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# Religion as *Mētis*: Catholicism and the Erosion of Authoritarian Rule in Poland

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The literature on institutional stickiness treats *mētis*— the local knowledge, values, and practices that constitute a society's deepest identity — as a constraint on reform, explaining why beneficial institutions imposed from outside fail to take root. We develop the symmetric implication. Because stickiness is not equivalent to institutional quality, a sufficiently potent indigenous and endogenous *mētis* can do more than withhold compliance from an imposed order: It can become an affirmative source of organized counter-institutional action. Religion can be a particularly potent form of *mētis* for this purpose, and we specify three mutually reinforcing conditions under which it is: religious homogeneity, a binding effect converting conviction into costly collective action, and an organizational carrier institutionally independent of a regime it opposes ideologically. We distinguish throughout between Catholic *mētis*, the informal order, and the Church that carried and operationalized it. The argument is tested against the within-case variation supplied by the failed Polish risings of 1956, 1968, 1970, and 1976, and against Hungary, where a church that traded independence for the right to operate produced no comparable movement. Our outcome is the emergence and persistence of a mass autonomous opposition capable of making negotiated regime change possible, not the timing of the 1989 collapse itself; the account thus complements rather than displaces explanations resting on Soviet reform and economic decline.

## 1. Introduction

On June 2, 1979, on the vigil of Pentecost, a Polish pope stood in Warsaw's Victory Square before a crowd numbering in the hundreds of thousands and closed his homily by calling down the Holy Spirit upon his country: "Let your Spirit come down! Let your Spirit come down! And renew the face of the earth. Of this Land" (Felak 2020, 30). The words were not his own invention. They are a refrain recited with Psalm 104 and a standard part of the Catholic liturgy for Pentecost Sunday, which every Pole in the square already knew. They carried a second meaning besides, because in Polish the word for *earth* and the word

for *land* are the same, so that the petition to renew the face of the earth was simultaneously a petition to renew *this* land (Felak 2020, 30). Nothing in the sentence was actionable, and the authorities could not answer it. Within two years the membership of the independent trade union Solidarity had reached ten million (Kubow 2013, 12). Within a decade the Polish People's Republic had ceased to exist.

Lech Wałęsa, Solidarity's leader and Poland's first democratically elected president, later put the matter without qualification: "Fifty percent of the collapse of communism is his [Pope John Paul II's] doing." More than a year after the pope spoke, Wałęsa recalled, "We were able to organize 10 million people for strikes, protests and negotiations. Earlier we tried, I tried, and we couldn't do it" (Kraszewski 2012, 45).

That last observation is the puzzle this paper takes up. Earlier they had tried and failed. Poles rose against the regime in Poznań in 1956, in the streets in March 1968, in the Baltic ports in December 1970, and across the country in June 1976, and each rising was absorbed by some combination of force and price concessions (Felak 2020, 5). Economic grievance was chronic, repression was constant, and Poland was as Catholic in 1956 as it was in 1980. Explanations that appeal to standing conditions—the inefficiency of central planning, the weakening capacity of the state for repression, international pressure, elite conflict—cannot distinguish the attempt that succeeded from the four that did not.

The dominant answer in economics to why some societies prosper and others do not is that institutions matter: Economies thrive when supported by legal and political arrangements that facilitate exchange, lower the transaction costs of conflict, and reward investment and innovation (North 1990). The harder question, and the one that has proved more stubborn, is why good institutions cannot simply be installed where they are absent (Boettke et al. 2008). Here the concept of *mētis* has done the explanatory work. *Mētis* refers to the local knowledge, skills, customs, and conventions that a society accumulates through practice rather than design (Boettke et al. 2008; Scott 1998). Institutions that fit a society's *mētis* stick; institutions imposed against it do not.

That literature has run in one direction. *Mētis* appears in it almost exclusively as an obstacle to reform—the reason transplanted constitutions, imported legal codes, and externally designed development programs fail to take root. Yet Boettke et al. (2008) are explicit that stickiness is not the same as goodness.

An institution can be ruinous and stick, or beneficial and fail. If that is right, the argument has a symmetric half that has gone largely unexplored. A *mētis* strong enough to repel good institutions imposed from outside can do more than withhold compliance from bad ones: It can become the basis on which a society organizes institutions of its own. This paper develops that half, and argues that religion can be a particularly potent form of *mētis* for the purpose, under conditions we specify.

One distinction is needed before the argument can be stated cleanly. *Mētis* is an informal order by definition, while a church is a formal organization with hierarchy, property, and appointed officers. We therefore distinguish three levels: *Catholic mētis*, the inherited knowledge, norms, and devotional practice; *Catholicism as an informal institutional complex*, which grows out of that *mētis* and is the indigenously introduced endogenous institution; and the *Church*, the formal organization that carries the complex and converts its legitimacy into collective-action capacity. The interaction across those levels is the mechanism we propose.

The conditions are three, and they are mutually reinforcing rather than individually necessary. The faith must be shared widely enough to give appeals national reach; it must bind adherents tightly enough that they will bear real costs; and its organizational carrier must be both ideologically opposed to the regime and institutionally independent of it. Where all three hold, religion supplies what an isolated population attempting to coordinate against a state otherwise lacks: a shared moral vocabulary, a dense network that makes participation visible, and an organizational infrastructure the regime does not control.

Poland is the natural test, and the case permits an unusually direct engagement with the framework this paper builds on. Poland is one of the four illustrations in Boettke et al. (2008), where its successful post-Communist transition is contrasted with Russia's failure and explained by the commercial *mētis* that survived the Communist period. That account explains why Poland's post-1989 reforms held. It does not explain why Poland entered 1989 with an organized opposition capable of negotiating a transition. The argument advanced here supplies that half: A second and deeper *mētis*, Polish Catholicism, gave the society the means to build a parallel institutional order that the commercial *mētis* of the transition later inherited. Hungary serves as the counter-case. It was Catholic, it was Communist, and its Church, having traded independence for the right to operate, produced no comparable movement.

We should be explicit about the outcome, since the paper's reach depends on it. We explain the emergence and persistence of a mass autonomous opposition capable of making negotiated regime change possible, not the timing of the 1989 collapse, whose causes—Soviet reform above all—this paper does not adjudicate. The accounts are complements: Ours explains why Poland possessed Solidarity when the opening arrived.

The question, then, is this: Under what conditions is religion not merely conservative, but revolutionary? The conventional treatment casts religion as a stabilizing force, a source of legitimacy for whatever authority exists. Poland shows it can be the opposite, and the aim here is to say precisely when. By *revolutionary* we mean something specific and deliberately bounded: not that religion independently topples regimes, but that it supplies the basis on which a society constructs autonomous institutions capable of contesting an imposed order and, when an opening comes, of negotiating its replacement.

