

The Apostasy of Jan Nieciślaw Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1929)

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Abstract: The great Polish linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay was the founder of the “Kazan School” of linguistics in imperial Russia. Baudouin’s work was seminal in the development of linguistics in Poland and Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition to linguistics, Baudouin’s career encompassed political activism, as exemplified by his unsuccessful candidacy for the presidency of Poland in 1922. This paper focuses on Baudouin’s uncompromising personality as a social activist during the latter part of his long life. This was brought to the fore in a dramatic episode: in 1927 Baudouin committed an explicit and public act of apostasy by petitioning the Catholic Church and the municipal authorities of the city of Warsaw to expunge his Catholic identity from his official government ID. Even to this day, apostasy is a controversial and taboo topic. I examine the reasons behind Baudouin’s daring act. I then extrapolate from this historical incident to the present-day situation of apostasy in Poland, where it has recently been trending as a social movement of protest against abortion law.

Keywords: abortion law, antisemitism, apostasy, canon law, Catholic Church, European Union, feminism, Gabriel Narutowicz, history of linguistics, history of Poland, identity documents, Jan Nieciślaw Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1927), Polish-Jewish relations, presidency of Poland, social activism, social media, social movements, Yiddish language

1. Introduction

In 1927, a very famous and well respected professor of Warsaw University, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (Radwańska-Williams, 1991, 2006, 2011, forthcoming), published a long pamphlet titled *My Attitude Towards the Church* (Baudouin, 1927). This publication was, in fact, a scandalous act of public apostasy. In this presentation, I briefly summarize the content of his pamphlet, examine the personal and political reasons behind his act of apostasy, and discuss the relevance of this historical incident to today's society in Poland.

Apostasy is defined as the act of renunciation of one’s religious faith. In the Catholic Church, it amounts to self-excommunication. Because of his apostasy, Baudouin was eventually buried at the Evangelical-Reformed cemetery in Warsaw, rather than one of the main Catholic cemeteries that would have befitted his social status as a distinguished professor. What does he say in his pamphlet about his drastic act?

2. Baudouin's Declaration of Apostasy

The pamphlet reads at once like a public confession and a last will and testament. When he was a little boy, writes Baudouin, his faith was strong, but late in his teenage years, he

stopped going to church. He witnessed so much suffering in life, first and foremost by his mother, who lost ten of her fourteen children, that he could not follow a God who allows such suffering. In adulthood, he lived for many decades as an agnostic and yet he felt that he was not being true to himself, or being accepted by society as being his true self, because his identity papers classified him as a Catholic.

At that time in Poland, one's ID and passport stated one's religion. I have some indirect experience of this myself, because my grandfather, who was Catholic, was not permitted to marry my grandmother, who was Orthodox, until she had officially converted to Catholicism. Later, during the Second World War, my grandfather, having had experience with this issue, helped my grandmother's best friend ("Maria Renata Mayenowa...", n.d.) to convert her identity papers from Jewish to Christian, and that was how she survived the war.

In his public declaration of apostasy, Baudouin petitioned the municipal government of the city of Warsaw to remove the designation of "Catholic" from his identity papers, and instead write "nondenominational". The exact Polish term he used was "bezwyznaniowy", which can also be translated as "without faith" or "agnostic". He also expressed his expectation that this would create a problem for his future funeral, and he willed that his body be used for medical research.

3. Baudouin's Outspoken Character

Why did Baudouin make his apostasy public? Why did he not go gentle into that good night, even as he was conscious that perhaps the end of his life was drawing near? In fact, this publication was consistent with his notoriously meticulous and uncompromising character as a man and as a writer. We could say that he was a devotee of truth. He was a great linguist and a great humanist. A Pole of French descent; a polyglot in Polish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Sanskrit and Slovenian, he was equally at home in several countries, and he made huge contributions to general linguistics, Polish philology, Russian philology and Slovenian dialectology.

