17

Religious dimension of Polish fears of Muslims and Islam

Konrad Pędziwiatr

Introduction

The 100th anniversary of Fatima revelations and 300th anniversary since the coronation of the highly venerated icon of Black Madonna of Czestochowa were celebrated in Poland on 7 October 2017, with a mass religious mobilisation event called “Rosary to the Borders”. This day marked also an anniversary of Christian victory over Ottoman Turks at the sea battle of Lepanto in 1571. The later anniversary was downplayed by some organisers of the event and stressed by others. The lay Catholics from the organisation Soli Deo Basta who put forward the idea of “Rosary to the Borders” encouraged Poles to go to designated points along the country’s borders for a mass rosary prayer and thus celebrate the double/triple anniversary. The liturgical commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference (the central organ of the Catholic Church in Poland) officially approved the programme of the event and encouraged the faithful to join the mass prayer, and mobilised parishes to help in the planning and to offer liturgies for the participants. Numerous state companies provided financial support to the organisation behind the event (Woźnicki 2017). Officially, according to the organisers, around a million of Poles prayed for the “salvation of Poland, Europe and the world”. However, before the event took place some of its organisers and prospective participants spoke about other goals of the prayer such as, inter alia, protection of Poland and Europe from the secularisation and Islamisation.

From the beginning there was a lack of clarity about the goals of the mobilisation not only among the organisers and participants but also among the clergy. Although the spokesperson of the Episcopal Conference stressed that the event had purely religious character and it is “a manipulation” to claim otherwise (Paweł Rytel-Andrianik quoted Giangravè 2017), some of the statements of the members of the Conference contradicted these claims. One of them came, for example, from the Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski of Kraków, who said that the event at the nation’s borders is a message “to other European nations so that they understand that it’s necessary to return to Christian roots so that Europe may remain Europe . . . it represents the only way to save its culture” (Kantorski 2017). Numerous people accused the organisers and participants of contributing to the country’s growing malcontent towards various “others” (especially from the Middle East and Africa) and providing a symbolic backing to the current right wing government and its policy of opposing the EU relocation and resettlement scheme.
and maintaining the policy of closed doors to “Muslim refugees”. This type of voice one could hear not only from outside of the Church but also from within it. The former secretary of the Episcopal Conference, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek told Italian newspaper *Famiglia Cristiana*:

> The rosary is a beautiful prayer, but the bishops did not foresee nor understand in time that it could be used as an ideological weapon by the government’s propaganda. . . . The Church not noticing this was at the very least a very serious naivety.  
> *(Bobbio 2017)*

The vagueness and contradictions in the statements about the goals of the Rosary to the Borders manifest well the wider ambiguity of the Polish Catholic Church and some of its most active lay members about their stand on “others” and in particular the most important religious “others”, that is, Muslims. The goal of this chapter is to shed light on some of the features of these ambiguities and religious dimensions of Polish fear of Muslims and Islam. It begins with brief introduction about the status of the Catholic Church in Poland and a few observations on intensification of processes of sacralisation of the nation and state in recent years. Then, it sheds light on Church official position on Muslims and Islam as to be found in the key church documents and as expressed by the church leadership. From the Church leadership and key documents it goes then to the assessment of the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in Church owned or affiliated weeklies and bimonthly.

### Polish Catholic Church and sacralisation of the nation and state

The importance of the Catholic Church in the country where around 90 per cent of people belong to the Catholic Church and half of them regularly participate in the services goes far beyond the religious sphere (Czapiński and Panek 2015; GUS 2015). The Church’s position in today’s Poland is not only anchored historically and culturally, but also legally, as it is the only religious institution that has relations with the state regulated by an international treaty or a Concordat. It stipulates independence and autonomy of the Church and State but, at the same time, gives the Church privileged status in many spheres (e.g. by guaranteeing the access to Catholic – services in all public institutions including education, health service, military and prison; see Wroczyński 1996). Through its teachings within the state educational system and outside of it, the Church plays an important role in regulating various matters traditionally linked with the private sphere and has a significant influence on the shape and content of public debates.

