
YOUNG UNBELIEVERS

ATTITUDES OF YOUNG POLES TO FAITH AND THEIR FUTURE CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

Until 2005, 96% of Poles identified as believers and this percentage has been systematically decreasing for a decade now. According to the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), in 2020 it amounted to 91%, the lowest result in the history of analyses carried out by the institute. The paper explains the changes in attitudes towards faith that displayed by young Poles over the last 20 years. The authors of the study formulate conclusions on the basis of the statistical data analysed and seek to forecast trends that will occur in the future in terms of religiousness. The observed direction of changes in terms of identifying as believers, as well as the declining participation in religious practices on the part of young Poles, make it possible to assume that in the coming decades, the percentage of believers will be decreasing at a much faster pace compared to the current rate. The paper is also an attempt to seek the reasons for the crisis of faith among young Poles and to indicate potential measures that could stop it.

Keywords: changes, attitudes, faith, religiousness, crisis

1. Introduction

The changes observed today in the sphere of religiousness are focused around two fundamental trends. On the one hand, there are clear manifestations of religious revival or religious activity associated with the emergence of new types of spirituality, often characterised by an ideological-axiological confusion [1]. On the other hand, in the religious area there are strong tendencies towards secularisation, understood as the distancing of believers from institutionalised forms of religion [2], as well as marginalisation of religion in the public dimension, or a change of its meaning and alteration of its traditional functions [3].

The paper analyses the latter trend, most noticeable in the European area, especially in the western part of the Old Continent, although it has also been appearing in Eastern European countries, including Poland. On the basis of

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statistical data, an attempt will be made to show the changes in the religiousness of Polish youth over the last 25 years (1995-2020), taking into account also the consequences of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The adoption of such a timeframe seems justified, as it will make it possible to indicate the trends in this respect, and indirectly potentially provide an answer to the question what their attitudes towards faith are and what they are determined by. Such an approach refers, therefore, to the traditional dimension of religious involvement, which will be identified as an indicator of the erosion of religiousness in Poland. For this reason, the analysis will take into account the aspect of individual religiousness related to participation in religious practices, treated as a manifestation of a private relationship with God, while the whole analysis will be based on a survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS). This institution conducts continuous research in which respondents are asked questions about faith-related aspects, among other things. The authors of this study asked CBOS to provide access to databases created in the fee-based SPSS software. Previously, they chose issues of interest to them (questions for the respondents) and specific years and months in which the research would be conducted. Therefore, the data used in the article are not publicly available in the form of CBOS survey reports. Moreover, their analysis was prepared independently by the authors. The selection of data from CBOS surveys was determined by the fact that, in the opinion of the authors of the study, this institution seems to be independent and unrelated to currents openly declaring their attachment to faith, and to the opposing side.

2. Case studies on secularisation and the Roman Catholic Church in Poland

2.1. The process of secularisation in Poland

The transformations in the religious sphere in contemporary Poland are part of a more extensive secularisation process taking place in Western European countries already in back in the 1960s. The decline in participation in religious practices and in the life of the Catholic Church among Poles, as well as the decreasing number of those who sharing Catholic beliefs, mainly among members of the younger generation, are visible effects of the secularisation process. We understand the phenomenon of secularisation as having the three basic connotations attributed to it by J. Casanova:

1. secularisation as the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies,
2. secularisation as the privatisation of religion,
3. secularisation as the differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms [4].

Peter Berger's research should also be quoted. Although it points to the fact that secularisation is by no means a direct and inevitable consequence of modernity, and that a process of desecularisation can be observed across the world [5], this claim does not cover Europe, which is largely undergoing

secularisation, as a natural ‘legacy’ of the French Revolution and of the Enlightenment.

The process of secularisation in Poland has had a strong impact on the model of the popular Church, based on the traditional transmission of faith from generation to generation and the ‘Polish Catholic’ personality type, which, however, is no longer adequate to describe the Polish reality. In fact, the process of secularisation process in Poland has resulted in the emergence of new types of contemporary ‘Polish Catholics’:

1. ‘Fanatical Polish Catholics’: deep believers, practicing and active in religious life. However, they are uncompromising in their faith and do not accept any other vision of the world.
2. ‘Believing Polish Catholics’: capable of properly expressing the ideas of faith, participating in religious practices, know the Creed and moral principles.
3. ‘Surface Polish Catholics’: declaring themselves as believers, but practicing only incidentally (for social or societal reasons, out of personal conviction). They believe religiosity to be part of their heritage, something that should be preserved like exhibits in an ethnographic museum.
4. ‘Declarative Polish Catholics’: participating in religious practices occasionally; declaring faith, but without considering it as a fixed element of their lives.
5. ‘Polish ex-Catholics’, i.e. baptised in the Catholic Church, but in adult life either declared atheists or followers of other religions [6].

The types indicated above describing the ways in which Poles experience religiosity confirm one of the consequences of secularisation, namely the phenomenon of individualisation of religion. We continue to observe a relatively high level of declarative religiosity and demand for religious ceremonies (baptisms, weddings, funerals), but a decline is seen in the degree of interest in regular practice of the faith and in participation in the life of the religious community, especially among young people.

The Polish society is characterised by some of the highest rates of religiosity in Europe. Over 90% of Poles consider themselves believers. The share of *dominantes* in 2019 was 36.9%. The Catholic News Agency (KAI) published a report in 2020 entitled ‘The Church in Poland’, showing a sharp decline in religiosity among young people. A clear process of “creeping secularisation” has been observed among members of the young generation [7].