In addition to being a linguist, Baudouin was a political figure. In 1913 in imperial Russia, he spent several months in prison for advocating the rights of ethnic minorities (Kryński, 1921, p. xvi). In 1922 in newly independent Poland, he stood as a candidate for President on behalf of the party of ethnic minorities, and lost to Gabriel Narutowicz in the third of five rounds of voting. This loss turned out lucky for Baudouin, because Narutowicz was assassinated several days after his inauguration (Polonsky, 1972); but it may have been incredibly unlucky for world history, as I shall presently speculate.

Baudouin's distaste with the mandatory denotation of religion in identity papers was deeper than his own agnosticism. At that time in history, the designation of ethnic and religious identity in official identity papers created and perpetuated divisions within society. Some years earlier, Baudouin had expressed his political views in another pamphlet, titled *On the Issue of Rising Antisemitism* (Baudouin, 1911). Baudouin advocated that to integrate society, it would be advisable not only for ethnically Jewish people to learn Polish, but also for ethnically Polish people to study Yiddish (Krzywiec, 2016; Prokop-Janiec, 2013, p. 82). In the 1927 pamphlet, he blames the Catholic Church for condoning or even instigating the rising tide of antisemitism.

At that time in the first half of the twentieth century, a large proportion of the population of Poland was ethnically Jewish (Kriwaczek, 2005, p. 276). During the Second World War,

the vast majority of Poland's Jews perished during the Holocaust. How different would not only Polish history, but world history have been if Baudouin had indeed been elected as President of Poland? Would his liberal policies of integration, ethnic equality and secularism have been implemented? Would he have made an indelible mark on the world's political stage? Some years later, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, if the citizens' identity papers had not specified a person's ethnic identity and religion, would the Holocaust itself perhaps have been thwarted? Tragically, these questions remain forever speculative.

However, a lesson can be drawn from Baudouin's outspokenness and remarkable personality. It takes courage to challenge the established social and political order. People like Baudouin risk their social reputation when they raise challenging questions and objections. Yet they may go down in history as visionaries.

As fellow citizens, we should not shirk the quirky, the outspoken, the self-revealing, the seemingly unwise or unpragmatic, the earnest, the rebellious, the truth-seekers and the truth-challengers. In the instance of Baudouin, what may have been a scandalous act of apostasy in his day, contained a kernel of truth of historical prescience. History is often propelled forward by "outliers". As intercultural communication scholars who are devoted to comparing cultures and promoting understanding between them, we should be attuned to voices of dissent such as Baudouin's.

4. The Relevance of Baudouin to Polish Society Today

When I was pondering about the relevance of Baudouin to today's society, I came across some astonishing information. In the last few months (late 2020 - early 2021), Baudouin has become a cultural icon for young feminist protesters in Poland. Since the passing of the controversial restrictive abortion law in October 2020, there has been a movement of apostasy or deliberately leaving the ranks of the Catholic Church in protest against its stance on sexual issues and women's reproductive rights, which is perceived as abuse of political power. I should make my personal stance clear here that I am a practicing Catholic and I do not advocate apostasy. However, in regard to the topic of this paper, the present trend of protest-apostasy is an astounding development. It is quite possible that this would not be happening now without having had the historical precedent of Baudouin.

Based on documents, media reports, and discussion available on the internet, I have reconstructed the following timeline of recent events.

On 7 October 2015, the Conference of Polish Bishops issued a decree ("Uchwała nr 20/370/2015...") permitting a formal procedure of leaving the Catholic Church in cases of heresy, apostasy or schism. An adult person who has been baptized as a Catholic but who no longer wishes to take part in the communion of the Catholic Church must submit a written declaration, in person, to the parish priest of that person's place of residence, and undergo in person a consultation with the priest, whose duty it is to try to dissuade the applicant and to ascertain the applicant's free will; the original copy of the applicant's declaration is then kept in the archives of the parish, while a copy is sent to the curia of the diocese. The Catholic Church then instructs an annotation to be made to the applicant's record of baptism that this person has expressed his or her free will to leave the communion of the Catholic Church. Theologically speaking, this act does not annul the sacrament of baptism, but it does *de facto* amount to excommunication, and an additional penalty of formal excommunication may also be imposed, which affects, for example, one's ability to be married in the Church

