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The Adaptive Strategies of Young Podlasie Residents in the Face of Secularisation: An Analysis of Religiosity and Social Camouflage

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Abstract The aim of this article is to present an analysis of secularisation processes among young people with higher education living in the Podlaskie Voivodeship. We also present the adaptation strategies used by them during their return to their hometowns. The research on which the analysis is based was carried out by means of individual semi-structured interviews containing retrospective questions with respondents aged 25 to 30, who come from villages and small towns of the Podlaskie Voivodeship. The study revealed two key phenomena: a significant weakening of religiosity in the majority of respondents at a young age and the use of camouflage strategies as a response to social expectations in their hometowns. It reveals the complex dynamics of changes in religious attitudes that begin as early as the middle school period (around age 14) and not, as one might assume, during the university period. The respondents use a camouflage strategy when returning to their home environment in order to avoid conflicts arising from differences in the worldview and from stigmatisation. The study reveals the complexity of adaptation strategies, particularly highlighting the conflict between individual beliefs and social expectations in the hometowns.

Keywords secularisation, religion, camouflage strategy, Podlasie

Abstrakt Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie analizy procesów sekularyzacyjnych wśród osób młodych z wyższym wykształceniem zamieszkujących województwo podlaskie. Przedstawiamy również stosowane przez nich strategie adaptacyjne stosowane w trakcie powrotów do rodzinnych miejscowości. Badanie, na którym opiera się analiza, przeprowadzone zostało metodą wywiadów indywidualnych częściowo ustrukturyzowanych zawierających pytania retrospektywne z respondentami w wieku od 25 do 30 lat, którzy pochodzą ze wsi oraz małych miast województwa podlaskiego. Badanie ukazało dwa

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kluczowe zjawiska: znaczne osłabienie religijności u większości respondentów w młodym wieku oraz stosowanie strategii kamuflażu jako odpowiedzi na oczekiwania społeczne w rodzinnych miejscowościach. Ukazuje ono złożoną dynamikę zmian postaw religijnych, które zaczynają się już w okresie gimnazjum (około 14 roku życia), a nie zaś jak można by przypuszczać w okresie studiów. Respondenci stosują strategię kamuflażu podczas powrotów do środowiska rodzimego w celu uniknięcia konfliktów wynikających z różnic światopoglądowych oraz stygmatyzacji. Badanie ujawnia złożoność strategii adaptacyjnych, szczególnie zwracając uwagę na konflikt pomiędzy indywidualnymi przekonaniami a społecznymi oczekiwaniami w rodzinnych miejscowościach.

Słowa kluczowe sekularyzacja, religia, strategia kamuflażu, Podlasie

Introduction

The processes of secularisation, defined as the weakening of the influence of religion on the lives of individuals and societies, is currently an important area of sociological research, especially in the context of dynamic cultural and social changes. Poland, a country with historically strong national and religious ties, has experienced significant changes in the level of religiosity in recent decades, especially in younger generations. At the same time, regions such as Podlasie, characterised by specific cultural and religious conditions, indicate the existence of local factors that modify general secularisation trends. In the context of Podlasie, multi-denominationalism and maintaining strong social ties play a particularly important role, which favors the durability of traditional forms of religiosity, but also faces young people with complex adaptation challenges.

The aim of this study is to determine how young, educated residents of the Podlaskie Voivodeship interpret and reconstruct their religious attitudes in different periods of life: adolescence, during studies and currently. Particular emphasis was placed on the adaptive strategies used by the respondents in contacts with local communities, especially in the context of the pressure of religious and social norms. Key research questions concerned, among others, critical moments in the process of changing religiosity, the influence of external socio-cultural factors on these changes and the mechanisms of negotiating religious identity in conditions of social tensions. The study was based on qualitative methodology, using individual interviews containing retrospective questions. The subsequent parts of the article aim to discuss the research results in detail. The first part presents the theoretical framework of the study, with particular emphasis on the specificity of secularisation processes in Poland and the socio-cultural context of the Podlaskie. The second part presents the methodological assumptions, including research techniques and characteristics

of the research sample. The third part focuses on a detailed analysis of the results, including the identification of the main factors influencing changes in the religiosity of the respondents and the adaptation strategies they used.

Secularisation processes in Poland and the cultural specificity of Podlasie

The transformation of religiosity in the Polish society and the processes of secularisation have long been the subject of interest of researchers who analyse their genesis and dynamics in the historical, social and cultural context. The key hypothesis explaining these phenomena is the historical connection of national and religious elements within the Polish national identity. Sociologists such as Molteni² or Grabowska³ emphasise the role of folk Catholicism as an important component of this identity, which is based on collective religious practices and identification with a religious community. It is worth noting that folk Catholicism is not a phenomenon unique to Poland, but a universal form of institutionalisation of religious beliefs, characterised by a high level of ritualisation, communal conformism and low religious reflexivity. As Borowik⁴ notes, religion in this form is transmitted mainly through family socialisation.

