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## Of the debate on the Catholic school in the II Republic of Poland

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**Jarosław Macala**

## **OF THE DEBATE ON THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL IN THE II REPUBLIC OF POLAND**

Representatives of all currents in Polish political thought in the inter-war period paid a lot of attention to issues which concerned upbringing and education since a great emphasis was placed upon the formation of young generations at the time. It is worth reviewing how the above mentioned issues were perceived by the milieux which reckoned Catholicism as a fundamental set of values (the Church circles, Christian democrats, National Democrats and conservatives). Considering the issue, it becomes quite clear that the Church's teaching had a real impact on the political conceptions during the Second Republic of Poland.

School was the most important instrument of public education where the influences of the three most important educational institutions, namely, the family, the Church and the state overlapped. According to the Catholic worldview, school played, alongside the family, a key role preparing the young to participate in public life. If it was not for the Catholic education at school, the nation would be threatened with spiritual and physical degradation. Hence, it was agreed that school was to bring up rather than merely teach because it was moral values that were of utmost priority to human beings. Abiding by the values was the only way to reinforce the relatively superficial impact that education had on the masses. Therefore, instruction at school ought to be subordinate to educative purposes of young people's upbringing. In fact, proposals concerning the nurturing of national awareness and personal morality at school which were devoid of explicit references to Catholicism appeared only among the „old” *Endecja* ranks in the early 1920s. The other currents of political thought unequivocally identified this issue with the principles of Catholic ethics (Pilch 1926; Czarnecki 1934; *Statut...* 1934; Zarzecki 1929: 268–269; Mich 1994: 27).

The relations between the school and the other most important institutions of upbringing were presented in quite a clear manner. The school was merely to aid by means of natural cooperation with parents and the Church. Superiority of the other two institutions with regard to upbringing of offspring was not to be questioned, with the school never relieving or replacing the other two. Parents had the right to control external influences which affected their children because they were morally responsible for their upbringing and for the formation of their souls. Thus, the school was supposed to consult parents in order to maintain consistency and stability in the process of upbringing and education, which was particularly significant in the case of Catholic upbringing. It could not remain isolated from the nation's Catholicism, inculcating knowledge incompatible with the principles of the religion (Klepacz 1930: 58; Iwaszkiewiczowa 1937: 210, 225–226; Zarzecki 1929: 292, 295; Świeżawska 1936; *Statut...* 1934: 43; W.K.W. 1924).

During the interwar period the Church advocated denominational (religious), Catholic schools (Podoleński 1930), rejecting secular ones altogether. Schools without lessons of religion were thought to propagate atheism and immoral conduct. Interdenominational schools, which were typical of public schooling in the Second Republic of Poland, were barely tolerated by the Church. The latter were attended by children of different denominations or non-believers. The teachers who taught in them held various worldviews, whereas obligatory lessons of religion were organised by relevant religious associations.

The interdenominational school was unanimously criticised for the promulgation of knowledge which was often contradictory to the teaching of the Catholic Church. For example, certain things were taught during lessons of religion, which were subsequently made fun of by teachers of other subjects. What is more, the school in question was based on the principle of equality of all denominations, which posed a hazard of religious indifference, secularisation etc. while the only truth was that inherent in Catholicism. It did not, however, have a decisive influence on education, even though the interdenominational schools could not have been labelled as non-religious ones. The influences of Jewish children and teachers on the young Catholic co-students were regarded as most destructive (by all but a majority of conservatives) although an emphasis put on accentuating the problem depended on the degree of one's anti-Semitism. Cardinal August Hlond (1936), far from being an extremist, put it in the following manner:

„It is a fact that the influence of Jewish youngsters on their Catholic fellow-students is generally negative in religious and ethical terms”. Hence in the 1930s, against the background of growing anti-Semitism, accompanied by demands advocating legal discrimination against Jews, formulated not only by, broadly understood, nationalists but also by a large number of priests, a demand was voiced to ban Jewish children from Polish schools as well as to prohibit teachers of Jewish descent from being employed in them (*List... Kard. A. Hlonda...* 1936: 11; Klepacz 1930: 71, 98; Rzepecka 1927: 350–353; Gluziński 1927: 86–87; Adamski 1921: 6–7; Kwasieboriski 1937: 16; Krasowski 1992: 199).

