

# Religious Grammar of the Welfare State in Poland

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**Abstract:** Religion is one of the factors that determine what welfare state model is chosen by a country. Poland is interesting in this respect because it has a fairly religiously homogenous society that looked for solutions to reconcile free market economy and social security after 1989. This country, where 95% of people are Catholics, opted for a non-obvious economic model that was far removed from Catholic social teaching. However, the Catholic Church continues to play an important role. The goal of this article is to describe the religious grammar of the welfare state in Poland. We analyse three issues that are crucial here: (1) the disagreement between the impact of primary ideologies (Pole–Catholic’s narrative) and secondary ideologies (contemporary socioeconomic trends); (2) the social functioning of the Catholic Church in relation to growing secularisation in Poland (muted vibrancy); (3) the role of the Church in the achievement of goals supporting social security in Poland.

**Keywords:** welfare state; religion and politics; religiosity of Polish society; political transformation

## 1. Introduction

Poland’s geography influences its historical, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic characteristics (Stobiecki 2020; Znamierowska-Rakk 2010). The Catholic religion has played an important role in the country’s history. It has shaped Polish national identity and contributed to the development of the Pole–Catholic’s (Polak–Katolik) cultural narrative (Grabowska 1999; Porter-Szűcs 2017). Poles and other countries of central eastern Europe, which in the past used to be under the influence of Russia or other continental powers, especially Germany, achieved independence after 1989. They chose their development directions and socioeconomic models. The transition from centrally planned to free market economy was accompanied by severe political, economic, and social crises. Initially, Polish society was convinced it could replicate the successes of such welfare states as Germany, where the free market economy had been introduced in the preceding decades. Welfare state doctrines were consistently being applied there (Offe 2000). However, it quickly became apparent that such replication was not possible. The situation in Poland was radically different from that in the post-war Germany. Moreover, individual models of the welfare state started to come under increasing criticism worldwide, and attempts were made to redefine them (Balcerowicz and Radzikowski 2018). Such debates had taken place in various countries from 1970s/1980s. There was a clash between two views: social, which advocated that the considerable achievements of the welfare state be maintained, and economic, which emphasised the need to reduce expenditure (Palier 2010).

The goal behind this article is to demonstrate the relationships between the social importance of Catholicism in Poland and the development of the welfare state after 1989. The theoretical basis for identifying and explaining these relationships will be the theory of primary and secondary ideologies, and muted vibrancy. These issues will be addressed on three grounds: (1) the disagreement between the importance of primary ideologies (Pole–Catholic’s narrative) and secondary ideologies (contemporary socioeconomic trends); (2) the social functioning of the Church in relation to growing secularisation in Poland



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(muted vibrancy); (3) the role of the Church in the achievement of goals supporting social security in Poland (Nassalska 2011).

## 2. Catholicism in Poland and Welfare State

### 2.1. Role of the Catholic Church in Poland

Today, Polish society is fairly homogenous when it comes to religion, and, in 2018 approx., 95% were Catholics (Sadłoń and Organek 2020). Despite growing secularisation, Poland continues to be among the most religious countries in Europe. According to a 2020 study, 91% of Poles identify as believers, of which 8% are devout believers. The proportion of people regularly attending masses, religious services, and meetings continues to be rather high. According to a CBOS study, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 47% of people practiced regularly (at least once a month), 38% irregularly (at least a few times a year), and 15% identified as non-practicing. These proportions are much lower compared to some past records. In 1997–2007, the proportion of regularly practicing people was as high as 58% (Bożewicz 2020). However, Poles have mixed opinions about religion in the public space. While religion in the public space is widely accepted, and with only 11% of respondents being against displaying crosses in public and 22% being against religion lessons in schools (Grabowska 2022), as much as 62% of respondents believe that the Church should not comment on important laws, and 81% argue that priests should not make any suggestions on how people should vote in elections (Grabowska 2022; Wodka et al. 2022).