Methodologically the paper combines the two qualitative strategies Skarbek (2020) recommends for institutional analysis, in the tradition of analytic narrative that Skarbek and Skarbek (2023) survey, and on the premise that economic analysis is a way of thinking rather than a way of testing (Leeson 2020). The Poland–Hungary comparison is a structured counter-case in the most-similar spirit, holding regime type, confession, and the early pattern of repression roughly constant so that the church–state relationship varies against a common background. We stop short of calling it a controlled design, for reasons set out in section 4.3. The treatment of the risings of 1956 through 1980 is process tracing, following the mechanism within a single case across episodes in which the outcome differs. Both suit an outcome explained through the mechanisms that produced it rather than through statistical association. Section 2 sets out the history of the Church under Polish Communism and the risings that preceded Solidarity; section 3 develops the theory and the three conditions; section 4 tests them against Poland condition by condition, folds in the Hungarian counter-case, and addresses rival explanations; section 5 concludes.

# 2. Background: The Church and Communism in Poland

## *2.1. An Imposed Order and the Institution That Survived It*

In 1945, following the collapse of the Nazi occupation, a Communist-oriented regime backed heavily by Soviet political and military forces assumed control of the government in Poland and gradually consolidated its hold over the political organs of decision-making and, beyond this, over the totality of the organs of influence, control, and manipulation (Dinka 1966, 332). The new order was not chosen by Poles and was not built out of Polish materials. It was installed under the protection of a foreign army and maintained in conformity with the requirements of a foreign power.

The regime disposed of opposition quickly (Dinka 1966, 332). It decimated the most significant opposition groups—the former political elites, the landowners, and the army—with a single exception: the Roman Catholic Church (Dinka 1966, 333). Several features made the Church uniquely difficult to absorb. Poland emerged from the war almost 96 percent Catholic, and the Church carried an excellent record of resistance to the Nazi occupation, having suffered alongside the population to the extent that nearly a fifth of all priests and religious lost their lives, which bolstered its reputation as guardian of the nation (Hruby 1982, 319). The Church could point to its attachment to national cultural traditions and its close association with Polish history (Dinka 1966, 333). Unlike most of the other satellites, therefore, Poland faced the Communist regime with an institution that had a national character and was associated with the most powerful forces of the country (Dinka 1966, 334). In the postwar period the Church in Poland was the only organization that could successfully compete with the regime for the allegiance of the Polish people (Dinka 1966, 333), and the regime understood this: The Communists had to identify themselves with the basic claims of Polish nationalism and aspire to replace the Church as the spokesman of Poland (Dinka 1966, 334).

The attempt to do so was systematic. The regime denied permits to reopen many Catholic schools that had operated before the war and systematically liquidated those still functioning (Dinka 1966, 336). In July 1946 it established an office that effected an almost complete censorship of the Catholic press, which during the interwar period had published some 250 newspapers and periodicals (Dinka 1966, 344). In 1950 the relief agency Caritas was disbanded, shrines were shut,

and Church estates were seized; by the spring of that year at least five hundred priests and religious had been arrested, and the secret police had begun placing priests and prominent Catholic laymen under surveillance (Hruby 1982, 320). Stefan Wyszyński, primate of Poland from 1948 until 1981, was himself arrested in 1953 and served three years in prison (Gacka 2009, 85, 90). The regime's ambition was explicit: In 1959 it declared that Polish atheism had to fight with the Catholic hierarchy for control over the souls of the whole nation (Laba 1991, 84).

None of it worked. The Church emerged from the 1950s diminished in resources but intact in authority, and in 1966 it celebrated a thousand years of Polish Christianity in a national observance the regime could neither prevent nor co-opt (Pokrzywa 2011, 5).

## *2.2. Four Risings Without a Revolution*

Solidarity was not Poland's first attempt to confront the regime, and the earlier attempts are essential to understanding it. Alone in the Soviet bloc, Poland saw a succession of uprisings spanning four decades. Workers erupted in Poznań in 1956, in the Baltic ports in December 1970, and in cities across Poland in June 1976; students demonstrated in March 1968. This unrest was driven primarily by economic grievances—wages, working conditions, food prices, and shortages—and was calmed each time by a combination of violent repression and concessions (Felak 2020, 5). The Poznań rising, which demanded higher wages and lower prices, was violent and cost more than fifty lives (Kubow 2013, 6). The December 1970 strikes on the coast were put down by force. The June 1976 price increases brought a worker reaction both broad and deep across Poland, with literally hundreds of strikes (Laba 1991, 94).

Polish collective memory treats these episodes as a single sequence, summarized in a formula that has become standard: August 1980 equals June 1956 plus March 1968 plus December 1970 plus June 1976 (Kubow 2013, 5). Each rising failed on its own terms. Prices were rolled back, leaders were arrested, order was restored, and the regime continued.

Two developments in the 1970s changed what a fifth rising could become. The first was the appearance of an organized secular opposition. The party's response to the 1976 strikes was vindictive enough that a group of Warsaw intellectuals formed the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR) to raise funds for the medical and legal defense of the state's victims, and within a year the group had

broadened its aims (Laba 1991, 94). The second, and for this paper the more consequential, was a change in the posture of the Church. Until 1976 the Church had carefully avoided associating itself with any movement outside itself. After the June upheavals it declared its support for KOR, and tacit cooperation between the Church and the secular opposition began (Hruby 1982, 322). The contrast with the previous decade is stark: Roman Laba observes that the Church was absent from the scene in December 1970—only one church on the coast appears to have held a memorial Mass for the December dead—yet by the late 1970s it had assumed an institutional role as a political sanctuary for the society (Laba 1991, 84–85).

### *2.3. The Pilgrimage and the Movement*

In October 1978 the College of Cardinals elected Karol Wojtyła, archbishop of Kraków, as the first non-Italian pope in four and a half centuries, the last having been Adrian VI in 1523 (Kraszewski 2012, 27). The reaction in Poland was, in George Weigel's much-quoted judgment, evidence that Poland was not a Communist state but a Catholic nation saddled with Communism (Kraszewski 2012, 28).

John Paul II returned to Poland in June 1979 for nine days. Over the course of the visit more than a third of the country's population, some thirteen million citizens, saw the pope in person, and those who could not had access to radio or television, ensuring that virtually all of Poland heard his message (Kraszewski 2012, 38). At Victory Square in Warsaw, on the vigil of Pentecost, he preached that it is impossible to understand the human person fully without Christ, and that human dignity, mission, and final destiny are all bound up with him (Felak 2020, 29)—a claim about the nature of the person that the regime's official anthropology could not accommodate. The Soviet leadership had anticipated the danger. In the months before the visit it circulated instructions stating that the pope was their enemy (Kraszewski 2012, 40).

