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Religious education in Poland: between absence and presence

Edukacja religijna w Polsce:
między obecnością a nieobecnością

Abstract

Introduction. The nature of religious education or religious instruction may vary in different societies. The confessional religious education, namely catechesis, dominates in public schools, as the Roman Catholic Church continues to hold a strong position in Poland. Considering the fact that 94.2% of elementary school students receive the catechism, the author of the paper was interested in whether the Polish elementary schools teach about different religions, religious diversity, and religion as a cultural phenomenon?

Aim. The aim of the presented paper is to analyse the National Curriculum and catechesis curriculum for elementary education in order to verify its content referring to religion in terms of cultural phenomenon.

Methods. The qualitative content analysis of National Curriculum of elementary school was used in order to find out where (which school subject) and how (which context) religion as a cultural phenomenon is included in the aforementioned document.

Results. The analyses indicate that the problem of religion as a cultural phenomenon is marginalized in the National Curriculum and catechesis curriculum for elementary school.

Keywords: Religious education, Poland, catechesis, National Curriculum, elementary school.

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Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. W poszczególnych systemach edukacyjnych istnieją różne podejścia wobec nauczania religii w szkole. W Polsce edukacja religijna ma charakter wyznaniowy (katecheza) w związku z silną pozycją Kościoła Katolickiego. Zważywszy na fakt, że 94.2% uczniów szkół podstawowych uczęszcza na katechezę, autorkę tekstu interesowało, czy w podstawie nauczania dla szkół podstawowych uwzględnia się problematykę różnorodności religijnej i wyznaniowej oraz czy religia traktowana jest jako fenomen kulturowy.

Cel. Celem artykułu jest analiza podstawy programowej dla szkół podstawowych i programu nauczania katechezy w celu zweryfikowania treści odnoszących się do religii jako fenomenu kulturowego.

Metody. Posłużono się jakościową analizą treści podstawy programowej dla szkoły podstawowej w celu ustalenia na jakich przedmiotach (gdzie?) oraz w jaki sposób (jaki kontekst?) religia jako zjawisko kulturowe zawarta jest w tym bazowym dokumencie.

Wyniki. Z przeprowadzonych analiz wynika, że problem religii jako zjawiska kulturowego jest marginalizowany w podstawie programowej dla szkoły podstawowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Edukacja religijna, Polska, katecheza, podstawa programowa, szkoła podstawowa.

The nature of religious education or religious instruction may vary in different societies. The growing volume of scholarship delivers different models and understandings of this phenomenon. The names for religious education are also different in individual educational systems. For instance, it may be called religious education, religious instruction, worship, catechesis, religion, etc. The author assumes that confessional and non-confessional religious education differ in their objectives. The primary objective of confessional RE is to bring students of faith (in Poland, the Catholics) to understand and experience that faith (teaching religion). While, the overall aim of non-confessional religious education, is to introduce all students, regardless of their religious identity, to the knowledge of different religions and traditions (teaching about religion). The latter model considers religion as a cultural phenomenon and practice, which can be learnt. Phenomenological approach to teaching of religious education presents different religions, practices, and beliefs, but doesn't favour or disfavour any of them (Smart, 1968).

The essence of religious education may vary, depending on the assumed perspective. For example, some academics agree that it should help people in being more reasonable with their religion (Wilson, 1992), some of them maintain that RE develops an understanding of religion and its role in the pluralistic society (Slee, 1992; Andree, 1997), while the others are going beyond these definitions and consider RE as a process of personal experience of mystery, spirituality, and the sacred (Hay, 1985; King, 1985; Lealman, 1982). The competing narratives about what RE

should be, have been evolving alongside one another. For instance, the phenomenological approach is criticized for perceiving religion in a reductionist, superficial, and trivial way (Barnes, 2001; Jackson, 1997; Lealman, 1982; Priestley, 1982), while the confessional approach is criticized for indoctrination and an ethnocentric outlook (Barnes & Davies, 2015; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006).

