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Teaching religion in postmodern society: some insights from the German "Carousel of Concepts" for the renewal of Catholic religious education in Poland

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ABSTRACT

Poland, still considered by some to be a bastion of Catholicism in Europe, is becoming more secularised every year, and its society resembles the postmodern societies of Western Europe. The changes in religiousness, which affect especially the younger Poles, are so strong that they call into question the validity of the current form of religious education, i.e. school catechesis, which is proving incapable of fulfilling its tasks, e.g. in the function of Christian initiation. Given the above context, the present article has a threefold purpose: The first step is to present the social and educational challenges of school catechesis in Polish schools. Based on these premises, the second step will outline the main similarities and differences in religious education between Poland and Germany, and then the German 'Carousel of Concepts' (H. Mendl) of the 1960s, which contributed to the emergence of a possible optimal model of religious education for a postmodern society. In the third and final step, ideas for the future will be formulated for the renewal of religious education in Poland, making it possible to characterise it in a guiding way as a dialogical-educational concept.

KEYWORDS

Religious education; postmodernism; secularisation; Poland; Germany

Introduction

Although Poland is still perceived as one of the most Catholic countries in Europe (91.5% of Poles are Catholics; GUS 2023, 199), it is a postmodern society in which the relationship with religion is undergoing significant changes. It is important to note that the relationship between the institutional Church and the general public cannot be taken for granted (Cikała-Kaszowska and Zieliński 2015; Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2015; Mariański 2021). In this context, it is worth mentioning four facts that point to the progressive erosion of religious socialisation in this country: 1. In the 1990s, the percentage of young Poles (18–24 years old) practising the Catholic faith was around 70%, while in 2021 it was less than 25% (Tilles 2021). 2. The discrepancy in religiosity between the elderly (approximately 55% practising) and the young is one of the most pronounced in the world (Research Center 2018). 3. In comparison to the general adult Polish population, the proportion of non-believers among young people is nearly five times higher (23% versus 5%, respectively) (Boguszewski 2022, 127). 4. In 2010, the percentage of students enrolled in Catholic religion classes in secondary schools reached a record 93%. By 2021, this figure had decreased to 54%, representing a 39% decline over 11 years (Gwiazda 2022, 141).

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The data presented above demonstrate that given the complex and rapid secularisation processes currently underway in Polish postmodern society, school religious education (also known as school catechesis) in its current form is no longer viable, especially at the secondary school level. Indeed, the data suggest that this form of education is unlikely to spark a religious revival or renewal among the youth (CBOS 2022, 10). Consequently, the Catholic Church and those responsible for teaching religion must reorient the conceptual and didactic foundations of this subject to make it more attractive to students and better integrated into the school's pedagogical programme. This reorientation should also ensure a stronger connection to students' everyday lives (cf. among others: Chrostowski and Kropač 2023; Chrostowski 2020, 2021b, 2021c, 2022e; Horowski 2022; Klimski 2021; Mąkosa 2024; Milerski and Zieliński 2023; Przybylska and Danuta 2020). Furthermore, it is necessary to modify the curriculum to effectively address the pervasive simplistic and pejorative perception of religious education, which has persisted for years. This perception views the subject as a space for fulfilling tasks aligned with the narrow interests of the Church (Milerski 2009, 8). Additionally, it is essential to ensure the sustained presence of religious education within an inherently politicised and thus volatile educational system.

Given the context previously outlined, the discourse within German religious pedagogy can serve as a source of inspiration for both the scientific community and church authorities in Poland. Despite the existing differences between the two countries, this claim is not unfounded. In Germany, religious education underwent a significant transformation from the 1960s, when it became the most criticised and least popular subject in schools (Mendl 2015). The catechetical model evolved by introducing intermediate forms into a subject-oriented and identity-supportive diaconal form (Mendl 2021, 523–524).

It is important to note that the purpose of this article is not to uncritically adopt and encourage the implementation of the German model of religious education. Such an action could prove harmful and detached from the Polish socio-educational reality. Furthermore, this article does not aim to construct a detailed conceptual model of religious education in Poland. This task goes beyond the scope of a small article. In addition, this article does not analyse religious sociological data on religiosity or the participation of young people in religious lessons. Instead, the author sets himself three fundamental tasks: *Firstly*, an attempt is made to identify the key challenges of religious education in Poland, which are intertwined with the postmodern social as well as educational context. *Secondly*, the discussion will be extended in two directions: an examination of the background conditions, which will highlight the major similarities and differences in religious education between Poland and Germany. This comparison will serve as a foundation for analysing Germany's historical experience of religious pedagogy to identify an appropriate framework for addressing the subject in postmodern society. *Thirdly*, also in the final step, the author will offer insights designed to encourage deeper academic debate on the future direction of religious education in Poland.

Key challenges of religious education in Poland

As indicated above, religious education always takes place in a specific social and educational context, which, in particular, influences not only its conception and organisational aspects but also determines the goals and tasks it assigns itself (Chrostowski and Kropač 2023; Tomasik 2017). Therefore, it is vital to examine the key challenges currently facing religious education in Poland, with a particular focus on these two determinants, as this will serve as a starting point for further in-depth analysis in the article.