At the same time, as the public opinion polls show these extra-religious roles played by the Church are accepted by the large part of the society. For instance, a study conducted by CBOS in 2013 showed that 80 per cent (or more) of Poles did not object to the participation of clergy in the ceremonies related to state holidays, accepted Catholic crosses in secular public buildings, religious lessons in public schools, and the religious nature of military oaths. Furthermore, almost three fourths did not see anything wrong in the participation of priests in the television programmes and 61 per cent gave the clergy right to speak publicly on spiritual and moral issues. The fact that the vast majority of Poles did want the clergy to tell for whom they should vote draws clearly the borders of the Church’s influence in the public sphere (CBOS 2013). In spite of these limits the social research shows the Church as an institution that has great impact on the public debates in Poland. They are concerned not only spiritual, moral and philosophical issues – but also legal, economic and political.

One of the examples of the Church’s impact on shaping the content of the public debates in the country concerns the bill that forbids large-scale commerce on Sundays. Theoretically, this
issue is an economic one and does not directly relate to religious life. Nonetheless, the clergy became one of the initiators of this discussion and has been actively lobbying for new regulations in this domain. The position of individual priests and bishops in this matter was significantly strengthened when the Polish Episcopal Conference officially stated that it supports the Sunday commerce ban (Mikulski 2017). The authors of the new legal regulations in this domain frequently refer to the church’s position and the social teachings of the Catholic Church as arguments in the political debate. Thus, they give primacy to arguments of a religious nature over those referring to economic nature or those linked with individuals’ economic freedom. While doing so, they are well aware of the surveys that show that 60 per cent of Poles have positive attitude to the reforms banning large-scale commerce on Sunday (Roguska 2016).

The Catholic Church is also one of the most trusted institutions in the country and the one that receives the highest social evaluation rates for its activism. Recent studies show that currently the Church’s activism is viewed positively by 52 per cent and negatively by 35 per cent of respondents. Although these ratings of the Church are quite stable (see graph 1 below), one may notice starting from 2015 a temporary decline in its positive evaluations and growing number of those who see this activism negatively (blue – positive, red – negative; CBOS 2017).

One of the explanations for the declining positive social evaluations of the work of the Church in Poland may be related to its increasing politisation over the last two years and its strengthening alliance with the right wing government that came to power in 2015. The Polish Catholic Church is politically divided with its more open, centrist and pro-European elements frequently sympathising with the former ruling party centre-right Civic Platform (or Party Modern), and more conservative and critical towards European Union, liberals and all kinds of “others” part of it that tend to support right wing Law and Justice Party (hereafter PiS). When PiS came to power, the later elements of the Polish Church were significantly strengthened. The new ruling party has repaid the Church for its silent support of wide range of reforms introduced under the slogan “good change” with, inter alia, aforementioned legislation banning large-scale commerce on Sunday, suspension of in vitro programmes, limiting access to medical contraception, eliminating sexual education from school curricula and giving the Church more space in the state-owned media cleansed from the journalists critical towards PiS.

The Church has profited from this new political alliance as numerous of its ideas and suggestions were either relatively quickly implemented (e.g. Sunday commerce ban) or being prepared for implementation by the governing party (e.g. legislation restricting rights to abortion). At the same time, the Church’s more aggressive intrusion into various spheres of life in alliance with the Law and Justice Party is clearly viewed by growing number of Poles as the transgression of the limits of

![Figure 17.1](image_url)  
*Figure 17.1 Social evaluation of the Polish Catholic Church’s activism between 2011 and 2017.*
its socially acceptable influence. It has also raised some very critical voices from within the Catholic Church in Poland. In one of the most recent cases, a Dominican monk and one of the spiritual leaders of the Solidarity Movement, Father Ludwik Wiśniewski has controversially announced that “Christianity in Poland is slowly dying”. For him clear signs of the Church’s demise are above all “the death of the Christian spirit” in the numerous believers who belong to the Church, their refusal to welcome refugees, hostility towards the people with a different skin colour, linking Catholic faith with nationality and hatred towards the Poles with a different political convictions’ (Wiśniewski 2018). The new alliance between some elements of the Church and the government has also significantly intensified the processes of sacralisation of the nation and the state.9

