



Optimising Religious Education in Poland in the Age of Secularisation

PAWEŁ MAKOŚA 

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, pawel.makosa@kul.pl

Abstract: The dynamic secularisation of Polish young people and the fact that many of them are opting out of religious classes prompts a critical analysis of the current model of Religious Education and the development of proposals that respond to contemporary socio-cultural challenges. In other words this article will seek to outline potential directions for modifying the current Religious Education model intended for secondary school students in Poland. This paper attempts to provide a synthetic answer to the following questions: Why is Religious Education in secondary schools today not leading to the expected results? What elements of it are inadequate for contemporary conditions? What should the model of Religious Education for young people look like in the context of a decline in religiousness? Where and how should catechesis be provided? This paper contributes to the discussion on the shape of Religious Education for young people in a changing society.

Keywords: Religious Education, catechesis, youth, secularisation, Catholic Church

The dynamic secularisation of Polish youth is confirmed by numerous studies (Mariański 2018; CBOS 2021; Boguszewski 2022; Mariański 2022; Adamczyk 2023), which makes it an indisputable fact and the trend can no longer be ignored. In addition to the weakening of religiousness, one of its manifestations is the widespread resignation of young people from religious classes, especially in the largest cities (Zakrzewski 2021; Małosa, Zając, and Zakrzewski 2022). In addition to the multidimensional processes of secularisation, which are, as it were, a constitutive feature of postmodern societies (Gabriel 2002), the reasons for the withdrawal from religious lessons also include the concept behind such lessons which does not meet the expectations of students and their parents or the expectations of religious teachers and catechists, or even those of ecclesiastical authorities. Profound changes are therefore needed in the concept of Religious Education in Polish schools, especially as far as secondary education is concerned, since it is in these environments that the greatest crisis is noted (cf. Zellma, Buchta, and Cichosz 2021). Indeed, it could be argued that maintaining the *status quo* risks the complete breakdown of this form of education. It should be added that some research confirms that many students also support altering the concept and practice of Religious Education in schools (Milerski and Karwowski 2023, 94; Kiełb, Pierzchała, and Gazda 2023). This article will attempt to develop potential directions for changes to the current model of Religious Education aimed at secondary school students. First, however, an analysis of current

assumptions of Religious Education will be presented and an attempt will be made to answer the question of why they do not work in today's cultural context.

1. The Assumptions of the Current Model of Religious Education

The model of Religious Education currently implemented in Poland can be described not only as confessional (denominational) but also as catechetical (Małkosa 2015, 60). Such an assumption stems primarily from historical factors, as emphasised by the authors of the 2001 *Directory for Catechesis of the Catholic Church in Poland*, stating that “In the Polish conditions, taking into account the historical factors and the catechetical tradition which has been consolidated over the last decades, school teaching of religion should be treated as part of catechesis, i.e. as a specific form of catechesis” (KEP 2001, 82). The aforementioned regulations mean that Religious Education is treated as one of the forms of catechesis. In theory, systematic catechesis of children and young people should also be held in the parish and the Church's documents take the view that the parish is “the most significant place for catechesis” (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, 257; cf. Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, 298–303). Polish parishes most often deliver only sacramental catechesis, although even in this respect the parish often delegates responsibilities to the school. In practice, therefore, Religious Education in school is the most common form of catechesis and, in many settings, even the only one.

For the above reasons, the current model of Religious Education (RE) in Polish schools is regarded as catechesis, which in its essence is education “of children, young people and adults in the faith, which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life” (CT 18; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, 5). Consequently, Religious Education understood in this way attempts to fulfil the aims and objectives of catechesis. It is worth recalling, therefore, that the definitive aim of catechesis is “to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (CT 5). The achievement of this aim presupposes, in turn, the realisation of all the tasks and functions of catechesis. The 2020 *Directory for Catechesis* identifies the following tasks of catechesis: to lead to knowledge of the faith (Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, 80), to initiate into the celebration of the Mystery (2020, 81–82), to form for life in Christ (2020, 83–85), to teach prayer (2020, 81–82) and to introduce to community life (2020, 81–82) (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, 85–86; Rayzacher-Majewska 2021). In other words, it is about the implementation of the main functions of catechesis, which include teaching, education and initiation (Congregation for the Clergy 1971, 31). The current model of Religious Education in Poland is

therefore primarily concerned with deepening personal faith, prayer, sacramental life and adherence to Catholic moral principles.