Fourteen months later, on August 14, 1980, Lech Wałęsa climbed the fence of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk with seventeen thousand striking workers behind him (Kraszewski 2012, 42). Within a week much of the country was in a strike-induced shutdown. The Gdańsk Agreement that followed recognized Solidarity as the first legal independent trade union in the Eastern bloc and conceded the right to strike, freedom of speech, and access to the media (Kraszewski 2012, 42). By 1981 membership had reached ten million (Kubow 2013, 12).

The regime answered in December 1981 with martial law. Tens of thousands were harassed, beaten, or arrested, Wałęsa among them (Kraszewski 2012, 43). Solidarity was driven underground, and the suppression appeared for a time to have succeeded.

It had not. John Paul II returned in June 1983 and again in June 1987, each visit reinforcing the movement's legitimacy and the regime's isolation; martial law was lifted a month after the second pilgrimage, and Wałęsa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that October (Kraszewski 2012, 43). Wildcat strikes in 1988 and 1989 forced the government to share power with a re-legalized Solidarity (Felak 2020, 132), the Round Table Talks opened in February 1989 (Kraszewski 2012, 44), and on June 4 Solidarity won ninety-nine of the hundred Senate seats—the first non-Communist government in Eastern Europe since Yalta (Kubow 2013, 14).

### *2.4. The Question*

Political economy conventionally casts religion as a conservative force: a source of legitimacy for existing authority, a brake on disruptive change. The Polish case does not fit. The Church here did not counsel patience or dissent quietly from the margins; it supplied the meeting space, the relief network, the communications channel, and the moral vocabulary of an organized mass movement against the state. Nor does Catholicism as such explain the outcome, since Hungary was also a Catholic country under a Communist regime whose Church arrived at an accommodation lasting until the system expired. The same faith, facing a comparable adversary, produced opposite results.

The question this paper takes up follows directly: Under what conditions is religion not merely conservative, but revolutionary? Section 3 develops an answer within the framework of institutional stickiness, and section 4 tests it against the Polish and Hungarian cases.

## 3. Theory: *Mētis* and Foreign-Introduced Exogenous Institutions

### *3.1. Institutional Stickiness and the Origins of Institutions*

Boettke et al. (2008) explain why institutional reforms that look identical on paper succeed in one setting and fail in another. Their answer turns on where an institution comes from. Institutions fall into three categories: foreign-introduced

exogenous (FEX), indigenously introduced exogenous (IEX), and indigenously introduced endogenous (IEN). The foreign/indigenous distinction tracks who designed the institution. The exogenous/endogenous distinction tracks how it came to be: Exogenous institutions are "constructed and imposed from above," the creations of governments or of bodies like the IMF and the World Bank, whereas endogenous institutions "emerge spontaneously as the result of individuals' actions, but are not formally designed" (Boettke et al. 2008, 335–36). Because spontaneous emergence requires participants already embedded in a society, endogenous institutions are necessarily indigenous.

What separates the three categories is their relationship to *mētis*. Borrowed from the ancient Greeks by way of Scott (1998), *mētis* is "characterized by local knowledge resulting from practical experience" and comprises "skills, culture, norms, and conventions, which are shaped by the experiences of the individual" (Boettke et al. 2008, 338). It cannot be written down as a systematic set of instructions; knowledge of *mētis* "is gained only through experience and practice" (Boettke et al. 2008, 338). Scott frames the same concept as a contrast in kinds of knowledge, setting "the forms of knowledge embedded in local experience" against "the more general, abstract knowledge deployed by the state and its technical agencies" (Scott 1998, 311).

*Mētis* is what makes institutions durable. "The presence or absence of *mētis* explains the stickiness of various types of institutions," and *mētis* may be understood as "the glue that gives institutions their stickiness" (Boettke et al. 2008, 338). IEN institutions are the stickiest because they emerge directly out of *mētis*; IEX institutions, designed by insiders who at least share the local context, are stickier than FEX institutions designed by outsiders who do not. This ordering, $S_{IEN} > S_{IEX} > S_{FEX}$, grounds what Boettke et al. (2008) call the *regression theorem*: The stickiness of an institution today is a function of its stickiness in the previous period, regressing back to the moment of its emergence, when its durability was fixed by whether it arose as an IEN, IEX, or FEX institution. The practical implication is a screening test for reformers: "If the proposed change cannot be traced back to an IEN institution, it should not be attempted" (Boettke et al. 2008, 345).

The empirical program built on this framework has run in a single direction. Formal rules succeed only when embedded in a preexisting informal order (Williamson 2009), and institutional transplants fail where the receiving society's practices give the transplanted rules a different meaning than their designers

intended (Couyoumdjian 2012). Recent work extends the framework to constitutional instability, arguing that neglect of and hostility toward the de facto rules people actually use to govern themselves perpetuates cycles of failed constitutional order (Basir et al. 2024). In every case *mētis* appears as an obstacle: the reason good institutions cannot be made to take root.

## *3.2. The Inversion:* Mētis *Against Bad Institutions*

The literature's one-directional emphasis is a choice of application, not a property of the theory. Boettke et al. (2008) are explicit on the point: "In our framework, institutional stickiness is not equivalent to institutional 'goodness'" (Boettke et al. 2008, 345). Stickiness measures the fit between an institution and the *mētis* of the people living under it, and nothing in that relation privileges institutions that promote prosperity. An institution may be efficient and fail to stick; it may be ruinous and stick for centuries.

### MĒTIS *AND ITS ORGANIZATIONAL CARRIER*

A distinction must be drawn here that the literature can leave implicit but this argument cannot. *Mētis* is an informal order, unwritten and transmitted through practice; the Roman Catholic Church has hierarchy, canon law, property, appointed officers, and a foreign sovereign. Treating them as one object would let the argument slide between something that qualifies as IEN by construction and a formal organization that plainly does not. We therefore work with three levels, since *mētis* is not itself an institution in this framework but what gives institutions their stickiness.

*Catholic mētis* is the base layer: the inherited local knowledge, norms, devotional practices, and moral vocabulary that Poles acquired through experience rather than instruction. *Catholicism as an informal institutional complex*—the parish calendar, the customary obligations, the shared expectations about what a Catholic Pole does and does not do—is the indigenously introduced endogenous institution, and it is sticky precisely because it emerged out of that *mētis*. The *Church* is the formal organizational carrier: hierarchy, clergy, property, canon law, an external sovereign, and the capacity to convene, communicate, and provide.