In the Polish context, these changes gained significance during the period of political transformation, when individualistic forms of religiosity based on private spiritual practices began to emerge. However, it is difficult to clearly determine whether this phenomenon resulted from the processes of modernisation, globalisation or the development of the information society. According to many researchers, the high level of religiosity that persisted during the Polish People's Republic had a pro-social character, mainly due to the perception of the Catholic Church as an antithesis to the socialist state. As indicated by Sommer⁵, Eberts⁶ and Borowik⁷, the position of the Church was strengthened at that time by the integration of national and religious values as well as by the ties with the Solidarity movement. With the end of the Polish People's Republic and the beginning of political transformation, the first signs of a decline in religiosity appeared. The aforementioned change can be explained by an increased sense of existential security, the development of civil society and the pluralisation of ideological offers. However, the memory of the oppositional role of the Church

² Molteni 2017.

³ Grabowska 2018.

⁴ Borowik 2008.

⁵ Sommer 1996.

⁶ Eberts 1998.

⁷ Borowik 2016,

and the integration of national and religious values maintained a high level of religious practices for some time. Requena and Stanek⁸ indicate that the economic crisis of the transformation additionally strengthened these tendencies. However, at the end of the 1990s, criticism of the Church's political activity began to grow, which coincided with a noticeable decline in religious practices⁹. After Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, the moral attractiveness and pro-social role of the Church was further weakened, which researchers attribute to the democratic social context.

Secularisation processes in Poland do not differ from the patterns observed in other European countries. As Berger¹⁰ emphasises, modernisation leads to a weakening of the influence of religious institutions. Chaves¹¹ and Norris and Inglehart¹² draw attention to the importance of the growth of ideological pluralism and the development of the information society, which in Poland has additionally accelerated due to the popularisation of mobile technologies in younger generations¹³¹⁴. Stoltz¹⁵ emphasises that modernisation promotes an increased sense of economic security, a higher level of education, and greater competitiveness of secular ideologies in comparison to religion. In such conditions, new generations are increasingly less likely to inherit religious attitudes, even if they are raised in religious families. Younger generations in Poland, especially "generation Z" (born after 1997), are characterized by the strongest decline in religiosity. As Grabowska¹⁶ notes, this process includes both irregular religious practices and their complete abandonment. CBOS¹⁷ notes that since 1992, the percentage of believers has fallen from 94% to 87.4%, while the number of non-believers has increased to 12.5%. On the other hand, Pew Research Center¹⁸ indicate that Poland has the largest intergenerational gap in terms of religiosity in the world, especially among young people. The decline is present in both participation in religious services and daily prayer. Voas¹⁹ indicates that secularisation processes in all the analysed countries occur in three phases: a decline in the number of religious people, an increase in diffuse

⁸ Requena, Stanek 2013.

⁹ Marody et al. 2019.

¹⁰ Berger 1967.

¹¹ Chaves 1994.

¹² Norris, Inglehart 2011.

¹³ CBOS 2021.

¹⁴ CBOS 2024.

¹⁵ Stoltz 2020.

¹⁶ Grabowska 2018.

¹⁷ CBOS 2021.

¹⁸ Pew Research Center 2018.

¹⁹ Voas 2009.

faith, and then an increase in the number of secular people. Data from the European Social Survey show that in every European country, except Israel, each subsequent generation is less religious than the previous one. As a result, it can be stated that the observed changes in Poland are of a cohort nature²⁰. Studies indicate that significant shifts in the level of religiosity are observed after the age of 25²¹, with the differences being particularly visible in case of younger generations. The decline in the involvement in religious practices and identification with the Church, while increasing individualised spirituality, is consistent with broader European patterns. According to the analyses of Voas²², secularisation in Poland is subject to the same processes as in other societies, and specific historical determinants do not change the general pattern of the changes in religiosity.