As Buchowski (2016) rightly notes, in Poland, where one may observe crosses present in almost every school and in many other public spaces, where there are religious classes in public schools, numerous religious monuments, national heroes presented as religious martyrs, religiously motivated restrictive abortion laws, etc., there is a strong intertwining of Catholicism and nationalism. In these processes of mixing Catholicism and nationalism, Poland is constructed as a hybrid of the sacred and the profane. In a new political context (locally and globally), a profane nation/state is converted into a holy body of a nation/state that is endangered not only by cultural Others, but – above all – by religious Others. In this context, Islam and Muslims have been narrated as the most important enemy and key threat to the nation and the state. The figure of a refugee has been constructed as the one that is supposed to embody Muslims and Islam (Pędzwiatr and Legut 2016). Thus, the opposition to the EU-proposed relocation and resettlement has in Poland very important religious dimension. In particular, the politicians of the ruling party backed by their media outlets have been repeating like a mantra that the opposition to (Muslim) refugees from Middle East and Africa equals saying “no” to Islamisation of Europe, “change of its normative structures” (MSWiA 2017) and its unavoidable pernicious effects such as terrorist attacks. Some of the most notorious ones spreading these kind of views were the former Minister of Interior Affairs (under PM Szydło) and current Minister of Defence (under PM Morawiecki) Mariusz Błaszczak and Minister of Science and Higher Education Jarosław Gowin. As argued elsewhere, while 2015 saw significant rise in the public expression of anti-Muslim sentiments in Poland, 2016 and 2017 saw further banalisation of Islamophobia in the country and anti-Muslim views becoming even more mainstream not only in politics, but also in media, education and other spheres of life (for detailed information see Pędzwiatr 2016, 2017).

These views found many sympathisers among the conservative anti-European parts of the Polish Catholic Church. In the most extreme version, the threat of Islamisation as imminent one was presented in 2015 and 2016 by a young charismatic Catholic priest, Jacek Midlår, who was suspended by his religious order (Zgromadzenie Księży Misjonarzy) for spreading openly anti-Semitic and Islamophobic views and later (in September 2016) announced his departure from the order. He became a symbol of the marriage of most extreme elements of Polish Catholicism with the far-right movements (Wszechpolsacy and ONR), especially after leading a Holy Mass and delivering a sermon in support of the far-right organisation ONR in Białystok Cathedral (Pędzwiatr 2017). During the nationalist rally on the Independence Day (11 November) in 2015, he famously addressed the gathering by saying:

Dearly beloved, we’re not afraid of the peaceful Muslims, but they’re a minority. We’re afraid of fundamentalism. We do not want violence, we do not want aggression in the name of Allah . . . We must oppose it. We do not want the hatred that is in the Quran, but we want the love and truth of the Gospel . . . The Gospel, and not the Quran! The Gospel, and not the Quran!

(Jacek Midlår, quoted in Haris 2016)
One could observe the continuation of the processes of sacralisation of the nation/state in Poland during 2017 Independence Day rally. The organisers of the event, which was initially celebrated only by the far-right organisation (ONR and Wszechpolacy) and from 2011 started to attract increasingly diverse audiences (including some right wing Polish MPs) and growing number of participants (Malinowska, Winiewski and Górska 2016), marched in 2017 under the banner “We Want God”. One of the organisers explained that by doing so they wanted to “invoke the fighting church . . . portray Catholicism not as a faith of the weak but as faith of the strong people” (Zakrzewski 2017). At the same time around 60,000 participants of the march that carried inter alia banners saying “Europe Will be White or Uninhabited”, “No to Islam in Poland” or “White Europe of Brotherly Nations” (TVN 2017) was trying to further nationalise the country’s Catholicism and to associate it with xenophobic, if not outright racist and Islamophobic vision of the nation and state.

Official Catholic pronouncements on Muslims and Islam

One of the key documents presenting the actual official Catholic stand on Islam and Muslims is the “Declaration of Nostra Aetate” adopted on 28 October 1965, during the Second Vatican Council. The document is in fact the church’s pronouncement on its relationship with non-Christian religions. The Declaration emphasises the common features of Christianity and Islam such as the belief in one God who is the omnipotent creator of heaven and earth, the recognition of Jesus (though not God) and Mary. Its general character is the great respect for Islam and its believers. The Second Vatican Council and Declaration Nostra Aetate by highlighting salvific validity of other faiths, including Islam, opened a new chapter in Christian-Muslim relations (Esposito 1992; Pratt 2010).