The above assumptions are reflected in the current curriculum documents, the *Core Curriculum for Catechesis* (KEP 2018) and in the Religious Education curricula, including the most widespread *Curriculum for Religious Education* of 2018 (KWK KEP 2018). As envisaged in these documents, each student should not only assimilate relevant content and acquire certain skills but also develop religious attitudes. For example, the *Core Curriculum for Catechesis*, in its objectives for secondary school, stipulates that the students “take care of the development of their own faith” (2018, 101), “develop in themselves an attitude of faith and trust in God” (2018, 101), “believe in the presence of the Guardian Angel and pray to him” (2018, 102), “develop devotion to Mary the Mother of God and a maternal relationship with Her” (2018, 103). Even though the attitudes described in the curriculum documents are not to be assessed, they show a conception of Religious Education in Poland that is very close to catechesis or even identified with it.

Since the very reintroduction of RE to schools in 1990, the Church on its part, and therefore in practice the Commission for Catholic Education of Polish Bishops' Conference and each diocesan bishop, has decided on the programmes and textbooks used for RE in schools. One of the main guidelines for the content of Catholic Religious Education is to analyse the entire deposit of faith in both primary and secondary school, obviously in a way that is adapted to the students' perceptive abilities. At the same time, RE teachers can only be employed in schools on condition that they receive a special referral from the bishop, the so-called canonical mission (MEN 1992). In addition to requiring Religious Education teachers to have a degree in Catholic theology. The Catholic Church also makes it a condition for them to lead a life in accordance with the doctrine and morals of the Church. Every RE teacher is obliged to be not only a teacher and educator but also a witness to the faith and to lead an active life in the Church (KEP 2001, 150).

In summary, according to the current assumptions, Religious Education in Polish schools is a form of catechesis and, like any catechesis, by its very nature, is intended for Catholics who wish to deepen their knowledge of Catholic teaching and the personal faith they wish to experience in the Catholic Church. Other Churches and religious communities also have analogous assumptions. Current surveys of religiousness, however, show that such participants in religion classes are increasingly difficult to find and that less and less percentage of young people meet these assumptions. Consequently, it is unrealistic to realise the aims, objectives and functions of catechesis in a strict sense. Therefore, there is a growing disappointment with the RE in Poland, as catechetical and even evangelising goals are achieved with little or no success.

2. Selected Features of the New Model of Religious Education

It can therefore be asserted with confidence that the current model of Religious Education in Poland does not work and needs to be changed. This is particularly true for secondary school students, who largely disapprove of the current curricular approach of this school subject, and express this by opting out of it. It is therefore becoming necessary to develop a new model for RE in Poland, especially aimed at young people. In line with the search for this new model, this article will propose its selected features synthetically.

2.1. Maintaining Confessional Character of Re

The main premise of the proposal presented here is to preserve the confessional character of Religious Education in Poland (Chrostowski 2020, 43). In the context of present-day hyperpluralism and also the increasingly sharp ideological dispute in Polish society, it should be left to the Churches and other religious communities to develop their own curricula and textbooks and to decide who can teach religion on their behalf. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that the basis of Religious Education in public schools is the principle of subsidiarity, according to which the state is obliged to assist parents in the upbringing of their children, including in its religious dimension. Giving the state the competence to determine the RE curriculum could lead to a breach of this fundamental principle and an attempt to impose a curriculum contrary to the views of parents. This danger is not merely theoretical, as it has already occurred in other countries.¹ The imposition of the educational monopoly of the state in this matter was explicitly called by John Paul II a form of totalitarianism (EA 71). Religious Education in Poland should therefore remain confessional, especially with regard to the content and qualifications of religion teachers.

