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Roman Catholic Religious Education in the Internet Media Coverage in Poland

Lekcje religii rzymskokatolickiej w internetowym przekazie medialnym w Polsce

Abstract: For many years, there has been a heated debate in the Polish media regarding the presence and concept of Roman Catholic religious education in schools. Therefore, questions arise: What image of Roman Catholic religious education emerges from the media discussion? Are the criteria used to evaluate Roman Catholic religious education fair, ensuring equal treatment of all subjects in Polish schools? This article attempts to answer these questions through a qualitative analysis of 100 publications posted on popular websites between 2018 and 2022. The results of the research confirm that the media debate on Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools is not always objective and tolerant.

Keywords: religious education; tolerance; Poland; Roman Catholic Church; media.

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Abstrakt: Od wielu lat w polskich mediach toczy się gorąca debata na temat obecności i koncepcji rzymskokatolickiej edukacji religijnej w szkołach. Pojawiają się zatem pytania: Jaki obraz rzymskokatolickiej edukacji religijnej wyłania się z dyskusji medialnej? Czy kryteria oceny rzymskokatolickiej edukacji religijnej są sprawiedliwe i zapewniają równe traktowanie wszystkich przedmiotów w polskich szkołach? Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę odpowiedzi na te pytania poprzez analizę jakościową 100 publikacji zamieszczonych na popularnych portalach internetowych w latach 2018–2022. Wyniki badań potwierdzają, że debata medialna na temat rzymskokatolickiej edukacji religijnej w polskich szkołach nie zawsze jest obiektywna i tolerancyjna.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja religijna; tolerancja; Polska; Kościół rzymskokatolicki; media.

1. Introduction

A year after the fall of communist rule in Poland, religion classes for children and youth, referred to in Polish educational law as religious education, were restored to the public education system in 1990. Religion has become one of the subjects taught in Polish schools, as is in most European countries (Mezglewski, 2009). Over the years, the presence of these school classes has been regulated by law. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland promulgated in 1997 ensures freedom of expression of religious, ideological, and philosophical beliefs. Simultaneously, Art. 53, section 3 of this constitution guarantees parents the right to educate and teach their children religion in accordance with their beliefs, and states that ‘the religion of the church or other religious associations with a regulated legal situation may be taught at school, while the freedom of conscience and religion of other people must not be violated’ (Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April, 1997; Krukowski, 1993, pp. 240–242). Moreover, in 1993, Poland concluded a concordat with the Holy See. This international agreement states in Art. 12, section 1 as follows:

Acknowledging parents’ right to the religious upbringing of children and the principle of tolerance, the State guarantees that public primary and secondary schools and kindergartens, run by state and local government administration bodies, organise religious education as part of the school and pre-school curriculum, in accordance with the will of those interested (Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland, signed on 28 July 1993).

Similar regulations are contained in the Education System Act adopted in 1991. In turn, detailed issues concerning the organisation of religious education in public schools were defined by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 1992, as amended (Ministry of National Education, 2020).

In light of legal regulations in force in Poland, as in many other countries (e.g. Italy, Croatia, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia), religious education is confessional in its nature (Chałupniak, 2000; cf. Misiaszek, 2006). This means that religious associations, not the state, local governments or schools, are the responsible bodies for the content and teaching of religious education. This solution results from the principle of subsidiarity and the obligation to help parents in their upbringing of children in accordance with their beliefs. Therefore, if parents want to raise their children in a particular faith and worldview, they have such a right, and the state should support them, e.g. by providing religious education according to their will. Therefore, curriculum assumptions and books are prepared by churches and religious associations legally operating on the territory of the Republic of Poland, as practice shows. Moreover, religion teachers must have a so-called canonical mission, which is permission from the bishop to teach religion. It is issued to those who have all the required qualifications. Most often, these are master's degree studies in theology and pedagogical preparation. Thus, the qualifications of religion teachers are analogous to other teachers (Zellma, 2013; 2021). Additionally, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, they are expected to be practising Catholics. Only after receiving the mission from the bishop can religion teachers be employed by school principals, and their rights and obligations are the same as teachers of other subjects (Mąkosa, 2015).

In the public education system in Poland, religious teaching is conducted by several religious associations, in particular, by the Roman Catholic Church, to which 84.5% of the population belongs (Central Statistical Office, 2021; cf. Bożewicz, 2020; Horowski, 2022). The Orthodox Church, Evangelical-Augsburg Church, Pentecostal Church and several other churches conduct educational activities at school as well (Milerski, 1998). In accordance with the aforementioned legal regulations, the substantive shape of religious education depends on each of these religious associations. Therefore, these religious communities usually develop their own core curriculum and textbooks and present them to the Ministry of Education.

The Catholic Church in Poland decided that the subject of religious education, for which it is responsible, shall include the entire deposit of the Catholic

faith contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2005), i.e. the truths of faith, liturgy and sacraments, moral principles and prayer. What is more, it is assumed that three basic functions of catechesis – teaching, upbringing and initiation – will be implemented during religious education (Polish Bishops' Conference, 2001). This approach, which is often called confessional and catechetical, not only consists in knowledge transfer but also in skill development and social attitude shaping, i.e. honesty, truthfulness, patriotism, and religious attitudes, i.e. faith, prayer, participation in the liturgy, observance of the commandments or involvement in the life of the Church (Polish Bishops' Conference, 2018; cf. Mąkosza, 2015). It is crucial to introduce students to the world of Christian culture and correlate it with school education. Participants of religious education have many opportunities for dialogue, reflection, negotiation of meanings, and existential problem-solving (Zellma et al., 2022a).

This concept of religious education is widely criticised today. Its source is most often secularisation and the influence of postmodern culture. Despite its formal affiliation with the Catholic Church, Polish society participates in church services and is involved in the life of the Church to an increasingly lesser extent. This is especially true for young people (Kiełb & Mąkosza, 2021; Zellma et al., 2022b). Respecting religious and ideological freedom, Polish legal regulations allow one to resign from religious classes and choose ethics, or to resign from both subjects. This decision can be made by parents or legal guardians, or by students themselves after turning 18 years of age. Currently, a great percentage of young people use this right but choose ethics to a small extent (Mąkosza et al., 2022). Most often, the reason for resigning from religious classes is not to contest their confessional concept but to save time for other activities.