Challenges related to the postmodern social context

The proposition that post-Christian modernity is a defining feature of the contemporary Polish context is not only premature but also arguably an exaggeration. Nevertheless, the second wave of secularisation, which can be called postmodern secularisation, is leading to a systematic

deconstruction of ecclesiastical religiosity in Polish society (Mariański 2021, 120–121; cf. also; Górski 2002). These transformations have been occurring since the fall of communism in 1989 and the associated socio-cultural modernisation (Mariański 2021, 167), and have gained momentum and accelerated since the second decade of the 21st century (Mariański et al. 2023, 199). In the present era, postmodern secularisation provides both external and internal contexts in which young people's attitudes and behaviour are shaped (Mariański 2021, 167, 2023, 155–156). It is beneficial to examine the main characteristics of postmodern secularisation about religiosity. This includes the following aspects, as outlined by Kropač (2015, 11) and Ziebertz (2010), 81–83):

(1) *Deinstitutionalisation*, which signifies the diminishing significance of the Church as a normative force for individuals, communities and society as a whole.
(2) *Detraditionalisation*, which results in the weakening of religious tradition as a binding force for society and also the very cohesiveness of religious traditions within the Church.
(3) *Pluralisation*, which has increased the number of denominations and religions not only in urban centres but also in small towns. This has led to the perception among young people that religion is a matter of personal choice rather than a fixed aspect of their identity.
(4) *Individuation*, which has resulted in a growing divergence between objective religion (or church religion) and subjective religiosity (or individual set of religious beliefs, attitudes and rituals).

These signatures are reflected in sociological studies on the religiosity of youth in Poland (Mąkosa and Adamczyk 2024; Mariański 2023; Mariański et al. 2023; Mąkosa, Zając, and Zakrzewski 2022; Boguszewski 2022; Mariański 2021), which will not be referred to in detail here. It is also noteworthy that more recent studies have highlighted that changes in the religiosity of Polish youth have occurred at an accelerated pace over the past five years. This is influenced by the processes of digitalisation and globalisation (Mariański et al. 2023, 199). This fact is conducive to an intensification of the heterogeneity of attitudes towards religion among young people, as well as the emergence of diverse forms of spirituality, religiosity and irreligiousness itself. Furthermore, religion plays a diminished role in the lives of young people, both in private and public spheres. This is frequently attributed to their desire to distance themselves from the institutional Church, whose mission is often perceived as being limited to establishing strict prohibitions and moral principles (Mariański et al. 2023, 199–200).

Table 1 presents a synthesis of the fundamental characteristics of the Christian faith in comparison with the religiosity of young people in a postmodern (Polish) society (Kropač 2015, 12).

Based on the above analysis, it is possible to conclude that the catechetical-evangelising model of religious education in Polish schools, introduced in 1990, i.e. after the fall of communism (for more detailed information on the assumptions of the current model of religious education in Poland, see, inter alia, the following publications: Mąkosa 2015; Zielińska and Zwierzdzyński 2013; KEP 2001, 2018, 2019), does not produce the results intended by the Church. Religious education – although structurally and functionally situated within the catechetical tasks of the Church (Klimski 2021, 44; Misiaszek

Table 1. A summary of the key characteristics of Christian faith and religiosity among young people in a postmodern society.

Christian faith	Youth religiosity
The content of faith, e.g. Credo (fides quae)	Syncretising and combining different religious traditions
The act of believing, e.g. the subjective, existential manifestation of faith (fides qua)	Religiosity at the service of the construction of one's own identity
Being part of a community of faith (fides cum communicate)	Individualised religiosity that does not need to be practised in the community
Living a Christian life, i.e. orienting activities towards Christian values and standards; appropriate involvement in society and the Church	Religiosity as incommunicable personal knowledge; internal seclusion; hard to see tangible effects on society

and Potocki 1995, 99–101) and intended to help build a bond between young people and the local parish community and the universal Church – in reality, does not in any way form ecclesiastical faith and morals, nor does it educate for participation in religious worship. The content taught is mainly memorised, but sporadically internalised, and is often perceived as alien, distant and boring. Awareness of the communal nature of school catechesis, the parish and the universal Church is also very low among students (Klimski 2021, 44–45; Potocki 2017, 592–594).

It is also worth noting that the very nature of religion lessons with a catechetical-evangelising profile is subject to critical assessment by young people. In total, 71% of pupils express a negative opinion of these lessons. 43% view them as ordinary and unremarkable, while 28% consider them boring (Gwiazda 2022, 146). These observations, which have been well-documented for years, should prompt those responsible for shaping religious education to reflect on the current state of these lessons at school. Despite minor curricular modifications over the past three decades, these lessons have remained largely unchanged (Czekalski 2023, 321). It is unfortunate that, as R. Czekalski correctly observes, attempts are often made to avoid addressing these challenging questions, which indirectly indicates that the situation in this field is not as positive as it could be. Conversely, this underscores the necessity for a critical examination of the current state of religious education, particularly in light of the declining number of students and religious educators (ibid., 320, 322).

Challenges related to the educational context

The above remarks on the need to critically examine the current state of religious education in Poland lead to the question of today's educational challenges. These can be divided into two main categories: *general challenges*, which stem from broader issues within the Polish education system (Pankowska 2008; Maj-Waśniowska 2017; Grzelak and Elżbieta 2017; Szelewa et al. 2018; Jakubowski 2021; CBOS 2023; European Commission 2023; Orlowska 2024), and *specific challenges* unique to religious education, particularly given its current catechetical and evangelising focus (Misiaszek 2010 Przybylska and Danuta 2020; Jedynak 2018; Wrońska 2023; Chrostowski 2020, 2021b; Milerski and Karwowski 2023; Mąkosa and Adamczyk 2024; Zellma 2024).