While the Catholic Church plays an important role in the public domain, there are significant differences in religiosity, especially among the young generation, and we can observe clear signs of secularisation and a strong polarisation of attitudes towards religiosity. There is a fairly large proportion of believers among Polish students, but it is becoming increasingly common for students to adopt different models of religiosity. In Polish society, religious nonconformity is expressed not only through radical departure from thinking in religious terms, but also through replacing institutional religion with some forms of “new religiosity”. The opposite can be observed in some people who are leaning towards religious conformism and hyper-religiosity (Guzik and Marzęcki 2020). In addition, people who identify themselves as Catholics are remarkably diverse in terms of religion-inspired activity, similarly to e.g., Italy (Garelli 2013).

Considerable variation in the perception of the Church was recorded in the early 1990s (CBOS 1994). Nowadays, the Church as an institution is falling in public esteem. In March 2021, 43% of respondents held the Catholic church in high regard, while 46% had negative opinions about it. Only 5 years earlier (March 2015), 55% had a favourable opinion of this institution, while 32% an unfavourable one (Roguska 2021).

Despite these processes, the importance of Catholicism in Poland is manifested through the cultural and religious narrative of Pole–Catholic (Porter-Szűcs 2017). In simple terms, it considers Catholicism as the primary constituent of Polish national identity. Catholicism has played a prominent role in the history of Polish statehood. Its beginning is associated with the baptism of duke Mieszko (966). The church and its institutions became part of the country’s history through centuries of charitable, educational, and civilisational activities (Sadłoń 2016). This was particularly noticeable over the last two centuries, when the country was partitioned, had no statehood, and experienced WW2 and communist reign (1944–1989) (Domagała 2018). Similarly to Italy, the Church became part of the national landscape (Garelli 2013).

There is no agreement as to when the Pole–Catholic’s narrative developed, but the strength of its influence varied over time. While some scholars argue that it emerged only in the 19th century (Porter-Szűcs 2017), its elements present in, e.g., the Counter Reformation though and activities of the Jesuit order, could be found even earlier. Especially during the partitions, the Pole–Catholic’s narrative and the associated important role of the Catholic Church constituted the foundation of Polish nation’s resistance against foreign powers. During those times, Catholic institutions helped ensure social security across different domains (education, charity, medical services) (Fel 2022; Zając 2019). In more contemporary

terms, the Church was an institution that contributed to the development of human and social capital (Gugin and Pliszka 2009), which is particularly important for identifying the origins of the welfare state in Poland. The impact of Catholicism on public life can be twofold. Firstly, through direct influence of papal and episcopal teaching on the institutions and individuals that clearly identify as Catholic. Secondly, through indirect influence of Catholics on public institutions, elections, etc. (Wood 2016).

An important context behind the development of the Pole–Catholic’s narrative were comparisons with “others” who used a different language and were often Orthodox, Lutheran, or proponents of atheism. The importance of Catholicism as a factor that shaped cultural identity and united Polish efforts was so profound that even non-believing, anti-clerical independence activists took part in church ceremonies and used religious symbols. This can be illustrated by the example of anti-clericalist Edward Dembowski, who died in combat in 1846 as an insurgent with a religious banner in his hand (Woś 2019), as well as a large and influential group of anti-clerical “Solidarity” movement activists in the 1980s, who often took part in church services (Szczecina 2015).

The impact of the Pole–Catholic’s narrative was less powerful during the times of relative stability and prosperity. This was the case during the periods when Poles had their own state. In the times of the Second Polish Republic and after 1989 the Church had more opportunities to play a part in social life. However, sometimes it faced a strong competition from other ideologies. Inspiration from social encyclicals, such as *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), was strong in Poland and contributed to the development of social Catholicism and emergence of Catholic organisations, such as the Catholic League and especially the Catholic Action (Jeżyna 1996), but political parties inspired directly by Catholic teaching were not successful. This was repeated after 1989, when power was held by parties representing different ideologies who implemented liberal economic reforms (Sozańska 2011).