The specificity of Podlasie, as a region with a unique cultural and religious character, significantly influences the dynamics of secularisation processes, making them more complex. A key role here is played by religious diversity, including both Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose communities maintain strong ties with local religious and cultural traditions. The multi-denominational and multicultural nature of Podlasie²³²⁴ promotes the maintenance of the ritual dimension of religiosity, which often combines religious practices with regional and national identity. It is also worth emphasising the role of family traditions and rural communities, which play a particularly important role in the transmission of religious patterns of life. In Podlasie, religiosity is closely linked to the sense of belonging to the local community, where religious rituals are not only spiritual but also social in nature. An additional factor hindering secularisation processes is the lower urbanisation of the region compared to other parts of Poland. In 2023, the urbanisation index in the Podlaskie Province was 0.1 percentage points lower than a year ago. This urbanisation index value placed the Podlaskie Province in 8th place in the country, where the share of the population living in cities was only 59.5%²⁵. As studies show, religious life in rural and small-town communities is characterised by greater stability, and social norms have a stronger impact on individuals²⁶. In the Podlaskie, religiosity still plays an integrative and symbolic role, which makes it resistant to democratisation influences or the individualisation of values.

²⁰ Voas, Chaves 2016.

²¹ Puga – Gonzalez et al. 2022.

²² Voas 2009.

²³ Sadowski 2020.

²⁴ Sadanowicz 2018.

²⁵ GUS 2023.

²⁶ CBOS 2014.

The use of young people's camouflage strategy towards religiosity in local communities of Podlasie and secularisation processes

Secularisation processes in Poland, although consistent with general European trends, encounter specific barriers in the Podlasie resulting from regional religious culture and strong social ties. In rural and small-town communities of this region, religiosity remains a key element of the social life, and belonging to a religious community is strongly associated with local identity. Renz states that the traditional folk religiosity²⁷ in these environments was characterised primarily by emotional attachment to the faith of the ancestors, but without sufficient knowledge of its basic truths and observing them in everyday life²⁸. An important feature of this religiosity is also its ritualism and ostentatious zeal for participation in collective religious rituals, while at the same time lacking knowledge of the dogmas of faith and traditionalism of attitudes and reluctance to change²⁹. Young people raised in such environments are subjected to social pressure that encourages conformism to religious norms, even if their individual beliefs dynamically evolve towards secularisation. Therefore, being raised in such an environment does not encourage the public manifestation of attitudes aimed at criticising or rejecting religious beliefs. However, this dynamic becomes particularly visible in the case of young people who move to larger cities, such as Białystok, in search of education or work.

In *The Secular City*, Harvey Cox argues that the modern globalised world has been shaped above all by two interrelated processes: urbanisation and secularisation. The expansive growth of contemporary urban centres has not only reshaped the ways in which individuals form social bonds and construct personal strategies, but has also, more fundamentally, marginalised religious worldviews

²⁷ It is important to describe the contemporary controversies surrounding the concept of folk religiosity. Both Michał Łuczewski and Izabella Bukraba-Rylska are critical of the way in which folk religiosity is presented in contemporary scholarly discourse and in journalism. Michał Łuczewski points out that the term folk religiosity is often used by social and scientific elites in Poland to describe the religiosity of simple people from rural areas. As a result, this leads to a significant objectification, negative valorisation and simplification of the description of rural religiosity. According to the author, rural religiosity is not a collection of exotic rituals or superstitions, but a deeply rooted way of life in which faith permeates the everyday activities of rural inhabitants. Izabella Bukraba-Rylska takes a similar view, pointing out that folk religiosity is often presented in scholarly descriptions in terms of sensualism, ritualism, particularism and religious nationalism. The author criticises this untrue and superficial image of rural religiosity that has been perpetuated in the minds of many scholars. Łuczewski 2008, Bukraba – Rylska 2008.

²⁸ Renz 2022.

²⁹ Bukraba – Rylska 2008.

that once structured human understanding of reality³⁰. The cosmopolitan and ideologically plural character of the modern city has exposed the contingency and relativity of religious traditions, increasingly relegating faith to the realm of individual choice rather than positioning it as the principal foundation of social cohesion. Cox repeatedly highlights, drawing upon empirical examples, that secularisation does not so much confront religion directly as displace it – gradually shifting it from the public domain into the sphere of private conviction. Secular ideologies, particularly those embedded in urban life, do not actively oppose religious belief; rather, they bypass it, reducing its social function to that of a cultural marker, an ethnic identifier, or, at most, an aesthetic pastime. Even the contemporary resurgence of religious movements or protests does not signify a reversal of the secularisation process, but rather reflects an adaptation to its underlying logic. As a result, the inhabitants of modern cities have ceased to perceive the world around them as shaped by divine plans, and instead have come to regard it almost exclusively as a field for their own individual and collective action. However, this does not imply the disappearance of religion altogether. Religions have always been and remain hybrid constructs, shaped by mutual influences and ongoing adaptation to a changing reality³¹.