In terms of *general challenges*, it should be noted that the Polish education system is in a prolonged crisis, which has been widely discussed in educational research (Nowosad 2011; Kwieciński 2012; Nowak-Dziemianowicz 2014; Cervinkova and Rudnicki 2019; Błażejewski 2021). Although much of the public and media attention has focused on religious education, which is often criticised and subject to attempts at removal from the curriculum, the fundamental issues lie elsewhere. The Polish education system is undergoing a process of orientation towards the preparation of students for the labour market. This reflects a range of factors, including the influence of neoliberal ideologies, as observed by Eugenia Potulicka and Joanna Rutkowiak (2012). There is a tendency to privilege subjects deemed useful for undertaking studies and professional work, while simultaneously marginalising the humanities (Potulicka 2011, 254–255). As a result, the education system is unable to cultivate self-awareness, spirituality, interpersonal relationships, social responsibility, or contemplation of broader existential issues such as uncertainty, humility, and vulnerability (Nikitorowicz 2008). Instead, it often encourages a 'closed mind' among students (Bloom 2012).

Another significant challenge is the instability of the Polish education system, largely driven by politicisation (Chrostowski 2022a, 2022c; Rutkowiak and Starego 2018) and frequent legislative changes. Major structural reforms, such as those enacted in 1999 and 2017, exemplify this volatility (Maj-Waśniowska 2017, 267–268). According to the (European Commission 2023) report, key current issues include a shortage of teachers (ibid., p. 5), declining standards in teacher training (ibid., p. 7), worsening reading skills among students due to reduced reading habits, and low levels of student well-being (ibid., p. 9). Local governments are also grappling with funding school activities, and the integration of migrant children, particularly from Ukraine, has become an urgent concern (ibid., pp. 10–11). Experts additionally point to insufficient access to mental health services, a lack of funding for extracurricular programmes, and the pressing need for

comprehensive career guidance to counter the increasingly instrumental approach to education, which places economic outcomes above personal development (Grzelak and Elżbieta 2017; Orlowska 2024).

In response, there has been a growing call for a more balanced and holistic approach to education. Advocates argue for a shift away from rote learning (CBOS 2023, 9) towards the development of practical life skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, personal growth, and a deeper understanding of oneself and the world (Orlowska 2024; Chałas 2017, 2018; Osewska 2020).

The 'instrumental' nature of Polish education also affects religious education, which, as Misiaszek (2021) notes, has been facing pedagogical failure for years and has proved ineffective in facing modern requirements (ibid., 8). This failure is largely attributed to the catechetical-evangelising approach of religious education in Poland (KEP (Polish Bishops' Conference) 2001, 2018, 2019; Mąkosa 2024, 272–273), which is deeply rooted in Thomism, personalism and virtue ethics. Consequently, it poses several *specific challenges* (Wrońska 2023, 116).

The main problem is that religious education in Polish schools inadequately addresses the lived experiences of students, lacks an emphasis on critical thinking, and fails to foster tolerance for diverse lifestyles and worldviews, including those of LGBT individuals and atheists. Additionally, students are not adequately equipped with interreligious and intercultural skills (Chrostowski 2023b, 266–269). Furthermore, even when human rights are mentioned in religious education, they are framed as subordinate to religious norms intended to 'protect' the Christian foundation of Polish and European culture (Wrońska 2023, 117; see too:; Zielińska and Zwierżdżyński 2017). In other words, the model of religious education in Poland 'is a transmission-cultural model rooted in rationalist ancient tradition (Aristotle) and Christian moral concept (Thomas Aquinas). The way of value occurrence in this model is of universal (objective) character; that is, the truth is a referential ethical category, and an indisputable one. It is based on faith, not knowledge, that, for instance, some lifestyles are rightful and others are not, and some are better and some are worse' (Przybylska and Danuta 2020, 6).

Another specific challenge is that religious education is often disconnected from other subjects and lacks objectification of knowledge. This can lead some to perceive it as a form of indoctrination. Moreover, when religion is reduced to a narrow set of dogmatic principles, it becomes susceptible to radicalisation (Wrońska 2023, 117). Additionally, the language employed in school catechesis, which is characterised by a reliance on theological terminology, serves to further alienate it from the interests and modes of thinking characteristic of younger generations (Przybylska and Danuta 2020, 6–7).

In conclusion, the above analysis demonstrates that the approach of school catechesis in Poland is characterised by a lack of clarity, obsolescence and inadequacy, particularly in the context of the contemporary postmodern society (Misiaszek 2021, 9–10). This situation is evidenced by two key aspects, namely: Firstly, there is an increasing perception that religious education is inextricably linked to the very concept of faith itself (Misiaszek and Potocki 1995, 5). Secondly, there is a risk that religious education will become elitist if it continues to be catechetical and evangelising in nature, with access primarily limited to fervent adherents of the Catholic faith (Klimski 2021, 46).

It is also important to note that the solution to the issue of reforming religious education in Poland in light of the current challenges cannot be achieved by focusing solely on religious education. Instead, it necessitates a comprehensive reflection on the fundamental principles of education and its role in fostering the holistic development of students, encompassing both the individual and the collective dimensions of human existence, including the spiritual aspect (Chrostowski 2021c).