During such times, the Pole–Catholic’s narrative was usually considered as an unreal ideal. This is confirmed by a study by Marta Trzebiatowska among non-religious people, in which a large number of respondents argued that the Pole–Catholic’s narrative was incongruent and could not be applied to the everyday individual and social lives of Poles (Trzebiatowska 2021). Paradoxically, these expectations of non-religious respondents as to the congruence of religious beliefs with everyday life demonstrate, at least to some extent, the persistence of the Pole–Catholic’s narrative. The fact that it existed in the consciousness of non-religious people shows the cultural strength of this idea; it continues to be alive, despite secularisation of society.

## 2.2. Primary and Secondary Ideologies

The Pole–Catholic’s religious and cultural narrative can be perceived as an ideal which was more important in the past; but, as argued by Czech economist T. Sedláček, it can still be considered an important force. Sedláček says that “The exploration of old tales can be useful not only to historians, and they are not only about understanding our ancestors’ way of thinking. They have a certain power, even when they are replaced by new, often conflicting, ones” (Sedláček 2012). This applies especially to religious ideas, as it has been proven that the cultural influence of individual religions is important for the development of various types of welfare state (Gabriel and Reuter 2013; Manow 2018).

One way to explain the impact of religion on the welfare state model can be the theory of primary and secondary ideologies, developed by Bernd Wegener and Stefan Liebig (Liebig and Wegener 1995). They identified two types of ideologies and demonstrated their relationship with the perception of social justice. The term ideology itself can be understood in a number of ways (Kowalska 2018). We understand it as an organised set of beliefs, claims, and views shared by some group, and which is representative of that group.

In this context, primary and secondary ideologies can be categorised by quantity or by quality, which is strongly associated with their origins. According to the former criterion, primary ideologies are ones that are adopted by society as a whole (and in practice a ma-

majority), while secondary ideologies gain recognition among groups existing within society. It is not uncommon for secondary ideologies to be based on vested interests and unique experiences, as they bring members of the group together. According to the qualitative criterion, primary ideologies rely on a general consensus and established norms and are shaped through the long-term effects of specific values. They are rooted in the common history and culture (usually shaped by the dominant religion) and, as a consequence, are the basis for the legitimacy of society. In addition, secondary ideologies are those which are important only for certain groups within a society, even if these groups are quite numerous. What constitutes their basis, however, is not common consensus, but individual choices, orientations, or even interests. It is sometimes the case that, despite contradictions between primary and secondary ideologies, these can co-exist within a society (split-consciousness). In such situations, both are declaratively accepted (Liebig and Wegener 1995). This can be observed against the backdrop of arguments over the distribution of goods within individual societies (Wegener 1992). Economic motivations, in particular, can lead individuals and groups to choose socioeconomic solutions that are more beneficial to their group than for society as a whole.

The Pole–Catholic construct, developed for two centuries, can be treated as a primary ideology, which has been accepted by a vast majority of society. In addition, one of the areas it influences is socioeconomic matters. At this point, it is important to note the specific attitude of the Catholic Church to economy and systemic solutions. It does not seek to identify a clearly superior socioeconomic model, but evaluates proposed solutions against ethical considerations (Jan Paweł II 1987). In addition, it operates within society e.g., through charitable efforts. As a result, the Catholic Church and Catholics in Poland were not indifferent to the choice of the welfare state following the fall of communism. Even in its most ringing declarations of approval for the free market, the Church also emphasised the need to support the poor and workers. In addition to criticising an overprotective welfare state and strongly affirming family and intermediate communities, encyclical *Centesimus annus* also gives acceptance to reasonable interventionism (John Paul II 1991).

It would appear that Catholic social thought, internalised by the majority of society, would have a decisive influence on socioeconomic solutions adopted in Poland after 1989. One could expect some similarities to the effects of Lutheran or Calvinistic doctrines in other countries (Gabriel and Reuter 2013). However, in reality, its effect was different from that observed earlier in Germany or the United States. During the Polish People's Republic, what provided substance to the ideology related to the concept of the Pole–Catholic's narrative were the thoughts and actions of such figures as Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko and cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. Both strongly emphasised the importance of the rights of working people to socioeconomic life (Wyszowadzki 2012). While, soon after the regaining of sovereignty, the Catholic Church was held in high regard by society, and power was in the hands of politicians who were happy to declare devotion or at least respect for religion, there were some rather radical reforms, which had little in common with Catholic social teaching. Those reduced the welfare state significantly. In order to explain those processes, it might be useful to explore the role of secondary ideologies.

