

# Reviews

Acta Poloniae Historica  
88, 2003  
PL ISSN 0001 – 6829

Stanisław Bylina, *Chryścianizacja wsi polskiej u schyłku średniowiecza (The Christianisation of the Polish Countryside at the Close of the Middle Ages)*, Warszawa 2002, Instytut Historii PAN, 262 pp. ill., sum. in English and Russian.

The title of Stanisław Bylina's latest book seems to be a reply to the rather provocative but frequently posed question: "When, in point of fact, did the Poles become Christians?" The close of the Middle Ages is regarded as one of the most probable dates. But Bylina has something else in mind. He regards Christianisation as a continuous process which has been going on from the first contact with the Christian religion to the Church teaching and its reception in contemporary times. By the term "Christianisation" he means the conceptual work conducted by the Church hierarchy (declaration of the Church's missionary strategy in the decisions of bishops and synodal instructions, control of parish clergy, elaboration of models of religious teaching) as well as concrete pastoral work among the rural population. The epoch dealt with in the book, the late Middle Ages, is a period of special importance in the Christianisation of Polish village if only because the sources we have at our disposal make it possible to make generalisations and also because this period was followed by the Reformation, which is regarded as a turning point in the history of Christianity.

In his book Bylina sums up the results of many years of his studies on folk religiousness in Poland in the 14th and 15th centuries, a subject which he has already raised in such works as *Człowiek i zaświaty. Wizje kar pośmiertnych w Polsce średniowiecznej (Man and the Beyond. Visions of Punishments after Death in Medieval Poland)*, Warszawa 1992), *The Church and Folk Culture in Late Medieval Poland* ("Acta Poloniae Historica", vol. 68, 1993, pp. 27–42) and in the study *Wiara i pobożność zbiorowa (Faith and Collective Piety)*, in: *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej XIV–XV w.*, ed. B. Geremek, Warszawa 1997, pp. 403–450). In his new book the author uses the same well-tested and appreciated research method and the same style of historical writing, a condensed, matter-of-fact, very communicative style.

There is a tendency in research on Christianisation (in Polish historiography it is more frequent among scholars dealing with a later period) to examine the numerical aspect of the question: the percentage of the faithful going to communion, the parishioners' attendance at services, the number of people taking the sacrament of confirmation, the percentage of references to a saint in last wills, and even the annual fluctuations in the weight of wax offered to the Church by the faithful in the shape of candless. Why not denying the sense of such calculations, let us point out that Christianisation is first and foremost a quality, and it is quality that is discussed in the book. Even when the author scrupulously calculates the distance separating individual settlements from the parish church, he wants the reader to understand what it means that a parish area had 77 square kilometres. It can be said that Bylina starts his analysis where other scholars end it.

The construction of the book is subordinated to the author's qualitative approach. The book is made up of nine chapters which are preceded by *Introductory Remarks* in which the author discusses the theoretical principles of his research and the sources on which the book is based. These consist, first and foremost, of Church normative acts, texts of sermons, collections of documents and also belles lettres, court records, historical chronicles and iconographic

material. Most of the information collected by the author concerns the formation of the parish network; as regards other subjects, the book is, to a large extent, based on premises and comparisons, even though Bylina has made use of a wealth of sources. To illustrate the problems that faced the author let us point out that not a single protocol of a medieval church inspection in Poland has survived, even though we know that such inspections were carried out.

Let us stress that the author has confined his research to Christianisation processes among the peasants (including rural craftsmen) and tries to separate these processes from the pastoral work conducted among the noblemen, who were the most important users of village churches. The rural population which was under the direct influence of urban priests with their specific Christianisation potential is also outside the author's interest. Many villages in medieval Poland belonged to parishes which had their seat in a town and the sources that have survived make it impossible to establish whether a special pastoral strategy was applied in towns towards the parishioners who came from villages. The author points out, however, that it was the large and medium-sized towns that applied different pastoral methods while a parish church's influence in a small town did not differ much from the influence exerted by a well-equipped village parish.

The first chapter, *Conditions and Possibilities*, depicts the conditions in which village churches worked: the area of parishes, the distance the parishioners had to cover to reach their church, seasonal transport problems and the role of "Mass routes" which enabled the faithful to take part in worship. The author also discusses the question of parish coercion as well as appointments of parish priests in villages, the question of non-resident priest, the priests' failure to fulfil their duties and their intellectual level.

The second chapter, *Catechisation*, deals with rudimentary teaching on Sundays and holy days in the course of which the rural parishioners learned the basic prayers and the foundations of religious knowledge which was latter controlled on the occasion of Easter confession. The chapter also discusses the number of parish schools set up at village churches and the principles on which their work was based. In a separate chapter (Chapter 3) the author examines the evangelisation of the rural population; he explains how the contents of the *Gospels* were conveyed and made clear to the people. In order to depict the teaching methods Bylina shows how fragments of the *Gospels* were read and explained, writes about the popularisation and use of written postils and about the role of mural paintings and religious songs in the teaching. He also reconstructs the messages conveyed to village parishioners in various parts of the liturgical year, the information they received on Jesus' life and the Passion of Christ, the saints and Christian eschatology; he discusses the sins which were thought to be characteristic sins of the peasants.