'Carousel of concepts': learning from the German postmodern experience

Because of the persisting social and educational challenges, Polish theologians and educators are engaged in the formulation of conceptual frameworks for innovative models of religious education in public schools. These models seek to integrate or segregate learning 'about', 'from', and

'in' religion. Among the most significant of these are: 1. the maintenance of the catechetical model, with a stronger emphasis on evangelising elements (Danecki 2024; Jasnos 2023; Łabendowicz 2022; Bednarczyk 2022; Księżak 2020; Kochel 2018; Tomasik 2022, 2017; Celary 2011); 2. the informative-educational model (Chrostowski 2020, 2021b, 2021c, 2022e, 2022a; Mąkosa 2024); 3. the informative-critical and existential-positional nature model incorporates elements of interfaith, interreligious and intercultural dialogue (Chrostowski and Kropač 2023; Różańska 2017; Orłowska 2012); 4. a model focusing solely on the transmission of religious knowledge (Czekalski 2023).

It appears that there will be an increasing number of conceptual proposals for religious education in Poland in the future, a development that is reminiscent of the situation in Germany in the 1960s (Mendl 2015, 53). It is therefore advisable to examine the efforts of the neighbouring nation in developing a forward-thinking model for religious education in a highly secularised society. This would enable the Polish educational authorities to gain insight from both the challenges and the successes encountered in this process. In other words, those responsible for the conception of religious education in Poland can, while conserving the already diminishing resources year by year, draw inspiration from the German case to develop a new model that is in line with contemporary challenges and thus avoid the 'carousel of concepts' (ibid.).

However, to guarantee that the subsequent analysis is not detached from the respective contexts and has a clear 'setting in life' ('Sitz im Leben'), it is first necessary to present the principal similarities and differences between the conditions of religious education in Poland and Germany. It is of the utmost importance to acknowledge the existence of legal and socio-cultural differences between the two countries. Without this acknowledgement, the subsequent subchapter, which presents Germany's 'Carousel of Concepts' in the context of the ongoing debate surrounding the framing of religious education in Poland, will lack intelligibility.

Religious education in Poland and Germany: main similarities and differences

From a historical perspective, it is noteworthy that both Poland and Germany have long traditions of religious education. After the Second World War, significant changes took place in both countries, with effects that are still visible today. In the People's Republic of Poland (1945–1989), religious instruction was gradually marginalised in public life, culminating in its complete removal from the school curriculum in 1961. Consequently, religious education was relegated to church catechesis, conducted within parishes. Following the political changes of 1989 and the subsequent social transformation, religion was reintroduced into schools in 1990 as an optional subject. The legal basis for this was provided by the instructions of the Minister of National Education, dated 3 and 24 August 1990, which outlined the structure of religious education concerning the Catholic Church, other churches, and religious communities. The Act on the Educational System of 7 September 1991, along with the Ordinance of the Minister of National Education from 1992, reinforced the initial legal framework for teaching religion in public schools in Poland. Despite numerous subsequent modifications, this framework continues to regulate religious education in public schools today. Moreover, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 enshrines the right to teach religion in schools (Article 53, paragraph 4), although it does not specify the detailed rules to be followed. The right to religious education is further supported by the concordat between the Holy See and the Polish state (signed in 1993, ratified in 1998), as well as other legislative acts governing the state's relations with individual churches and various religious organisations (Milerski 2013, 43–44).

Regarding the legal status of religious education in Germany, it is important to recognise that the individual states of the Federal Republic of Germany (the Länder) enjoy significant autonomy in matters of internal and public international law. As a result, both the German state (through the 'Reichskonkordat' of 1933) and some Länder have entered into concordat agreements. While federal law provides a general framework, it is ultimately the Länder that hold authority over Church legislation (Kleina 2007, 10; Mendl 2021, 519). Following the end of the Second World War, the

German Basic Law of 23 May 1949 guaranteed religious education as the only school subject explicitly outlined in the constitution, under Article 7(3). Consequently, religious education is recognised as a standard subject within the public school system, except in certain states, such as Berlin, Brandenburg, and Bremen, where the so-called 'Bremen clause' (Article 141 of the German Basic Law) places restrictions on its implementation (Holze and Pfister 2019, 10). Under Article 7 of the Basic Law, religious instruction in Germany is regarded as a 'res mixta' – a shared responsibility between the state and the Church. Accordingly, it is subject to the same democratic principles that govern other subjects (Kalbheim and Ziebertz 2010, 306–308).

The primary similarity between Poland and Germany in terms of their legal frameworks is that, in both countries, confessional religious education can be included as part of the public school curriculum. In these cases, churches are responsible for the teaching content, while the state's role is limited to approving the curriculum (Chrostowski 2021c, 182). In either country, participation in religious lessons is generally optional, at the discretion of parents or adult students. The key difference is that in Poland, students can choose between religion or ethics and are permitted to opt out of both. In contrast, in Germany, as previously mentioned, religion or ethics/philosophy are compulsory subjects, though the scope and format vary across the federal states. Additionally, the grade achieved in religious education in Poland is not included in the overall average grade, whereas in Germany, it is. German students also have the option to take religious education as a subject for their higher school certificate (= Abitur), which is not permitted in Poland. It is also notable that in both countries, teachers of confessional religion must obtain approval from a church authority to teach. For instance, Catholic religion teachers must receive approval through the so-called 'missio canonica' (ibid. 181–184; Kalbheim and Ziebertz 2010, 306–308; Domsgen and Witten 2022, 18–19).