### 2.3. Muted Vibrancy

Public opinion polls clearly suggest growing secularisation of Polish society in recent years. While Catholicism continues to be an important point of reference for Polish people, the Church itself, and Catholic organisations operating in social protection, need to function under new circumstances. Compared to religiously diverse societies, in religiously homogenous Poland it seems more difficult for new strategies to take root (Manow 2005). In practice, the Church in Poland continues to look for ways to function in the context of ideological pluralism and an increasingly hostile environment. This is due to the fact that it is still an important social force, but its position is much weaker than it used to be not that long ago.

In many European societies, the Catholic Church, and sometimes other religious denominations as well, have fought over key ethical and social issues. As a result of some lost cultural wars about the legalisation or decriminalisation of abortion and euthanasia, and legal acknowledgment of same-sex relationships, and attitude towards divorce, the Church has redefined its strategy concerning its presence in society. This was largely affected by the child abuse crisis. Three options became available: (1) to continue to firmly oppose any changes, and heavily emphasise differences between Catholic teaching and laws adopted by the state; (2) to fully adjust or update its doctrine so that it “keeps up with the times” (this can be exemplified by many Protestant denominations which accepted the possibility of abortion, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of women as priests or episcopal members); (3) to use the approach known as muted vibrancy, or more inconspicuous presence of the Church in an increasingly secular society, i.e., to focus its teaching and activities on non-controversial, but socially important, matters. These include helping the poor, and as a result becoming one of the key actors in this domain. Advocates of the last option argue that it would allow the Church to become even more involved in social matters, that it can contribute to the development of the welfare state in the country, and that, by softening its social stand on moral and doctrine-related matters, and by intensifying its efforts that meet social expectations, it can cooperate with other forces. These also include groups and organisations with radically different ideological characteristics. Historically, this can be exemplified by the hard social efforts by Catholics in France governed by socialists led by Francois Mitterand (Manuel and Glatzer 2019).

Recently, muted vibrancy is being adopted in Poland. However, it has its unique characteristics. The positions of some hierarchs and lay Catholics in favour of muted vibrancy intermix with approaches based on holding on to ethical principles consistent with orthodox doctrines. The importance of the Church in Poland during previous decades or even centuries is also often accentuated.

So far, Poland has not reached a turning point for the majority of crucial ideological matters. During the “secular tsunami” in western-European countries in 1970–1980 (Garelli 2013), the Church in Poland strengthened its social role and was treated as the bastion of freedom. Ideological battles for legal abortion, euthanasia, and formal legalisation of same-sex relationships have not yet been lost by the Church. Polish Catholicism, its strength and vitality, were by all means affected by the long pontificate of John Paul II, which ended in 2005. The social influence of the Polish Pope helped delay the secularisation of this society. As a result of his death, society felt it lost an authority figure of more than just religious significance. Any sparse happenings and efforts intended to make little of this fact met with spontaneous condemnation (Hodalska 2010). In consequence, Polish Catholicism continued to be in good shape for the whole duration of Benedict XVI’s pontificate.

What emerged during that time was the idea of “Generation John Paul II”, which, in one form or another, was present not only in the media, but also in scientific discourse (Pawlus 2014). Some people used this term to describe individuals who had their childhood and adolescence during pope Wojtyła’s pontificate. Others used it to mean a certain community of values which young people could learn from the Pope’s teaching (Tasak 2021). This perspective created a portrayal of Polish Catholicism that differed from reality. What seems to be an accurate opinion is that the Church in Poland “is neither as strong as its supporters like to think, nor as weak as its critics claim” (Mariański 2017). A certain indication of what Polish Catholics think was provided by their responses to the judgement by the Constitutional Tribunal stipulating that eugenic reasons for abortion were unconstitutional (Dz.U. 2021). The ruling by the Tribunal was met with approval from the leading representatives of the Polish Episcopate as being in line with the Catholic morality that excludes the possibility of abortion (Gadecki 2020). In addition, heated discussions, arguments, and demonstrations that followed showed the multitude of positions on the matter, also among Polish Catholics.