Despite the discussed specificity of religious teaching, the quoted documents show that in Polish public schools it is a school subject that has the same status as other ones. Religious education teachers are also fully-fledged teachers with the same qualifications, rights and obligations as other teachers. Therefore, it seems obvious that religious teaching should be treated like all other subjects at school, both by state and local authorities, parents, and students, as well as by the wider public. The formal status of religious education in Polish schools does not give any grounds for discrimination, i.e. treating these classes worse than other school classes. This goes for both the presence of religious classes in the system of education and their concept and organisation. Moreover, teaching religion in Polish schools has an important educational function, both in the

social and individual dimensions (Simiński, 2018; cf. Zellma, 2013). During these classes, values such as respect for every human being, protection of life and health, truthfulness and honesty are practised (Małkosa, 2014). They serve the whole of society, directly or indirectly.

Considering the above, the main objective of the study was to analyse the Internet media coverage of the issue of Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools. Taking into account the above statements, the main research goal was to determine how the issue of religious education in Polish schools is present in the media. Achieving this goal required analysing, reconstructing and interpreting specific features of this issue, inscribed in the context of broader socio-cultural and religious changes that have been taking place in Poland. The research material includes 100 media reports in the Polish language on the Internet, which were published in 2018–2022. The article presents the results of a critical analysis of texts. The main theoretical framework of the research is the aforementioned legal regulations concerning the organisation of religious education in Polish schools. The media on the Internet show this issue in a way that is not homogeneous, and it contains elements from various concepts of upbringing. This media message is divided into two parts: the first is related to integral education based on universal values, having its source in Christianity, and the second is liberal, with no reference to fundamental values. In this study the authors try to draw attention to the nature of various texts and statements of supporters and opponents of Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools. We want to show the main thematic threads but also the method and argumentation of the content of Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools.

The research results are of a pilot nature, but they allow us to examine the meanings in which Roman Catholic religious education is presented. The study's findings can serve as a starting point for further research conducted among different recipients of media messages.

2. Methodology

The theoretical framework for the issues to be analysed includes critical analysis of press content. A qualitative method of text research in electronic media was used (Woźniak, 2012, p. 99). Drawing on the methodology of press content

critical analysis, a qualitative and quantitative examination of selected Polish Internet websites in 2018–2022 was the starting point for this study. The content of selected Internet portals was analysed to reconstruct different visions related to the presence of religion classes in Polish schools (Woźniak, 2012, p. 99). The research goal was to determine how the issue of religious education is present in the media message in Poland and to reconstruct specific features of this message inscribed in the context of broader socio-cultural and religious changes that have been taking place in Poland. Both thematic threads within the analysed issues, as well as their presentation methods (positive, negative, substantive, objective, subjective, impartial, biased), and the type of argumentation to reconstruct the nature of reference to religious education in Polish schools, were in the scope of our interest. Therefore, the subject of analysis included different types of texts present on the Internet. These were both press reports, articles, interviews, and opinions of various experts. The effects of such texts can influence public opinion, deepening or eliminating the effects of unequal treatment of religious education. The views expressed in the media are also of great importance for the shape of systemic solutions concerning religious education in Polish schools.

Three terms were used for the search for the study material: religious education, religion teacher, and teaching Roman Catholic religion in schools. These terms were used as the tool for seeking and selecting the material for analysis. A categorisation key was used in which publication titles, main topics and detailed content categories were taken into account. The study material analysis takes into consideration its judgemental nature. The study covers the methods of presenting religious education conducted by the Roman Catholic Church in Polish schools. Therefore, various texts published on the Internet (press releases, articles, interviews, opinions, expert publications) were classified into positive (in favour of religious education) and negative (against religious education). Texts presenting a positive image of religious education in Polish schools included studies whose authors, referring to the applicable regulations, point to parents' and children's rights, the didactic and educational values of such classes and to benefits gained by children from participating in such activities. Texts of this type were free from prejudice. Texts that brought up the issue of unlawful organisational solutions applied in schools and the harmful consequences (financial, mental, social) of religious education in school were classified as negative. A large majority of these texts were biased.

Prejudices against religious education and religion teachers were noticeable. Importantly, there were no texts in the media, either Catholic or mainstream, which would point to both positive and negative aspects of religious education in Polish schools.

When selecting the research material, the focus was on the last five years, which are important for creating the image of Roman Catholic religious education. The adopted period was related to the drastically decreasing number of students participating in religious education, especially in secondary schools (Grabowska, 2022b). This situation arouses various emotions and opens a discussion between supporters and opponents of religious education. However, it should be noted that in the last months of 2022, articles and reports on religious education appeared on the Internet very often. Due to the material size, the analysis covers only those media messages on the Internet that directly relate to religious education. Most of the research material was collected as part of systematic preliminary research into existing data. After an initial review and selection of the collected research material, 100 media reports in the Polish language published in 2018–2022 were selected and analysed (see Table 1). The selection of specific materials was made based on non-probability sampling. Those that dealt with the broadly understood issues related to the presence of religious education in Polish schools were selected.

The basic criterion for the selection of online texts was their long tradition associated with their presence in the world of the media and recognition in Polish society. The social subject matter taken up on these websites and the consideration of local social, cultural and religious conditions were equally important. The selected material covers issues related to the educational policy of the state, including religion teaching and the work of a religion teacher in a Polish school. The analysis covers texts published by recognizable Polish language portals, including Catholic websites and mainstream.