2.2. Resigning from the Catechetical Initiatory Function

However, the proposal to preserve the denominational character of Religious Education in Poland does not mean that all the tasks and functions of catechesis should be fulfilled. This point applies especially to the initiatory function of catechesis. Indeed, it is clear that in a situation in which an increasing proportion of young people are not committed and practising Catholics, the implementation of this function does not make sense. It is therefore a matter of realising that in the present-day school, it is not possible, or even legitimate, to carry out catechesis and especially the catechetical initiatory function. In practice, this mainly means abandoning the joint recitation of

¹ This refers e.g. to the so-called *Danish Sex Education Case*, when parents had to send their children to classes with which they disagreed. Judgment of the European Court of Human Rights of December 7, 1976.

prayers, the use of celebratory methods (in the form of worship services) and even the intensive encouragement of young people to participate in the liturgy and sacramental life (cf. Milerski 1998, 301). This is because it is clear that religious practices should be an expression of faith and it is difficult to suggest participation in such practices to secularised students who consider themselves non-believers.

While catechesis in school had already faced criticism, evangelisation or an evangelising catechesis was most often proposed in its place, in which evangelisation would precede and accompany catechesis (Offmański 1996; 2000; Szpet 2002). However, the present proposal implies the abandonment not only of catechesis but also of evangelisation in the strict sense. In fact, evangelisation is the proclamation of the Christian kerygma in a way that calls for conversion (Paciorek 2000, 1360–61) and therefore pursues not only strictly denominational objectives but also initiatory and catechumenal ones. Schools, especially state schools, do not seem an appropriate place for evangelisation (Misiąszek 2002). Such activities in state schools are also increasingly failing and can face accusations of proselytising (Francis 2016). In addition, many of today's young people do not want to be evangelised and doing so against their will would violate their freedom and would not have the expected effect.

2.3. Communicating Knowledge about One's Own Religion and Belief

The main feature of the proposed model of Religious Education is the focus on the provision of religious knowledge, but this should be done from the perspective of the Church or other religious organisation that is responsible for RE. Furthermore, in confessional terms, the content of Religious Education at school should be most concerned with knowledge of that particular religious community. With regard to Catholic religion classes, this is about providing information about the Christianity and Catholicism. However, the selection of the content for such religious classes is crucial. Current curriculum documents assume the integrity of the communication of catechetical content and that the entire deposit of the Catholic faith will be discussed three times during school education. In other words, it is assumed that all the content of, among other sources, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will be covered, including the following areas: the confession of faith; the celebration of the Christian mystery (liturgy); life in Christ (morality); and Christian prayer. In line with current assumptions, the deposit of faith should be discussed at different levels of detail and intellectual capacity, adapted to the perceptive abilities of the pupils. In other words, current curricular assumptions for Religious Education are dominated by extensive material that presents theological content to be taught to all students. However, due to the dynamic changes in the faith and religiousness of young people described above, it seems that the transmission of the entire deposit of faith is not feasible. Nor does it seem necessary at this stage of learning about Christianity and Catholicism. It is therefore necessary to select the content discussed in religion

classes and to impart only that which will enable students to learn (or recall) the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, the origins of Christianity and its pillars. Therefore, it is worthwhile not only to reduce the scope of the issues covered, abandoning, among other things, a detailed discussion of the history of dogmas, and a detailed analysis of the liturgical year, but also to leave more freedom for the religion teacher to choose the content so that it can be adapted to the students.

Among the specific issues that seem particularly relevant in today's cultural context, one can point to the historicity of the person of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. Showing the facts that confirm the existence of Jesus is the starting point for further analysis. In turn, the historicity of Jesus' resurrection gives credence to the Christian religion (Rusecki 2001, 45; Seweryniak 2001, 100). A confessional Religious Education would also need to discuss the specific nature and credibility of the Catholic Church (Canizares 2007, 741). It is also imperative to incorporate teachings about religious experiences. This is because religion is not merely a theoretical and abstract perspective but rather a tangible means of influencing and molding one's life (Schreiner 2019, 53). The aforementioned topics have a pre-evangelising dimension and can draw students towards Christianity and Catholicism, but this cannot be assumed, especially against their will. However, they undoubtedly represent an elementary body of knowledge that students should acquire.