Our study of this population in the period 1994-2018 points to a decrease in the level of religiosity. Young people have been participating in religious practices and identifying themselves as believers increasingly rarely. Over the past 25 years, the decline in young people’s declared belief in God has been by approximately 20%, and the decline in religious practice has been by as much as 50%. This phenomenon can be referred to as the disruption of intergenerational transmission of faith. The number of young unbelievers is also growing rapidly, with a fourfold increase between 1994 and 2018 (Table 1).

Table 1. Declared faith, regardless of participation in religious practices, 18-19 age group, percentage share. Own compilation based on reference [8].

Declared faith	1994	1996	1998	2003	2008	2010	2013	2016	2018
deep believer	6	6	7	6	8	6	6	8	8
believer	75	74	73	72	73	71	65	61	55
undecided	15	15	15	15	14	16	19	18	20
unbeliever	4	5	5	7	5	7	10	13	17

The content of young people’s faith has also been changing significantly. The majority (37%) declare that they believe in God, while 23% have doubts about His existence. The remaining group of respondents is divided nearly equally into those inclined towards the following attitudes: hesitating, belief in an impersonal higher power, agnosticism, and atheism. Each of these was indicated by about one tenth of those surveyed. Compared to the 2013 and 2016 surveys, the share of respondents declaring belief in God decreased (Table 2).

Table 2. Declared faith, only one statement, 18-19 age group, percentage share. Own compilation based on reference [8].

Declared faith	2013	2016	2018
I believe in God and have no doubts about His existence	45	42	37
I believe in God, although I sometimes have moments of doubt	26	25	23
Sometimes I think I believe in God, sometimes I think I don’t	10	9	11
I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in some kind of Higher Power	7	7	8
I don’t know if God exists, and I don’t believe there is a way to find out	6	9	10
I don’t believe in God	6	8	11

Participation in religious practices, alongside declarations of faith, is an important indicator of religiosity. Currently, 35% of young people participate in them at least once a week, and a further 11% participate once or twice a month on average. Less than a fifth of young people (18%) claim that they practice several times a year. More than a third (35%) do not participate in religious practices at all (Table 3).

Table 3. Participation in religious practices, percentage share. Own compilation based on reference [8].

Participation in religious practices	1996	1998	2003	2008	2010	2013	2016	2018
several times a week	7	6	7	7	7	6	8	7
once a week	55	48	41	42	38	37	33	28
once/twice a month on average	0	10	12	15	15	13	9	11
several times a year	22	20	21	20	20	21	21	19
I don’t participate at all	16	16	19	16	20	23	29	35

Apart from the decline in the declared religiosity of young people, we have also observed a systematic decrease in the percentage of pupils attending religious instruction at school. This is a reversal of an earlier trend. From the school year 1990/1991, when religious instruction was introduced in schools, an upward trend was observed, lasting as long as until 2010. The share of pupils attending religious instruction increased by 12 percentage points over that period (from 81% in 1991 to 93% in 2010). Starting from the 2013 measurement, the share began to decline. In 2018, 70% of upper secondary school students in their final year declared attending religion instruction at school, which was the lowest result in the history of our measurements (Table 4).

Table 4. Attending religious instruction, percentage share. Own compilation based on reference [8].

Attending	1991	1992	1994	1996	1998	2003	2008	2010	2013	2016	2018
yes	81	85	88	84	89	90	91	93	89	75	70
no	19	15	11	16	11	9	9	7	11	25	30

The sources of the Polish version of secularisation should also be sought in the changing communication, as Poles are ceasing to use a common system of religious narration, and a large part of them ‘believe in their own individual way’. Trust in the Church has also decreased: until 2010, approximately 65% of Poles judged its activities positively, while in 2020 the share was only 42%, which is related to the changing views of young Poles on aspects to which the Church devotes too much attention: criticism of the LGBT+ community, teaching about the unacceptability of abortion, promoting a conservative vision of sexuality and of the family - these formulas have worn themselves out and no longer convince young people.

The process involving the changes described above will probably not resemble the Spanish or Irish type of secularisation in Poland. The Italian variant is more likely, i.e. standing out against a secularised Europe, but no longer to the extent seen before. The changes will probably include a process of stronger challenging of the Church as a religious and social institution, leading to a greater selectivity in religious attitudes. The Catholic Church will become one of many options, with individuals identifying with faith deciding for themselves what to believe in and when.

Cognitive value can also be found in an exercise that involves comparing high levels of declared faith with the actual observance of Church teaching and believing in one’s own way. In fact, this makes it possible to highlight a completely different dimension of faith among Poles (Table 5).

The research findings indicate clearly that almost half of all believers live by the faith of the Church (and the dogmas of faith), and the other half live by faith experienced in an individualised manner (which fits within the process of privatisation of religion) [9]. Janusz Mariański refers to this phenomenon also as “subjectivisation of religious beliefs and departure from the dogmatic content of Catholicism”, “de-Churching of religiosity” and “religiosity outside the Church” [10, 11].

Table 5. Declared position, only one statement, percentage share. Own compilation based on reference [CBOS, *Zmiany w zakresie wiary i religijności Polaków po śmierci Jana Pawła II*, CBOS announcement BS/49/2012].

Declared position	2000	2006	2013
I'm a believer and I follow the Church's guidance	56.7	62.9	45.9
I'm a believer in my own way	39.6	31.8	47.3
I can't say whether I'm a believer or not	1.3	1.7	2.2
I'm not a believer and I'm not interested in these matters	0.7	1.7	1.7
I'm an unbeliever, as the teachings of Churches are wrong	0.4	0.8	1.5
Other	0.5	1.0	0.3
Difficult to say	0.8	0.1	1.0

A phenomenon resulting from the privatisation of Poles' faith is also its selectivity, expressing itself in believing in only some of the theses of the Catholic faith, while denying or even rejecting others (Table 6).