The chronological range of 2018–2022 seems to be sufficient to seek answers to the above questions. The critical content analysis method was used to study ready-made, specific, existing messages. It did not require the researcher to interact directly with journalists or readers (Wimmer & Dominick, 2009, p. 211). It allowed using qualitative research and, within it, the qualitative analysis technique of the content of Internet sources (Szulich-Kałuża, 2018, p. 73; cf. Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2018, pp. 143–165). The quantitative content analysis was a supplementary research tool. It provides structured data and findings

for a study conducted on specific media coverage (Langer, 1997, pp. 6–7). A model application of this type of qualitative and quantitative analysis was clearly defined in the literature (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004) and covered a wide range. Therefore, precise categorisation of data was required according to the research assumptions described above. The study was exploratory, which is why no research hypotheses were formulated (cf. Tukey, 1977).

The study attempts to answer the following research questions: What were the prevailing subjects related to the education of Roman Catholic religion in Polish schools in texts published by Internet media? How was the education of Roman Catholic religion in Polish schools described and discussed? Did the publications focus only on facts, or did they extrapolate the consequences of religious education in Polish schools on broader political and social contexts? What rhetorical devices were applied on the lexical level, and what persuasive measures were used? Were individual issues concerning Roman Catholic religious education presented in an impartial or biased manner? What similarities and differences were observed in the narrative of individual media coverage? Were there any elements discriminating against religious education in Polish schools? If there were, in what sense and in what form? The answers to these questions may shed light on the extent to which the media coverage of issues related to education of Roman Catholic religion in Polish schools can impact the social perception of these educational activities, which, in turn, can further impact the condition of Catholicism in Poland.

Moreover, the study did not require statistical compilations, which is typical of quantitative research. The analysis of the content of selected media reports included attempts to maintain objectivity in order to identify hidden but existing forms of unequal treatment of religious education, which should be revealed in the research (Jabłońska, 2008, p. 169). The points of reference when assessing the substantive content of individual Internet sources were the legal regulations concerning religious education in Polish schools. Based on this, when analysing the issues described in media reports, conclusions were drawn from the conducted analysis (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004, pp. 14–15; 2013, pp. 27–42). Conclusions were based on what was written in these texts and how it was written (Rapley, 2019, pp. 194–196). The resulting content analysis is not the researchers' simple conclusion from the researched material or just an attempt by the authors to read and interpret the content of the research data. It is, rather, a multifaceted interaction in which the analysed texts, as well

as the researchers' knowledge, experience and beliefs, play an important role (Szczepaniak, 2012, pp. 84–86). This kind of research approach was undoubtedly a challenge for the researchers. It required a description and explanation of the issues of interest.

3. Analysis of Internet media coverage

In the analysed media reports, the content concerning religious education in Polish schools aroused great interest, as presented in Table 1 below.

Internet media responded immediately to events related to religious education. Content of this type has the potential to attract readers' attention, given the intense ideological conflict in Poland, where actions of right-wing, conservative and ultra-Catholic politicians clash with those of liberal and left-wing groups. By dealing with issues of Roman Catholic religious education, Internet media seem to be particularly inclined to manifest their socio-political involvement. Prioritisation of such news can be regarded as one of the tools of manipulation in journalism as well as of influencing opinions, attitudes and behaviours on the individual and social level (Olszański, 2006, pp. 5, 78, 202; Paszenda & Rogoż, 2023, p. 6).

Table 1. The number of analysed texts on the Internet devoted to religious education in Polish schools

Name of Internet portal or service	Number (N = 100)
onet.pl	9
wp.pl	7
gazeta.pl	15
interia.pl	4
oko.press	6
NaTemat.pl	8
wroclaw.naszemiasto.pl	3
lodz.pl	2
jawnylublin.pl	1
gdansk.naszemiasto.pl	2

Table 1. (cont.)

Name of Internet portal or service	Number (N = 100)
warszawa.naszemiasto.pl	3
olsztyn.com.pl	2
Gość.pl	12
Niedziela.pl	6
e-kai.pl	14
deon.pl	4
pch24.pl	2

Prepared by the authors.

There were a range of important social events during the period in question (2018–2022) which attracted the media interest and affected the perception of not only the Roman Catholic Church in Poland but also of religious education in schools. The most important of them include: the rule of the conservative, right-wing party “Prawo i Sprawiedliwość” [“Law and Justice”], reform of the education system (liquidation of 3-year gymnasia [junior high schools], introducing 8-year primary school, 4-year secondary schools, 5-year technical secondary schools and 3-year vocational schools), merging the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (January 2021), appointing Przemysław Czarnek – a declared conservative as Minister of Education and Science (October 2020), plans to introduce obligatory ethics classes in primary and post-primary schools, large numbers of pupils quitting religious education, especially in senior classes of primary schools and in secondary schools, and a women’s strike in defence of abortion rights. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine (February 2022) and the influx of refugees to Poland, who were embraced by the Polish education system, sparked many discussions in the media on their attending religious education. The broader context of accelerating secularisation in Poland is also important. There is a visible crisis of religiousness despite a large number of Poles declaring their affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. This is caused by economic growth, which affects socio-political relations, promotes the culture of individualism and consumerism, weakens social bonds, and changes one’s view of the world (Paszenda & Rogoż, 2023; Podgórska, 2021; Szostkiewicz, 2018; cf. Hearlson,

2019). Moreover, 'the heavy involvement of the Catholic Church hierarchy and local priests in politics as well as their open and active support for right-wing and nationalist parties seem to constitute an additional crucial factor hastening the process of societal secularisation' (Paszenia & Rogoż, 2023, p. 2; cf. Podgórska, 2021). Polish society has become deeply divided with respect to the worldview of its members, which is exploited by the media involved in the ideological dispute, or negating any manifestations of transcendence.

Table 2 shows the basic division of media coverage, depending on the dominating message.

Table 2. Categorisation of the dominating media coverage of religious education in Polish schools

Dominating media coverage	Place of publication	Number (N = 100)
Against religious education in schools	Internet portals and services: onet.pl, wp.pl, gazeta.pl, interia.pl, oko.press, NaTemat.pl and local news portals	62
In favour of religious education	Internet portals and services: Gość.pl, Niedziela.pl, e-kai.pl, deon.pl, pch24.pl	38

Prepared by the authors.