The sociopolitical situation that was created as a result of the judgement by the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland in October 2020 on eugenic abortion leads to the following

conclusions: (1) the Church has weaker influence on society than expected, which was in a way confirmed by the increase in social support for the liberalisation of abortion laws following what was known as “the Black Protests” (Frackowiak-Sochańska and Zawodna-Stephan 2022); (2) the Church in Poland, including the Episcopate, was not determined to act in line with muted vibrancy, and there seem to be at least two attitudes to this matter.

The second conclusion is especially crucial for the relationship between Polish Catholics’ beliefs and activities, and the supported idea of the welfare state. Poles accept and support the extension of the range of social transfers and increased involvement of the state in social security (Roguska 2021). This is mainly about attitudes towards the 500+ programme, which provides PLN 500 worth of benefits per child until they come of age or complete their education. Five years since programme launch, 73% of respondents are for the programme. In addition, radical environmental efforts are met with reserve and suspicion (Michaluk 2019). In the coming years, the Church in Poland might address this topic more extensively, taking inspiration especially from papal teaching (Dylus 2021).

### 3. Catholicism and Institutional Solutions of the Welfare State

#### 3.1. Time of Choosing the Socioeconomic Model

In order to understand the religious grammar of the welfare state in Poland, we need to go back to the time when decisions were first made as to how to shape the welfare state in Poland. Some elements of the welfare state were introduced as early as the inter-war period, and during communist times a strong emphasis was placed on providing social security. Communist Bloc governments, including that of the Polish People’s Republic, provided full employment. Combined with subsidising rent, free education, and healthcare, this delivered common security, if of a rather poor quality. In no way was this based on economic grounds (Glatzer and Manuel 2020). However, following 1989, profound transformations came about. The selected welfare state model was compatible with the rules of democracy and consistent with how market mechanisms worked (Freise 2005).

In this context, it is important to note public sentiments at the time: (1) generous support for the Church, which, especially during the final years of communism, served as the bastion of freedom and Polishness (Łatka 2019); (2) enthusiasm for free market (Grela et al. 2015); (3) excitement at the prospect of implementing solutions adopted in the Federal Republic of Germany.

It could appear that this combination of important public sentiments would produce a compromise between acceptance of the free market and the German model of the welfare state. In addition, the principles of Catholic social teaching should have a powerful effect in this respect. The still vivid memory of the social message that put emphasis on solidarity and the value of work embodied in the “Solidarity” movement, as delivered by such figures as Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko and primate Stefan Wyszyński (Sadlon 2021a), would again make the Pole–Catholic’s narrative have a profound effect. It turned out, however, that the way the market economy was introduced involved a social “shock therapy” associated with the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, Leszek Balcerowicz (Skodlarski and Pieczewski 2011). This calls for an explanation as to why things turned out the way they did. For this, we rely on the classic types of the welfare state, as identified by Danish sociologist (Esping-Andersen 1990). He identifies the following types:

- Social democratic, Scandinavian—the product of Lutheran influences and the egalitarianism of agrarian groups. It is more about consensus than about conflict;
- Conservative, continental/European—a mix of Lutheran influences and Catholic social teaching, which sometimes compete but ultimately are forced to reconcile. On the continent of Europe, the proportional electoral system makes it possible to develop social coalitions that force redistribution to a greater extent. However, the interplay of market forces is still crucial, and redistribution is limited by corporate elements. Certain inequalities are normal and an inescapable effect of market-related economic growth (Kochuthara 2017). In addition, vertical social mobility is not as high as with the Anglo–American type of the welfare state;

- Liberal, Anglo–American—with significant influences from Reformed Protestantism, but also a unique electoral system. As a result of the two-party system, it is impossible for any coalition between workers and the middle class to develop to force redistribution (Manow 2018). In addition, in societies that adopted it, there is high social mobility. Consequently, welfare state is fairly limited and includes only some basic benefits.

