

*Agnieszka Pasieka*

## **Hierarchy and Pluralism: Living Religious Difference in Catholic Poland**

*Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave & Macmillan 2015. 261 + xix pp. ISBN: 978 1 137 50052 6. £ 60.*

**REVIEWED BY Eileen Barker, London School of Economics/INFORM, England**

Let me start by declaring that this is one of the best monographs I have ever read. In it, Dr Pasieka tells us about her ethnographic study of a cluster of villages in the District of Rozstaje in southeast Poland near the Slovakian border. Due to historical circumstances, the area is, ethnically and linguistically, inhabited by a Polish majority and a sizable Lemko minority – all of whom are Polish citizens. Generally speaking, the Poles are likely to be Roman Catholics, whilst the Lemkos tend to be either members of the Orthodox Church or, alternatively, Greek Catholics (sometimes referred to as Uniates), who owe their allegiance to the Pope, but follow an Eastern rite that is virtually indistinguishable from that observed by the Orthodox Lemkos. To complicate matters further, Rozstaje plays host to a number of Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. There is also a small handful of Buddhists, and an amiable atheist who enjoys the company of the Orthodox and Greek Catholics as well as that of Pentecostals and Adventists, but is unequivocal in expressing his distaste for Roman Catholic priests and devout Roman Catholics.

The title of the book provides us with its main focus. Rozstaje is religiously, ethnically and socially pluralistic, and, on the whole, the villagers appear to live together in exemplary harmony. Out of respect for their neighbours, the Orthodox do not work on Roman Catholic holidays, and the Roman Catholics do not work on Orthodox holidays. Numerous examples of neighbourly actions can be observed. Doors are left unlocked so that anyone can drop in for a chat or to make sure that the occupants are alright. A local grammar school offers three optional religion classes: Roman Catholicism, Greek Catholicism and Orthodoxy. In addition to Polish, it provides four supplementary language classes: English, German, Lemko and Ukrainian. There is a significant amount of intermarriage, with a spouse changing his or her religion to that of the partner on occasion, but it is not unusual for a family to attend different churches on alternate Sundays.

But despite the harmonious relations and mutual respect that the villagers display, Rozstaje is by no means a community of equals. Some are clearly more equal than others – or, perhaps more accurately, some are considered more normal or natural than the others. There is a distinctly hierarchical underpinning to the pluralism. Poles are undoubtedly in the superior position, and it is taken for granted that it is normal – natural even – for a 'real' Pole to be a Roman Catholic. There is, moreover, a (frequently implicit) pecking order in which, while Roman Catholics consider themselves to be superior to the Orthodox, the latter will see themselves as superior to the Greek Catholics, who, in turn consider themselves superior to, respectively, the Pentecostals, the Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses (and, it would appear, there is a general agreement among villagers that they are lucky there are no Muslims in the region). Interestingly, the further up the hierarchy one goes, the less interest there is in theological, as opposed to ethnic, cultural or presumed historical, differences.

The incident that Dr Pasieka selects to illustrate the tensions that can come to the fore arose when it was suggested that the signs proclaiming the villages' names should be printed not only in Polish but also in the Lemko language, which has a Cyrillic alphabet. The substantial opposition that this met from a significant section of the Polish majority meant that not all the

villages succeeded in getting the necessary number of votes in favour of the addition, giving rise to some considerable mistrust and hostility amongst neighbours.

But the theoretical analysis underlying this story is not to discover whether it is more accurate to view the inhabitants of Rozstaje as living either in harmony or in tension with their ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously differing neighbours. It is, rather, to recognise the existence of a phenomenon that Dr Pasieka defines as *hierarchical pluralism*, 'emphasizing the constant tension between pluralism and horizontal relations, on the one hand, and hierarchy and vertical relations, on the other' (p. 213). Hierarchical pluralism can, moreover, "be understood as an affirmation of good social relations and respect for others' beliefs and practices, but also as a cover for inequalities and dominance" (ibid.).

Throughout the book Dr Pasieka stresses and illustrates the importance of studying religion through understanding how it is *lived* by people, rather than looking at official dogmas or listening to what theological authorities say are the beliefs and practices of a particular faith. Although she clearly knows her way around the relevant literature, Dr Pasieka uses the insights (and errors) of others to enhance her findings, rather than letting the experts guide her story – as is all too often the case in doctoral dissertations. There are a few minor typographical errors, but the English is exemplary – jargon free, yet rich and evocative. By the end of the book, we feel that we know the villagers as individuals, with their different perspectives and different roles within their community. In short, she tells a convincing story which is always interesting and provides an excellent example of how to conduct productive fieldwork. I recommend the book without any hesitation whatsoever to students, academics, and lay persons with the slightest interest in learning about religions and how people live them. As I wrote at the start of this review, *Hierarchy and Pluralism* is one of the best monographs I have ever read.