The post-conciliar documents also have an important role in determining the attitude of the Catholic Church towards non-Christian religions. Some of the most important documents of that character are “The attitude of the Church towards the followers of other religions. Reflections and directions on dialogue and mission” and “Dialogue and preaching”. The first document issued by the Secretariat for Non-Christians assesses the progress in interreligious dialogue that has been made since the Second Vatican Council. It was published in 1984 and called for ecumenism encompassing not only different Christian communities but also other faith communities. According to this document the basis for interreligious dialogue should be linked at the theological foundations – for example, the belief that God through the incarnation of Jesus loved all men. It also recognises that in other non-Christian religions one can see the good and the truth and the elements that are common to the Christian faith (Fic 2010, p. 56). The second document, published in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for International Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, reiterates the post-conciliar ideas about other faiths including Islam confirming that the Roman Catholic Church is officially seeking dialogue with the Islamic culture. There is also respect for the fundamental values of the Muslim world (Fic 2010). The Church after the Second Vatican Council, in its official pronouncements, is generally more likely to emphasise the similarities that the followers of both religions may have, rather than differences.

Yet one more of the post-Vatican documents that have an important role in determining the attitude of the Catholic Church towards non-Christian religions is the Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Asia, signed by John Paul II in November 1999. It talks about the necessity of interreligious dialogue with Islam. According to the document, dialogue between religions – especially monotheistic ones – “is the will and intention of God”. At the same time, the Church continues to view dialogue between religions as part of its evangelising mission (Sakowicz 2006). The official standpoint of the Polish Catholic Church on Islam
and Muslims stays in line with the key pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council and Declaration Nostra Aetate and other relevant conciliar documents. In some ways it goes even beyond these pronouncements and answers directly the call of the late Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła – Pope John Paul II for “a truly dialogical relationship where both sides give and both receive” and “dialogues of life and action” (Pratt 2010). One of the most important elements of it is the Day of Islam in the Polish Catholic Church for the first time celebrated in January 2001. This unique initiative, not only in European but also global context, consists of numerous interreligious events (e.g. conferences, seminars and interreligious services) held every year on 26 January in different parts of the country. It was proposed to the Bishops Conference and accepted in 2000 by the Common Council of Catholics and Muslims (Rada Wspólna Katolików i Muzułmanów), which was established in 1997 (Lewicka 2010).

As far as the individual standpoints of the Polish bishops on Islam and Muslims are concerned, they are much more diverse. One may find among the leadership of the Catholic Church in Poland both strong supporters of interreligious dialogue with Muslims within the parameters set by the Vatican II who sometimes have very nuanced and in-depth knowledge of Islam and Muslim world, as well as sceptics and opponents of such a dialogue. The latter group usually perceives Muslims and in the context of migration crisis also refugees as a “threat” to Christian Europe. Among the first group one may find inter alia current archbishop of Łódź and former rector of Cracow religious seminary Grzegorz Ryś who has repeated many times that “one should not associate Islam with terrorism” and that “in line with the teaching of Jesus we should accept refugees” (Fakt 2016). Another one is bishop Krzysztof Zadarko, who frequently commenting on the migration crisis, emphasises that not all Muslims are a danger to Europe but only a small minority of them and that assistance to refugees should be provided not only abroad (main argument of the current government) but also in Poland (2017). Some of the members of the Church who see these issues from a different perspective are bishop Edward Frankowski who recently argued that “moderate Islam has run rampant in Europe. It threatens us with immigration, demography . . . Mosques and Quranic schools” (Fronda.pl 2015), or the aforementioned bishop Marek Jędraszawski who said that the politics of multiculturalism has failed in Western Europe and warned against opening the country to immigration (Kantorski 2017).

**Portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the Catholic press**

In order to better understand the impact of the Catholic Church on the perception of Muslims and Islam in a society made up by 90 per cent of Catholics, it is worth going beyond the official documents of the Church and statements of its leadership. One way of doing this is by analysing the narratives on Muslims and Islam that appear in the largest newspapers and journals published by the Church: weeklies Gość Niedzielny (Sunday Guest) and Niedziela (Sunday) or related to the Church – bimonthly Polonia Christiana. The weeklies with the circulation around 200,000 copies per week and the bimonthly with circa 30,000 copies sold six times per year extend significant influence on their buyers and their families. In addition, all the newspapers and journals influence their audiences through their websites. The most frequently consulted one is maintained by the bimonthly Polonia Christiana – the website pch24.pl registered almost two million visits in the last six months – followed by the website of the weekly Gość Niedzielny (gosc.pl) 1.9 million visits and the site of the weekly Niedziela (niedziela.pl) visited by 1.3 million times in the last six months. The body of the texts selected for detailed content and critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer 2001) was made up of 217 articles that talked about Muslims and Islam, and were published in the aforementioned weeklies between 2010 and 2017 and in the bimonthly from 2008 to 2017.
One of the most popular contexts in which Muslims and Islam emerge in the analysed body of texts is the one of oppression and persecution of Christians worldwide. In these articles, Muslims are framed as the main oppressors of Christians. This topoi (or argumentation schemes/ headings as part of wider sets of discursive strategies; Krzyżanowski 2010) are present within the Catholic press more frequently after the proclamation of so-called Islamic State in June 2014 and its advances to Christian areas of Iraq and Syria and all kinds of violations of human rights (e.g. killing civilians, taking them hostage, forcing them to convert to Islam). In one of numerous articles of this type, the author of the article in the weekly Sunday argues that:

Christians in Nigeria constantly face discrimination, they are falsely accused of blasphemy against Islam as a result of which Christian students and lecturers are forced to leave schools; there is lack of permissions to build churches and set up cemeteries; the ones that are considered illegal are demolished; the youth is often forced to convert to Islam, especially women; there is a discrimination of Christians in the state jobs market; Muslims who convert to Christianity are being sent death threats.

(Cisło 2012)

Although some authors explicitly say that not all Muslims are responsible for the persecution of Christians and that some followers of Islam even help persecuted Christians or solidarise with them (Łuczak 2014a), the general description of the situation of Christians in the Muslim countries is very grim. Some authors argue that the level of persecution of Christians in the Muslim countries (e.g. in Iraq) amounts to “Holocaust” (Jakimowicz 2014) and that soon they will become in certain parts of the world (Middle East) history (Dziedzina 2013).

An important sub-topos of the aforementioned topoi is the oppression and persecution of all those Muslims who decide to embrace Christianity. The authors of numerous articles on these themes often argue that the West is blind to the problems of Christians in the Muslim countries and because of political correctness or for other reasons (e.g. economic – wanting to maintain good commercial relations with partners in the Middle East or elsewhere in the Muslim world) does not address their problems. The cases of Asia Bibi (Pakistan) or Meriam Ibrahim (Sudan) have been particularly widely explored in the Catholic press (Rędchio 2014). Some authors argue that Muslims who converted to Christianity are even persecuted in Europe. One of them wrote that “We talk about persecution of Christians and Christophobia only with regards to Iraq, Egypt or North Africa but we are persecuted also in Europe, in the suburbs of Paris. Muslims embracing Jesus there face death” (Bątkiewicz-Brożek 2012).

Another very popular way of framing Muslims that is linked with the aforementioned representation of followers of Islam as persecutors of Christians is to view them as radicals and fundamentalists and their religion as “the most intolerant religion on earth” (Szaniawski 2010). One of the common arguments being made in the analysed texts is that among the followers of Islam there is huge overrepresentation of terrorists (Łuczak 2014b) and that the slogan of “liberal Islam” is only a smokescreen for the expansionist nature of their religion. Doerre (2008) argues:

Although Muslims claim that Islam is a religion of peace and that war against the “infidels” is being waged only by a fringe of extremists. The truth is that war and conquest of non-Muslim lands are part of the culture of Islam from the time of its birth.

The crusades in this context are presented as the response to Muslim aggression, which supposedly aimed to halt the expansion of Islam on the European continent, freeing Christians from the repressions of Muslims and protection of the holy sites.
Yet another narrative in which Muslims and Islam play key role is the whole stream of texts about the Islamisation of Europe. Numerous authors argue in these texts that as in the past (from the 8th century to the 17th century, with the battles of Poitiers 732 and Vienna 1683 invoked as the key historical moments) Islam is once again today trying to Islamise Europe. According to this narrative, the inflow of Muslims migrants to Europe constitutes a deadly “threat” to European values and cultures. One of the many articles of this type points out that “Bassam Tibi, Muslim scholar living in Germany, says that contemporary Muslim immigration to Europe is a third wave of Islamic expansion to the West. The first was the conquest of Al-Andalus, the second victories of Ottoman Empire and now is the third” (Dziedzina 2013). This topos was very strongly emphasised in the articles especially over the last two–three years while referring to the migration crisis. Many articles either explicitly – like the whole issue of Polonia Christiana from November–December 2015 (see the photo of its cover below) – or implicitly argued that Muslims migrants coming to Europe are a form of Caliphate’s (Daesh’s) “Fifth Column” or a form of terrorist in disguise. If they are not current terrorists then they are future ones – as symbolically depicted on the cover of the Polonia Christiana by a person holding a time-bomb in their hands.