In Polish schools, the nature of religious education is confessional, and it is mostly provided by the Roman Catholic Church. For the students who do not attend catechesis, the school is obliged to provide ethics classes. As the consequence of the domination of the confessional model, the author assumes that such approach may be insufficient to develop knowledge and understanding about different world religions. Moreover, the dominant role of the confessional model of religious education may inhibit the development of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, which are suggested to play a vital role in the understanding of cultural diversity (Jackson, 2005). However, the overall aims of the *Podstawa Programowa* [National Curriculum] (2017) for the elementary schools indicate that the students should be stimulated to develop openness towards the world and other people, take responsibilities in the community, and be equipped with knowledge that will help them to understand the complexity of the modern world. The author assumes that the Polish students are provided with confessional religious education and do not gain sufficient knowledge of different religions and cultures. As a consequence, the lack of a comprehensive approach towards religious education, including cultural and religious diversity, may lead to development of prejudices and stereotypes among students. For instance, Niels Reeh (2013) suggests that, although it may be impossible to avoid all stereotypes in the learning process, religious education can control them, when it is based upon the academic study of religions approach.

The aim of the presented paper is to analyse the National Curriculum for elementary education in order to verify its content referring to religion in terms of a cultural phenomenon. The premise of choosing elementary education was the assumption that at this stage at which the key competences are developed, including understanding, and critical thinking, but also acquiring stereotypes. Considering the fact that 94,2% of elementary school students attend catechesis (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics, 2020) the author of the paper was interested in the question of whether schools provide teaching of the catholic religion only, or that religion as a cultural phenomenon is included in the National Curriculum in order to teach about religion(s)? Do the National Curriculum, and the catechesis curriculum include the issues of world religions, religious diversity, and an opportunity to develop the intercultural dialogue, or contrary, are these issues marginalized due to domination of the confessional model?

Cultural conditions and the legal status of religious education in Polish schools: selected issues

The confessional religious education, namely catechesis, dominates in public schools, as the Roman Catholic Church continues to hold the dominant position in Poland. Historical events have played a significant role in creating its authority. Firstly, it played a vital role in sustaining the national identity during annexation, and secondly, it supported the opposition movement during the communist regime. The degree of religiosity since the collapse of communism seems to be high and stable. The data collected from the end of 1980s to the present, indicates that almost all respondents (93% to 97%) are theists, while 3% to 8% respondents describe themselves as non-believers, which has placed them in the minority group (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej [CBOS], 2009, 2018). The Pew Research Center survey (2018) indicates that 40% of adults are “highly religious” and 64% of them see religion as a key component of national identity. The high level of religiosity is also manifested by the young generation. Among people aged between 18 and 24 years, 77% state that they believe in God. However, a slight tendency of secularization among the younger generation is noticed, as the proportion of non-believers has increased from over 6% to 15% during the first decade of the 21st century (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2015; Pew Research Survey, 2018). Different surveys have shown that the proportion of non-believers constitutes approximately 15% of the population in the 18-24 age range (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2018). A more significant change is found in religious practices. Regular attendance to the Mass was reported by half of the respondents, compared to the 1992 survey when the percentage was 72% in this age group (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2015).

The number of people who profess that they are Catholics is steady but the sense of belonging to the Church has weakened. According to Janusz Mariański (2012) many of the Catholics in Poland create their own approach towards religion, rejecting institutional teaching of the Catholic Church. Since 2005, the year Pope John Paul II died, the percentage of people who follow the institutional rules ordered by the Roman Catholic Church has fallen from 66% to 46% in 2017 (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2018). This decline can be explained by the theory of privatization of religion. However, positive opinions (58%) on the Roman Catholic Church still outweigh the negative ones, and their percentage is higher than in other European countries (33%) (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2018).

This data indicates that, in Poland, the process of secularization is in the early stage, compared to other European countries. The creeping secularization mostly affects the young, residents of agglomerations, and academic degree holders (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2018).