In this way, the extremists would be able to use the Catholic school as a tool for outright suppressing Jewish influences, or in the least, as a way to separate from them, which was propagated by Catholic circles less radical in this respect, i.e. by Christian Democrats.

The introduction of a denominational school in the independent state had for a long time been a postulate of the Church and of almost all political forces basing on Catholicism. The Catholic public opinion in Poland was mobilized to support the issue. Only in this particular type of school both teachers and students would all be Catholic, the curriculum would be compatible with the teaching of the Church and the whole educative efforts would be subordinate to the Catholic assumptions and purposes (Urban 1919; Adamski 1921: 4, 10; Thullie 1930; Wątor 1999: 159; Mich 1994: 27). Leftists, i.e. socialists and communists, were unanimously against such a school, demanding a secular school as a consequence of the separation between the Church and the state. This was, naturally, to be expected from them, the Catholic milieux claimed.

Nevertheless, according to Bishop S. Adamski (1938), many „weak” Catholics shared the socialists’ opinion regarding the denominational (religious) school, believing it to be an oasis of ignorance and fanaticism, an end to freedom and democracy. Consequently, a lack of unanimous Catholic opinion facilitated the proceedings of those who were hostile to religion. This resulted from a low religious awareness, generally observed in the Second Republic of Poland as well as from the fact that opinions which had little in common with Catholicism were frequently labelled as Catholic (Adamski 1938: 37–38). Thus, many believers approved of a mixed model of the interdenominational school, which was a compromise, believing – as priests and religious lessons were present there – that they constituted no threat to religious

education. They failed to notice that it might be an intermediary stage leading to a completely secularised school (Klepacz 1930: 93–94).

An attitude of the national camp stirred a lot of doubts in this respect. Neither the programme of the Związek Ludowo-Narodowy [Popular-National Union, ZLN] of 1919 nor the one of the Stronnictwo Narodowe [National Party, SN] of 1928 directly mentioned a postulate of the denominational school, approving merely of mandatory lessons of religion at public schools which were stipulated in the March Constitution. This undoubtedly was an attitude characteristic of a political compromise, motivated by the fear that this model of school – when imposed in the Eastern borderland – would greatly hinder national assimilation in that area. Nevertheless, the postulate was firmly advocated by many activists of the national camp, including reverend Józef Prądyński and reverend Kazimierz Lutosławski, whereas in the 1930s it was already supported by the whole camp (*Program Związku...* 1993: 29; *Program Ruchu...* 1993: 34; Prądyński 1925). The Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny [National Radical Camp, ONR] still displayed an indifferent attitude. It allegedly advocated the denominational (Catholic) school. On the other hand, the Camp seemed to be simultaneously propagating the idea that Polish children of different denominations should be able to attend the type of school. It was even in favour of maintaining the interdenominational school in certain (dominated by Orthodox Christians) areas. The concept of the denominational (religious) school had for national radicals fundamentally anti-Semitic undertones (Grott 1987: 64–65).

At the end of the 1930s sincere acceptance of the postulate to establish Catholic schools raised many objections, especially due to the attitudes of certain milieux gathered around the OZN (apart from conservatives and certain youth groups, i.e. the ones related to Jerzy Braun). The camp stressed its Catholicism ever more. However, it was rather as part of the political tactics they made use of at the time. Nonetheless, it did lead to an increased role of the Catholic religion in schools (Majchrowski 1985: 152–153).