Studies on secularisation processes indicate that urbanisation and contact with a more ideologically diverse environment encourage the individualisation of values and an overt weakening of religious identification³². Although religion still continues to provide moral ethics, existential security, and meaning in life, the modernisation processes enable the satisfaction of these needs through secular and rational values. The processes of cultural change in highly developed countries suggest that Western modernisation is rooted in the cultural evolution of individualism, capitalism, and democracy³³. After the establishment of these institutions, modernisation promotes secularisation as a result of the development of the generalised social trust, tolerance, civil society, and well-functioning public institutions³⁴. As a result, religion is increasingly chosen rather than ascribed. According to recent studies, people are more often choosing their own form of religiosity or lack thereof³⁵. On the other hand, some people still commit themselves to the religion they inherited from their parents, even if they do not practice it. Others do not attach themselves to any institutionalised religion and declare atheistic attitudes, but still exhibit behaviors focused on

³⁰ Cox 2013.

³¹ Cox 2013.

³² Mouzelis 2012.

³³ Kusano, Jami 2022.

³⁴ Schultz et al. 2019.

³⁵ Davie et al. 2017.

celebrating holidays or spiritual practices. Trzebiatowska points out that in the new environment, young people are more willing to criticise religion, introducing various forms of “rejection identity”^{36,37}. This identity is revealed not only by a gradual disillusionment regarding religion in everyday life, but is also shaped by earlier experiences of hypocrisy or religious immorality observed in one’s local communities of origin³⁸. Non-religious people also use the strategy of demoralising their previously held religious beliefs in order to moralise their own nonreligious moral principles, treated as more logical and coherent³⁹.

However, returning to their hometowns often forces young people to conformistally adapt⁴⁰ to local religious norms. This is related to the process of intensive internalisation of religious norms during adolescence, which the discussed individuals experienced. Internalisation is usually caused by the need to gain an accurate assessment of reality in a situation when an individual does not have enough information or is uncertain about the accuracy of the knowledge they possess. In such a situation, people’s conformist actions will be motivated by the phenomenon of informational social influence⁴¹. This causes individuals to feel uncertain and anxious about the fear of undertaking inadequate behavior in a given social environment. On the other hand, a situation when an individual conformistally adapts despite the lack of internal conviction about the validity of the norms functioning in the community is associated with a motive referred to as normative social influence⁴². It consists in the individual striving to obtain social approval and not experiencing negative stigmatisation in a given community⁴³. Conformism in the analysed cases will mainly be based on adaptation in the sense of normative social influence, because non-religious or atheistic people, as part of their identity, strongly negate the validity of recognising religious norms. This generates a specific way of conformist behavior in situations when the aforementioned people periodically function in rural and small-town local communities, e.g. during holidays or a short vacation. In such situations, the conformism of the respondents is not their permanent disposition, but is adapted to the situation. Individuals who experience the impact of social influence only in the presence of representatives of a given community due to a strong fear of negative sanctions may interchangeably use the strategies of conformism

³⁶ Trzebiatowska 2021.

³⁷ Smith 2011.

³⁸ Zuckerman 2015.

³⁹ Sumerau, Cragun 2016.

⁴⁰ Paszkiewicz 1972.

⁴¹ Deutsch, Gerard 1955.

⁴² Deutsch, Gerard 1955.

⁴³ Bocchario, Zamperini 2012.

and regaining independence at the moment of spatial separation from it⁴⁴. Such diverse conformism strategies indicate their universality, related to the cultural evolutionary adaptation of frequently moving individuals and groups in order to effectively maintain specific social norms and generate prosocial behaviors⁴⁵.

Non-religious or atheistic people, in order to avoid negative sanctions, use so-called camouflage strategies during their stay in rural and small-town communities. In the analysed cases, the reduced religiosity or atheism are often hidden from the residents of a small local community, which in this context becomes a way to avoid social tensions and exclusion. In this article, we use the concept of camouflage in a different approach to that used in criminology⁴⁶ or medicine^{47,48}. We are interested in the phenomenon of using the social camouflage as a strategy both similar and distinct from animal camouflage. Here, we use a more functionalist approach based on the rationality of using the camouflage strategy as a natural phenomenon resulting from the adaptation of specific individuals to diverse contexts of social reality⁴⁹. This phenomenon is sustained as a result of the integrative nature of religion in Podlasie, where participation in religious rituals is perceived not only as an expression of faith, but also as a social obligation. Strong connection of religiosity with local traditions and identity promotes the stability of religious patterns of life, even in conditions of progressive secularisation, generating specific attitudes based on situational conformism. This specificity of Podlasie illustrates how local cultural factors can weaken the impact of global secularisation processes. While in large cities, Poland fits into the general European pattern of increasing dilution of religious beliefs and growth of atheism, in rural areas and small towns, especially in regions such as Podlasie, strong community norms effectively inhibit complete ideological changes, forcing individuals to undergo complex social adaptation.