Apart from migration, the danger for Europe is seen above all in the current demographic patterns and in the visible consequences of them – in particular mosque building projects. One of the authors for instance is complaining that “Muslims did not respect even the French rules of laïcité. Islam started to slowly enter schools, public offices and streets. Muslims who were praying on the streets of France and blocking them now have their mosques” (Bątkiewicz-Brożek 2013).

Figure 17.2 Cover of the magazine Polonia Christiana from November–December 2015.
Numerous articles similarly to the aforementioned one paint a picture of Europe in which the processes of secularisation lead not so much to increasingly liberated social spaces from the control of the sacred, but to the opening of new spaces for the religious expansion of Islam. Thus secularisation is viewed similarly negatively as the demographic growth of Muslim communities and emergence of Muslim institutions. One of the authors argues:

Demographic problems are not the reasons but consequences of the crisis of deep cultural and moral roots linked with the loss of the Christian identity by the old continent. Contemporary Europe is attacked from one side by Islam and from the other by secularism. It becomes a place with increasing number of mosques and minarets and churches being transformed into discotheques and supermarkets.

(Mattei 2008)

In this context, Poland is often mentioned as the last “hope” for Europe. Its historic role of being the “bulwark of Christiandom” (in Latin - Anntemurale omniae Christianitatis) is very strongly revived. In this narrative, Poland is framed as a guardian of Christian Europe and protector from new “infidel” invasions. Many contributors to Catholic press envisage a new role for Poland as a re-Christianising force. This motive in Poland in the last years has been brought by several Polish politicians including Prime Minister – Mateusz Morawiecki (Gazeta Wyborcza 2017). According to several authors, Poland as a country spared from dynamic secularisation processes is obliged to defend Christianity and religious fundaments of Europe. One of them writes, for example, “Poland should remain faithful to her role of being the bulwark of Christiandom. The history seems to point out that this role God has reserved for the Polish nation” (Doerre 2008).

Partially linked to the last topos as well as to the one on Muslim converts and persecution of Christians, is the topos of fearing and saving Muslim women. On the one hand, they are framed as the main “threat” to Europe and on the other hand, as victims of oppression of Muslim men that require to be saved. As Narkowicz and Pędziwiatr (2017b) note, these two types of narratives frequently go hand in hand. One of the authors referring to this topos writes that “Fanatical Islamic imams preach in thousands of mosques that they will win the war with the infidels thanks to the oil and bellies of our women” (Szaniawski 2011). According to many contributors to the analysed weeklies and the bimonthly, Muslim women need to be saved from Muslim men while, at the same time, they have to be feared, because thanks to them, Islam expands silently in Europe and the world. The deployment of liberal feminist sentiments in anti-Muslim narratives in the analysed texts is inconsistent with social realities of Poland and especially with the Church’s conservative stand on the role of women in the society (Szwed 2015).

In contrast to what one could expect from the analysis of the key documents of the Church after the Second Vatican Council on Muslims and Islam, the topos of interreligious dialogue does not feature frequently in the analysed body of texts. In each of the analysed titles it is possible to find articles on this issue (often related to the Day of Islam in the Polish Catholic Church or information about Papal visit to one the Muslim countries – e.g. Rozpiątkowski 2014), however, they make up only a small percentage (around 10 per cent in the sample of texts) of all the articles that mention Muslims and Islam.

Conclusions

Research has showed that Poles are characterised by some of the highest rates of fear of Islam and its followers in Europe (Pędziwiatr 2017; Narkowicz and Pędziwiatr 2017a; Zick, Küpper and Hövermann 2011). These fears have developed largely in the absence of any interactions
with Muslims or visits to the Muslim world (CBOS 2015) and on the basis of earlier types of xenophobia (inter alia anti-Semitism, anti-Roma and homophobic attitudes) not properly being addressed in the earlier decades, that constitute powerful templates for contemporary patterns of “othering” (Bilewicz and Krzeminski 2010; Gołębiewska 2009; Tycner 2017). The analysed data show that the Polish Church is doing very little to dispel misconceptions about Muslims (as well as refugees and immigrants). The official pronouncements of the Catholic Church and its leadership on Muslims and Islam are quite distant from the portrayal of them in the Church or Church-related press. The most popular socio-cultural representations of Muslims and Islam in the analysed titles are strengthening the stereotypical images of Islam and its followers rather than challenging them. The popular images of Muslims as “other” and a serious threat to “Christian way of life” and “our social and cultural norms and values”, as well as, if not current, then “prospective terrorists” are strengthened by the analysed media. The Polish Church is thus very poorly living up to the spirit of the Declaration Nostra Aetate and instead of mitigating the growing fear of “others”, conceived above all as Muslim others, it is frequently exacerbating these fears.