It is important to note that welfare state concepts are subject to constant modifications. By definition, the welfare state is implemented to protect society against any risks associated with the free market. Often, there are also influences from factors that significantly affect economic life, COVID-19 being a recent example (Ebbinghaus et al. 2022).

### 3.2. Assessment of Free Market Transformations by the Church

Tadeusz Kowalik, Polish economist, critic of free market transformations, and social activist, argued that Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Polish Prime Minister in 1989–1991, dreamt of the socioeconomic solutions from Bonn, but those from Chicago and Washington were “foisted on him” (Kozłowski 2012). This is a gross oversimplification but shows the discrepancy between social expectations and actual free market reforms, which were, in fact, accepted by the leaders of “Solidarity”. Naomi Klein included Balcerowicz’s reforms in Poland in a series of historical examples of what she referred to as “the shock doctrine” (Klein 2014). It is important to note that, in many cases, there is no clear relationship between the Christian–Democratic rule and heavy social expenditure. This is confirmed by the findings reported by scholars from the universities in New York and Yale (Scheve and Stasavage 2006). In addition, in Poland, too, reforms were influenced by several major factors.

What did the Church think of these transformations? The position of the Church and Catholics should be based on the key principles of Catholic social teaching. Some time later, encyclical *Centesimus annus* took on special importance. Some people believed this document by John Paul II to be the most pro-market papal pronouncement ever. It openly criticised the welfare state as often being too extensive, ineffective, and following a wrong philosophy that violated especially the principle of subsidiarity (John Paul II 1991). This criticism was not, however, an expression of dislike for the welfare state as such, but referred to a specific type of the same, one that was no longer useful in the face of post-1989 challenges.

As mentioned earlier, in Poland, the Church enjoyed great trust; in May 1988, as many as 67% of respondents declared that the Church should have the same or greater influence on what happened in the country (Roguska 2007, p. 3). At the same time, a new Polish model of relationship between the state and the Church was being developed (Tatarczyk 2020). The purpose of the reforms that were being implemented from 1 January 1990 was to move from centrally planned to free market economy. In the first place, this required macroeconomic stabilisation, and especially curbing rampant inflation and reducing budget deficit. Efforts were made for the economy to accommodate the requirements of the Washington Consensus. While the transformation in Poland proved to be a success, it had come at a significant social cost. This cost had the form of massive unemployment, which had been hidden in the centrally planned economy, and also deterioration in the quality of life for disadvantaged groups and a decrease in GDP by 22% per annum (Jakubowicz 2019). This blow was particularly devastating for those who used to work in the public sector.

These reforms were soon criticised by the majority of society. In addition, for the next 25 years, this was one of the areas of political dispute in the country. It might come as a shock that a culturally Catholic country and a society that had greatly valued solidarity and subsidiarity adopted reforms that were far removed from the conservative–continental model of the welfare state. Polish economist Ryszard Bugaj, who was critical of these transformations, wrote this about Balcerowicz’s plan: “In terms of political changes, intentions were not clearly defined, even though, given subsequent developments, these could be reconstructed at no significant risk. (...) the programme was not particularly innovative. It was determined by classic principles of neo-liberal economy, such as privatisation, deregulation, radical restriction in domestic market, and structural changes (including reduction

in welfare state functions)" (Bugaj 2015). Similar reservations were made against other countries, some of which were considerably different from Poland (Kochuthara 2017).

Bugaj also blamed the Church for remaining silent in the face of those transformations. He argued that it focused on ethical/moral and political matters. In his opinion, this ultimately led to reinforcing the social belief that there were no alternatives to the liberal reform programme (Bugaj 2015). In reality, Balcerowicz's plan shared little with the ideas advocated by Catholic social teaching. In addition, it turned out that the commonly expected "socialisation of economy" after the German fashion stood no chance when faced with free market ideology, which clearly superseded social solidarity associated with the Pole-Catholic's narrative (Fel 2013).