Regarding the socio-cultural context, Catholicism in Poland is particularly embedded in historical, traditional and cultural practices. As previously stated, 91.5% of the Polish population identifies as Catholic (GUS 2023, 199). Due to their proportionately small number of believers, other religions and denominations play a limited role in the social and media discourse on religious education. This is corroborated by the findings of the CBOS (2024) survey, which indicates that Orthodoxy represents 0.5% of the population, while Protestantism and Protestant-related churches account for 0.4%. Additionally, 0.5% of the population adheres to Jehovah's Witnesses, and 7.3% of individuals are not affiliated with any particular denomination (ibid.). In contrast, Germany is distinguished by a high level of religious diversity, with two dominant denominations, Catholic and Protestant, representing 24.3% and 26.7% of the population, respectively (Kropač and Schambeck 2022, 14). It is also worth noting that Germany is currently facing new challenges concerning religious education, as well as in the broader context of the educational system and social life. These are related, among other things, to the growing number of non-denominational persons and Muslims, who represent about 40.7% and 3.5% of the population accordingly (ibid.). The significance of interreligious education is becoming increasingly apparent in discussions surrounding religious education, particularly in light of the considerably greater socio-cultural diversity in Germany compared to Poland (Chrostowski 2021c, 183; see also Schlag and Schweitzer 2023; Kolb 2024). This is exemplified by initiatives such as the conceptualisation of 'Religious Education for All' (= 'Religionsunterricht für alle') as seen in Hamburg (Bauer 2019, 2022), and interreligious learning through interdisciplinary cooperation with ethics and philosophy lessons (Boehme 2023; Boehme and Petermann 2022). The development of co-operative interfaith education for Catholics and Protestants has also played a significant role in the discourse in recent years (Schröder 2022; Schröder and Woppowa 2021; DBK 2016; EKD 2018).

Finally, it is worth noting that the goals of Catholic religious education, as formulated by the Polish and German bishops, differ significantly in their current forms (Chrostowski 2021c, 183). The Polish episcopate views Christian upbringing and the transmission of faith doctrine as primary aims of religious education and promotes evangelisation in the context of the teaching of religion in schools (KEP 2001, 2018, 2019). For this reason, Polish theologians M. Zając and P. Mąkosa argue that

religious education in Poland is best characterised as an introduction to the life of the ecclesial community (Zając and Mąkosa 2009, 172). In contrast, the German bishops emphasise that Catholic religious education should not be limited to the transmission of 'mere knowledge' (DBK 2005, 18), but must seek to 'make faith and religion accessible' (ibid.). Students should be equipped to live as Christians in modern society while critically reflecting on their own and others' religious beliefs (ibid.). Furthermore, religious education in German schools has the responsibility of imparting religious interpretations and ways of life to children and young people, encouraging them to think and act responsibly concerning religion and worldviews. This contributes to their personal development and orientation in the world (DBK 1996a, 2023a; see also Chrostowski 2021c, 183–184).

Naturally, the objectives of religious education in Germany, as formulated in response to post-modern society, are the outcome of a long-term and complex process. This development, which is closely linked to the evolution of theological, pedagogical and philosophical thought and the growing pluralisation of worldviews, is also inextricably linked to the concept of the 'Carousel of Concepts', which will be explored in more detail in the next stage of the analysis.

Concretisation: Germany's 'Carousel of Concepts' in the Struggle to Frame Religious Education

In Germany, as a consequence of the profound and far-reaching changes in cultural, social and educational policy since the middle of the 20th century, and particularly as a result of the protests of the 68' movement (Heger 2021, 531), the theologically oriented deductive and church-missionary approach to religious education experienced a deep crisis, paralleling the situation in Poland today. This prompted an intensified search for new didactic and conceptual solutions, among which the following proposals are of particular note (Mendl 2021, 521–522, 2015, 53–55; Mendl 2007a, 357–360):

- *The concept of hermeneutic religious education*: Hermeneutic religious education, inspired by existentialist exegesis, sought to interpret biblical texts in the context of contemporary reality. This approach differed from catechetical methods, which treated biblical passages as catechism evidence. Instead, the new approach regarded them as autonomous documents of faith requiring analysis. This model, developed by Protestant religion educators, was inspired, among others, by the work of Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). Catholic religion educators adopted this model, distinguishing themselves from catechetical and kerygmatic religious education. This understanding was central to the development of a new approach to religious education, which involved examining the religious message from both the subject and the addressee's perspectives. This approach can be seen to have formed the basis of an empirical turn in religious education (Klappenecker 2017, 4–5; Mendl 2021, 521).
- *The concept of problem-oriented religious education*: This model also emerged as a reaction to the ineffectiveness of the Church's missionary and catechetical activities within the context of school lessons. The new model thus necessitated contextualised teaching, with a focus on the role of Christianity in the modern world. This entailed questioning the reality of students' lives while emphasising the necessity of faith in life. The concepts of emancipation, self-discovery and coping with life were to assume a central role within the framework of the educational process. A significant challenge associated with this approach was the tendency to overlook the subsequent step of interpreting students' experiences, life situations, and social problems concerning the Scriptures due to time constraints. This resulted in religious education being perceived as a mere weekly 'chatting session' and its devaluation, or 'Laberfach' (Mendl 2015, 54–55; 2019, 221–222; Hahn 2016, 4–7).
- *The concept of subject-oriented and therapeutic religious education*: This approach was designed to provide support for pupils in developing their identity and to address any socialisation