Table 6. Declared position, only one statement, percentage share. Own compilation based on reference [CBOS, *Kanony wiary Polaków*, CBOS announcement 29/2015].

Declared position	I believe	I don't believe	Difficult to say
that God hears prayers	82	12	6
in the Last Judgment	70	22	8
in Heaven	70	23	7
that humans have an immortal soul	69	22	9
in destiny, in the existence of good or bad fate	66	26	8
in the afterlife	66	26	8
in the resurrection of the dead	62	29	9
that we are born burdened with original sin	59	29	12
in Hell	56	36	8
that animals have a soul	36	51	13
in the transmigration of souls (reincarnation)	30	55	15

The selective nature of Poles' faith is therefore based mainly on highlighting positive elements such as the immortal soul, Heaven and the afterlife, and less often on the negative ones. What is even more interesting, the faith of Polish Catholics also includes elements of foreign religion (sic!). The share of those who declared themselves as Catholics is high, but at the same time 66% of them believe in fatalism (!) almost 30% in reincarnation, and just under 40% that animals have a soul. Consequently, the high percentage of Poles declaring faith does not mean that they all accept the individual dogmas. In fact, one can even find here certain features of syncretism, which can pose a threat to the unity of the Church, since it is precisely "acceptance of the Creed which is so important for religion that only the individual who has accepted all of its elements can be considered a full believer" [11].

2.2. *The role of the Catholic Church in the times of the Polish People's Republic*

The basic aim of the authorities of the Polish People's Republic was, on the one hand, to push the Catholic Church and Catholicism - as a worldview contrary to the Marxist doctrine - to the margins of public life and, on the other hand, to control church structures using measures such as financial, legal and administrative obstacles and harassment, as well as repressions against Church people.

The effect of these actions was the almost complete introduction of the concept of separation of state and Church, expressed through the dismantling of Catholic associations, removal of religious education from schools, shutting down Catholic school and care facilities, taking over real estate, including printing houses, 'Caritas', removal of the cross from the public space, and finally - reduction of the autonomy of the Church by the decree of 9 February 1953 on the filling of clergy positions. At the same time, the communist authorities placed so-called patriotic priests dependent on the government and priests from the Pax Association circles (an association of Catholics cooperating with the communist authorities) within the Church structures. Violent repressions were used: arrests, imprisonment of some bishops, ordering others to leave their dioceses, and finally the decision was made to intern the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who remained imprisoned in the years 1953-1956 [12].

In the school system, the communist authorities began the process of building a 'socialist human', using propaganda methods in new, ideologized subjects being taught, intensive continuing training of teachers and their surveillance, as well as repressions, including direct ones, for instance dismissal of inconvenient people from work. Activists from the Union of Polish Youth exerted constant pressure on young people, as part of the attempts to discourage them from the Church, and the Church itself was almost entirely deprived of influence on the educational system, as most monastic schools were shut down [13].

Another element of control over the Church in the Polish People's Republic involved the establishment of special teams of party and state activists, with members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, the Administrative Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, and led by top staff from the Ministry of the Interior and the Office for Religious Affairs, responsible for religious policy. Decisions were also made at meetings of a special party commission on clergy at the Administrative and Social Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. This commission was later replaced by the Team on Religious Policy.

The awareness of the general public was significantly influenced by the election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as Pope on 16 October 1978, which objectively contributed to the strengthening of the nation's mass resistance to communism [14]. John Paul II's first pilgrimage to Poland in June 1979 was

widely recognised as an event having a significant impact on the subsequent protests of Polish workers in the summer of 1980, which spread from the Gdańsk Shipyard to the whole of Poland.

The tumultuous period of the August 1980 strikes, which ended with the signing of the Gdańsk Agreement on 31 August 1980, opened a new chapter in the relations between the government, on the one hand, and the society and the Church on the other hand. The possibility of establishing the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union 'Solidarity' (NSZZ 'Solidarność') was a signal indicating that legal opposition was possible in a totalitarian state, although it lasted only for a short time in this form, until 13 December 1981. However, the general public recorded it as a freedom-oriented breach in the 'iron curtain'. The Church, on its part, supported the democratic transformations in Poland, which, however, were taking place as a result of strikes and protest actions [15].

The proclamation of martial law in the territory of Poland on 13 December 1981 resulted paradoxically in the strengthening of contacts between the Catholic Church and Solidarity, whose leaders had been mostly interned in camps prepared earlier for that purpose. Solidarity members took refuge and shelter in churches. Churches were also places where charitable aid was organised for the interned and arrested activists and for their families; teachers and journalists who had been dismissed from work were supported there. Chaplaincies got involved working with nearly all occupational groups: workers, teachers, artists, as well as the interned. The heroic attitude of Blessed Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, priest of Warsaw's steelworkers should be recalled: he was murdered by officers of the Ministry of the Interior on 19 October 1984, and who, during masses for the Homeland, had preached words leaving a mark on Solidarity's people: "Overcome evil with good" [16].

One of the most important events on the road to democratisation of Poland was undoubtedly the Round Table Talks. From the very start, preparations for the talks and the talks itself involved representatives of the Catholic Church and of the Lutheran Church [17]. However, it should be pointed out that the church achieved a not entirely desirable position during the Round Table works - it was in fact used instrumentally by the communist authorities as a kind of buffer in the situation of an imminent political collapse of the Polish United Workers' Party. However, a strong feeling remained among the general public that the presence of Church hierarchs lent credibility to the results of the talks, making a bloodless transition possible.