What is noteworthy is that public opinion polls in 1991 showed a very strong support for the free market (73%), which later decreased. Moreover, a general feeling (88% of respondents in 1992) was that while the intention behind the reforms was valid, developments in the country led "average people to become poorer and poorer, with only a small number of rich people getting richer" (Kowalczyk 2014). Faced with such sentiments, the Church did not want to take a firm stand on any specific systemic solutions that were being implemented. It adopted the position based on its social teaching, that the Church did not support any specific systemic solutions. In addition, its role was rather to evaluate these from the perspective of justice and the common good, with due regard to the protection of the disadvantaged (John Paul II 1991).

At least at the first stage of the reforms, leaders of the Church in Poland prioritised support for democratisation and political freedom. They bore in mind that, in the previous era, religion also suffered as a result of the lack of freedom (Tatarczyk 2020). It was believed that, on matters of social security, any government chosen through democratic elections would follow the mandate given to them by their constituents. However, in reality, what prevailed was monetarism preferred by World Bank experts, a technical approach to economic transformation, and the neoliberal belief that future economic growth could only be achieved by abandoning the standards associated with the welfare state, as found in the conservative-continental European model. Support for stopping such radical transformations could also be a reason for political concern among Polish Catholics because the suggestions to slow down or shelve those reforms were associated especially with post-communist circles (which was not accurate and more complex) (Wilczyński 1994). In 1993, when the power was taken over by the coalition of the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SRP), which originated from the previous system, and the Polish People's Party (PSL), the threat of a complete departure from the way of the reforms could seem real. This certainly affected the position of the Church; however, in reality, the reforms were only slowed down. It could be argued that there was what the literature describes as problem aggregation (Scheve and Stasavage 2006). In this case, it undermined the social influence of religious institutions. As a result, constituents with religious motivations would vote for political forces that they found ideologically similar in political terms (anti-communist) but who were against any increase in social expenditure.

During these transformations, the Church in Poland faced many dilemmas concerning its deeper involvement in the socioeconomic affairs of the time. Janusz Mariański reports a fairly strong influence of neoliberal economic thought. This resulted in a specific belief among Polish society that there was a divide between the Church and economy; they were completely separate domains. Under this view, religious and moral principles would hamper economic growth, rather than support it (Mariański 2006). This constituted a factor that could deter people from supporting any specific solutions modelled after, e.g., German solutions. The Polish Episcopal Conference (KEP) exercised restraint in relation to economic transformations connected with property privatisation, but also to those that caused unemployment or a reduction in social security. While social pathologies were actively condemned, and socially painful phenomena were recognised, these concerns were voiced only in relation to specific situations. The Church avoided addressing any systemic matters. The Polish Episcopate issued documents that recognised the need for



protecting the family and emphasised the negligence of this area. Furthermore, it argued that no excessive burden be laid on society in the transformation process (Delong 2017).

The strategy adopted by the Episcopal Conference of Poland, led by cardinal Józef Glemp (1981–2004), was employed again during Poland's accession to the European Union. While Polish bishops argued against some solutions they found unacceptable, especially in terms of values (e.g., those related to the protection of life), in general, they supported the integration. Support expressed by John Paul II (John Paul II 1997) was of key importance, and bishops argued that there was no reasonable alternative. They were afraid Poland would again become closer with Russia (Życiński 1996). There was support for the accession among Polish clergy. Despite certain reservations, as many as 84% of clergymen supported the integration in 1997 (Mazurkiewicz 1997). A number of Episcopal documents argued that the accession to the European Union was the only, if imperfect, way (KEP 2003). The Church in Poland had a similar attitude towards the free market transformations.