The methodology adopted in the study

The aim of the study was to analyse the changes in religiosity among young, educated people from rural areas and small towns of the Podlaskie Voivodeship. Within the framework of the adopted theoretical assumptions, formulated within the framework of the international research grant entitled "Religion, Ideology

⁴⁴ Bocchiaro, Zamperini 2012.

⁴⁵ Mesoudi, 2011.

⁴⁶ Fesmire, Wright 2019.

⁴⁷ Williams 2021.

⁴⁸ Cook et al. 2022.

⁴⁹ Brighenti, Castelli 2016.

& Prosociality: Simulating Secularizing Societies”, headed by prof. Konrad Talmont-Kamiński, three key factors influencing the respondents’ declarations were taken into account. Firstly, the retrospective narratives of the respondents were analysed, comparing their religiosity in three periods of life: at the age of about 14, during their studies and at present. Secondly, the context of the study was set in the specific culture and history of Podlasie, characterised by the strong influence of both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church⁵⁰. Thirdly, the intensity of secularisation processes taking place in the Polish society was taken into account⁵¹.

The movement of young people between different environments is associated with the need to adapt to different cultural patterns and social expectations that differ between small family communities and large cities. The study aimed to understand how young, educated residents of the Podlaskie Voivodeship define their approach to religion both in the past and today, while functioning in diverse social environments. Another important aspect was the analysis of the strategies used by the respondents during visits to the family communities in which they grew up, with particular emphasis on the mechanisms of negotiating religious attitudes in the face of cultural pressure from local communities. In this context, the use of the camouflage strategy, consisting in adapting behaviors in order to avoid tensions resulting from local norms, and the dynamics of changes in declared religious attitudes and practices, were examined.

The main research hypothesis assumed that the majority of the respondents would declare a significant decrease in religiosity. The specific hypotheses predicted that the level of religiosity would begin to decrease around the age of 14, and not at the age of studying. It was also assumed that in order to avoid conflicts during visits to family and local environments, the respondents would use camouflage strategies, masking their real views on religion.

The basis of our research was the qualitative methodology⁵² and partly the interpretative paradigm⁵³. It was stated that this approach allows for the most comprehensive approach to the specificity of the processes and phenomena that are the subject of the research. The research technique was individual, semi-structured qualitative interviews⁵⁴ containing retrospective questions. This format allowed for the implementation of a conversation scenario with the possibility of deepening themes that spontaneously emerged during the interview. The interviews lasted from 45 to 120 minutes and took place in the

⁵⁰ Weber 2014; Barwiński 2014.

⁵¹ CBOS 2024.

⁵² Kvale 2013.

⁵³ Czyżewski 2013.

⁵⁴ Smith 1995.

participants' homes or in the rooms of the Faculty of Sociology of the University of Białystok. The participants of the study were informed about the anonymity, voluntary participation and the possibility of withdrawing at any stage of the study. The study was conducted using the purposive sampling method. The population consisted of 20 people aged 25–30, currently living in Białystok, coming from villages and small towns in the Podlaskie province and of higher education. The sample was divided into two equal groups, based on the dominant religions in the region⁵⁵, therefore individuals coming from Catholic and Orthodox families were chosen. The participants were 14 women and 6 men, most of whom (13 people) came from small towns, while the rest (7 people) came from rural areas.

The interview script included 10 thematic blocks, focusing on, among others, the analysis of the participants' religiosity at different stages of life, their attitudes towards the institution of the Catholic Church, moral principles, spiritual needs and adaptation strategies in the family environment. Of particular importance was the comparison of the current level of religiosity with that declared by the respondents at the age of 14 and during their studies in Białystok. The actions undertaken by the participants in situations when their current religious views differed from those dominant in their family communities, were also examined, as they often led to tensions or the need to hide the participants' beliefs. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed in accordance with the principles of personal data protection. The material was analysed using the deductive and inductive coding methods⁵⁶. Deductive coding was based on theoretical assumptions, while inductive coding allowed for the identification of new themes resulting directly from the data. This combination made it possible to both verify the research hypotheses and discover new aspects related to the changes in the religiosity of young inhabitants of the Podlaskie Voivodeship.

Research results

A detailed analysis of the obtained research material allowed for the formulation of several regularities related to changes in the religiosity of the surveyed individuals. In accordance with the adopted research assumptions, the majority of the surveyed participants, apart from three people, declared that their current level of religiosity was significantly lower than during their adolescence in local

⁵⁵ Bienkowska 2019.