One can certainly argue that in the period of the Polish People's Republic, the Church consolidated its strong role, autonomous with regard to the centralised socio-political and economic system, as the most important actor both in a symbolic and in a political sense. The Church and the people associated with it were significantly involved in the process of overthrowing communism in Poland. The general public manifested religious rituals: processions, pilgrimages, Sunday masses, and meetings with the Pope, who played a significant role in the process of 'democratisation' of the Polish People's Republic and later became the moral father of the Third Republic of Poland.

2.3. *The role of the Catholic Church in the Third Republic of Poland*

The political involvement of the Catholic Church in the fight against communism during the period of the Polish People's Republic, perceived as clearly positive in the Polish society, later ceased to be so unambiguous in the historical situation of regained sovereignty. The first signs of the decline in trust in Church institutions were observed as early as in mid-1990, when a public debate started on the project of introducing religious instruction into public schools [18]. The Church's return to the public sphere and its equally strong attempts to become politically involved made it a target of criticism, and often also of attacks for the clear political position it had adopted.

The sources of this state of affairs must be sought predominantly in the fact that after 1989, the Church had to undergo an internal evolution from a Church of the opposition against the totalitarian system to a Church supporting the process of democratisation, and to define its place in this democratic system. At the same time, on the one hand, the Church was expected to support the system transformation, but on the other hand, it was accused of wishing to build a religious state and of being overly involved in politics. The Catholic Church faced a significant challenge - all its activities aimed at achieving a more distinct position in the public life became the target of fierce criticism. It is also obvious that a part of the political circles identified strongly with the Church and with its teachings, although this was often only instrumental and semantic in its nature, such as for instance the use of the term 'Christian values', abused in the electoral rhetoric. The Church was also used in the political struggle against the so-called flooding wave of atheisation.

The presence of the Church in the public life of the Third Republic of Poland was formally sanctioned by the signing of the concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland in July 1993, emphasising the relationship of mutual independence and autonomy of the structures of the state and of the Church, as well as the cooperation of the two entities for human development and for the common good. The Church was also granted a number of guarantees that stirred controversy in some political circles, e.g. concerning the teaching of religion in schools and financing of historic sacred buildings and works of art belonging to the Church [19]. As a result of the concordat being drafted during the period of post-Solidarity government, favourably inclined towards the Church, it contained provisions advantageous for the latter.

In the late 1990s, the Catholic Church changed its attitude slightly, adopting a strategy of caution and lack of ostentatious involvement in electoral campaigns, which was, however, not tantamount to withdrawal from the political sphere, because it continued to try to set standards of conduct. Also noteworthy is the emergence of characteristic currents, deriving not only from pluralism in the theological sphere, but also from historical, social and even political connotations. As a result, a dichotomous division crystallised around two figures. Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz of the Archdiocese of Cracow, former private secretary of John Paul II, maintains detachment from politics and appears as a representative of the

‘Krakow-Łagiewniki Church’, a Church open to dialogue. On the opposite pole, there is the ‘Toruń Church’, with the extremely conservative Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk and his media empire, with Radio Maryja at the top [20]. This division is still alive and real, and the consecutive governments have supported either one or the other ‘option’ within the Polish church.

A problem which remained unresolved for a long time, affecting the public perception of both institutions, was the issue of the return of Church property, seized by the communist authorities as part of the agricultural reform of 1950 on the basis of the law on nationalisation of so-called mortmain property. Although in 1989, the Polish state acknowledged its responsibility towards the Church and declared its willingness to make amends for the wrongs, passing an act in May 1989 on the attitude of the state towards the Catholic Church, regulating the ways of restoring ownership of the nationalised properties, the establishment of the Property Commission stirred considerable controversy among a part of the general public with regard to its activities, including the decisions to grant land to the Church at a price lower than the market price, or charges from the public prosecutor against members of the commission [21, 22].

The activity of the Polish Church in the period of system transformation undoubtedly indicates that it was an important actor in the public and political space. The role of the Church in the building of democracy was confirmed by the President of the Republic of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski in his speech welcoming John Paul II during the latter’s pilgrimage to the homeland in 2002. He called Poland a country of peace between the state and the Church, where in only several years after the removal of the communists from power it had been possible to create a proper model of relations between these institutions, based on the provisions of the new Constitution of the Republic Poland and of the Concordat. President Kwaśniewski stressed that the majority of Poles understood how democracy and religion supported each other, as democracy would guarantee freedom of action to believers. Religion, on its part, strengthens the foundations of democracy - conveying universal values related to human dignity and respect for one’s neighbour, without which democracy does not exist [23].

2.4. The Catholic Church in Poland in the second decade of the 21st century

In the 21st century the position and role of the Church itself in the society is transforming. According to one of the concepts of change, a steady decrease will take place in the social significance of the Church (the ‘decline’ theory), while according to another one, the role of the Church will be subject to changes going in multiple directions, not excluding the strengthening of its significance in certain areas of life (the ‘modification’ theory), and according to yet another scenario, the image of the Church, changed only slightly in the last decade of the 20th century, does not seem to indicate radical changes in the 21st century (the ‘stabilisation’ theory) [24].