The mechanism runs across all three. The *mētis* makes the informal complex sticky; the informal complex lends the Church a legitimacy no decree could manufacture; the Church, so long as it remains independent, converts that

legitimacy into collective-action capacity. Remove any level and the chain breaks. *Mētis* and informal complex without an independent carrier yield sentiment and private dissent, which is Poland before 1976; a carrier without them is an organization nobody follows; a carrier captured by the state retains the doctrine and loses the capacity, which is Hungary after 1964.

### *SORTING THE POLISH CASE*

With those levels in place the case sorts cleanly. The Communist order installed in 1945 was designed abroad, imposed from above, and maintained under a foreign army (section 2.1): a foreign-introduced exogenous institution in the strict sense. Polish Catholicism, as an informal institutional complex resting on centuries of accumulated *mētis*, sits at the opposite corner of the typology—by the regression theorem, the stickiest category set against the least sticky. The question is what happens when the two are placed in opposition with an independent organization standing between them.

The symmetric implication has gone largely undeveloped, and the interesting half of it is not that an imposed order becomes harder to sustain. It is that the *mētis* stops being merely an obstacle and becomes a resource: a basis on which people organize. That distinction is worth making precise, because Scott's cases might appear to have occupied this ground already. His studies of Soviet collectivization, compulsory villagization in Tanzania, the planned city, and scientific forestry describe high-modernist schemes defeated by the practical knowledge they ignored: "Freehold tenure, planned cities, collective farms, *ujamaa* villages, and industrial agriculture, for all their ingeniousness, represented fairly simple interventions into enormously complex natural and social systems" (Scott 1998, 352). In each, *mētis* worked through *noncompliance*—evasion, foot-dragging, the withholding of local knowledge on which the scheme depended. The schemes failed; nothing was built in their place.

What the Polish case adds is *mētis* as an affirmative basis for building rival institutions. Catholic *mētis*, carried by an independent Church, did not merely make Communist projects unworkable. It supplied the shared vocabulary, the meeting places, and the moral authority out of which Poles constructed a parallel set of institutions—an independent trade union, an underground press, a relief network, a commemorative calendar—that the state could neither absorb nor destroy. The contrast is not between schemes that fail and regimes that fall. It is between *mētis* that generates noncompliance and *mētis* that generates organization. Table 1 situates the argument.

Table 1. *Mētis*, institutional quality, and what *mētis* does. The bottom row is the paper's contribution: not that *mētis* can make an imposed institution fail, which the middle row already establishes, but that it can serve as the organizing basis for institutions built against the imposed order.

| | **Institutions promoting prosperity** | **Institutions obstructing prosperity** |
|---|---|---|
| *Mētis* accommodates the institution | Postwar reconstruction in Japan and West Germany; post-1989 Polish privatization (Boettke et al. 2008) | Not addressed here |
| *Mētis* withholds compliance | Reconstruction in Bosnia; Russian privatization (Boettke et al. 2008) | Soviet collectivization; *ujamaa* villagization; the planned city; scientific forestry (Scott 1998) |
| *Mētis* supplies the basis for rival institutions | Not addressed here | Communist Poland (this paper) |

The case also lets this paper extend Boettke et al. (2008) on their own terrain. Poland is one of their four illustrations: They contrast its successful transition with Russia's failure and explain the difference by a commercial *mētis* that survived Communism—a tolerated private sector, and close to 80 percent of farms never collectivized (Boettke et al. 2008, 350–51). That explains why Poland's post-1989 reforms stuck. It does not explain why Poland arrived at 1989 already possessing an organized opposition able to negotiate the transition. The present argument supplies that half: A second and far more encompassing *mētis*, and the informal Catholic complex resting on it, gave Poles the means to build a parallel institutional order in the decade before the commercial *mētis* was called upon. The accounts are sequential rather than competing.

### *3.3. Religion as* Mētis

Religion is an unusually strong candidate for IEN status. It is not designed by any formal authority; it propagates through family, parish, and habit; and its content is transmitted through precisely the practical, unwritten, experiential channels that define *mētis*. Where religious practice structures the daily rhythms of a community, shaping education, moral reasoning, social bonds, and collective memory, it satisfies the defining criteria of knowledge rooted in lived experience rather than in abstract design.

Two features of religion as a political resource matter for the argument. The first is that its political valence is not fixed. Scholarship on religion and politics has long recognized religion's "double function" of legitimating both privilege and protest, and the literature contains well-developed accounts of religion as a conservative force and as a progressive one (Williams 1996, 370). A theory that treats religion as inherently stabilizing, or inherently subversive, is therefore underspecified from the outset; the interesting question is what determines which function obtains.

The second is that the answer appears to turn on circumstance rather than doctrine. Adapting Swidler, Williams (1996, 371) observes that in "settled" times culture "holds" people, binding them to legitimate ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, whereas in "unsettled" times ways of life lose their taken-for-granted status and become contested. An imposed institutional order is precisely what makes a period unsettled. This is the same intuition the stickiness framework expresses in institutional terms, and it suggests that religion becomes politically potent when an exogenous order forces a society's deepest commitments from the background into open contention.

The Polish material bears this out in outline. Roman Catholicism has for centuries been an important part of Polish national identity, and the Church a symbol of freedom and opposition to foreign oppressors; when the Polish state ceased to exist after the partition of 1795, the Church became the guardian of national identity, and membership in it constituted a form of resistance to foreign rule (Eberts 1998, 818). Nor is the Polish case isolated. Catholicism contributed materially to democratization across several regions in the latter half of the twentieth century (Philpott 2004).

Religion is not automatically a potent *mētis*, however. It may be nominal, fragmented, or aligned with the state, and in each case its capacity to resist is diminished or absent. The remainder of this section specifies the conditions that distinguish a religion capable of grounding an autonomous counter-institutional order from one that is not.

### *3.4. Three Conditions*

We identify three mutually reinforcing conditions whose conjunction makes religious *mētis* particularly capable of sustaining organized mass resistance to an imposed order. We do not claim that any is necessary. Religiously grounded resistance has emerged where one or another is attenuated, and the comparative

literature reviewed below documents such cases. The claim is about potency rather than necessity: Where all three obtain, as in Poland, the combination is distinctively powerful, and where one is removed, as in Hungary, the capacity degrades sharply.