or to receive a Church burial. However, if that person later in life in the face of imminent death expresses repentance, he or she may be forgiven and receive last rites and communion. If the person wishes to return to the Catholic Church earlier in life than in the face of imminent death, he or she must undergo a similar application procedure to the original act of apostasy, in order to gain permission to reverse the apostasy and remove the penalty of excommunication.

On 22 October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland, most of whose judges have been appointed by the conservative Law and Justice party, ruled against abortion in most cases except for rape, incest and when the mother's life is in danger ("Poland Abortion...", 2020). This means that abortion is prohibited even in cases when the fetus is found to have severe genetic abnormalities, and makes Polish abortion law one of the strictest in the European Union, alongside Malta.

In regard to this ban on abortions, United Nations human rights experts have expressed the opinion that: "It cannot be justified by invoking the protection of the right to life, as the right to life and all other human rights under international human rights law are accorded to those who have been born [...] Those who believe that personhood commences at the time of conception have the freedom to act in accordance with their beliefs but not to impose their beliefs on others through the legal system." ("Poland 'Slammed the Door Shut' ... ", 2020).

Since October 2020, there have been many protests, both in person and on social media, against this extremely restrictive abortion law (Mortensen & Reuters, 2021). While the street protest have been more visible, the social protests mediated by the Internet have been equally striking. The leftist political party named *Wiosna* (Spring) established an "apostasy counter" on the Internet, where people who have formally filed for apostasy can register their names publicly in protest against the Catholic Church ("Wiosna Biedronia... ", 2020). Ironically, these recent acts of public apostasy are not so much an expression of renunciation of faith, which is the theological definition of apostasy, but specifically of protest against the political power of the Catholic Church in Poland (Sidorski, 2020). It is in this context that commentators on the Internet have referred back to the historical precedent of the apostasy of the famous professor of linguistics, Baudouin de Courtenay, who criticized the Catholic Church before the Second World War (Sidorski, 2020).

Being a part of the European Union, Poland is in a democratically privileged position relative to some other countries in the world. There are no legal repercussions of apostasy other than the consequences of excommunication under canon law; and even under Catholic canon law, apostasy is reversible and does not incur any physical penalty, unlike under Sharia law in Islam ("Apostasy in Islam". n.d.). It is an act of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as articulated under Title II, Article 10, of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights ("Article 10", n.d.), which states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have described the very controversial, even taboo, act of apostasy as a social expression of freedom of conscience. As stated in the theme of this conference (*IAICS Online 2021*), "As we move further into the 21st century, issues of diversity and

multiculturalism are becoming increasingly complex. The constant flow of persons, cultures, and ideas between and among nations not only intensifies contact and connection among global citizens but also brings to the surface both emergent and perennial issues of difference, identity, and territory.[...] What does it mean to live in a multicultural society?" In the case of Poland, it has had to face this question repeatedly in its history. Today, as part of the European Union, Poland is a democratic country, and its citizens are cognizant of the freedoms that democracy brings. Polish citizens are free to travel and work in other countries and are in daily contact with other cultures. This freedom brings to the surface tensions between competing, perhaps even incompatible, values and beliefs. Like many European countries, Poland is struggling with issues of governance and social identity. Democracy is a guarantor of individual freedoms, whereas governments seek to legislate social norms. Individual acts of self-expression, especially in the days of social media, can catalyze social movements. We have yet to see where the current social movements will lead and how the present tensions will be resolved.

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This research was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of State Title VIII Program for Research and Training on Eastern Europe and the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union, for research conducted at the Summer Research Laboratory of the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center and the International and Area Studies Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.