This listing includes Internet texts of varying informative value, engaging opinion-forming centres, i.e. government authorities (minister of education and science), the Polish Episcopate, science and education circles (school superintendents, school headteachers, class tutors, teachers, religion teachers) and parents. Some media coverage looks like it was created in response to discussions on the plans to introduce obligatory classes of ethics or religion (see, e.g. Makowski, 2022; Wojtysiak, 2021; Zaręba, 2021b). Since these plans are directly linked to the Ministry of Science and Education and to the Conference of the Polish Episcopate, they were perceived as discriminating against non-believers and restricting religious and world-view liberties in Poland (Fundacja Wolność od Religii [Freedom from Religion Foundation], 2021).

Various aspects of Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools were presented in the Internet media under analysis by means of various journalistic genres (Table 3). The texts presented opinions (np. feature articles, comments, interviews, discussion) and information (e.g. news, reports).

Table 3. Typology of texts on Roman Catholic religious education in the Internet media coverage

Dominating media coverage	Place of publication	Journalistic genres (number N)	Number (N = 100)
Against religious education in schools	onet.pl	feature article (3) commentary (2) news (4)	9
	wp.pl	feature article (2) commentary (3) news (2)	7
	gazeta.pl	feature article (4) discussion (2) commentary (3) news (4) interview (2)	15
	interia.pl	feature article (2) commentary (1) news (1)	4
	oko.press	feature article (6)	6
	NaTemat.pl	commentary (5) discussion (1) news (2)	8
	wroclaw.naszemiasto.pl	feature article (1) news (1) interview (1)	3
	lodz.pl	news (2)	2
	jawnylublin.pl	news (1)	1
	gdansk.naszemiasto.pl	news (2)	2
	warszawa.naszemiasto.pl	news (2) commentary (1)	3
olsztyn.com.pl	news (2)	2	
In favour of religious education in schools	Gość.pl	feature article (3) commentary (1) news (3) interview (3) account (2)	12
	Niedziela.pl	feature article (2) commentary (1) news (2) account (1)	6
	e-kai.pl	feature article (4) news (6) interview (3) account (1)	14
	deon.pl	feature article (4)	4
	pch24.pl	feature article (1) commentary (1)	2

Prepared by the authors.

The greatest diversity of the text types was observed on *gazeta.pl* and *Gość.pl*, whose texts included feature articles as well as interviews, news, discussions, commentaries, and reports. This diversity was partly a consequence of the specific nature of the websites that also publish a paper issue (*gazeta.pl* – the “*Gazeta Wyborcza*”; *Gość.pl* – “*Gość Niedzielny*” and its local supplements) and of the number of publications. *Deon.pl*, which is a social and information portal, was the least diverse in terms of the published genres. Local Internet portals also published information on Roman Catholic religious education in their news services. A considerable number of articles on Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools in the Internet media attempted to present events in a broader historical, cultural, social and economic context (MEiN, lk, 2021b; Przeworski, 2019; 2022a; 2022b). Interviews were a significant form of presenting information, especially in the media with a favourable attitude to religious education. The most frequent interviewees included: the minister of education and science, representatives of the ministry, school superintendents, school headteachers, heads of church departments responsible for religion teaching in schools, bishops, Chairman of the Committee for Catholic Education in the Conference of the Polish Episcopate and its members, scientists – experts on religious education, as well as members of the clergy, some of whom are regarded – to a different extent – as authorities (MEiN, lk, 2021b; Osial, 2021; Zaręba, 2021a). Fragments of parents’ statements were also published. Frequently, one interview contained statements from different interviewees on a subject (Osial, 2021; 2022).

Undoubtedly, the ideological nature of editorial lines and the values represented by editorial boards clearly differentiate both the scope and the way religious education are described. Aside from substantive texts, emotional statements by opponents of religious education, with no reliable knowledge of applicable legal regulations, can be noticed (see, for example, Ambroziak, 2022; Bagińska, 2021; Kwiatkowska, 2021; Mrowicki, 2022). In response, supporters of religious education refer to the constitution, the concordat, the agreement on teaching religion and the qualifications religion teachers need to have, and the education law (see, e.g. Babuchowski, 2020; Gajewski, 2020; KAI, 2019; Łoziński, 2022).

All of the text genres mentioned above demonstrate a diversity of opinions on religious education. Obviously, they are permissible. Only some manipulative strategies, applied in part of the texts and usually visible to a skilful reader, may be ethically dubious.

The titles of the analysed texts on Roman Catholic religious education, published in Internet media, had various functions (Table 4). They were information carriers (see, e.g. Ambroziak, 2022; Bagińska, 2021; Cieślik, 2022; Mrowicki, 2022; Gajewski, 2020; Łoziński, 2022). They also contained keywords. The titles often contained fragments of interviewees' statements (see, e.g. Cieślik, 2022; Chrzczonowicz & Pacewicz, 2022; Jakimowicz, 2019; Zaręba, 2021a). There were also distinct qualitative and quantitative differences between the media who were positive and negative to religious education (Table 4).

Table 4. Functions of titles of publications on Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools

Dominating media coverage	Place of publication	Function	Number (N)
Against religious education in schools	Internet portals and services: onet.pl, wp.pl, gazeta.pl, interia.pl, oko.press, NaTemat.pl and local news portals	Nominative	8
		Pragmatic, and also descriptive	54
In favour of religious education	Internet portals and services: Gość.pl, Niedziela.pl, e-kai.pl, deon.pl, pch24.pl	Descriptive	13
		Nominative	20
		Pragmatic	5

Prepared by the authors.

The nominative function dominated the Catholic and Christian national Internet services. It was identified in 20 publications: the titles of national Catholic and Christian Internet services named events and situations concerning religious education in Polish schools. Thirteen titles presented a description of the material content as a summary – conclusion, i.e. it had a descriptive function. Further, five texts published in national Catholic and Christian Internet services had a pragmatic function, which was expressed in skillfully attracting readers, encouraging reflection, taking a stand and influencing readers with the intention of persuading them to accept the presented content. The pragmatic and descriptive function of the titles of the analysed materials dominated the mainstream media (54 titles). The titles with nominative functions were used by the authors and editors less frequently (8 titles). Titles of Internet publications

can obviously play an important role in making the general public interested in the issue of Roman Catholic religious education in Polish schools as well as in providing information and in shaping public opinion on the issue (Kozłowska, 2006; Zellma, 2020). They affect a decision to click the headline and to read the text (Pałuszyńska, 2016).