2.4. Communicating Knowledge about Other Religions and Beliefs

Understandably, in the confessional conception of Religious Education, most of the content is devoted to the religion that decides about the curricular assumptions. However, the knowledge imparted to young people should also include other religions and faiths, especially those that are present in the young people's everyday environment (Barnes and Davis 2015; Hejwosz-Gromkowska 2020, 92–93). The idea is that the students should not only know their own religion but also have a basic knowledge of other Christian denominations, i.e. Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Pentecostal movements and the main non-Christian religions, i.e. Islam and Judaism or Hinduism and Buddhism. This knowledge, in addition to its intrinsic value, can and should overcome various stereotypes, build dialogue and attitudes of tolerance and cooperation (Rybicki, Małkosa, and Mazur 2022; cf. Chrostowski and Kropač 2023, 165; Różańska 2015). Of course, in a confessional approach, the material on other religions need not be as detailed as that on one's own religion. However, as part of their Religious Education, students should learn about the fundamental truths of the faith, moral principles and forms of worship, including the festivals celebrated in other religions.

The communication of knowledge, both about one's own religion and about other denominations, is directly in line with the basic objectives of the public education system and its beneficiaries are all students, regardless of their religiousness.

However, it is important that religious knowledge is communicated with reference to the latest findings in biblical, theological, historical, biological, psychological, and social research, as well as research in other fields. In this context, it is worth remembering that religious knowledge should be conveyed in connection with other fields of knowledge and other school subjects (Tomasik 2004, 296–328; 2003, 128). In particular, it is about shaping an integral vision of the world that is free of the opposition between faith and reason, religion and science, Church and world, ect. (Lange 1991, 241; Misiaszek 2004, 300; Muskus 1999, 102). It is also a matter of ensuring that “religious instruction in schools [should] appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines. [...] It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines, but rather it should engage in a necessary inter-disciplinary dialogue” (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, 73).

2.5. Helping to Solve Existential Problems

Education, both in its individual and social dimensions, should also be an important function of religious instruction in postmodern society (Chałupniak 2003, 188–89). With regard to the individual dimension, religious education lessons should primarily help young people in their search for answers to fundamental existential questions, such as questions about their own identity, the meaning of life, love and suffering, ect. (Wadowski 1999, 138; Bagrowicz 2000, 178).

The help offered by Religious Education in answering existential questions seems particularly relevant today in the face of frequent low self-esteem, depression, self-harm, addiction and even suicide among young people. Indeed, it is clear that finding a sense of one’s own existence “is a condition for proper development and becomes essential for normal functioning” (Mendyk 2014, 144–45). Religious Education at school can and should, in this respect, first and foremost show the undeniable and unique dignity and value of every human being that results from that dignity, and also help interpret negative experiences, such as lack of self-acceptance, loneliness, illness, suffering, death, etc. In this respect, it would be useful to refer not only to psychology or pedagogy but also to theology. Indeed, religious argumentation is extremely important for believers, and for non-believers it provides additional knowledge about the Christian approach to human problems and experiences and can prompt personal reflection on oneself and the world. As early as the 1960s, Pierre Babin argued that the main task of teaching religion is to help people discover their own identity, the meaning of life and the world (Babin 1965, 46). These words seem particularly relevant today.

It should not be forgotten that among the questions of the youth, there is also the question about God, about his existence, providence, omnipotence, mercy, justice etc. (Zarosa 2010, 325). After all, as Benedict XVI stated, “The question of God must not be absent from the other great questions of our time” (2011). Religious

instruction in school can and should help young people to find answers to these questions. Referring more often to philosophy than to theology if students have not had an experience of faith (Kowalczyk 2001, 178–79).

2.6. Building Social Attitudes

As part of the educational dimension of religious instruction, efforts to build desirable social attitudes are also worthwhile. To this end, it would be useful to discuss issues that are common to all individuals and societies, regardless of their religious background. Such issues are, for example, war, disease, famine, persecution, social injustice, devastation of nature, etc. (Tarnowski 1995, 33–36). In this context, Benedict XVI said: “Many people acknowledge that they are not part of any religion, yet they long for a new world, a world that is freer, more just and united, more peaceful and happy” (2011). The proposed approach to Religious Education would primarily involve the formation of attitudes such as justice and love in the broadest sense, which would then be expressed in specific attitudes, such as empathy, respect for others, diligence, honesty, truthfulness, concern for nature, patriotism, etc. (Nowak 2012, 58; Mąkośa 2014, 353; Zellma 2003, 189).