Religious education was reintroduced into Polish state schools after the political transformation of 1989. The Education Act of 1991 allows all religious communities to carry out their religious instruction and obliges the state-funded schools to develop the environment for RE teaching. As the law stands, religious education should be provided “following the interested persons”. The religion classes are organized if at least seven persons declare their will of attendance (parents, legal guardians of students, or adult students). Religion has equal status to the other school, or pre-school, subjects and activities; therefore, it has to be included in the school schedule (*Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej w sprawie Warunków i Sposobu Organizowania Nauki Religii w Publicznych Przedszkolach i Szkołach*, 1992). Religious classes are not obligatory, and the refusal of consent to participate is not required according to *the Polish Constitution*, Article 53, which guarantees the right to conceal one’s philosophy of life, religious convictions, or belief.

Under the law, all religious groups have equal rights; however, the Roman Catholic Church enjoys more privileges, which results not only from the numbers of members, but also from the international agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland. The Concordat was signed in 1993, and it strengthened the position of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. This legal act ensures that state schools and kindergartens provide religious education following the will of the parties. The professional qualifications of religious education teachers are specified in the agreement. Firstly, the state is obliged to ensure the same rights for religious education teachers as the teachers of the other subjects have, under *the Teacher’s Charter* of 1982 and *the Education Act* of 1991. The bishop of the proper diocese authorizes the employment of the religion teacher, who has to have professional qualifications and observe the teaching of the Catholic Church. Secondly, the development of the curriculum, and selection of the textbooks, is within the competence of the Church (Article 12 of the Concordat). The authorities of the Church are obliged to inform the public, and the state authorities, about the curriculum content and the choice of the textbooks (Pisarek, 2013).

The alternative to religious education is ethics classes. The provision of ethics classes has not been regulated by the law since the beginning of the 1989 transformation. Parents or adult students could not apply for such classes, and kindergartens were not obliged to include them in the schedule (*Biuletyn Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich*, 2015). Due to the absence of a legal basis, many schools did not provide ethics classes. It was only in 2014 that the law was introduced enabling schools to provide the above-mentioned course on the written request of an interested person. It followed the judgment of *The European Court of Human Rights in the Grzelak v. Poland case*. The Court stated that “the lack of factual access to ethics classes in Polish schools constitutes a violation by the authorities of the right to cultivate religious beliefs and

is of discriminatory character” (Application No.7710/02). According to the survey conducted on behalf of the Commissioner for Human Rights, the school headmasters explained that they did not provide ethics classes since the students and their parents did not show any interest. Moreover, they emphasized a shortage of professional staff capable of delivering such classes (*Biuletyn Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich*, 2015).

Under Polish law, the state funded schools should be impartial to the personal conviction, whether religious, philosophical, or to the outlooks on life (*The Constitution of the Republic of Poland*, 1997, Article 25). However, the principle of impartiality does not apply to the authorities representing students, parents, or legal guardians, e.g., a parent council. While the school headmaster is not allowed to organize religious activities, they should support all initiatives suggested by the school, parents, or the student council. Thus, they cannot disallow organizing religious events in the school as, otherwise, it would violate the freedom of conscience and religion. According to the Polish Constitution: Articles 48 and 53, the state is only the guarantor of exercising the parents’ right to bring up their children following their convictions, so the school authorities are not allowed to impose, or forbid, any religious practices.

The relations between the church and the state are still in flux, so the debate about the status of religious education in Polish schools returns from time to time. According to public opinion polls, the current relationship between the state and the church is satisfactory for most of the respondents (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2018). Polish law guarantees that state schools provide religious education to ensure plurality and cultural diversity. However, the privileged role of the Roman Catholic Church, and religious homogeneity, limits the possibility of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, presenting the religious problems mostly from the Catholic interpretation.