deficits that may have arisen in a religious and social context. The objective was to assist pupils in the process of self-discovery, fostering solidarity with others and encouraging the development of alternative thinking, with due consideration of the socio-therapeutic aspects of child and adolescent development. The concept of religion was to be constructed using relevant biblical texts (e.g. Ps 23, Mt 11:28–30; 2 Cor 1:3–4) as a liberating factor, counteracting the often negative childhood experiences that pupils may have encountered. However, this approach had limitations, including a one-sided focus on the destructive aspects of socialisation. Furthermore, it overlooked the fact that the school per se is not a therapeutic institution. Nevertheless, one enduring value of this approach was the learner-centred orientation of didactic processes in religious education. This included biographical learning, consideration of students' life worlds, an emancipatory reading of biblical narratives, and an emphasis on the affective-emotional dimensions of learning in school (Mendl 2021, 522; Leimgruber, Hilger, and Kropač, 2010, 55–58).

- *A conceptual framework for religious education in religious studies*: The intensifying criticism of religious education, which focused on ecclesiastical premises and the year-on-year decline in student engagement, led to a demand for religious education that adopted a religious studies approach to religion. These lessons were designed to provide information about different religions from an external perspective while allowing for critical analysis. However, this model was criticised for being cognitively narrow and for losing the existential dimension of religious questions. The outcome of the debate surrounding this concept was the incorporation of other religious traditions and critical questions regarding religion into denominational religious education in schools (Mendl 2015, 53–54; Leimgruber, Hilger, and Kropač, 2010, 49–51).

The specific impasse created by the proliferation of divergent conceptions of religious education in Germany was only satisfactorily overcome by the Synod of Würzburg, held between 1971 and 1975 (Mendl 2021, 520). It was at this juncture that the current diaconal form of religious education in German schools was developed (Altmeyer 2015, 7; Mendl 2007b, 8). The fundamental didactic principle is based on a synthesis of pedagogical and theological premises, which can be succinctly expressed in the following formula: 'Faith should be grounded in lived experience, and lived experience should be illuminated by faith' (1974/2012, 139). In this way, the synod took as the basis for religious education the fundamental theological approach promoted by Karl Rahner, the so-called 'anthropological turn' (Rahner 1967, 1975; cf. also; Losinger 2020), while adopting a hermeneutical approach to developing an understanding of the Christian faith tradition and the practice of faith through the experience of the students (Sajak 2020, 8; Simon 2005, 6). This has contributed to the fact that even if the synod itself does not use the term, the foundations of correlative didactics have been laid, which assumes within the processes of religious education the interconnectedness between the Christian faith and the present-day environment of young people's lives (Heil 2015, 1). Consequently, a fundamental tenet of religious education in schools was established and remains valid to this day, despite repeated criticisms (Sajak 2020, 8; Schweitzer 2015, 9–13; Mette 2013, 51).

In light of the aforementioned considerations, it would be beneficial to formulate guidelines for the renewal of religious education in Poland, taking into account the German concept of the diaconal religious lesson and the religious-pedagogical debate surrounding it.

Rethinking religious education in Poland: ideas for the future

The reflections thus far have shown that the ongoing social and educational transformations in Poland require a clear separation of the tasks of religious education in schools and catechetical ministry in parishes. The place of catechesis is the parish community, not the public school, which is an increasingly pluralistic environment in terms of worldview (Chrostowski 2022a, 156–157).

Furthermore, if the Catholic Church is still entitled to provide religious instruction within the public education system, it must expand the conceptual and didactic scope of this subject to encompass 'the tasks of humanistic education' (Milerski 2009, 8). This would transform education into an integral and compulsory element of the school curriculum, rather than an optional addition, as it currently is in Poland. In this way, religious education would not only fulfil the specific aims of the Church but also the general educational tasks that are ascribed to the public school (Milerski 2009, 8, cf. also; Marek 2014; Śliwerski 2014, 2020; Chrostowski 2021a, 2021c). Furthermore, the actions of the Polish Ministry of Education, which have been influenced by the catechetical, non-compulsory profile of religion lessons, have led to the announcement of several changes. The reduction in the number of hours of religion classes at school from two to one hour at all educational levels is a further consequence of the aforementioned transformations. Furthermore, the possibility of combining pupils attending religion or ethics lessons into inter-departmental groups (comprising pupils at the same stage of education) or inter-class groups (bringing together pupils from different stages of education) has been introduced. The combination of pupils from different stages of education is permitted, with no limit on the size of such groups in secondary schools. Furthermore, the organisation of religion lessons is to take place only during the first or last lesson, separately from the timetable of individual classes. These plans serve to discredit religious education in its current catechetical form as an equal school subject, without addressing the issue of systemic discrimination of believers (KEP 2024; Bernaciński 2024; EKAI 2024).