In fostering attitudes, it is worth paying attention not only to the transfer of objective information but also to the need for “the teacher to give subjective expression to his or her own beliefs, which plays a significant role in the achievement of educational goals” (Milerski 1998, 301). Indeed, the role of RE classes should not only be to impart knowledge about values but also, and perhaps above all, to provide motivation to live by these values. “Indeed, it is well known that mere knowledge, however thorough, of ethical and moral values is not enough to foster the right attitudes. This is because, in addition to the intellect, it is necessary to involve the emotions and the will. Motivation is therefore needed to internalise values and absolutise them, i.e. to place them at the top of the hierarchy of values” (Mąkośa 2014, 354). In this respect, it seems important to show their meaning in a religious context, which undoubtedly increases the motivation to live by these values in believers (Szymoń 2002, 189). In other words, it is about forming a mature, righteous conscience (Marek 2014, 129).

3. The Parish as the Primary Environment for Catechesis and Evangelisation

The model for Religious Education in Polish secondary schools outlined above does not provide for strictly catechetical or evangelising activities. However, these efforts are absolutely necessary, as the personal faith of young people and their belonging to

the Church largely depend on them. Of course, it is the family that should be the primary environment for catechesis and, for this reason, too, it should be given special care by the Church (Stala and Osewska 2005, 16). At the same time, it is the parish that should be responsible for systematic catechesis as well as evangelisation of young people. It is what is referred to as the primary environment for catechesis in the strict sense (Stala and Osewska 2005, 16) and thus for the transmission of the entire deposit of the Catholic faith. At the same time, in addition to imparting knowledge, the parish should help young people to come to a personal experience of God and the community of the Church. The idea, therefore, is that catechesis in parishes should not focus only on the transmission of knowledge, “but on such forms (services, celebrations, Bible courses, schools of prayer) that will touch people deeply and make them reflect on what has already taken place in them during initiation. A special role is played in this regard by the individual experience of those who receive catechesis, which forms the basis for the exploration of the Christian mysteries, especially the mystery of inclusion in the community of believers in Christ” (KWK KEP 2001, 139–40).

While appreciating the catechetical potential of the parish, one must be aware, however, that participation in parish catechesis at the secondary school stage will probably involve only a small percentage of young people. Preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation provides strong motivation to participate in parish catechesis, but this is most often given at the end of primary school. In dioceses that have moved the sacrament of Confirmation to secondary school, attendance is much higher, which may inspire other dioceses to change their own practice. Except for sacramental catechesis, it is difficult to motivate young people to participate in parish catechesis. On the other hand, Catholic movements and associations, in which there is a small percentage of young people, have great potential in this respect. It would be worthwhile to promote this type of formation and embrace all other opportunities.

Conclusions

The proposal presented in this article contributes to the discussion on the shape of Religious Education in Polish schools. However, it goes slightly further than previous proposals, as it does not suggest replacing catechesis with evangelisation, but instead focusing on the transmission of knowledge and abandoning the initiatory function of catechesis. The vision presented, however, does not undermine the confessional concept of RE but, instead of a catechetical and evangelising approach, it proposes an informational and educational one. The categorization of objectives within Religious Education into three ideal-typical areas comprised: ‘learning in religion,’ ‘learning from religion’ and ‘learning about religion’ (Grimmitt 2000; cf. Dinham and

Shaw 2017). With regard to this differentiation, it can be expressed that the essence of the proposal outlined in this article is to integrate these three theories tailored to the context of Poland, while placing a focus on the tangible acquisition of knowledge about one's own and other religions. Additionally, it emphasizes the concurrent contemplation of one's worldview and religious convictions (Makosa 2019, 372). According to this approach, religious instruction should enable students to "relate themselves to fundamental questions about their belonging, their search for values and the meaning of life" (Osewska 2008, 93; cf. Michalski 2012). From this perspective, Religious Education is "denominational at the level of material content, but respects the secularity of the school at the level of aims and method" (Misiaszek 1999, 166). Such an approach would have the potential to develop students' own religious identity while taking into account their diverse beliefs (Ruggiero 2022).²

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² A similar approach to Religious Education can be found in, among others, Portugal and Italy (Ruggiero 2022).

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