Taking into account the case of Poland, the recent years have witnessed a slow process of the Church losing its strong social authority. It seems that this crisis has been affecting the crisis of religious authority as such and vice versa, and is a result of the conglomerate of problems the Church is struggling with in Poland. The largest of these concerns issues related to the behaviour of priests and the sphere of their sexuality, including in particular cases of paedophilia among priests and other clergy [25]. In Poland, the media have contributed to exposing the issue, by starting to cover stories of people harmed by clergymen, and so did non-governmental organisations providing psychological assistance and social education, as well as representing the victims. The building of a strong circle of individuals exposing these problems (journalists, editors, experts) [26] is a key factor in the observed passage through the successive stages of the problem of paedophilia in the Church: from the hidden phase, through the stage of exposure, to the legitimisation and institutionalisation of the problem. However, a part of the society still thinks that the Polish Church is unable to face this problem, which it has been reacting inappropriately to the revealed cases of sexual abuse of children. The actions taken by some of the hierarchs, guided by the wrongly understood interests of the Church, still fail to seek explanation of the cases, even past ones, by hiding them or covering them up. The public opinion, on its part, perceived the indecision or the misguided reactions of the hierarchs as the lack of will to resolve an important and outrageous phenomenon, concerning a milieu marked by the concern for the good of the other and for education of the young generation.

Another important problem which the contemporary Catholic Church in Poland is facing is its excessive political involvement; the political engagement of its individual representatives who, by expressing their own opinions and defining their political sympathies *ex cathedra*, demonstrate a significant weakness of the Church as an institution in Poland. After a deeper investigation of this matter it seems that the Church supports only one, very specific political option, namely the anti-postsocialist and anti-liberal one. As a result, in many social circles in Poland, the Church is refused the right to express its opinions on socio-political matters, and if such opinions do appear, they are perceived as political interference - political statements that do not concern the spiritual or ethical dimension of the matter at issue [27]. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger even pointed out that the Church in Poland had acquired also a political dimension, which should be redefined in a longer-term perspective [28].

The institutional Church should therefore avoid a situation in which it supports a particular political party or analyses current politics, and should rather focus on the principles of social teaching and their implementation. From the point of view of relations, it should continue to work on defining the relationship between the Church and the state, including in particular their competences and forms of cooperation. It continues to be a mistake of the Polish Church that it remains too close to the government.

Not much has changed since 1989 in the style and manner of contacts between the clergy and the faithful. In fact, it is still possible to see the hierarchs using ritualised ways of contact with the faithful, in terms of the form and style of their statements, although on the other hand it should be stressed that the faithful themselves are unable to maintain naturalness in their contacts with the clergy and use out-dated mechanisms in their relations.

The final problem addressed, which illustrates and at the same time impacts the decline in religiousness among young people, involves the clergy's failure to think in terms of actual problems people have. Instead of engaging in dialogue and trying to understand what these problems are, the clergy remain in the realm of internal insights, assuming that "we know better" [29]. This can also be perceived in terms of mistrust towards people, refusal to acknowledge their maturity or competence with regard to describing the world. Therefore, a shortage continues to be seen in terms of the need for dialogue and understanding felt by the Polish Church: there is closure to dialogue, or even abandoning dialogue altogether with people with a critical position, which undoubtedly leads to radicalisation of attitudes.

Many young people also express the conviction that the Catholic Church is unable to offer a convincing response to important social, economic and political challenges faced by the contemporary world. In the sphere of a young person's individual consciousness, their own conscience has been gradually and successively replacing external authority, both in terms of axioms of faith and of Christian ethics. Many arguments therefore support the prediction of a prolonged decline in public trust in the Catholic Church. The coming years will most probably be full of minor or major conflicts and there will be a great deal of criticism with regard to the role of the Church in the contemporary Polish society, especially among young people.

3. Results and discussion

One of the institutions conducting representative research and opinion polls in Poland is the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS). This entity carries out, among other things, cyclical research on the religiousness of Poles. The databases obtained from the CBOS for the years 1995-2020 were used to analyse aspects related to the faith of young people in Poland.

The study considered as young people respondents belonging to two age groups: 18-24 and 25-34. These groups differ in terms of their life situation. Respondents aged 18-24 usually continue their education (including higher education) and start their first jobs, thus entering adulthood. Respondents in the second group (25-34) usually decide to live independently, start their own families, as well as pursue their professional careers. Nevertheless, representatives of both groups can be considered young people due to the development they experience, in the educational, occupation and family area. The vast majority of them are also the target group of the youth policies of the European Union and of the individual Member States.

In the period analysed here (1995-2020), a clear increase can be observed in the share of young people declaring themselves as more of an unbeliever or as a complete unbeliever, with the simultaneous decline in the percentage of those who declare themselves to be ‘deep believers’ or ‘believers’. These trends are clearly visible in the 18-24 age group. In the 25-34 age group, on the other hand, they are not found only in those who considered themselves deep believers in the studied period.

In the 18-24 age group, the increase in the share of people declaring themselves as more of an unbeliever in the years 1995-2020 amounted to 10.9 percentage points (pp), while in the case of people describing themselves as complete unbelievers, it was 6 pp. The decrease in the share of deep believers was 4 pp, and in the share of those declaring themselves as believers was 17.2 pp. Taking into account only the year 2020, it can be observed that as many as 23.2% of the respondents described themselves as unbelievers (more of an unbeliever or complete unbeliever). This is the highest result in the analysed period, and moreover the increase in the share of such declarations is significant compared to the previous years. In 2015, unbelievers in this age group accounted for 8.8%, in 2010 for 10.5%, in 2005 for 7.8%, in 2000 for 9%, and in 1995 for 6.3%. The data concerning declared faith of respondents aged 18-24 are presented in Tables 7 and 8.

