UNIVERSITY OF OPOLE
 g.omelan@op.pl

The Church of England as an Example of Democratization of a Religious Organization

“The Vatican is so undemocratic that it cannot become a member of the European Union” – states Adam Boniecki (2014), a Polish Catholic presbyter and journalist. It is so because each branch of government – legislative, executive and judicial – in this state is led by one person, which makes it similar to absolute monarchies. A Scottish theologian, Peter Taylor Forsyth, seems to be perfectly at peace with this – he states that if the Church abandoned the guidance of God in the name of democracy, it would cease to be a Church (cf. Arthur 2006, 158). Forsyth bases his understanding on the assumption that seeing the church as a democracy makes one think about the church as being all about the people, however the church always belongs to God and owes him obedience. So, in his view, it is a good thing that churches are as far away from democracy as possible and to expect or demand it within the ranks of a religious organization is a fundamental misunderstanding of the very nature of such an organization (Cortez 2013).

The discussion on democratization of the Catholic church has been going on for decades, if not centuries. One of the most widely known voices in this discussion, although relatively recent, is Valentin Zsifkovits' 1997 book *Die Kirche, eine Demokratie eigener Art?*, in which the author, a Catholic priest and a university professor, tries to find a sensible answer to the question “Should, or at above all to what extent, the Catholic church become democratic?”. Zsifkovits stresses that it is not about transferring the ancient or Montesquieu's models of democracy into the realm of a religious organization. He points to the fact that there already are certain elements of democracy within the Catholic church – the democratic tradition of the first Christians or *Communio* – the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. However, he strongly states that introducing the rule of majority, as in secular democracies, would be improper for a religious structure (cf. Steger 1998).

As for the Polish environment, the discussion has also been dynamic. Despite the fact that Catholicism in Poland is quite a different phenomenon from those

in Germany, France or Great Britain¹, there are communities that propose democratization of the church. For example journalists and academics writing for magazines which are considered (or at least regard themselves to be) Catholic – *Znak*, *Więź*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, or anticlerical organizations (viz. Polish Rationalist Association), which criticize the Church from more hostile positions. Nevertheless, it seems that this very Church, especially in countries where it enjoys strong influence over the legislative process (Poland, Ireland), is not very willing to adhere to the social changes that have been taking place in the Western world for at least two centuries.

What interests us here, however, is the English religious environment, so different from the Polish one. It is fairly specific, not only because a different Christian denomination has been the leading one in this country for almost 500 years, but also because a few smaller protestant denominations (including ones born within the Revivals of the 19th and 20th centuries) gained significance throughout history.

One may ask this question: “How is it possible that a Church born out of a deeply individual caprice of a monarch has become a leading religious organization in any country?” As well as: “How is it possible that this very Church, born in such undemocratic circumstances, has developed relatively deep democratic ways?” The Church of England (henceforth referred to as CoE) was founded after the king Henry VIII was unsuccessful in seeking the papal annulment of his marriage. However, according to the CoE’s authorities, its beginnings might be traced back as far as the 6th century AD, at the times of Augustine of Canterbury’s mission dispatched by Pope Gregory the Great in order to convert the Anglo-Saxons living in the southern part of the British isles. Today the CoE is a state church, meaning that the monarch is its governor, the country’s government recognizes the Church (supports it), and at the same time the Church recognizes the government (Morris 2009).

The first thing that many consider democratic as regards the CoE is the fact that in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British parliament, there are 26 bishops representing this denomination. Five seats are reserved for the most important bishops (among others Canterbury and York), the rest go to ones who have served the longest in any ranking position within the Church hierarchy. It is quite debatable, however, if this state of affairs is truly democratic. There are opinions in the United Kingdom itself stating that if a constitution allows a religious organization to be represented in a parliament, it means that this political system is undemocratic as for modern Western standards because of unnecessary church

1. In Poland to criticize or disagree with the Catholic church, or to propose democratization of this organization is seen as a betrayal, an attack on both the faith and the organization. This may stem from, among others, the fact that Poland is almost religiously homogenous, which makes the Catholic church there the only faith organization that has real spiritual and social influence over a significant part of the population.

influence on matters of state (Parkinson 2012). Yet at times this influence might be very democratic. For example, when in 2012 the House of Lords debated the Welfare Reform Bill, the government was pushing for hard cuts in welfare, and one of the cuts would have affected children and teenagers growing up in poor areas. The Bishop of Ripon and Leeds took matters in his hands and led peers opposing this proposition. His move paid off – the government lost the vote embarrassingly – which ensured the vulnerable would not suffer from spending cuts decided in the Houses of Westminster or at 10 Downing Str. What makes this even more democratic, a group of bishops-turned-lords voted in support of the government. So, in the United Kingdom a Christian bishop is able to vote down any government’s bill, even if there are differences of opinion among all 26 bishops who serve as parliamentarians. Moreover, a bishop said “no” to a bill presented by a right-wing government, usually associated with being friendly to churches. If one looks at it from this point of view, the bishops’ presence in the upper chamber of the British parliament must feel democratic.