At the beginning of the 1920s the postulate of the denominational school was also contested by the Narodowa Partia Robotnicza [National Workers' Party, NPR]. However, the movement was far from being clear or straightforward with regard to the matter discussed. According to the party, only the interdenominational school provided children with an opportunity to get to know each other well, reaching

the conclusion that knowledge and talent were not necessarily bound to a material status or a denomination. They learned tolerance there, which, according to the party, was the only way to rebuild Polish society and its consciousness. At the time, the national workers' movement rejected the concept of a totally secular school as well. Religious instruction implemented by the particular denominations was regarded indispensable, while its coordination with the other subjects taught was even believed desirable (*Sprawozdanie... 2 XII 1920; Sprawozdanie... 10 III 1921*).

The Christian Democrats blamed both the National Democrats and the NWP for the failure to introduce a formula in favour of the denominational school into the March Constitution – they prized political haggles more than Catholic principles. According to the then leader of the Christian Democrats, reverend Adamski (1921), the constitutional formula was a minimal plan. He believed that the Catholic society might by means of pressure extort the establishment of the denominational school through ordinary acts of Parliament, which was, according to him, not contradictory to the Constitution. Here, the issue referred to was the one related to a proper political representation of Polish Catholicism (Adamski 1921: 14, 16, 22–23).

As one may see, even among Catholics there was no unanimous approval of the denominational school. Hence, the advocates of the idea kept explaining that its establishment neither jeopardised the secular nature of the state nor religious tolerance, posing a threat neither to science nor to culture. Quite to the contrary, it prepared the young generation for public and national life well. The Catholic school guaranteed a consistent system of Catholic upbringing, stemming from the harmonious cooperation of the three fundamental educational institutions: the Church, the family and the state. It was free of conflicts mushrooming in the interdenominational school where children and teachers of different denominations had to coexist. Finally, science was presented within a context of a religious perspective, which protected the youth from harmful influences, made them into believers – active adults endowed with strong personalities, full of devotion and heroism both in private and public life. Such a school also taught tolerance, without doing harm to any denominations since all of them had the right to open their own schools (*Sprawozdanie... 1925; Podoleński 1921; Klepacz 1930: 79–86; Odbudowa... 1936; Kwasiebski 1937: 19–21; O czym... 1936*).

During the interwar period the Church had continuously demanded that the denominational school for Catholics be established. However, its efforts did not prove to be successful. Thus, the failure to establish such schools bespoke of the weakness of Polish Catholicism. In Bishop S. Adamski's (1938) view, a failure to set up the denominational school in Poland was, as has already been mentioned, a result of disunity among Catholics in Poland. Had they acted unanimously, they would have definitely outvoted the relevant legal resolutions (Adamski 1938: 37–38).

Since the advocates of the Catholic school did not succeed in changing the legal status thereof, they stipulated perfecting the existent model of the interdenominational school in order to make it more compatible with their conceptions. Therefore, they emphasized that the constitutional formula of mandatory lessons of religion should be respected. After all, it had frequently been stated that insufficient religious education was to blame for the low religious awareness of Poles. Furthermore, treating religious instruction at school in an unfair manner was believed to breed religious illiteracy (Piskorz 1939: 99). Thus, demands for an increased number of lessons of religion at public schools became more and more frequent. They were accompanied by continuous attempts to improve the quality of education since it was often the case that graduates were familiar with the religious dogmas but lacked religious faith. This was related to employing better qualified staff as well as to creating an appropriate spiritual atmosphere at schools. Only such circumstances provided a chance to eradicate the superficial and ritual attitudes towards the faith which were characteristic of Polish believers (Lechicki 1924; *Księża...* 1927; Klepacz 1930: 90–91; Wilk 1992: 283–284).