The purposes and scope of religious education in public schools in Poland

The confessional and catechetical nature of religious education dominates in Polish schools, and it is expected that the other school subjects would include teaching about different religions. In this part of the paper, the author would like to discuss the primary objectives of religious education at the second level of elementary school (grade 4th-8th), and to analyse the context, and the place, of religion in the National Curriculum for elementary schools. The qualitative content analysis of the National Curriculum of elementary schools was used in order to find out where (which school subject) and how (which context) religion, as a cultural phenomenon, is included in the aforementioned document. Moreover, the author would like to ascertain whether the intercultural dialogue is promoted via both the catechesis and the other school subjects.

The catechetical nature of religious education (Małosa, 2011) implies the overall objectives of RE, the roots of which involves knowing and experiencing religious truths and values. The catholic catechesis is aimed at evangelization, liturgical preaching of the word of God, introduction to the life in faith, the community, the liturgy, and the sacraments (Chałupniak, 2012). According to the leading Catholic documents, the main objective of religious education in the school is to “bring about a synthesis of faith and culture, which is, to lead to developing a coherent vision of man and the world. To this end, Catholic religious education should interact with other school subjects and other branches of knowledge” (Małosa, 2015, p. 59).

Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [The Polish Bishop’s Conference] (2010) emphasizes that the students who participate in religious classes demonstrate a different level of religious activity and maturity, and therefore, the first and foremost aim of RE should involve raising interest in “Jesus Christ and His good news”. Accordingly, the catechesis is provided for believers to strengthen their faith, but also for those who have religious doubts to allow them to discover the faith and search for the answer of the Church. Catechesis is also for non-believers, and then, the aim is to “ignite their faith” (Małosa, 2015, p. 63). Paweł Małosa (2015) argues that it may be difficult to meet all the objectives of catechesis for such a varied group. Thus, the main purpose of catechesis is hard to achieve while it should strengthen the faith of believers and at the same time, ignite the faith of non-believers. The question remains: how many non-believers have adopted Catholic morality and become “good Catholics”?

Adopting catholic morality and preparing to participate in the liturgy are discussed in the curriculum of religious education for elementary education, which includes the following issues: introduction to the religious life, introduction to the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, introduction to the process of mystagogue, and introduction to the responsible profession of faith at the elementary school level (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, 2010). The debate over the aims and scope of religious education indicates that more emphasis should be placed on philosophy, the meaning of life, and the dilemmas of human beings’ existence, not only on the issues of faith (Chałupniak, 2012; Małosa, 2015).

The guidelines for teaching catechesis don’t include the issues concerning different religions and cultural diversity. The overall aim of catechesis is to focus on the development of faith. Moreover, catechesis values the catholic religion only, so even if the classes provide information about different religions, the teaching process will be always ethnocentric. In such circumstances the indoctrination value is inevitable.

The subject literature review (Jackson, 1997, 2005) provides information that one of the aims of religious education in the 21st century is that it should develop its intercultural nature. Understanding, and meeting “the other” sits in the core of intercultural

religious education, both confessional and non-confessional. Global atrocities, such as the September 11 attacks and their aftermaths including the attacks in European countries, reinstate religion on political agendas around the world. For instance, the Council of Europe (2002) issued recommendations to include religious education in intercultural and civic education.