Against this background, a forward-looking approach to religious education in Poland, together with an expanded discussion in this field, should pursue changes in the following aspects: the character and profile of religious education, its orientation, objectives, basic didactic principles, the relationship of teachers to their community, and the discovery of the potential of school pastoral care.

Character and profile of religious education

The character of religious education should remain confessional (Mąkosa 2024, 274; Chrostowski 2020, 43), and the Church and other faith communities – especially in the face of deepening worldview pluralism – should be allowed to continue developing their own (and in the future perhaps joint interfaith and interreligious) curricula and textbooks (Mąkosa, 274). However, it should be borne in mind that in a postmodern society, curricula should break with the conventional fixation exclusively on Christianity and the (major) world religions and include, besides 'religion', two additional pillars, i.e. 'religiosity', understood as an independent construction in the biographies of individuals, and 'religious culture', as the manifestation of religion in high and popular culture (Kropač 2019).

On the other hand, the profile of religious education needs to undergo a radical change. The extreme approaches, i.e. the catechetical-evangelistic model of religious education (Danecki 2024; Jasnos 2023; Łabendowicz 2022; Bednarczyk 2022; Księżak 2020; Kochel 2018; Tomasik 2022, 2017; Celary 2011), which is too intrusive and excludes others, as well as the religious studies model (Czekalski 2023), which is mainly limited to the transmission of information and thus does not correspond to the complexity and multidimensionality of religious phenomena and youth religiosity. In this sense, the aim of work on the conceptualisation of religious education cannot be to sharpen religious learning within the paradigm of 'learning in religion' or 'learning about religion', but to consistently orient religious education in schools as 'learning from religion', while also incorporating these other two perspectives. More specifically, the idea is not to 'box' pupils into believers, agnostics and non-believers, as is the separate attempt to implant these three categories but to leave it to the teachers themselves to determine the learning intentions of their learning group and to take them into account accordingly in their teaching. 'learning from religion' has a conceptual advantage here, which is also confirmed by the case of religious education in Germany, as it can – with the help of

appropriately selected didactic and methodological means – easily include students with different views and attitudes towards religion from a middle position (König and Kropač 2021, 197, 207–208).

Orientation of religious education

The confessional character of religious education and its profiling within the framework of 'learning from religion' allows for a broad orientation of the subject, i.e. one that combines both the informative-educational model promoted in the Polish context (Chrostowski 2020, 2021b, 2021c, 2022e, 2022a; Mąkosa 2024) and the informative-critical and existential-positional model with elements of interreligious and intercultural dialogue (Chrostowski and Kropač 2023; Różańska 2017; Orłowska 2012). In an attempt to take into account, as much as possible, the models of religious education proposed in the specialised literature, it is possible to propose a common term for the concept of dialogical-educational religious education. Such a designation, on the one hand, emphasises the central role of dialogue, which is necessary in a pluralistic society (Chrostowski and Kropač 2023, 168–169). On the other hand, it also makes it possible to emphasise the importance of educational aspects that support the development of religious competence in students by providing knowledge about their own and other religions and beliefs, solving existential problems and building appropriate social attitudes that prepare young people for responsible action (Mąkosa 2024, 275–278).

Objectives of religious education

The present form of religious education presupposes first of all that all catechetical efforts in the school should lead to the fulfilment of the six tasks of catechesis characteristic of parish catechesis:1. development of knowledge of the faith, 2. liturgical education, 3. moral formation, 4. formation in prayer, 5. education for community life and 6. missionary initiation (KEP 2001, no. 37–53). As already mentioned, the public school is not an appropriate place for parish catechesis, and it is disingenuous to identify the goals of religious education in a postmodern society with the above-mentioned catechetical tasks specific to the parish (Chrostowski 2020, 43–44). Moving away from the catechetical fixation, it is worthwhile to be inspired by religious education in Germany and, by the premises of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), to formulate the objectives of religious education as including the ability to engage in interdenominational, interreligious and intercultural dialogue and the development of pupils' identity in the context of the Christian message. Religious education should also support students' understanding of religious and ethical issues, encourage them to reflect critically on their own lives, moral and social attitudes, and to evaluate reality from different points of view (Kropač 2019, 201–240). All these goals can only be achieved if the reality of students' lives, their experiences and preconditions are taken into account and brought into a productive relationship with the Christian faith tradition. This is the basis of didactics of religion that is oriented towards the students as subjects of religious education and allows them to be considered competent to make their own free decisions in religious matters (Boschki 2021, 72–73).

Basic principles of the didactics of religious education

Since the aforementioned anthropological turn in Catholic theology in the twentieth century and the official adoption of these assumptions by the Church in the context of the Second Vatican Council, the human being, together with his or her experiences and relationships, has been at the centre of theological reflection (Chrostowski 2022d) and must therefore also be at the centre of the didactics of religion. In this sense, it is human experience that becomes the focus of theological reflection on the relationship with God. In religious education, students' experiences are the starting point for a dialogue with faith experiences from the Bible and Christian history (Boschki 2021, 74), as well as for updating the Christian message under the influence of current transformations, e.g. digitalisation and artificial

intelligence (Chrostowski 2023a). Also significant are the decisions of the Second Vatican Council on openness to other confessions and religions (e.g. the document Nostra Aetate), which must manifest itself in the ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural doctrine already mentioned. It is a question of developing a didactics that is sensitive to pluralism, a didactics that appreciates others and their otherness. This is relevant not only for socio-political reasons but also for the understanding of one's own ecclesial, theological and ethical-moral convictions (Boschki 2021, 74).