The main topics associated with Roman Catholic religious education are particularly noteworthy (Table 5). In the context of progressing secularisation of Polish society, mass participation of young people in 'black marches,' quitting religious education on a massive scale and an attempt to introduce obligatory religious education and ethics classes in schools, they seem to reflect social, religious and educational events which influence people's world view, beliefs and behaviours.

Table 5. Major topics of texts on the Internet devoted to education of the Roman Catholic religion (the figures do not sum up, one text can deal with several topics)

Dominating media coverage	Place of publication	Topics (number N)	Total
Against religious education in schools	onet.pl	* pupils attending religious education (18) * financial issues (6) * discrimination against some pupils (6) * religion teachers (4) * organisation of religious education (4) * plan of obligatory religious or ethics education (2) * other issues (5)	45
	wp.pl	* pupils attending religious education (7) * financial issues (4) * organisation of religious education (4) * religion teachers (2) * plan of obligatory religious or ethics education (1) * other issues (4)	22
	gazeta.pl	* pupils' attendance at religious education (15) * financial issues (15) * discrimination against some pupils (15) * quality of religious education (14) * religion teachers (12) * plan of obligatory religious or ethics education (3) * other issues (12)	86

Table 5. (cont.)

Dominating media coverage	Place of publication	Topics (number N)	Total
Against religious education in schools	interia.pl	* pupils attending religious education (4) * financial issues (3) * discrimination against some pupils (6) * religion teachers (2) * plan of obligatory religious or ethics education (1) * other issues (4)	20
	oko.press	* pupils attending religious education (6) * financial issues (6) * discrimination against some pupils (6) * religion teachers (6) * indoctrination (6) * organisation and conducting religious education (12) * plan of obligatory religious or ethics education (2) * other issues (4)	48
	NaTemat.pl	* pupils attending religious education (5) * financial issues (6) * discrimination against some pupils (6) * quitting religious education (7) * parents' rights (5) * religion teachers (4) * organisation and conducting religious education (7) * plan of obligatory religious or ethics education (1) * other issues (8)	49
	wroclaw.naszemiasto.pl	* pupils attending religious education (3) * financial issues (3) * other issues (3)	9
	lodz.pl	* pupils attending religious education (2) * financial issues (2) * religion teachers (2) * other issues (2)	8
	jawnylublin.pl	* pupils attending religious education (1) * financial issues (1) * other issues (1)	3
	gdansk.naszemiasto.pl	* pupils attending religious education (2) * financial issues (2) * other issues (2)	6
	warszawa.naszemiasto.pl	* pupils attending religious education (3) * financial issues (3) * other issues (2)	8
	olsztyn.com.pl	* pupils attending religious education (2) * financial issues (2) * other issues (2)	8

Table 5. (cont.)

Dominating media coverage	Place of publication	Topics (number N)	Total
In favour of religious education in schools	Gość.pl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * legal regulations concerning religious education in schools (12) * the essence and functions of religious education (12) * organisation of plan of obligatory religious education in schools (12) * pupils attending religious education (6) * financial issues (7) * discrimination against some pupils (10) * religion teachers (7) * syllabuses and textbooks for religion teaching (7) * good practices (5) * other issues (3) 	81
	Niedziela.pl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * legal regulations concerning religious education in schools (6) * the essence and functions of religious education (6) * organisation of religious education in schools (6) * pupils attending religious education (3) * financial issues (3) * religion teachers (6) * syllabuses and textbooks for religion teaching (5) * good practices (2) * other issues (4) 	41
	e-kai.pl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * legal regulations concerning religious education in schools (14) * the essence and functions of religious education (14) * organisation of religious education in schools (14) * pupils attending religious education (5) * financial issues (5) * religion teachers (8) * syllabuses and textbooks for religion teaching (10) * good practices (5) * other issues (11) 	86
	deon.pl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * legal regulations concerning religious education in schools (4) * the essence and functions of religious education (4) * organisation of religious education in schools (4) * pupils attending religious education (2) * financial issues (4) * religion teachers (4) * syllabuses and textbooks for religion teaching (4) * good practices (2) * other issues (7) 	35

Table 5. (cont.)

Dominating media coverage	Place of publication	Topics (number N)	Total
In favour of religious education in schools	pch24.pl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * legal regulations concerning religious education in schools (2) * the essence and functions of religious education (2) * pupils attending religious education (2) * financial issues (2) * religion teachers (2) * syllabuses and textbooks for religion teaching (1) * good practices (1) * other issues (2) 	14

Prepared by the authors.

The main topics that received the most attention and the most extensive sections of publications in the nationwide Catholic and Christian Internet services include: discussing the legal regulations for teaching religion in Polish schools, content related to the essence and function of teaching religion, information about the organisation of religious education in schools and the qualifications of religion teachers, as well as referring, in the form of a quote, discussion or summary, to the content of state law documents and Catholic Church documents in Poland regarding religious education (cf. Jakimowicz, 2019; Kasper, 2022a; Łoziński, 2022; Przeworski, 2019, 2022a). In the so-called mainstream media, unequal treatment of students who do not participate in religious education, students' resignation from religious classes, financing of religious classes, negative behaviours of religion teachers, and various problems and conflicts that occur during religious classes were mainly described (cf. Brachacz, 2022; Cieślak, 2021; Mrowicki, 2022; Szwaliowska, 2021; Szymczak, 2019).