Intercultural education, understood as a dialogue between religions and cultures, can be key to doing away with the stereotypes of the representatives of “the others” (Jackson, 2005; Róžańska, 2008). The confessional nature of RE does not exclude the possibility of teaching about different religions or negates a religious and intercultural dialogue. According to the Roman Catholic Church, the interreligious dialogue is advisable. The ecumenical nature of catechesis is not additional to, but, rather, an integral part of religious education, which can help students to know and understand different Christian churches and to have a dialogue with non-Catholics (Kałużny, 2011). From that perspective, what is omitted is as important as what is taught. However, the confessional-catechumen model has an advantage over the confessional-dialogical model in Polish schools. Aniela Róžańska (2015) points out that the issues of the other religions in Poland are not included, while the world religions are approached in a very superficial and selective way in the curriculum of catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church. The content of some religious education textbooks, especially at the secondary level, refers to other religions, but only from catholic perspectives (Zielińska & Zwierzdzyński, 2013). Neglecting the issues of religious diversity and dialogue has developed a mono-religious and ethnocentric nature of RE, without the interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Interestingly, the general objectives of education in the National Curriculum at the elementary level are meant to “equip students with the specific information and develop skills which enable them to understand the world in a mature and orderly way” (*Podstawa Programowa*, 2017, p. 8), and to “develop openness towards the world and other people, being active in social life, and to take responsibility for the community” (*Podstawa Programowa*, 2017, p. 11). These formulations indicate that students should be able to learn about different religions as an integral part of the cultural heritage. The knowledge of different cultures and religions helps to understand the complexity of the world and the meaning of religion. Without the rudiments of religious diversity, it may be difficult to meet the general objectives of elementary education, such as developing openness and tolerance. The aim of catechesis should be in line with the general educational objectives; however, the primary purposes of confessional RE in Poland are not to teach about different religions. What about the other subjects? Has the legislator considered issues related to religions to be included in other school subjects and discussed as a cultural phenomenon and religious diversity? The analysis of the National Curriculum (2017) indicates that the issue of reli-

gion as a cultural phenomenon is partially addressed in the humanistic subjects such as literature (namely Polish), ethics, civics, history, and geography.

Most references to the issues of religion are found in the history courses. It is not surprising that most topics related to religion are discussed mainly from the Catholic perspective. Religion is displayed as a factor of change (the breakdown of the Roman Catholic Church in the 11th century, the causes and effects of the crusades, the causes and effects of the Reformation, and the reforms of the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century), as a cultural development factor (the role of the Church, including the monasteries, in developing culture, architecture, and science in medieval Europe) or as a political factor (the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland during the communistic regime 1957-1981, and the role of Pope John Paul II in the social and political changes in Poland). Religious diversity is discussed when students learn about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Second Polish Republic. The Non-Christian religions are mentioned when students are expected to describe the social structures and belief systems of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome as well as the religion of ancient Israel. Islam appears once in the context of the history of Byzantium (*Podstawa Programowa*, 2017). The National Curriculum for history at the elementary level presents pupils with national and world history from ancient times to 2004, when Poland joined the European Union. Assuming two of classes per week (90 minutes per week) for four years, the curriculum may be overloaded. The religion topics may be thus marginalized, in particular the discussions on exploring religious diversity.

Ethics is the second subject which provides knowledge of religion as a cultural phenomenon. The author would like to emphasize that it is a facultative subject for those students who do not attend catechesis. The legislator has scheduled a separate unit for the teaching the religion aspects, namely *Man and God (Sacrum)*. The pupils learn about the distinction between believers and non-believers, and they will know that for the believers, God is a source of moral law and the highest good, they will learn about Christian values and secular morality (*Podstawa Programowa*, 2017). Ethics is the only subject which provides teaching regarding the moral components in the main religions, i.e., Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The students will also develop skills which enable them to be tolerant towards people of different faiths, as well as non-believers. Although values and morality are the vital components of every religion, ethics classes are limited to the moral dimension. The subject does not include the traditions, specific rites, and institutions of the major religions (Iwanicki, 2019). According to the National Curriculum, ethics does not provide knowledge of religious diversity in the social context of the modern world.

It may be surprising that civics (knowledge of society) does not provide the pupils with knowledge of religions and religious diversity. The National Curriculum does not include a direct reference to religion issues. Perhaps the legislator has assumed

that teachers would discuss religion during classes on preventing xenophobia, including racism, chauvinism, and anti-Semitism. However, without the basic knowledge of Judaism, a broader context of the social, and cultural, roles of the Jews in Europe, the stereotypes towards them, and the persecution which they experienced, young students are not able to understand the nature of anti-Semitism and, on top of everything, to recognize such an attitude (Iwanicki, 2019).