⁵⁶ Fereday, Muir-Cochrane 2006.

communities. In the surveyed population, 9 people stated that they identified with atheism, and 8 indicated a varied level of identification with the Catholic or Orthodox religion, but not taking into account participation in services (religious, but not practicing). Every person from the surveyed group emphasised that the turning point in their lives was the period of junior high school. As a rule, religiosity at that time was associated by the respondents with social control and participation in collective services in their town based on coercion:

Well, now it's zero. I'm not religious at all. When I was 14, I still had some faith. Then there was confirmation, the preparatory process, and then there were still some remnants of religiosity in me. (A1,M,At)

I think maybe a little bit, because I'm an adult so no one is pressuring me, but it's been going on for a long time for me, because I stopped going to religion classes at the end of middle school and I thought that I didn't need it, quite the opposite. (A11,F,At)

From the respondents' statements, it can be concluded that the decline in religiosity occurred in two forms. In the first case, as a gradual, processual decline in religiosity based on the respondents' increased criticism of the Catholic or Orthodox religion. In the second approach, a specific starting point was an important element, described in the respondents' experiences as a sudden event associated with experiencing strong negative emotions.

My view of the world has changed. I started to verify what I hear, to look at what is good for a person, and not at what someone made up. (A20,F,At)

Extremely different. At that time I was a very religious person, and the culminating point was an illness in a close family, and then my brain and my consciousness started to connect the dots and something stopped adding up. It was a breakthrough period, when I slowly started to move away from faith, and by high school I was already an atheist. But I couldn't withdraw from religion for a long time, because my parents didn't want me to. (A19,M,At)

It changed because I attended the church choir until I was 12–13, but after a certain incident it changed. I stopped having much to do with the church at all. (A7,F,Rn)

The interviews conducted suggest that there are specific factors that significantly influenced the decline in religiosity of the respondents during their adolescence in local communities. Among the most frequent narratives of the respondents, the rebellion against mandatory “empty” collective religious rituals, the lack of logic of religion itself, the increase in criticism of the activities of the Catholic Church and, less frequently, the Orthodox Church, access to content on social media, were the main variables weakening the religiosity of the respondents.

That I don't want to go there, to be a part of it. When I was 14, my parents went to church when I was sleeping and then they told me to go there, and I didn't go there, I just did other things. (A4,M,At)

It changed quite a lot, because I don't remember if it was at that time and how old I was, but I had a period in my life when I went to church every day. I don't remember it badly, because in some way it made me happy and gave me inner peace, but it changed, I started reading and what was happening with the clergy in general. Orthodoxy itself didn't influence it, but it is connected with what is happening in the Catholic Church. (A12,F,Rn)

Definitely the environment. As I said, I started reading. YouTube and videos contributed a lot to this, what things are mutually exclusive in religion, what practices are considered ok by priests, but it's not even in the Bible. The convergence of different religions, how much they intertwine. (A1,M,At)

The feeling that the Catholic or Orthodox religion has no significance in their lives turned out to be obvious for the majority of the study participants during their studies in Białystok. The respondents' release from the pressure to participate in religious collective rituals strengthened their previously formed attitudes of partial or complete rejection of religious beliefs. Despite the reported tensions (mainly related to the temporary stay at home), the transformation of private views rejecting religion into overt attitudes of non-religion or atheism was treated by the respondents as an unquestionable result of functioning in a pluralistic, tolerant and open social environment. In the collected material, a recurring theme in the respondents' statements is the topic of the deep meaning of their attitudes rejecting religion as an expression of adopting a modern, metropolitan lifestyle.

Just studies. No time for social life and the fact that I had to study a lot. The second thing is that a person who spends time with other people who are less religious has an indirect effect on a person and they wanted to blend in with the company. (A2,F,Rn)

It hasn't changed. My mother used to tell me that it would be nice to go to church. And that's it. (A5,F,At)

The deepening of the critical thinking of the respondents towards religious beliefs during the study period, expressing religion in the language of indifference or negative emotions, mainly in the case of assessing the political activities of the Catholic Church in Poland, is an expression of the respondents' satisfaction with the previously made turn and is associated, for a significant number of them, with a sense of liberation from the religious norms internalised during the period of socialisation.