Relationship of teachers to their religious community

Religious education teachers in Poland should be seen as a link between the content of the lessons developed by the Church's curriculum committees and the pupils, who, although baptised Catholics, are in most cases not religiously socialised. In this sense, from the point of view of canon law, teachers need to have a 'missio canonica', which is issued by the competent ecclesiastical authorities and constitutes an authorisation to teach the subject. It presupposes above all the teacher's declared willingness to teach religion and a way of life by the teaching of the Catholic Church (Boschki 2021, 72–73). Two observations should be made in this context: 1. it must be remembered that the 'missio canonica' must allow for a critical attitude towards the Church (= critical loyalty), which must give teachers the freedom and self-determination to present the teachings or statements of the Catholic Church from a critical perspective in the classroom, which is especially important when dealing with, for example, financial scandals, clericalism or the abuse of minors in the Church (Boschki 2021, 72–73). 2 The ecclesiastical authorities in Poland – particularly given the aforementioned decreasing number of religion teachers and the progressive moral-axiological changes in the younger generations – should follow the example of the German bishops and critically review the principle of making the receipt of the 'missio canonica' conditional on the conformity of the religion teacher's lifestyle with the teachings of the Church. In other words, it should be accepted that teachers of religion are first and foremost called to give Christian witness 'regardless of their origin, age, disability, personal life situation, sexual orientation or gender identity' (DBK German Bishops' Conference 2023b, 4).

Discovery of the potential of school pastoral care

The concept of dialogical-educational teaching of religion proposed here does not envisage the catechetical functions of initiation or evangelisation of pupils being realised as part of the teaching and learning process. However, if the Church is concerned about these tasks, it should look for other creative solutions. One of these is the implementation of a school pastoral offer independent of religious education (= 'Schulpastoral'). This Christian commitment in schools goes far beyond the boundaries of religious education and is implemented not only in voluntary, diverse pastoral and recreational offers but also in spiritual, psychological and pedagogical counselling, in ordinary human accompaniment in the face of challenges (e.g. problems in the family, death, loss of a job, etc.) and cooperation with various social institutions or church groups. In general, school pastoral care has one goal: the humanisation of the school environment in the spirit of the Christian message of charity (Chrostowski 2020, 45–46; cf. also; Chrostowski 2022b; DBK 1996b, 2020). In this regard, the Church could benefit from the exemplary model developed by M. Chrostowski for the Diocese of Łomża, entitled 'School Pastoral Care for All!', in which the understanding and aims, the theological foundations and principles, the basic forms of action and the organisational structure of school ministry are elaborated, and the stages of its implementation in schools are presented (Chrostowski 2021c, 2022a).

Summary

Summarising the above reflections, it is essential to emphasise once again that the current model of religious education in Poland, specifically school catechesis, is outdated and lacks pedagogical justification in contemporary schools – aside from the narrowly defined interests of the Church. Young people growing up in postmodern society are very different from those of the 1990s when the assumptions of the current form of religious education were developed. Therefore, the notion of religiosity developing conventionally and linearly (Lehner-Hartmann 2014, 107) must be abandoned, along with the belief that school religious education can compensate for the deficiencies of religious socialisation in the family and thereby strengthen young people's faith and their attachment to the Church. Such assumptions do not reflect the reality or the complexity and dynamics of the transformative processes shaping young people's attitudes towards both objective and subjective religion. The characteristics of postmodern religiosity – deinstitutionalisation, detraditionalisation, pluralisation, and individualisation – must be recognised as fundamental elements of students' religiosity and thus considered in the conceptualisation of religious education in schools. Moreover, religious education must address the current educational challenges, including the instrumentalisation of the educational system in Poland, that it is facing.

Indeed, the search for a new model of religious education in Poland is not a trivial task, and different approaches to learning 'in', 'about' and 'from' religion will continue to clash. However, the German experience shows that neither the catechetical model that existed in this country before the Würzburg Synod, nor the hermeneutic, problem-oriented, subject-oriented and therapeutic concept of religious education, nor the religious studies of religious education work. This is because they are either impossible to implement in a school setting, or they deal with religious phenomena only in an informative and hence fragmentary way. The concept of dialogical-educational religious education proposed above, which is still confessional in its assumptions, therefore comes to the fore. However, based on 'learning from religion', it is at the same time an option that places Polish pupils with their biographies at the centre of religious didactic processes, expands the curricula of religious education to include the category of 'religiosity' and 'religious culture', and is open to interreligious, interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the new approach of having the religious educators themselves regulate their relationship with their religious community, as well as the possibility of implanting the school chaplaincy as a place where, among other things, voluntary offers of evangelisation can be made effective, are also proposed concerning this model and are worthy of consideration.

Finally, it should be pointed out once again that the sketch of proposals for change in the model of religious education in Poland presented here should be regarded as a starting point for further discussion in this area, since it requires extended, detailed analytical-critical elaboration and adaptation to Polish educational conditions – also in the organisational-legal sense. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that it is far from being based on principles that have been tried and tested in Germany for years and that have made it possible to give religious education a more humanistic, i.e. youth-friendly, problem- and interest-friendly face. It seems that moving in a similar, future-oriented direction should be the common goal of all those responsible for religious education, especially academics and the institutional Church in Poland.

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