On national Catholic and Christian websites (e.g. deon.pl, ekai.pl, gosc.pl, niedziela.pl; pch24.pl), all issues related to religious education in Polish schools were presented in the context of the applicable state, church and educational laws (awo, lk, mp, maj/pz, 2020; Babuchowski, 2020; lk, awo, mp/mip, 2018; Jałowiczor, 2018; Kasper & awo, 2022). Numerous times, the authors of texts posted on websites such as deon.pl, pch24.pl, niedziela.pl, and gosc.pl quoted information from the Catholic Internet portal ekai.pl. Much attention was paid to parents' rights to raise their offspring in accordance with their own conscience, declared faith and professed values. References to legal regulations were

made including the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997, the Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland signed on 28 July 1993, the agreement between the Polish Episcopal Conference and the Minister of Education on qualifications required from religion teachers, Regulation of the Minister of Education on the organisation of religious education in public kindergartens and schools (awo, lk, mp, maj/pz, 2020). It was explicitly stated that 'Polish citizens have the constitutional right to participate in religious classes at school, churches and religious associations have the right to teach it, and catechists to remuneration' (lk, awo, mp / mip, 2018; Kasper, 2022b). It was emphasised that that school principals have the responsibility to organise religious education at school. Religion curricula and textbooks are approved by the Church, which has autonomy in the substantive planning of religious education (KAI, 2018). The educational importance of religious education was also emphasised many times, pointing out that

teaching the Catholic religion and other types of faith supports the school's educational role. With the presence of religious classes at school, it is possible to educate integrally: in the intellectual, physical and – what is very important – spiritual spheres. ... Religion teaching brings universal human values, such as brotherly solidarity and the need for justice, and when referring to the evangelical content, it teaches love of God and neighbour, openness to others, empathy and cooperation, and shapes the very much-needed social attitudes (Commission of Catholic Education of the Polish Bishops' Conference, 2022; cf., e.g. lk, awo, mp, 2019; Kasper, 2022a; 2022c).

Supporters of religious education at school competently wrote about the substantive and pedagogical qualifications that religion teachers need to have (Jałowiczor, 2018; PAP, 2019). They reaffirmed the point that the vast majority of religion teachers are lay people who are given the mission to teach religion at school (Łukaszów, 2019). They drew attention to the Church's concern for the appropriate theological, pedagogical, didactic and spiritual preparation of Polish religion teachers and for their permanent formation (Jałowiczor, 2018; Kasper, 2022b). They exposed stereotype about the discrimination of students who do not participate in religious classes (KAI, 2019). They noted that the school must provide students who do not participate in religious education with appropriate conditions to spend time safely while waiting for the next classes

(Kasper, 2022b; Przeworski, 2022a; 2022b). In this context, supporters of religious education at school pointed to the new challenges faced by religion teaching (Kalbarczyk, 2021; Osial, 2022). The challenges included: engagement in students' holistic development, cooperation with young people, search for new ways to evangelise and activate children and youth at school, the start of a dialogue with other areas of school knowledge, intensified cooperation with parents (Jakimowicz, 2019; Kalbarczyk, 2019; Osial, 2022). They also presented the Church's concern for the quality of substantive and pedagogical preparation of religion teachers and their continuous professional development (KAI, 2021a; Osial, 2022; Ik (KAI), 2022). They mentioned new methods to help teach religion, including new curricula for religion at school and new textbooks (Kasper, 2022b; Dobrowolska, 2019). These narratives were positive. Different, valuable aspects of religious teaching and the need to supplement religion with catechesis in the parish were pointed out (Babuchowski, 2020; Frydrych, 2020). Problems and challenges related to the organisation and implementation of religious education in Polish schools were also noticed. The message was presented in a positive context. There were references to good practices, and religion teachers were appreciated for their work in the changing school environment and in the context of galloping secularisation processes.

Therefore, the positive perception of religious education came to prominence. Conflict situations resulting from, for example, religion teachers' improper behaviour, were ignored. There was no reliable sociological analysis, which would reveal the causes of the progressing secularisation of the young generation. Moreover, it was stressed that Christian parents are responsible for their children attending religious education. However, the crisis in the Catholic Church, caused by issues related, for example, to problems with paedophilia among the clergy, was ignored (cf. Adamczyk, 2020; Szymczak et al., 2022).

In many discussions with journalists (e.g. at ekai.pl, gosc.pl), the Chairman of the Catholic Education Committee of the Polish Episcopal Conference noted the non-obligatory nature of religious education (Osial, 2021; 2022). He pointed to problems that were related to the student's possibility to choose 'nothing,' which meant it was not mandatory to choose between religious education and ethics classes. According to the Church, this situation requires appropriate legal regulations, thanks to which students would be obliged to participate either in religious or ethics education. The current solution seems to be anti-educational. It is worth noting that the postulate of a mandatory choice

between religious education and ethics classes was supported by the Minister of Education and Science, but it has not received appropriate legal regulations yet (MEiN, lk, 2021a; MEiN, lk, 2021b). This is because the resistance of various groups in society became visible (e.g. Freedom from Religion Foundation), who interpret the obligatory choice between religious education and ethics classes as a violation of the world-view freedom and an attempt at indoctrination (see, e.g. Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich [Ombudsman], 2022; Fundacja Wolność od Religii [Freedom from Religion Foundation], 2021).

In the analysed media content, issues related to placing religious education in the first or the last hour of classes at school seem very important. Supporters of religious education at school have repeatedly emphasised that this situation is conducive to students not participating in the classes and is against the applicable law (Kasper, 2022b; LG, 2019). The fact of placing religious education in the first or the last hour of classes at school proves that students are treated unequally, and religious education do not have the same rights as other school subjects. The church has repeatedly called for a change in the approach of school principals to organising religious education and not placing them in the first and/or the last hour of the timetable (MEiN, lk, 2021b; Walas, 2021).

An important element of the media message concerning religious education in Polish schools is the issue related to the financing of these classes. The church (e.g. bishops, directors of catechetical departments), responding to the allegations of opponents of religious education at school, emphasised that

the financing of religious education at school should not be treated as a subsidy for the Catholic Church (and other religious associations) but as one of the costs of the system of education, which – on the basis of respect for the right to religious freedom – guarantees the possibility of participating in school catechesis to those who want it. Religion teaching in schools takes place at the will of interested citizens (parents, legal guardians, adult students) (Kasper, 2022a).