#### *3.4.1. CONDITION 1: HOMOGENEITY*

The first condition is that the religion be dominant within the society, practiced or respected by at least a majority. Where a faith pervades the customs, education, moral reasoning, and collective memory of a whole nation, it constitutes a shared foundation that a regime cannot easily displace. Homogeneity supplies the scale required for mass mobilization: A regime can suppress a sect, but it cannot make war on the faith of an entire people without undermining its own legitimacy (Lowden 1993).

The qualification runs in two directions. Religious minorities can mount formidable resistance without demographic dominance: In the Netherlands during the Holocaust, minority communities were more likely to protect persecuted Jews than their majority-religion counterparts, because minority status generated denser networks, stronger in-group trust, and better screening against betrayal (Braun 2016, 2018). Examining ninety-nine civil resistance campaigns between 1951 and 2011, Nepstad (2021) likewise finds religious elite defections unnecessary for success, though religious support supplies critical resources. Homogeneity is therefore not necessary for religiously grounded resistance as such.

Cutting the other way, the same literature identifies homogeneity as the condition under which religious support is most potent: Nepstad reports Slater's finding that such defections matter most where the population is religiously homogeneous and faith leaders retain autonomy, and her own work on Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador found political autonomy decisive (Nepstad 2021).

The two findings clarify rather than undermine the condition, and they mark its scope. Where resistance is clandestine and localized, minority communities can compensate through tighter networks, and homogeneity buys little. Where the objective is mass, open mobilization, homogeneity contributes a great deal, because it lets a single appeal draw on a moral vocabulary the whole population already shares. The Polish case is emphatically the second type, and the condition should be read as a claim about that type rather than about religious resistance in general.

### 3.4.2. CONDITION 2: BINDING EFFECT

The second condition is that the religion bind its adherents, that believers be willing to bear real costs rather than compromise. A society that does not seriously practice its religion cannot be expected to suffer for it. Those strongly fused with a cause may become "radicals-in-waiting" when the cause or their identity is threatened, and beliefs held to be nonnegotiable are the ones defended through extreme sacrifice (Martel et al. 2021, 2, 10).

This condition carries the theory's answer to the collective action problem, which any account of mass resistance must confront. Each citizen may want the regime gone while preferring that others bear the risk of opposing it. Belief alone does not solve this. Research on high-risk activism shows that ideological commitment is necessary but insufficient for costly collective action: It must be joined to dense organizational ties and interpersonal networks that impose social costs on nonparticipation (McAdam 1986). Institutional practice matters as much as private conviction. Churches that frame resistance as a sacred obligation, supply organizing infrastructure, and lower the costs of participation mobilize their members far more effectively than those that leave political engagement to individual conscience (Coddou 2016).

A binding religion therefore works on the collective action problem from two directions at once. It raises the perceived value of participation by casting sacrifice for the community as a religious duty rather than a personal cost, and it raises the cost of abstention by embedding each believer in a visible network of others who are watching, participating, and expecting participation in return. Where the religion also possesses a parish structure, a calendar of shared observance, and a recognized moral authority, the network required for costly coordination already exists and does not have to be built under repression.

### 3.4.3. CONDITION 3: INDEPENDENCE FROM AND OPPOSITION TO THE REGIME

The third condition has two parts, and it attaches to the carrier rather than to the *mētis*. The faith must be ideologically opposed to the regime's governing precepts, and the organization carrying it must be institutionally independent of the regime. Doctrine supplies the grounds for objection; organizational autonomy supplies the capacity to act on them.

Ideological opposition is a precondition for principled resistance: A faith that agrees with the state's ideology has no ground from which to object. For Catholicism confronting Marxist regimes, the opposition was foundational rather

than incidental. John Paul II (1991, no. 13) identified socialism's fundamental error as anthropological, in that it considers "the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism," and traced class struggle and militarism to "the same root, namely, atheism and contempt for the human person, which place the principle of force above that of reason and law" (no. 14).

Independence is what converts opposition into capacity. Where regimes co-opt religious institutions through patronage, compliant appointments, or agreements trading operational freedom for loyalty, the capacity for resistance is neutralized (Schleutker 2021)—and the capture does not even buy what the regime wants: Across Christian-majority countries between 1990 and 2014, state support for religion is associated with *lower* confidence in government, one proposed channel being that state control undermines the perceived authenticity of the religion itself (Fox and Breslawski 2023, 1395). Autonomy, conversely, is what the successful cases share. In Chile the Church's capacity to oppose Pinochet rested partly on insulation secured by its connection to the Vatican, which smaller national denominations could not achieve (Lowden 1993); in East Germany the Protestant churches' lack of an independent international hierarchy limited sustained opposition (Töpfer 2024); and comparative work on the Latin American dictatorships found political autonomy decisive (Nepstad 2021). Independent institutions serve as "free spaces" where oppositional identities are cultivated beyond the regime's reach (Lowe 2007), while state-sponsored monopolies tend to produce clergy who serve the government rather than their congregants (Finke and Iannaccone 1993).

This is where the distinction between *mētis* and carrier does analytical work. Capturing a church does not extinguish the underlying *mētis*: Belief, devotion, and inherited identity persist in households and parishes, whatever the hierarchy has signed. What capture destroys is the conversion mechanism. A church that owes its operating licence to the state has been absorbed into the state's own exogenous order, and while it may retain every doctrinal objection, it has forfeited the autonomous footing from which objection becomes organization. The society is left with the *mētis* and no means of acting on it. The comparison of Poland and Hungary in section 4 turns on precisely this asymmetry.

# 4. Evidence: Poland and Hungary Against the Three Conditions

## *4.1. Condition 1: Homogeneity*

Poland satisfies the homogeneity condition about as fully as any modern nation could. The postwar population was almost entirely Catholic (section 2.1), and to that demographic fact Catholicism added centuries of identification with nationhood: Across roughly a millennium nothing has been more identifiable with the country, to the point that many regard Catholicism as a necessary component of being Polish (Kraszewski 2012, 27, 30). The identification hardened under foreign rule. As noted above, when the Polish state ceased to exist after the partition of 1795 the Church became the guardian of national identity, and membership in it amounted to a form of resistance to foreign oppression (Eberts 1998, 818).

Homogeneity mattered because it set the reach of a religious appeal. When the Church spoke, it addressed the whole nation at once, in a moral vocabulary every listener already possessed, and no competing institution came close—the regime having dismantled every other organized center of Polish life.

#### *WAS THE OPERATIVE IDENTITY CATHOLIC OR ANTI-RUSSIAN?*

An obvious objection is that Polish identity in this period contained a second and equally potent element: accumulated grievance against Russia and the Soviet Union. The Molotov–Ribbentrop partition, the execution of some twenty-two thousand Polish officers and professionals at Katyń and other sites by the NKVD in 1940, the mass deportations eastward, and the Red Army's refusal to assist the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 are all part of the same national memory (Felak 2020, 4). If national resistance rested on anti-Soviet grievance rather than on Catholicism, the argument advanced here would be misattributing the mechanism.