What are the reasons for this? Mainly the political situation, but it is also related to my mother, because the more she practices, the more it repels me. I don't do it out of spite, it's just that what she tells me are such fairy tales, I can't believe in something like that. It simply irritates me (A12, F, Rn)

I became more aware. As a child I was never a believer. It was always forced by a sense of duty, fear. And at university I stopped being afraid of it and started saying that I was an agnostic, and later that I was an atheist. (A16,F,At)

In the material presented above, the Catholic or Orthodox religion is primarily associated by the respondents with the category of control by significant others (parents, teachers, priests) during their adolescence in small communities. Local communities were an important socialisation context for our respondents, being a source of patterns related to religion and morality. A significant discrepancy between "empty" collective religious rituals and the morality actually practiced in local communities gradually created in the respondents a sense of rebellion against these messages and constant social control. However, atheistic attitudes strengthened during the studies or based on the lack of practicing collective religious rituals, according to the respondents' narratives, are subject to constant pressure in situations of contacts with close family. During holidays, visits to the family home or during family celebrations of events such as weddings or christenings, the respondents declare that their attitudes are often met with a lack of acceptance and are a source of conflict. Considering that in the interviews there is a sense of misunderstanding of the respondents' relatives in relation to their declared atheism/lack of religious practices, the world of the local community becomes a space forcing them to adopt various camouflaging strategies. Based on the interviews, it can be seen that it is the socialisation in local communities to "empty" religious rituals and the high level of social control that caused our respondents to self-censor their real beliefs about religion during their visits to their family home. The strategy that was used the most frequently, which is visible in the statements of the study participants, is to limit the disclosure of their true attitudes towards religion only to the closest people, while at the same time demonstrating to other residents of the local community and extended family their participation in collective religious practices and the celebration of holidays.

And when there are celebrations, do you go to them? I go. I just stood there and that's it. And for example, when it's hot, I go out. (A4,M,At)

I don't associate holidays with religion. For me, it's a stage where I come to my mother and that's it. There's some prayer, but I don't feel like I need it (A5,F,At)

Was there a conflict between you and your family in the area of faith? Yes, I mean your parents asked why I stopped going to church. When I'm alone I don't go, but for peace I go sometimes. But also rarely. (A6,M,At)

Data analysis revealed two key phenomena: firstly, a significant weakening of religiosity in most of the respondents, which began in middle school and deepened during their studies, and secondly, the use of camouflage strategies as a response to social expectations in their hometowns. The results indicate that secularisation processes in the analysed group fit not only into nationwide, but also into European patterns, while revealing specific conditions related to the local context of Podlasie.

Discussion of the research results

The study conducted among young, educated residents of the Podlaskie Voivodeship shows the complexity of secularisation processes in the specific cultural and religious context of this region⁵⁷, which cannot be identified with the simple impact of modernisation processes. In the context of this research, it is important to take into account alternative concepts of secularisation, which emphasise cultural differences and historical circumstances influencing the specific course of secularisation processes in specific societies, despite the existing compliance with global trends⁵⁸. Our results indicate that although the general trends of declining religiosity are consistent with nationwide⁵⁹ and European patterns⁶⁰, local conditions, such as strong social ties and the integrative role of religiosity, significantly affect the dynamics of these processes. Basically, the analysis of the research results showed a significant weakening of the level of religiosity among the respondents, which began in adolescence and intensified during the period of studies. This phenomenon has been associated with a critical reevaluation of religious dogmas and practices in light of individual experiences and exposure to a more pluralistic social environment. Numerous studies indicate that atheists are more likely to perceive morality and meaning in life as self-constructed, which may lead to a greater diversity of their worldview based on earlier life experiences⁶¹, including those of a religious nature. Coleman et al. indicate that, according to research, some atheists appreciate and participate in ritual

⁵⁷ Bienkowska 2019.

⁵⁸ Flatt 2023.

⁵⁹ CBOS 2024.

⁶⁰ Bruce, Voas 2023.

⁶¹ Speed et al. 2018.

activities and enjoy the community of their fellow non-believers. Some non-religious people are particularly critical of religion, and sometimes even of their own non-belief, while at times their views will be embedded in a religiously positive context⁶². The research conclusions indicate the need for a detailed sociological and psychological analysis of the adaptation strategies that are actually implemented by non-religious people, beyond the dichotomy of religiosity and non-religiosity⁶³. This is particularly important in Poland, where the majority of people declaring atheistic attitudes have converted from religious beliefs, which were an important element of their primary socialisation⁶⁴.