The fears of Islam and its followers to which numerous articles in the analysed press contribute are very skilfully filtered over the last years in the nationalist narratives through the historically-constructed notion of Poland as a bulwark of Christiandom. The Polish Church and its priests are seen in this vision as being destined to play a key role in the “battle” with enemies of Western Christianity, and Muslims in particular. Documents such as the “Christian Dimension of Patriotism” published in April 2017 by the Bishops’ Conference that try to prevent the politicisation of Catholicism by these types of mobilisations and the revival of narrowly-understood national pride (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2017) have been little known to the larger public and are a rare attempts by the Church leadership to prevent such instrumentalisations in a period of high securitisation and politicisation Islam. Similarly, the initiative of the Day of Islam in the Polish Catholic Church is targeting only a small section of the clergy and faithful (mostly those already involved in inter-religious dialogue) that is not able to deconstruct the hegemonic visions of Muslim “others” supported by large sections of the Church and its media platforms.17

Notes
1 More information about the event can be found on its official website at http://rozaniecdogranic.pl.
2 Officially the event marked double anniversary (the revelations of Fatima and the coronation of Black Madonna), however, numerous organisers and participants mentioned also the third anniversary related to the 16th-century Lepanto sea battle.
3 Yet other anniversaries mentioned by the organisers were the approaching anniversary of the century since Poland regained independence in 1918, and the 140th anniversary of revelations of Mary of Gietrzwałd.
4 In several instances one of the main organisers of the event Maciej Bodasiński mentioned not only general religious goals but also such aims of the event as protection of Poland and Europe from “Islamisation and linked to the terrorist attacks, armed conflict in Europe and departure of the West from the Christian roots” (Polsat 2017).
5 For example one of the participants interviewed by the BBC said that by participating in the event she was expressing thanks for the survival of her son in a car crash, but also praying for the survival of Christianity in Europe: “Islam wants to destroy Europe . . . They want to turn us away from Christianity” (BBC 2017).
6 Religious education was re-introduced to state schools in 1990.
7 New regulations in this domain started to be implemented from March 2018.
8 More information about the conservative part of the Church that is often associated with the social movement formed around the Radio Station Mary see Pędziwiatr (2015).
K. Pędziwiatr

9 It is important to stress that this process has a very long history (see, for example, Janion 2006; Łuczewski 2012).
10 More information about the Council can be found on its website at www.radawspolna.pl.
11 This section of the text draws from the article published by the author in 2018 (Pędziwiatr 2018).
12 One of the oldest Catholic newspapers in Poland. The first issues were published in 1923. It is published in Warsaw by the Publishing House of the Metropolitan Curia in Katowice. It has nationwide circulation and average circulation is 204,000 copies per week (Rygiel 2013).
13 Niedziela is second oldest and largest Catholic weekly in Poland. It is published since 1926 by the Publishing House of the Metropolitan Curia in Częstochowa with varied circulation between 175,000 and 200,000 copies per week (information from www.niedziela.pl/dzial/37 and Rygiel 2013: 173).
14 Polonia Christiana is a bimonthly published from March 2008 by the Association of Christian Culture of Father Piotr Skarga in Krakow. It aims to “Wake Poles’ Conscience”. It cooperates with the Italian monthly “Radici Cristiane”. It publishes around 30,000 copies (information from www.pch24.pl/pismo/redakcja).
15 Data obtained through the market intelligence tool provided by Similarweb.com.
16 In the case of the bi-monthly Polonia Christiana the issues from 2008 onwards were taken into account in order to have a sample of texts that would match these from the weeklies.
17 Acknowledgment: This work was supported by Ostersjöstiftelsen (grant number Dnr 45/13).

References

Religious dimension of Polish fears


Toruński: Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej.