Four considerations tell against that reading. First, and most tellingly, John Paul II largely declined to use the grievance register. Across his pilgrimages he raised the partitions, the 1863 revolt, the murder of Father Popiełuszko, and the killing of workers in 1956, 1970, and 1983, but he did not mention the Katyń Forest Massacre and made no direct negative reference to the Soviet Union (Felak 2020,

257). If mobilization ran on anti-Russian sentiment, the deliberate avoidance of its most explosive symbol by the movement's most influential figure would be inexplicable.

Second, contemporary observers did not treat that sentiment as decisive. Writing in 1966, Dinka (1966, 333) judged that anti-Russian feeling had been blunted by Poland's recovery of the Western Territories, and dismissed anti-Soviet alienation as unhelpful for explaining the Polish case specifically.

Third, grievance was not scarce in the bloc, nor distributed in a way that predicts outcomes. Hungary in 1956 had grievance of the most immediate kind—Soviet officers scattered its army outright (Laba 1991, 91)—yet produced no comparable sustained resistance. Grievance abundant, mobilization absent.

Fourth, the two elements are not in fact rivals in the Polish case, because Catholicism was the institutional vehicle through which national memory was preserved and transmitted at all. Under a regime that controlled the schools, the press, and the commemorative calendar, parishes celebrated Masses for patriotic occasions absent from the Communist calendar and for the victims of state assaults on workers (Felak 2020, 78). Anti-Soviet feeling was real, but it had no organizational home outside the Church. That is precisely what it means for a religion to function as a society's *mētis*.

## *4.2. Condition 2: Binding Effect*

The binding condition asks whether adherents will bear real costs rather than compromise. The raw materials were present throughout: Most Poles attended Mass regularly, the parish priest remained a local authority (Paczkowski 2015, 223), and Catholic education reproduced Catholic identity across generations (Pokrzywa 2011).

Yet the theory predicts something more specific than diffuse piety. Condition 2 requires that belief be joined to organizational infrastructure capable of converting conviction into coordinated action. The Polish case supplies an unusually clean test of that requirement, because Polish Catholicism was roughly constant across four decades while Polish resistance was not.

### *A WITHIN-CASE TEST: 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, AND 1980*

The risings of 1956, 1968, 1970, and 1976 described in section 2.2 pose the puzzle in its sharpest form. Catholic identity, economic grievance, and violent repression were all present in each of those episodes, and each of them failed. If Catholicism explains 1980, why not 1956 or 1970?

The answer is that the binding condition was not in fact constant across the period, because the second element it requires was not. Polish belief held roughly steady; the Church's organizational relationship to the workers' movement did not. It was absent from the Baltic coast in December 1970 and had become a political sanctuary for society by the late 1970s (Laba 1991, 84–85), and the turn is datable to the aftermath of June 1976 (Hruby 1982, 322). Before that point Poland had deep faith without organizational alignment, and the result was a sequence of episodic revolts that repression and price concessions could absorb. After it, faith joined to an independent institutional network produced a movement of ten million.

The 1978 election and the 1979 pilgrimage completed the transformation by supplying what the earlier risings had never had: a moment at which private opposition became common knowledge. Thirteen million Poles saw the pope in person and effectively all of them heard him (section 2.3); a population in which each person separately doubted the regime became one that knew its doubt was universal.

Observers on the other side registered the change in exactly these terms. Courtois et al. (1999, 388) note that in August 1980 the strikers, unlike those of 1956, 1970, and 1976, followed Jacek Kuroń's advice not merely to break up party committees but to organize their own. That shift—from attacking the regime's institutions to building rival ones—is the observable difference between the failed risings and the successful one, and it presupposes what condition 2 requires: somewhere to meet, someone to convene the meeting, and a shared vocabulary in which to justify the risk.

### *CONVICTION, NETWORK, AND COST*

The mechanism is visible in the texture of Solidarity itself. The August 1980 strike at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk displayed a framed photograph of the pope on the shipyard gates, and a Mass was celebrated within the yard three days in; representations of the strike centered on devotions to the cross, the rosary, and Our Lady of Częstochowa (Kraszewski 2012, 42–43). Wałęsa signed the

Gdańsk agreement with a pen bearing John Paul's image, acquired during the 1979 pilgrimage (Kraszewski 2012, 42). Symbols such as the Black Madonna and the suffering Christ translated the movement across social boundaries in terms intelligible to all Poles (Ediger 2005, 303).

These are not decorations. They are the observable signature of the two mechanisms condition 2 specifies: Framing resistance in devotional terms raised the value of participation by recasting personal risk as religious witness rather than private cost, while conducting resistance through parishes, pilgrimages, and Masses raised the cost of abstention by making participation visible within a community whose good opinion mattered. The evidence that the movement's operative norms were Catholic norms runs deeper than iconography.

Consider first what Solidarity asked for. The Twenty-One Demands issued on August 17, 1980, led with free trade unions and the right to strike, but they also included the broadcast of Sunday Mass on radio and television (Laba 1991, 84), a demand with no bearing on wages or working conditions advanced by a workers' movement in the middle of a labor dispute. The accords that settled the strike delivered it (Felak 2020, 73). Through the movement's leverage the Church achieved several of its own long-standing objectives: partial restoration of religious education in state schools, greater access to the media, and more freedom for priests to minister in the workplace. The relationship that developed between the workers' movement and the Church was mutually supportive, and Solidarity explicitly sought to identify itself with religion and with the Church (Hruby 1982, 325). A union pursuing purely material aims does not spend bargaining capital this way. As the movement's self-understanding was put at the time, the economic protest had to be simultaneously a social protest, and the social protest simultaneously a moral one (Kubow 2013, 11).

Catholic commitment also disciplined the movement's conduct. Solidarity's resistance was passive yet passionate, a hallmark of the nonviolent approach to Communism that John Paul modeled (Kraszewski 2012, 46), and its pacifism was a deliberate adoption rather than a tactical accident (Kubow 2013, 8). For a mass movement facing armed repression, restraint of that kind is exactly the sort of costly behavior that requires enforcement, and the authority enforcing it was one the members already recognized.