It was also pointed out by Catholic representatives that

due to other duties, priests usually work part-time in schools, and the vast majority of religion teachers are lay people. Moreover, religion teachers rarely conduct only catechesis. Most often, they combine these duties with teaching

history, social studies, Polish or other subjects to fill in the full-time spectre of work. Thus, the remuneration for religious classes is partial (Kasper, 2022a).

It was also emphasised that ‘remuneration for work is the income of religion teachers, not religious associations’ (Kasper, 2022a). In turn, opponents of religious education at school, often associated with the Freedom from Religion Foundation, stated that the church itself should finance religious education from its own funds and not from public money (Diduszko-Zyglewska, 2018; Pytlak, 2022; Szymczak, 2019; Zaręba, 2021a). At the same time, ignorance or intentional omission of information about the applicable legal regulations regarding the organisation of religious education in Polish schools, including the financing of religion teachers, could be seen. This image of religious education in the media was significantly affected by the information about students willingly resigning from participating in these classes. Opponents of religious education have repeatedly raised this issue, emphasising that we have been observing a strong decrease in interest in religious education, especially in secondary schools, in Poland recently (Bagińska, 2021; Kwiatkowska, 2021). The message is dominated by statistical data, which is also mentioned on Catholic websites, but in the context of searching for reasons and ways to counteract secularisation processes among children and young people. Opponents of religious education use the decreasing tendency of students to participate in religious education as one of the arguments against religious education in schools (Cieślak, 2021; Kwiatkowska, 2021). They believe that the parish is the right environment for this type of activity. This stance strongly correlates with other arguments that prove there is a manipulation of facts related to the organisation and implementation of religious education in Polish schools. Texts against religious education present information on irregularities in the implementation of legal provisions. Opponents of religious education in Polish schools state that, in practice, this subject is not optional because parents are subjected to pressure to send their children to religious education (Ambroziak, 2022; Cieślak, 2021). Without giving specific examples, they state that school principals put the blame on organisational difficulties (developing timetables or hiring teachers) and do not offer a real alternative. Thus, in practice, they force parents to send their children, especially the youngest ones, to religion (Szwalikowska, 2021). The media critical of religious education at school believe that school principals should schedule religion at the beginning or end of the day, as these are extracurricular activities (LG, 2019).

Publications critical of religious education at school presented negative opinions on teaching religion in Polish schools only. What was mentioned was the lack of substantive, methodological and educational competencies of religion teachers in the context of the galloping secularisation of Polish society, students' resignation from religious education, which consolidates negative attitudes towards the work of religion teachers in society and the stereotype of religious education as a waste of time (Brachacz, 2022; Zaręba, 2021a). A lack of objectivity in the approach to religious education in Polish schools was noticeable, but there was also manipulation of legal regulations and facts. Religious education was often shown with negative comments made by opponents (Brachacz, 2022). Information about the involvement of religion teachers in various didactic, educational and preventive activities of the school, such as the organisation of academic and sporting competitions and patriotic and cultural events, was not mentioned at all. The message that concerned issues related to religious education at school usually presented negative behaviour of religion teachers, indoctrination of students, and organisational and financial problems related to religious education (Cieślik, 2022; mp., 2021; Mazur, 2022). At the same time, the inferiority of religious classes compared to other school subjects and the lack of educational and upbringing potential were demonstrated. Situations during religious education when topics unattractive to students were discussed, where religious teachers showed a lack of competence and commitment to motivating students, and helplessness in the face of problematic situations, were often emphasised (Cieślik, 2022). The media message repeatedly described the undertaking made by the Same Plusy association, which initiated a tour of the cities of central and northern Poland in a van with the inscription saying "Goodbye religion!" (Basiak, 2022; Mrowicki, 2022). The goal was to inform parents that religious education is not obligatory. This project is associated with the radical left-wing, which demands secularisation of public space. Its initiators and supporters show religion primarily as classes that teach hatred towards women and LGBT people, and superstitions, and at the same time, introduce students to an environment where the probability of encountering a pedophile is disproportionately higher than anywhere else (Basiak, 2022; Mrowicki, 2022). In practice, such undertakings discriminate against participants of religious education. They are founded on a negative attitude to the Roman Catholic Church. Worrying behaviours of religion teachers often enhance the ideological debate on religious education in Polish schools.

Negative events that take place during religious education are described out of context and judged with criticism. Their interpretation is often unequivocal: religious education classes in Polish schools do not fulfil their didactic or educational functions, they violate parents' and their children's religious freedom and are indoctrinatory in nature. Hence, according to opponents of religious education, changes in the organisation of such classes are necessary. They should be conducted in parish facilities. Given the above, the media that are in favour of religious education try to justify their sense and value in the school setting. They often adopt a defensive attitude. They focus on positive aspects. It leads to strong polarisation in the image of religious education as presented by journalists in various Internet messages. This effect is amplified by the use of persuasive communication and rhetorical devices, both in the media that are in favour of religious education and those that are against them.

The media coverage under analysis presents not only information but also opinions on religious education. Moreover, it delivers interpretations of the common knowledge regarding the issue. The media with a favourable attitude towards religious education used legal arguments and applied interpretation framework schemes, repetitions, intensifications, and quotes. They referred to regulations laid down in the state, education and ecclesiastical law. However, they rarely quoted detailed data, statistics or examples (good practices). In consequence, the message delivered by proponents of religious education was not always credible. The mainstream media coverage of the religious education issue can be seen to contain opinions and suggestions, but also strong arguments, detailed data, facts and statistics, and convincing conclusions for the described events, which made the arguments presented there more credible. The context of the presented situations (e.g. during a religious education) or a religion teacher's behaviour was extremely important. It evokes strong emotions, brings back memories, and appeals to the values and beliefs typical of a secularising society. Rhetorical devices (including metaphors and rhetorical questions), expressive language and emotional arguments were used, which is a sign of emotional involvement in a debate in religious education in schools in Poland. Moderation was shown when using visual means in all the analysed texts on the Internet. Photographs were provided as illustrations of the texts. They introduced the reader to the subject matter and brought back memories, and were information carriers, i.e. they supplemented the text message.