Table 7. Declared faith, 18-24 age group, number of indications provided by respondents. Own compilation based on CBOS data.

Independently of your participation in religious practices, do you consider yourself: 18-24 age group						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
a deep believer	10	3	12	15	5	15
a believer	94	89	131	113	77	204
more of an unbeliever	3	5	6	11	4	41
a complete unbeliever	4	4	6	4	4	29
refusal to answer	0	0	0	0	1	13
Total	111	101	155	143	91	302

Table 8. Declared faith, 18-24 age group, percentage share. Own compilation based on CBOS data.

Independently of your participation in religious practices, do you consider yourself: 18-24 age group						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
a deep believer	9.0	3.0	7.7	10.5	5.5	5.0
a believer	84.7	88.1	84.5	79.0	84.6	67.5
more of an unbeliever	2.7	5.0	3.9	7.7	4.4	13.6
a complete unbeliever	3.6	4.0	3.9	2.8	4.4	9.6
refusal to answer	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	4.3

In the 25-34 age group, over the years 1995-2020, there was an increase by 1.9 percentage points in the share of people describing themselves as more of an unbeliever, and an increase by 6 pp in the share of complete unbelievers. The share of respondents declaring themselves as believers decreased by 8.7 percentage points. On the other hand, the percentage of deep believers increased slightly (by 0.1 pp). Analysing only the year 2020, it can be observed that 14.8% of the respondents declared to be unbelievers (more of an unbeliever or complete unbeliever). Similarly as in the case of the younger age group, this value is the highest in the whole analysed period. In 2015, the percentage of unbelievers was 7.6%, in 2010 it was 6.6%, in 2005 it was 2.1%, in 2000 it was 7.5%, and in 1995 it was 6.9%. Also, similarly to the case of respondents aged 18-24, a sharp increase in the share of unbelievers in the 25-34 age group can be observed between 2015 and 2020. The data concerning declared faith for this age group are shown in Tables 9 and 10.

Table 9. Declared faith, 25-34 age group, number of indications provided by respondents. Own compilation based on CBOS data.

Independently of your participation in religious practices, do you consider yourself: 25-34 age group						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
a deep believer	9	17	15	10	10	25
a believer	165	118	166	145	145	402
more of an unbeliever	12	5	3	7	7	42
a complete unbeliever	1	6	1	4	6	33
refusal to answer	1	0	0	0	2	6
Total	188	146	185	166	170	508

Table 10. Declared faith, 25-34 age group, percentage share. Own compilation based on CBOS data.

Independently of your participation in religious practices, do you consider yourself: 25-34 age group						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
a deep believer	4.8	11.6	8.1	6.0	5.9	4.9
a believer	87.8	80.8	89.7	87.3	85.3	79.1
more of an unbeliever	6.4	3.4	1.6	4.2	4.1	8.3
a complete unbeliever	0.5	4.1	0.5	2.4	3.5	6.5
refusal to answer	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.2

The percentage share of respondents who declared themselves as unbelievers in the CBOS survey in 2020 among young respondents (23.2% for the 18-24 group and 14.8% for the 25-34 group) is much higher than in the case of the older respondents. In 2020, unbelievers accounted for 9.6% in the 35-44 age group, for 8.5% in the 45-54 group, for 4.2% in the 55-64 group, for 6.5% in the 65-75 group, and for 9.3% in the 75 and over group. These data prove that the crisis of faith affects young Poles to a much greater extent.

Apart from declared faith, what is important in the context of the problem of religiousness, including the religiosity of young people, is participation in religious practices (masses, church services, religious meetings). In the analysed period (1995-2020), the percentage of people aged 18-24 not participating in religious practices at all increased by 25 percentage points. Moreover, an upward trend is also visible in the percentage share of those participating in such practices 1-2 times a month, from 0 to 15.2%, as well as of those participating several times a year. The difference between 1995 and 2020 in this case was 4.8 pp. A large decrease (by 42.1 pp) was observed in turn in the share of respondents indicating that they participated in religious practices once a week. Over the last five years (between 2015 and 2020), it was as high as 25.6 pp. A downward trend is also seen in the percentage share of people declaring their participation in masses, church services or religious meetings several times a week, by 3.7 pp in the analysed period. The data on participation in religious practices of people aged 18-24 are presented in Tables 11 and 12.

Table 11. Participation in religious practices, 18-24 age group, number of indications provided by respondents. Own compilation based on CBOS surveys.

Do you participate in religious practices such as masses, church services or religious meetings? (18-24 age group)						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
several times a week	7	3	10	4	2	8
once a week	72	44	63	66	44	69
1-2 times a month	0	17	24	28	11	46
several times a year	23	21	38	28	21	77
does not participate at all	9	16	20	17	13	100
refusal to answer	0	0	0	0	0	2
Total	111	101	155	143	91	302

Table 12. Participation in religious practices, 18-24 age group, percentage share. Own compilation based on CBOS surveys.

Do you participate in religious practices such as masses, church services or religious meetings? (18-24 age group)						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
several times a week	6.3	3.0	6.5	2.8	2.2	2.7
once a week	64.9	43.6	40.6	46.1	48.3	22.8
1-2 times a month	0.0	16.8	15.5	19.6	12.1	15.2
several times a year	20.7	20.8	24.5	19.6	23.1	25.5
does not participate at all	8.1	15.8	12.9	11.9	14.3	33.1
refusal to answer	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7

The trends observed among people aged 25-34 are similar to those in the younger age group. In the analysed period, the share of respondents declaring no participation in religious practices increased by 20 percentage points. The percentage share of those participating in these practices 1-2 times a month also

increased, from 0 to 12.2%. After a decrease in the share of declarations concerning participation in masses, church services or religious meetings several times a year between 1995 and 2000, an increase was observed in the case of this response and consequently in 2020 it amounted to 26.2%, i.e. 0.1 pp more than in 1995. A downward trend is seen, on the other hand, for the ‘once a week’ and ‘several times a week’ responses. The share of respondents who declare participation in religious practices once a week decreased by 33.1 pp and the share of those indicating participation several times a week by 1.2 pp. Tables 13 and 14 include the statistical data on respondents in the 25-34 age group.