The clearest case of Catholic infrastructure performing organizational work is Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. Vicar at Saint Stanisław Kostka parish in Warsaw, he was chaplain to Solidarity's Warsaw steelworkers, an organizer of support for the interned and their families, and the initiator of the pilgrimages of working people to Jasna Góra (Felak 2020, 142). From February 1982 he celebrated a monthly "Mass for the Fatherland," an occasion to pray for those killed under martial law and for those interned, arrested, or dismissed from their jobs (Felak 2020, 142–43). These were functions a banned union could not perform for itself: a recurring assembly the state could not easily prohibit, a roll of those who had paid a price for participating, and a public accounting that kept the movement's obligations visible to everyone present. The regime understood what it faced. Security services targeted pro-Solidarity clergy in a series of operations, and in October 1984 Popiełuszko was abducted and murdered by security agents; more than two hundred thousand people attended the funeral (Felak 2020, 143).

Under martial law the same infrastructure sustained the movement more broadly: Dioceses supplied food, clothing, and medical aid to internees and their families, some churches became "Solidarity fortresses" where the union could be commemorated, and priests ministered to prisoners, carried information past prison security, and helped hide activists (Felak 2020, 77–78). Parishes also kept the movement's calendar alive, celebrating Masses for patriotic occasions absent from the Communist calendar and for the victims of state assaults on workers (Felak 2020, 78). Where the state had abolished the union's meetings, its press, and its commemorations, the parish supplied a functional substitute for each.

The moral content mattered as much as the logistics. Returning to Gdańsk in 1987, John Paul greeted the city as the place "in which the need of renewal of man through labor, the liberation of man through labor, was born anew" (Felak 2020, 175). He then used Saint Paul's injunction to bear one another's burdens as the ground of social solidarity, which he insisted never means one against the other (Felak 2020, 176)—an argument directed squarely against the Marxist dogma of class struggle. Solidarity was thereby given a foundation that made mutual sacrifice a duty owed to one's neighbor rather than a contribution to a collective abstraction.

### *4.3. Condition 3: Independence, and the Hungarian Counter-Case*

Ideological opposition between Polish Catholicism and Polish Communism was never in doubt on either side, as the regime's 1959 declaration of war on the hierarchy and Moscow's assessment of the new pope both attest (section 2). Against the regime's materialism John Paul set an anthropology the state could not absorb, teaching at Victory Square that it is impossible to understand the human person fully without Christ, and that dignity, mission, and final destiny are all bound up with him (Felak 2020, 29).

Opposition alone, however, decides nothing. What distinguishes Poland is that the Church retained the institutional autonomy to act on its convictions. The campaign against it was severe enough to have broken a weaker institution—schools liquidated, press censored, Caritas dissolved, estates seized, hundreds of clergy arrested, the primate imprisoned (section 2.1)—and it failed. The regime never converted the Church into an instrument of the state. Wyszyński's refusal to submit episcopal appointments to government veto, his insistence that God's realities may not be placed on Caesar's altars (Gacka 2009, 90), marks the boundary the Polish hierarchy would not cross. Because that boundary held, the Church remained available as a free space, and after 1976 it could lend that space to a movement it had not created.

#### *HUNGARY: SAME RELIGION, OPPOSITE OUTCOME*

Hungary provides the counter-case, and it is valuable precisely because it holds so much constant. Hungary was likewise a majority-Catholic nation with a deep Catholic heritage, and its Church faced comparable early repression: the dissolution of Catholic youth organizations, a crackdown on the Catholic press, the arrest of priests, and the prevention of pilgrimages (Kertesz 1949). Cardinal József Mindszenty and other Hungarian bishops spoke critically against Communism on behalf of Hungarian Catholics, marking a clear clash between the Hungarian Church and the Communist government (Kertesz 1949).

We should be candid about how much this comparison can carry. Hungary matches Poland on regime type, on confession, and on early repression, and those are the dimensions the argument most needs held constant. It does not match Poland on the intensity of condition 1: Poland was almost entirely Catholic, while Hungary was Catholic by majority rather than by saturation. Nor do we have, for Hungary, the kind of evidence that would establish condition 2 in the sense our

theory requires—not merely widespread belief but dense organizational networks capable of inducing costly action. Hungary is therefore a structured counter-case rather than a controlled experiment. What it can show is that Catholic demography and doctrinal opposition were insufficient on their own; what it cannot do is isolate independence as the single operative variable with the cleanliness a matched design would provide.

Condition 3 was not present. The decisive difference is institutional rather than doctrinal or demographic. Hungary's hierarchy accepted an accommodation that Poland's refused. The Partial Agreement of 1964 restored the institutional framework of the Catholic Church in Hungary, but in return secured legal bases for state intervention in Church life by recognizing the Hungarian state as holder of the right of patronage (Jobbágy 2016, 514). By the mid-1970s the leadership of the Hungarian Church increasingly cooperated with the party-state, an arrangement that granted the Church a relatively free framework in which to operate while neutralizing the risk that it would stand up as a serious and unified political threat, as in Poland (Jobbágy 2016, 515). In return for limited concessions, the Catholic hierarchy remained loyal to the system even in 1989 (Jobbágy 2016, 513). The comparative judgment is blunt: Apart from Mindszenty's lonely resistance, the Hungarian Church largely remained supine, showing little effective resistance until 1988 (Philpott 2004, 38).

The Hungarian accommodation should be understood in its wider ecclesial context rather than as a simple failure of nerve. Under Popes John XXIII and Paul VI the Vatican pursued an Eastern policy, the *Ostpolitik*, that sought improved relations with the Communist world after the mutual hostility of the Pius XII pontificate; John XXIII, believing that the Communist regimes were there to stay, judged accommodation necessary (Felak 2020, 34). The 1964 agreement was the first major international result of that policy. The Second Vatican Council reshaped the Church's engagement with the modern world in the same period, and its influence on the Polish Church ran the other way, contributing to a growing social conscience and to attempts to redefine the relationship between church and society (Hruby 1982, 322). The same council and the same decade thus produced accommodation in Budapest and mobilization in Warsaw. What differed was whether the national hierarchy had traded away its independence in exchange for the right to operate.

This is the theoretical payoff of the comparison. A church that owes its operating license to the state has been absorbed into the state's own exogenous institutional order, whatever its doctrine continues to affirm. Hungarian Catholicism retained its *mētis* and its informal complex; what it lost was the independent carrier that could act on them. Poland kept all three levels intact, and it was the third—an organizationally autonomous Church—that turned an inherited informal order into the capacity to build institutions against the imposed one.

### *4.4. Alternative Explanations*

The claim advanced here is not that Catholicism alone brought down Polish Communism. The historiography offers several rival or complementary accounts: an out-of-touch Soviet empire crumbling under its own economic ineptitude, the internal reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev, the proposition that Soviet society was rotten to the core, and Western pressure under US President Ronald Reagan (Kraszewski 2012, 28). Each of these plausibly helps explain the eventual collapse, and we do not dispute them. What none of them explains is why Poland had already generated a mass, autonomous, and durable opposition by 1980, years before the opening they describe arrived.