4. Discussion

Without any doubt, the image of Roman Catholic religious education presented in the media plays an important role in the approach of parents, students, teachers and other social groups to those classes. It influences the opinions and assessments on teaching religion in Polish schools.

Although texts on Roman Catholic religious education were present in all the Internet media under analysis during the discussed time interval, there were considerable differences in terms of their content and the linguistic framework of the reported events. The contrasts seem to be rooted in the political and ideological persuasion of individual Internet media sources. The lack of mutual respect for different world views and the inability to conduct a dialogue across the divide breeds many conflicts with religion in the background (cf. Johnson, 2018). Hence, the presence of religion as a subject in Polish schools has been a cause of conflicts between believers and atheists since the beginning (since 1990) (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2018; Głuszek-Szafraniec, 2017). The concepts of religious discrimination and religious freedom are used in this conflict as arguments both by Catholic and mainstream media. Each side has its own concept of religious discrimination, which applies to religious education. This is demonstrated by statements of the ecclesiastical side (e.g. religion teachers) and the Freedom from Religion Foundation (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2018; Roszak et al., 2021).

In this context, the difference between the Catholic media message and the mainstream media is noteworthy. The Catholic media try to show the applicable legal regulations concerning religious education in Polish schools. For example, experts speaking in these media explain substantively that according to legal regulations in force in Poland, it is not obligatory to place religious education at the beginning or end of classes on a given day. However, the school is obliged to provide care or educational activities to students who do not participate in religious education. School principals are obliged to provide students with care or educational activities. Due to the fact that the content presented in the Catholic media is of interest mainly to people participating in religious education and in the life of the Church, their opinion-forming impact is definitely smaller (Kołodziejaska, 2022). The popularity of social media, where various proposals for online participation in religious practices are available (e.g. thematic conferences, services, thematic meetings, and prayer proposals), has been

on the rise. Specific issues (e.g. concerning religious education) are often not of first interest to people participating in religious practices (Kołodziejka, 2022). Therefore, the image of teaching the Catholic religion in Polish society is shaped by media that are unfavourable or even discriminating (see, e.g. Dąbrowska, 2020; Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2002; Paszenda & Rogoż, 2023; Sulkowski et al., 2022; Tiles, 2020). An example of such discrimination consists in ridiculing the confessional nature of teaching religion, undermining religion teachers' competence, encouraging the scheduling of religious education in the first or last class hours, and even making offensive comments about religion teachers and students attending these classes (Milerski & Zieliński, 2023; Synowiec-Jaje, 2018). Given the above, proponents of religious education in schools take defensive actions without an in-depth sociological analysis, which would reveal the causes for the deepening of a negative attitude to religious education. They rarely see that young people are dissatisfied with the Catholic Church. They try to relativise and downgrade the weight of critical comments on religious education published in the media. They sporadically take promotional actions which require increasingly high communication competence.

However, the mainstream media engage in campaigns against religious education. Selective messages presented in a way that seems more attractive, meaningful and valuable to many recipients are characteristic here (Czackowska, 2023). However, they lack a substantive basis. Such conclusions are provided by the research on the opinion of Polish people on the presence of religion and the Church in public spaces (Grabowska, 2022a). Criticism of various forms of the Church's activity in the world has become widespread in Polish society. The more severe the criticism, the lower the level of acceptance of the presence of religion and the Church in public spaces, and vice versa: the higher the approval, the higher the rating (Grabowska, 2022a). Thus, the subject of media interest in recent years has been everything that undermines the Church's authority as an institution and community of faith, including the authority of people representing the Church (including bishops, priests, and religion teachers). What is more, it is not surprising that the criticism is particularly visible in the mainstream media that promote the model of liberal upbringing, as research shows (Zellma, 2020). Thus, it turns out that the criticism of religious education is conditioned by the current system of values in a particular medium. The more left-wing it is, the greater the intolerance towards religion. Moreover, the galloping secularisation processes in Poland,

especially among the young and middle generations, play a key role in the lack of tolerance towards the presence of religious education in Polish schools.

5. Conclusion

The research conducted among popular Internet portals in the years 2018–2022 in the context of presenting Catholic religious education has shown that, on most popular websites, it is subject to biased criticism, and it is not treated equally with other subjects at school as a result. Admittedly, the Catholic media present the opposite approach to religious education, but they often have a small reach. This is because they are in the interest of a small group of recipients, mainly people participating in religious practices and involved in the life of the Church community (parish, diocese). Criticism is widely taken to be the business of media, however, a serious problem is the large dose of negative emotions motivated by ideology and, consequently, unequal treatment of religious education in relation to other school subjects, which can be defined as discrimination. Journalists in the mainstream media deal with the same subject matter and interpret it identically, often negatively, without a reliable reference to the applicable legal regulations. Many journalists do not refer to sources but repeat the opinions of other editors who have already reported some facts with errors and untrue interpretations. It is hard to resist the impression that the goal of the mainstream media is to discourage Polish society from religious education, leading to a mass resignation from these classes. In many environments, this goal has already been achieved. However, the question remains – is the lack of religious education and its educational dimension good for children and youth? Is it the other way around? What should the media do in this situation? Undoubtedly, in a situation in which intolerance towards religious education in Polish schools is clear, efforts should be intensified to influence the media reality. This can be done, e.g. through appropriate professional preparation of journalists who will apply the principles of journalistic ethics in their professional work, such as the pursuit of truth, impartiality and honesty, respect for others' privacy, independence from interest groups, respect for the law and respect for good manners. The availability of true information about religious education in the media, correcting untrue information (even repeatedly, but consistently) and showing the real functions

of religious education in holistic human development seem equally important. However, this must be done professionally, with quick reactions to untrue media reports because only then can one become a partner for the media against unfavourable religious education in Polish schools.

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