It is significant that our respondents identified the approximate age of 14 as a turning point, when their religious commitment began to wane. Migration to cities and the associated increase in worldview pluralism were therefore not the starting point for the decline in the respondents' religiosity. Factors influencing the change in the respondents' religious attitudes during their secondary school years included an increase in critical awareness of religious institutions, negative emotions related to the forced participation in "empty" collective religious rituals, and the influence of content available on social media. Our respondents also emphasised the growing importance of replacing "blind" religious faith with rational and logical thinking, shaped during the respondents' adolescence mainly through content and knowledge obtained from the Internet. Many studies have shown that analytical thinking is negatively associated with religious faith, as well as with belief in various other supernatural phenomena^{65,66}. Our respondents, who did not feel the importance of religious rituals as significant determinants of prosocial behavior in their local community, began to reject intuitive thinking focused on beliefs⁶⁷ in favor of individual efforts related to scientific thinking. Many people also indicated individual critical events, such as experiences of negative emotions or the perception of inconsistency between religious teachings and reality. As a consequence, the respondents gradually distanced themselves from formal religious practices, and many of them eventually declared atheism or lack of involvement in collective forms of religiosity. However, these were not declarations openly disseminated in local communities, but rather represented internal moral conflicts of the respondents. In this approach, the respondents often represented the attitudes of so-called practical (implicit) atheism. This is an attitude that can be observed in a situation when

⁶² Coleman et al. 2018.

⁶³ Taves et al. 2018.

⁶⁴ Tyrała 2014.

⁶⁵ Norenzayan, Gervais 2013.

⁶⁶ Pennycook et al. 2012.

⁶⁷ Atran, Norenzayan 2004.

individuals publicly admit to religious faith, but it is completely absent in their daily lives⁶⁸. During the studies, in the conditions of less social control and greater freedom of worldview, these processes intensified. Freedom from the pressure to participate in religious practices facilitated deeper critical thinking towards religion and the formation of more individualistic worldviews⁶⁹. Many respondents emphasised that their current beliefs reflect a sense of liberation from religious norms and are consistent with their vision of a modern lifestyle.

Despite the significant decrease in religiosity, our respondents' contacts with families in small towns and villages in the Podlaskie Voivodeship revealed the complexity of worldview adaptations. Strong normative pressure from the community, in which religiosity is a central element of social life, forced the respondents to use the social strategy of camouflage⁷⁰. The use of social camouflage entails the use of specific adaptive games by individuals in a staging aimed at false social involvement. Goffman's theory contains a number of descriptions of social impression management strategies used by people. The use of these interactive games is aimed at creating a specific action among the recipients, an impression of using acceptable behavior, which is described as obtaining the so-called "dramaturgic loyalty"⁷¹. The experience of using camouflage is linked to the concept of imitation, which is one of the basic elements of the process of cultural learning in people⁷². Imitation is defined as changing the behavior of individuals by copying the behavior of others. Conscious and unconscious decisions made by individuals are influenced by contacts with others, observations of the behavior of others, the attractiveness of the possibility of obtaining specific benefits, the desire to avoid negative sanctions, and the distribution of types of behavior in the population, which is related to the probability of meeting people behaving in the same or different way⁷³. In the case of our respondents, these strategies included participating in religious rituals only in the presence of the local community, avoiding open expression of criticism of religion, and maintaining neutrality in situations that could cause tension. The respondents emphasised that such adaptive behaviors resulted not from their internal beliefs, but from the need to avoid conflict and social exclusion. Camouflage, defined in the study as hiding the real attitude to religion, was a key adaptive mechanism in the face of pressure from local communities. It was mainly motivated by normative influence (the need for social acceptance) and

⁶⁸ Lotz 1992.

⁶⁹ Smith 2011.

⁷⁰ Brighenti, Castelli 2016.

⁷¹ Goffman 1956.

⁷² Tomasello, Kruger, Ratner 1993.

⁷³ Poleszczuk 2004.

partly by informational influence (the need to avoid mistakes in uncertain social situations). The respondents pointed to the situational nature of these strategies, which were mainly used during visits to their hometowns and included periodic adjustments to community expectations, for example by participating in holiday services or religious celebrations. Outside this context, in the metropolitan environment, respondents openly declared their non-religious beliefs.

Summary

The study confirmed that religiosity in the Podlaskie is strongly connected with regional and social identity. Rural and small-town communities, in which ritual religiosity plays an integrative role, forced individuals to make difficult choices between personal beliefs and social expectations. In situations of tension between these two dimensions, the respondents used a variety of negotiation strategies, which indicate their ability to adapt to complex social conditions. The results of the study show that secularisation processes in the Podlaskie Voivodeship is complex, combining general European patterns with local modifying factors. The weakening of religiosity among young residents of this region does not mean a complete disappearance of the influence of religion, but rather indicates its transformation and adjustment to individual needs. The camouflage strategies used by the respondents emphasise their ability to adapt in a changing socio-cultural context, while also showing how local specificity can inhibit the full implementation of secularisation trends. The study provides important conclusions for further analyses of religiosity processes in diverse environments, emphasising the importance of both global and local conditions in shaping worldview attitudes.

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