Table 13. Participation in religious practices, 25-34 age group, number of indications provided by respondents. Own compilation based on CBOS surveys.

Do you participate in religious practices such as masses, church services or religious meetings? (25-34 age group)						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
several times a week	6	10	7	5	3	10
once a week	118	76	94	74	71	151
1-2 times a month	0	21	28	26	30	62
several times a year	49	19	39	38	39	133
does not participate at all	15	20	17	23	25	142
refusal to answer	0	0	0	0	2	10
Total	188	146	185	166	170	508

Table 14. Participation in religious practices, 25-34 age group, percentage share. Own compilation based on CBOS surveys.

Do you participate in religious practices such as masses, church services or religious meetings? (25-34 age group)						
List of possible answers	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
several times a week	3.2	6.8	3.8	3.0	1.8	2.0
once a week	62.8	52.1	50.8	44.5	41.8	29.7
1-2 times a month	0.0	14.4	15.1	15.7	17.6	12.2
several times a year	26.0	13.0	21.1	22.9	22.9	26.2
does not participate at all	8.0	13.7	9.2	13.9	14.7	27.9
refusal to answer	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	2.0

The youngest respondents follow religious observances (attend masses, church services, religious meetings) less frequently than the respondents from older age groups. In 2020, 33.1% of CBOS survey participants aged 18-24 and 28% of those aged 25-34 did not participate in religious practices. Those not following religious observances accounted for 19.7% in the 35-44 age group, for 18.5% in the 45-54 group, for 14.1% in the 55-64 group, for 17.8% in the 65-74 group, and for 20.4% in the 75 and over group.

CBOS also conducted a study on religious practices during the first social quarantine in Poland in spring 2020, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The epidemic situation forced the introduction of restrictions in social contacts, which also concerned religious worship. Among other things, limits were determined for

the number of people allowed to participate in church services, and people were encouraged to stay at home and participate in the services either online or via TV or radio transmissions. An additional factor limiting the size of the congregation during the services was and still continues to be the fear of infection. In the context of the issue of religiousness (especially among young people), this is all the more important since the time of the pandemic may represent a certain turning point in the transformations taking place in this respect. The number of believers and of those following religious observances may decrease, and this will potentially be caused by the effect of growing disaccustomed to regular attendance of masses or services. The pandemic may also further deepen the crisis of faith.

In the case of the 18-24 age group, 73.2% of the respondents declared that their religious commitment had not changed during the period of social quarantine, 14.6% said that they had been dedicating less time to religious practices, and 5.7% said they had been dedicating more time to that. 83.3% of respondents in the 25-34 age group indicated no changes in this respect, 9.5% said that they had been spending less time on prayer, meditation, etc. and 5.2% said that they had been spending more time on that (Tables 15, 16).

Table 15. Religious involvement during the social quarantine period in spring 2020, 18-24 age group. Own compilation based on CBOS data.

Did your religious involvement change during the social quarantine? (18-24 age group)		
List of possible answers	number	(%)
yes, I dedicated more time to prayer, meditation and other religious practices	7	5.7
yes, I dedicated less time to prayer, meditation and other religious practices	18	14.6
no	90	73.2
difficult to say	7	5.7
refusal to answer	1	0.8
Total	123	100

Table 16. Religious involvement during the social quarantine period in spring 2020, 25-34 age group. Own compilation based on CBOS data.

Did your religious involvement change during the social quarantine? (25-34 age group)		
List of possible answers	number	(%)
yes, I dedicated more time to prayer, meditation and other religious practices	11	5.3
yes, I dedicated less time to prayer, meditation and other religious practices	20	9.5
no	175	83.3
difficult to say	3	1.4
refusal to answer	1	0.5
Total	210	100

The youngest respondents do not differ significantly from the other age groups because of the share of people who spent less time on religious practices during the first social quarantine. The percentage for respondents aged 18-24 was 14.6%, and for respondents aged 25-34 it was 9.5%. In the remaining age groups, it was: 11.5% for the 35-44 group, 10.5% for the 45-54 group, 9.3% for the 55-64 group, 7.6% for the 65-74 group, and 9.5% for the 75 and over group. However, it should be taken into account that young people are not in a high-risk group for developing a severe form of the COVID-19 disease, as opposed to the elderly. Importantly, it was among the youngest respondents that the highest percentage of respondents indicated that they had been spending less time on religious practices (and consequently also church services). It also seems interesting to see whether the faithful will return to religious practices after the end of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and whether they will dedicate as much time to them as they did before the pandemic.

Crises in the life of an individual and of the whole society, the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic undoubtedly being one of them, should instead result in turning to faith and increasing involvement in religious practices. For this reason, the responses of Polish respondents to the last question mentioned in the study seem surprising. Of course, it should be emphasized that the vast majority of people (both believers and non-believers) have not changed their religious commitment. However, it is surprising that the decrease was declared by 14.6% of people aged 18-24 and 9.5% of people aged 25-34. This may prove that believers in Poland (including young people) are instead attached to tradition and thus also traditional forms of participation in religious practices, i.e., church services. Perhaps Holy Masses broadcast on television, radio, or even via Internet are not an attractive form of cultivating their faith for them. This, in turn, influences the lower involvement in religious practices declared by a significant part of the respondents.