On Gorbachev, sequencing settles less than it might appear, and it is worth being precise about what it settles. Gorbachev came to power in 1985; Solidarity's membership had reached ten million by 1981 (Kubow 2013, 12), and the movement survived martial law imposed in December of that year. Soviet reform therefore cannot explain the *emergence* of the Polish opposition, which is this paper's outcome. It may well form part of the explanation for the *collapse* of 1989, which is not.

Timothy Garton Ash's much-quoted formulation makes the relationship plain: Without the pope, no Solidarity; without Solidarity, no Gorbachev; without Gorbachev, no fall of Communism (Kubow 2013, 9). Read carefully, that sequence places Gorbachev inside the causal chain running to regime collapse rather than outside it. We take the point and adopt the division of labor it implies. Catholic *mētis* and its carrier explain why Poland possessed a mass autonomous opposition, organized and durable, when the geopolitical opening arrived. Soviet reform helps explain why the opening arrived when it did. The two accounts are complements, and the paper claims only the first.

Economic deterioration faces a related difficulty. It was present in 1956, in 1970, and in 1976, and on each occasion repression and price concessions restored order (Felak 2020, 5). This does not show that economic conditions were causally idle: A factor present throughout may still vary in magnitude, or may matter only in combination with something else. What it shows is narrower, and sufficient for our purposes. Chronic economic deterioration cannot by itself distinguish 1980 from the crises that preceded it, so whatever did distinguish them must be sought elsewhere.

The most serious rival is the regime's diminished capacity for repression, and the evidence for it is real. At a Polish Communist Politburo meeting on August 28, 1980, it was pointed out that the troops which would be required to crush the strikes "were neither numerous enough nor at all willing to confront the hundreds of thousands of strikers who were occupying hundreds of factories" (Courtois et al. 1999, 388). The party could not find anyone willing to take responsibility for ordering force.

That account is correct, and it is complementary to ours rather than competing with it. Diminished repressive capacity plainly formed part of the reason why the strikes of 1980 were not crushed. But it is also, in part, a restatement of what needs explaining. The capacity shortfall is specified relative to the scale of mobilization: hundreds of thousands of strikers occupying hundreds of factories. A state able to crush ten thousand strikers may be unable to crush a million, so the question is what produced a mobilization of that size when the same regime had successfully dispersed the risings of 1956, 1970, and 1976. Courtois et al. (1999) in fact identify the difference in the same passage: On this occasion, unlike in those three earlier years, the strikers followed Jacek Kuroń's counsel to build their own organizations rather than attack the party's. What changed was organization, and section 4.2 identifies where the organizational capacity came from.

These accounts divide the explanatory labor rather than compete for it. Soviet economic weakness and, after 1985, Soviet reform help explain why the opportunity arose when it did; what they leave open is why Poland had something ready to meet it. Repression was bloc-wide, yet only Poland generated a mass movement able to survive it; Catholic demography was shared with Hungary, yet only Poland produced a durable autonomous opposition. That is the outcome this paper explains, and the variable tracking it is a homogeneous and binding

Catholic order carried by an organizationally independent Church. When 1989 came, Poland possessed an opposition capable of negotiating the transition rather than merely welcoming it.

## 5. Conclusion

The literature on institutional stickiness has treated *mētis* as a constraint: Local knowledge, custom, and belief explain why transplanted institutions fail to take root and why development programs designed abroad disappoint at home. The lesson has consistently been a cautionary one addressed to reformers: Know the ground before you build on it.

This article has argued that the same mechanism runs in the other direction. Boettke et al. (2008) note that stickiness is not equivalent to goodness without pursuing the implication. Pursued, it yields a claim not about institutional failure but about institutional creation from below: A sufficiently potent indigenous endogenous *mētis*, carried by an organization the state does not control, can become the basis on which a society builds institutions of its own against an imposed order.

The distinction between noncompliance and organization is what separates this argument from existing work. The high-modernist schemes catalogued by Scott (1998)—collectivization, villagization, the planned city, scientific forestry—were defeated by the practical knowledge they ignored. But *mētis* worked there through evasion and withholding, and when those schemes failed, nothing stood in their place. Polish Catholic *mētis* did something different in kind. Carried by an independent church, it supplied the vocabulary, the meeting places, and the moral authority out of which Poles built a parallel institutional order: an independent union of ten million, an underground press, a relief network, a commemorative calendar the state did not control.

Religion is not always capable of this. We identify three mutually reinforcing conditions, none individually necessary, whose conjunction is what matters. The faith must be widely enough shared that appeals reach the whole society. It must bind adherents tightly enough, and embed them densely enough, that conviction converts into costly collective action rather than private dissent. And it must be both ideologically opposed to the regime and institutionally independent of it, since a church holding its license from the state has been absorbed into the state's own order, whatever its doctrine continues to affirm.

Poland satisfied all three, and the within-case evidence is the strongest point this paper offers. Catholic identity was no less present in 1956, 1970, or 1976 than in 1980, yet those risings failed. What changed was not belief but alignment: A Church that had stood apart from the workers' movement before 1976 became its sanctuary afterward, and the 1979 pilgrimage converted scattered private opposition into public common knowledge. Hungary marks the opposite boundary. Comparable in faith and demography, its hierarchy accepted an accommodation that preserved the institution and forfeited the independence on which resistance depends.

Two implications follow. For institutional economics, the Polish case fills a cell the literature has left empty: *Mētis* appears there almost exclusively as friction, rarely as a resource from which the governed construct alternatives. Reformers are advised to respect *mētis*; the corollary is that a regime which violates it may find that what it suppressed becomes the scaffolding for something built against it. For the study of religion and political economy, the three conditions offer a portable framework—general enough to travel to other faiths and other authoritarian settings, specific enough to be wrong. Whether they hold outside the Catholic cases examined here this paper leaves open.

A final word on scope. We have not argued that Catholicism brought down the Polish People's Republic. The collapse of 1989 had causes this paper does not adjudicate—Soviet reform, economic exhaustion, the calculations of a party that had lost the will to shoot. What we have argued is narrower and, we think, more defensible: that Catholic *mētis* and its independent carrier explain why Poland, alone in the bloc, possessed a mass autonomous opposition capable of turning that opening into a negotiated transition rather than a vacuum. The deepest constraint on political authority may not be the balance of coercive power but what the governed already believe about what a person is—and, decisively, whether they retain an institution through which to act on it.

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