In Chapter 4, *The Religious Practices and Duties of a Good Christian*, the author presents the basic religious duties of the faithful, analysing them from the point of view of the requirements the peasants had to meet. He shows how the Church saw to it that the parishioners participated in religious services, confessed at Easter and received other sacraments. He explains how the duty of refraining from work and amusement on holy days was interpreted in villages. He also analyses the question of tithes, especially the religious meaning ascribed to them by the Church.

In Chapter 5, *Penance and Church Punishments*, Bylina raises the little known subject of the various kinds of penance imposed by confessors on the penitents. He analyses individual and collective excommunication, the reasons for its use and its ceremonial and practical aspects. These are questions of great importance for the history of religiousness because they concern mutual relations between the parishioner and the Church. In rural conditions, where religiousness was of a collective character and religious conformism was very important, it was individual penance and punishment that made the individual the subject in a

religious act. It may be assumed that in a way this forced the individual to reflect on his actions.

Chapter 6, *The Calendar of Village Parishioners*, deals with the role of the liturgical calendar in village life and its links with the traditional agricultural calendar. The author analyses the syllabic calendars which facilitated a mnemotechnical mastery of the liturgical calendar and shows the influence exerted on them by folk religiousness. This helps him to depict the mechanisms by which time was Christianised in the rural environment at the close of the Middle Ages. The Christianisation of space is the subject of the seventh chapter which depicts the role of the church building, the cemetery and the belfry in shaping the symbolic space of the village. The author also draws attention to the significance of processions round the fields, the presence of Christian signs in uninhabited areas, the religious symbolism of frontiers and toponymy of a Christian character.

Chapter 8, *The Meeting with Folk Culture*, deals with the important question of transition from paganism to Christianity. According to the author, "paganism" was only a concept of theological rhetoric in the 14th and 15th centuries. What was called "paganism" was in fact traditional culture (p. 171). The attitude of the Church to this phenomenon varied. The Church tolerated family rites as long as the faithful observed religious ceremonies. But a sphere of conflict did exist. This was due to the fact that theologians did not know much about folk culture, used clichés and generalisations. The main reason why folk rites were criticised was that they took place at the very time when a pious Christian should have prayed (Whitsun or the period of Lent). The condemnation of the nature of a rite was only an offshoot of the former objection and was frequently exaggerated (clergymen suspected that the exclamations accompanying Midsummer Day dances were names of pagan gods). The author emphasises that folk culture was something alien to the Church hierarchy and Church intellectuals (the persons whose written testimonies we have), which does not mean that it was alien to the parish clergymen whose training in a cathedral school did not last long and who spent the rest of their lives in a provincial place. This may be the reason for the Church's "everyday toleration" of folk culture. Tolerant behaviour is mentioned in sources, e.g. the case of a parish priest who did not object to his parishioners collecting embers from the fire consecrated on Holy Saturday, even though he knew that they would probably be used for magic (p. 185).

The last, ninth chapter entitled *Christian Peasants* is in fact a summing up. The author depicts the peasants' participation in religious cult, their attitude to God, to the saints and the Church's injunctions. However, Bylina does not define the peasants' religiousness for — as he emphasises — their religiousness was made up of various cultural layers. He only tries to define the results of the Christianisation work carried out by the Church in villages at the close of the Middle Ages. He avoids simplifications and groundless generalisations and has doubts about the rural parishioners' universal participation in the religious cult celebrated in churches. On the other hand, he emphasises that there is evidence that at the end of the period under review some parishioners criticised parish priests' negligence in the fulfilment of their duties. We can therefore assume that religious practices were assimilated to such an extent that they became a tradition, a custom. It was the same with the sacraments, in particular with baptism, confession and Easter communion. The knowledge of prayers was probably rather weak; practically nothing is known about the peasants praying outside the church. The peasants' participation in pilgrimages to sanctuaries and to the spontaneously emerging "miraculous places" which were not recognised by the Church but bore a definite Christian mark, is also a measure of the Christianisation of the rural population. In conclusion the author cites sources which indicate that the peasants assimilated the foundations of Christian eschatology.

The book paints a picture of village Christianity at the close of the Middle Ages in a detailed way, but at the same time it is a synthesis of the question. In this respect it is a pioneering work for so far we have been receiving only

fragmentary or at most partial studies. This is why this is a work of fundamental importance. The book can be an inspiration not only to medievalists but first and foremost to scholars engaged in research into religious culture in general. The author has shown that in the 14th and 15th centuries Polish ecclesiastic élites were not greatly interested in the peasants, the most numerous social group of the faithful. The instructions addressed to them were of a general character; the clergy did not realise the specific character of pastoral work in the villages and generally speaking, the Church did not develop a clear Christianisation strategy addressed to the rural population. The situation did not change until the end of the 16th century, but even the plans of pastoral work among the peasants during the Counter-Reformation were vague and to a great extent repeated the solutions and requirements of the medieval Church. Would it not then be worth while to examine the essence of the Christianisation process in a wider chronological perspective?

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