It should be emphasised that the decline in religiousness is not only a Polish phenomenon. It has been occurring in most European countries, as confirmed by the results of the European Social Survey [European Social Survey, *Sociodemographics*, Round 1 (2002), Round 9 (2018)]. The only exceptions in this respect are Austria, France, Italy, Lithuania and Slovenia. In these countries, there was an increase in religiousness between 2002 and 2018 (i.e. between the first and the ninth edition of the survey). Although the decline in religiousness observed in most countries affects the whole society, it is worth noting that young people experience it in a particular manner. In the group of people aged 45 and over, it is relatively small. Young people, in turn, experience it at a faster rate than the other age groups. Only Lithuania and Germany are exceptions in this respect. In these countries, religiousness has been increasing in the youngest generations, in fact.

In 2018, the Central Statistical Office of Poland conducted a representative Social Cohesion Survey [30]. More than 13,000 people aged 16 and over provided answers to the survey questions at that time. One of the aspects analysed in the survey concerned belonging to a religious faith. It turned out that 93.5% of

respondents declared religious affiliation, including 91.9% to the Roman Catholic Church, 0.9% to the Orthodox Church, 0.3% to Protestant Churches, while 0.2% were Jehovah's Witnesses, 0.1% were Greek Catholic and 0.2% belonged to other churches. 3.1% of the respondents indicated that they did not belong to any religion, 0.5% were unable to give an answer and 2.9% refused to respond. According to the presented data, the vast majority of Poles are faithful of the Roman Catholic Church. This means that the progressive crisis of faith, especially among young people, is largely a crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.

4. Conclusions

The significant decline in religiousness of young people in Poland, as shown by the CBOS statistical data, has intensified in the recent years. Although the decreasing share of believers among the youngest adults is a phenomenon typical for most European countries, the scale of the crisis of faith of the young generation in Poland must lead to concerns among the clergy.

From a scientific point of view, it is interesting to look for the reasons for such a rapid secularisation process among young Poles. The answers can be sought in lifestyle, different from that of the older generation, as well as in the accepted system of values. Nevertheless, a completely separate group of determinants of this phenomenon is represented by the role and position of the Catholic Church, to which the vast majority of believers in Poland belong. This role has changed significantly in Poland's most recent history. In the 1980s, the Catholic Church supported the opposition fighting against the communist system, and belonging to its structures was a form of objection against the Polish People's Republic. Poles, especially believers, undoubtedly had a reason to be proud when Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope and continued as the head of the Holy until his death in 2005. Church representatives participated in the Round Table Talks, and politicians of the emerging Third Republic of Poland coming from the opposition did not hide their faith and emphasised the significant achievements of the Catholic Church in the transformations taking place. An important event in this context was the transfer of religious education to schools, enabling children and young people to acquire knowledge about the Catholic faith as part of general education. The signing and subsequent ratification of the concordat should also be mentioned. The death of the Polish Pope was also important for religiousness in Poland. Poles plunged into mourning and manifested their faith at that time. Mass-scale prayers, church services and vigils were attended by a large number of young people, who began to call themselves the JPII generation. It can be concluded, and this is confirmed by the analysed results of the CBOS survey, that the crisis of faith among young people in Poland intensified only after the death of Karol Wojtyła, and in particular in the last 5 years. It soon turned out, in fact, that the emotions and the sense of great loss cementing the young people were transitory, and the JPII generation was a short-term creation. Moreover, it seems that also the very position of the Catholic Church in Poland was weakened by the Pope's passing. In addition, it has been further undermined by the events of the

recent years, i.e. the exposure by journalists of paedophile scandals, which the Church's hierarchs had been trying to cover up for years.

After a period when the Catholic Church played a significant role in Poland, which ended in the first decade of the 21st century, its position has now been gradually diminishing. This coincides with the growing crisis of faith among Poles, especially among young people. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is also causing some doubts about the condition of the Catholic Church and of other Churches and religious organisations. On the one hand, everyone is now seeking peace and security and being locked in one's home may encourage the development of spirituality, but on the other hand it limits the possibility of participating in religious practices.

The decline in religiousness in Poland raises many problems to which the clergy of all faiths, including in particular the Catholic Church, will have to respond. It is also worth pointing out that apart from religiousness, participation in religious practices is also declining. A large share of believers refer to themselves as non-practising, and this situation may be further exacerbated by the habits associated with the difficult epidemic situation in Poland. In the future, it may be necessary to redefine the clergy's approach so that it can start to listen carefully to the needs of young people and, consequently, offer them forms of experiencing their faith that are adequate to this day and age and respond to those needs. Grassroots initiatives (undertaken increasingly often) may be insufficient, and systemic solutions will be required. Perhaps it will be necessary to settle accounts with the painful past, admit to mistakes and apologise for them. One thing seems certain: both the Catholic Church and other Churches or religious organisations must take action as soon as possible to halt the secularisation of young people. Without this, the number of believers will be decreasing in the coming decades, and the next generations of young Poles will not see any value in religion.

Failure to act will most certainly lead to a deepening of the crisis of religiousness among young Poles. Due to the fact that young people usually inherit their attitudes towards faith from their family home and potentially revise them (or not) later in life, a further sharp decline in religiousness can be expected in the future. This, in turn, will bring Poles closer to the secular societies of Western European countries.

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