Polish language classes merely provide knowledge of religion. Interestingly, pupils from elementary schools, are expected to use in the interpretation of literary works, references to universal values related to social, national, religious, and ethical attitudes, and make them hierarchical (*Podstawa Programowa*, 2017). Considering that students are provided mostly with Catholic, or at least Christian, morality, it should be assumed that the religious attitudes are limited to that religion. It would be worthwhile to know that one of the general aims of teaching Polish is to develop openness towards the other cultures and respect towards them (*Podstawa Programowa*, 2017). Therefore, the question is how to meet that objective when religion, as an integral part of the culture, is hardly mentioned, not only during Polish classes but in the whole general education? Perhaps, the subject literature could provide information about different cultures; however, according to the National Curriculum, most of the obligatory readings refer to the national culture and heritage.

Some interesting data concerning religious issues is found in the National Curriculum for geography education. Although the general objectives of geographic education indicate that students acquire knowledge of global cultural diversity, develop the skills of examining the social-cultural and economic phenomena in the world, which helps them to avoid stereotypes and develop tolerant attitudes toward other cultures, the content of the curriculum does not directly indicate the problems of religion and religious diversity. Religion is mentioned only once in the unit, discussing the Asian problematic. The National Curriculum requires that students develop enquiry and respect towards other cultures and religions. Interestingly, and questionably, the religion issues are not included in the units about Africa, North and South America, and Oceania. For Europe, the Curriculum indicates that students would be able to compare and explain the national, ethnic, and confessional diversity of the Polish population and selected European countries. From this perspective, the National Curriculum for geography is scheduled selectively about the religious issues. Moreover, the problem of religion seems to be arranged in a random way or in the manner that the authors considered as an interesting topic (e.g., religion in Asia).

The National Curriculum oversees the issue of religion as a cultural phenomenon. Although the general objectives indicate that students should develop respect and understanding of different cultures, the content does not include enough religion and religious diversity issues to meet these objectives. Developing and organizing the

National Curriculum is always challenging in terms of priorities and content selection (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018), especially at the elementary level when it is expected to present the pupils with the rudiments of general knowledge and to prepare them for the intellectual “journey”. Nevertheless, the lack of systematized knowledge of the topics related to religion as a cultural phenomenon has created a gap in the National Curriculum for the elementary level.

Discussion

Lack of Religion as a cultural Phenomenon in the National Curriculum

As mentioned above, the issues of religion as a cultural phenomenon are not represented in the National Curriculum for the elementary level. The knowledge of the specific religions is undisclosed, fragmented, and scattered across different subjects. There is no space for systematized knowledge which could fill the missing topics on the religions, religious systems, practices, symbols, values, etc. The religious pluralism in Polish education is also hardly present. The mono-confessional nature of religious education is perhaps a good source for the religious identity, but it is not enough for developing openness towards others (Róžańska, 2015). Introducing some additional issues or a separate subject on religious education to the already overloaded National Curriculum (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2019) may be challenging. The civics classes may fill the gap in religious education. Although, the phenomenological approach has been criticized (Copley, 2005; Felderhof, 2004; Moran, 1989) the combination of citizenship education and religious education may be complementary for each other (Jackson, 2005). Religious education – whether confessional or not – should display religion as a unifying force, as a platform for dialogue, and as the act of recognition of the other people of faith.

Confessional religious Education does not include the Problems of religious Diversity

Religious education could be complementary to citizenship education, specifically for cultural diversity. *The General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) does not exclude interreligious dialogue, however, it promotes building the community between Christians. From such a perspective, it is assumed that the main purpose of confessional RE is not to educate about different religious and cultural diversity. As the author has already mentioned, according to the teaching of the Catholic Church, the main objective of religious education in the schools “is to enable learners to participate in a dialogue between Christianity and contemporary culture, mainly through the transfer of genuine knowledge correlated with other school subjects” (Małosa, 2015, p. 59). From that perspective, citizenship education and religious education could be

complementary on religious pluralism and cultural diversity, provided the curriculum content includes the systemized knowledge of religion as a cultural phenomenon. Nonetheless, the content of catechesis has to be approved by the specific body of the Catholic Church. For instance, the works of John Hick on religious pluralism did not receive the approval of the Congregation of the Doctrine and the Faith (Hick, 1998). Additionally, the religious teachers – who are expected to be Catholics – would be required to complete an additional course on the different religions, religious diversity and also develop skills enabling them to talk with the students about the sensitive issues of different faiths. The question remains open who should provide the course: the representatives of the Catholic Church, or independent scholars, or both.