Another, and, arguably, much stronger example of the democratization of the CoE is the fact that this religious organization is governed by a tricameral legislative body. It is called The General Synod and consists of the House of Bishops, the House of Clergy and the House of Laity. What is democratic about this body is the fact that, for example, in the House of Clergy there is clergy elected by main English universities, there are also chaplains of military ranks and of prisoners as well as representatives of small religious communities. In the House of Laity there are many dozens of lay people, for example the Dean of the Arches (highest CoE court judge), the chairman of CoE Pensions Board, church estate commissioners. The body decides upon the CoE’s doctrine and its institutions, regulates relations with other churches and approves the central Church budget each year. Most important regulations must be passed by the majority of members in each house of the Synod, minor bills require overall majority only². Lately there has been a strong example how democracy works within the body – CoE bishops called for a vote on the Church’s stance on homosexuality; they wanted to strengthen the “only a man and woman could marry in church” position. Two houses voted for, but the House of Clergy – with a slight majority – voted against. It means that the bishops must rethink their stance and, if they wish to vote again on the measure, they need to rephrase the text using more welcoming language (Ludgard 2017).

The Synod also played a very significant part in allowing women to become CoE priests and bishops, which is another example of modernization and democratization of a religious organization. First women priests, after years of discussions,

2. *About General Synod*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod/about-general-synod.aspx>

were ordained in the CoE in 1994, however regulations allowed parishes not to accept women. This law proved controversial – there have been lawsuits which challenged it in civil courts, however matters stayed as they had been decided by the Synod. As regards ordination of woman bishops, it also took years before the final decision. It was also controversial among more traditional members of the Synod, and in 2012 the House of Laity rejected this idea. Two years later the measure was accepted and the first CoE woman bishop (Libby Lane) was consecrated in January 2015. During the ceremony a very democratic situation happened – when officiating archbishop Sentemu asked if Lane should become a bishop, Paul Williamson, a controversial Anglo-Catholic priest, stood up and shouted “Not in the Bible!” He was allowed to speak freely, listened to (he said, among others, that “the fact that Lane is a woman is an absolute impediment”), after which Sentemu explained in detail why Lane should become a bishop and asked the question again. This time nobody uttered a word (Bingham 2015). At this very moment the CoE, a religious, hierarchical organization, showed truly democratic colours: a priest whose opinion is different from the Synod’s ruling, may speak freely against the decision of majority of his colleagues, is not criticized for that, is not asked to leave the organization, is not asked by his supervisors to stop expressing his opinions in public. It is possible only when there is a lot of respect among clergy, which in turn is possible when there is a strong democratic base within the ranks of an organization.

As regards sexual abuse scandals, the CoE is dealing with this in a relatively open way. There have been some cases in which CoE priests, bishops and lay employees sexually abused children, teenagers and adults. First of all, the Church’s authorities have apologized many times for any wrongdoing in this respect, in a few cases the Church has paid compensations to abuse victims. Second, the authorities have been increasingly open in reporting the scandals to the public; they have called the abuse “a matter of deep shame and regret.” Thirdly, in March 2016 the CoE issued the first report into the abuse cases, acknowledging that it was “an embarrassing and uncomfortable reading” (Sherwood 2016). This report also published recommendations for further actions aimed at bringing positive change into this area. This reaction, although in any case delayed for decades, shows church authorities can behave in a decent way even if the organization is overwhelmed by sex abuse reports and complaints.

Forsyth, mentioned at the beginning of this article, believed a church should not be (or become) democratic. The above examples state otherwise – a religious organization can – and probably should – become democratic, at least in areas where it is possible. A democratic church will always be more inclusive, more welcoming and more tolerant towards anything that its doctrine does not go along

with. Christianity was born two thousand years ago, many of its ideas are socially out-of-date today. Protestant churches – Church of England among them – understand it and have introduced reforms in many areas of original Christian doctrine. In at least a few cases they go hand in hand with democracy as we know it today. In the English State church then we have a tricameral legislative body, where rules of majority work; it is open to public (for example every believer knows how affluent the organization is); constitutionally limited number of bishops vote in the House of Lords on matters important for the people; women can become priests and bishops, and clergy can be or get married and have children. Lately the CoE authorities have also been honest about the matters of clerical sexual abuse. This Church today is a believer-friendly religious organization which proves that as such it might be – at least partially – democratic.

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