Political parties which advocated this solution did not see anything blameworthy in making children attend Catholic religion lessons, even against their parents' will. According to them, this not only did not violate religious feelings of the children (since Catholicism was based not on feeling but on reason and will) but was most recommendable in terms of their moral and ethical interests. Being a true Catholic was taken to mean that religion was sanctity and passing this belief on to one's children was one's duty. Otherwise, lacking faith was the reason for a breach with both religion and Polishness. Since Catholics constituted a vast majority of the nation, obligatory lessons of religion complied exactly with the Catholic parents' will which

should be respected by the state. Parents' duty to raise their offspring in the spirit of the Catholic religion was an indefeasible entitlement which had been prior to the state. It was believed that this was the only way to dispose of a discord between the life led by Catholics and the Catholic ethics, visible, for example, in the attitude towards the denominational school held by a large number of Catholic parents (*Sprawozdanie... 2 XII 1920*).

Such a stance spelt a danger related to the consolidation of integralist attitudes since many children viewed Catholicism as something external that was imposed on them. This lack of afterthought as well as coercion occasionally did (according to Ignacy Czuma, 1927) give birth to rebelliousness and indifference among a considerable number of well-educated people who believed they did not need religion – religion was for the uneducated masses. Eventually, the so-called Catholic minimalism was yet another ailment typical of the Catholics. It implied a selective application of principles of the faith and morality (Czuma 1927: 30–35).

Therefore, the postulate that followed entailed coordination of the whole curriculum, educational atmosphere with the Catholic spirit, even though it was rather obvious that full implementation of the above was possible only in the denominational school. The demand to strengthen priests' presence at schools was in accordance with the postulate. Such voices clearly gained in significance after 1935 when the governing elites lost some grounding, becoming more susceptible to the postulates of the Church (*Uchwały... 1938*). The stance of the Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny [ONR] stood out mainly due to its original character. The movement demanded that the subjects taught were coordinated, basing on a single worldview: „This worldview is of national nature and rests on the absolute foundations of Christ's religion”. This was the only framework within which all taught subjects could be reconciled, displaying moral and idealistic values (Kwasiebski 1937: 23–24).

An urgent abolishment of co-education was repeatedly called for. As Cardinal A. Hlond claimed in 1936, „co-education is depraving and conducive to bolshevism”. Its harmfulness was also thought to stem from the dissimilarities between the male and female psyche as well as from different social roles and vocations of the two genders. In many of the Catholic circles, the origin of co-education was viewed in terms of pathology since it had originated in French secular schools, being the work of masonry. Thus, co-education was not only a danger in itself but



it also paved the way for secularisation of the system of education (*List... kard. A. Hlonda...* 1936: 18; Adamski 1921: 4–5; *Statut...* 1934: 45; Kwasieboriski 1937: 21–23; Wilk 1992: 291).

Meanwhile such reasoning was also being questioned. Hence, regarding co-education even a Catholic newspaper wrote in 1931: „although no researcher proved that co-education did not exert any positive influence, but only negative one, on the other hand, no other was able to prove that it entailed positive effects exclusively (...). The one who permits co-education cannot assume that the results will be positive. They cannot protect themselves from unwanted consequences either” (Wachowski 1931: 324–329). The NPR had spoken against the abolishment of co-education for many years.

These postulates were accompanied by radically varying assessments of the way in which Polish interdenominational schools functioned in practice. The statements that the Catholic religion did not have any significant impact on the education therein, with the Catholic spirit not being passed on to the youth, were complemented with a thesis by Cardinal Aleksander Kakowski in 1936: „school in Poland is in principle, thanks to God, religious as a rule” (*Sprawozdanie...* 2 XII 1920; *Księża Prefekci...* 1927; *List... kard. Kakowskiego...* 1936).

In the interwar period, the establishment of the Catholic school had been a priority of the Church and political forces which identified themselves with Catholicism (though not without some doubts as regards the latter). Such an attitude on the part of political movements was undoubtedly influenced by the unequivocal teaching of the Church with regard to this issue as well as their willingness to gain support of the Church in order to attain their own objectives. Nevertheless, the failed attempt to enact law which would legitimize the establishment of the denominational school in the Second Republic of Poland was, without a doubt, a failure of both the Church and the political milieu which identified with Catholicism. It evidenced the low level of religiosity and poor knowledge of their own faith among the society, testifying finally to weak organization of the Catholic masses in Poland.

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