Religious Education about different Religions is left beyond the School System

Insufficient education about different religions, focusing only on the catholic perspective, may lead to a stereotypical perception of other religious groups, especially when the citizens acquire knowledge from different and diffuse sources, fear-filled, and falsely informed. The hostile attitudes among Poles towards Muslims warrant special attention. The image of Muslims portrayed by the Polish media has created stereotypical opinions about Islam. Most Muslims are presented as a “foreign”, “unfriendly”, and a homogenous group associated with war, violence, and terror (Pędziwiatr, 2010; Wigura, Bertram, & Puczejda, 2017). The stereotypes of Muslims have been perpetuated in the Western culture for ages (see the work of Edward W. Said, 1978, 1981), but after the September 11 attacks, they have been strengthened, depicting Islam as a monolithic religion and ideology associated with war and terror.

A lack of knowledge of a different religion facilitates developing reluctance towards that group. The media is a powerful source for creating a false and simplified picture of Muslims in the country where most of the citizens are hardly informed about their culture, identity, religion, and daily life. The anti-Muslim attitudes may be interesting in the country where they constitute approximately 0.06% of the population. The attitudes towards Muslims are perhaps *platonic islamophobia* (Górak-Sosnowska, 2006), which is an aversion towards the absent minority group. According to 2019 opinion polls, only 14% of the respondents admitted that “they know a Muslim” and 45% displayed “a negative attitude” towards them (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2019). In the Polish public space, the Muslim is considered as the enemy of the western world, and who tries to destroy the Christian civilization using violence and terror (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2019; Wigura, Bertram, & Puczejda, 2017).

The aforementioned analysis indicates that Polish schools do not educate about religious diversity which is a vital issue in citizenship education and religious education. According to the survey (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 2019), Poles

gain knowledge of Muslims and Islam from the media. Consequently, most of them have developed distrustful attitudes towards the “other”, and Islam is considered in a grotesque and simplified way. A lack of knowledge of different religions and religious diversity in the National Curriculum and religious education may reinforce the students’ view on religion as a marginalized and misrepresented part of life. Even though Poland is a more homogenous country on the grounds of religion compared to Western European countries, the globalized world is open for the new generation. Young Poles migrate abroad, and more immigrants from the eastern border come to Poland. Developing the mechanisms to identify the common aspects and differences is crucial to maintain tolerance, peace, and development of a pluralistic society. The role of the school would be to equip young people with communication and dialogue skills. Religious education would then be a helpful tool to replace the fear towards different religions with “experience and insight” (Toropov & Buckles, 1997).

Conclusion

The catechetical nature of religious education in Polish schools is seated in tradition, and the Polish Constitution protects the basic parents’ right to bring up children following their beliefs. The facultative nature of religious education, or ethics, allows the parents to decide whether the child will attend the confessional classes or participate in a secular course. Despite this choice, the issues of religious diversity, religious pluralism, and religious groups are scarce in the National School curriculum for the elementary level. Knowledge of religion is limited mostly to Christianity depicted in the historical context. The contemporary issues on religious diversity, living together with different religious groups, and developing the intercultural and inter-faith dialogue are not included in the school curricula. It is expected that the emergence of “creeping secularism”, a gradual loss of trust in the Catholic Church in Poland, and increased numbers of non-Catholic children in the schools will initiate a new wave of discussion about the role of religious education in the Polish National Curriculum and subsequently in the schools.

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