It is important to mention a conservative current among Polish Catholics, which significantly rose in importance in the 1990s. It concentrated around Radio Maryja, a Catholic radio station established in 1991 and was ran by Redemptorists led by Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk (Mielczarek 2009; Pokorna-Ignatowicz 2010). The radio, and the related TV station created later, operated in line with the people's spirituality characteristic of the order. They rapidly won a fairly large audience, while not staying away from involvement in politics (Meyer Resende and Hennig 2021). They criticised approaches to privatisation and economic transformations after 1989, but also accession to the European Union (Pokorna-Ignatowicz 2010). In their programmes, they accentuated not only religious content but also the systemic shortcomings of a weak welfare state (Gowin 1999; Grabowska 2011). This current was later explored by the political party Law and Justice (PiS). The party has gradually adopted nationalist/Catholic ideas, presenting Poland as the bulwark of Christianity (Grabowska 2011). Ultimately, the party was able to make some political capital out of incorporating these in its programme, because it won enough votes in parliamentary elections to come to power in 2015.

This marked the launch of large-scale social transfers. In a way, this brought Poland closer to the welfare state model found in Germany and other developed European countries. To some extent, this confirms a claim put forward by Marta Trzebiatowska about the relationship between the Pole–Catholic's narrative and certain forms of revisionist thinking (Trzebiatowska 2021). Having won continued support from its electorate gathered around the aforementioned conservative media, Law and Justice took over a large part of its postulates, starting with the increase in social transfers. In addition, there was a positive verification of a claim found in the literature, one arguing that the development of an extensive welfare state requires a broad consensus among social forces (Manow 2018). This consensus was achieved through winning the votes of the electorate gathered around conservative media, which were the leading advocates of the Pole–Catholic concept, and a group of constituents dissatisfied with previous transformations, including the former electorate of left-wing parties and families with young children who had received no support before. Before, the reach of the welfare state in Poland was limited mainly to investments in education and the old-age pension system. The main focus was on current consumption; active family, labour-market, and residential policies have been established only recently (Bremer and Bürgisser 2022).

The welfare state in Poland was funded by, e.g., strong economic growth; however, subsequent efforts to expand it further have raised growing concerns. It seems, therefore, that the relationship between redistribution and electoral aspirations is at its limits.

### 3.3. Social Security

The religious grammar of the welfare state in Poland is not limited solely to the attitude of the Church towards free market transformations and the choice of socioeconomic model. It also addresses direct and indirect religious inspirations across various domains of the welfare state. The first such domain is social security defined as fundamental social

protection. This is provided through a system of financial and non-financial benefits via the Polish institution and available to all members of the community.

The social security system adopted in Poland has been subject to multiple modifications, including its fundamental reform in 1999 (Chrzanowska 2017). The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997 clearly stipulates that every citizen has the right to social security. In addition, more specifically (Article 67), this means:

- Social security against incapacity for work due to illness or disability;
- Social security upon reaching state pension age;
- Social security for individuals who are involuntarily unemployed and have no other income (Dz.U. 1997).

In the last situation, the extent and forms of such security are defined by law. Sometimes this is perceived as something that actually puts eligible individuals at a disadvantage. As noted by Gertruda Uścińska as early as in 2007, in practice, this meant that the system adopted in Poland complied with the minimum standards defined in Convention 102 of the International Labour Organisation. She further stressed that the subsequent years would have to bring about compliance with European standards rather than sticking with the minimum ones (Uścińska 2007).

From the Catholic influence point of view, there are only indirect influences, albeit very powerful ones. Since its beginning, the social security system adopted in Poland has put a heavy emphasis on the importance of family and on the need for its protection. It expressed the need for providing assistance especially to single-parent families, those with many children, and those who are struggling financially. The Constitution also recognised the need for offering special support to mothers before and after they give birth (Dz.U. 1997). For many years, those provisions have remained unimplemented, especially when compared to solutions found in other developed European countries. It was not until recently that this changed. These changes involve a more family-oriented social policy and many assistance programmes, such as 500 Plus (PLN 500 worth of benefit paid monthly for every child). Regardless of whether it is reasonable to introduce significant financial transfers and rather extensive redistribution, it is important to clearly note that this re-embraces the Pole-Catholic's vision and strongly emphasises the importance of family.

Note that in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997 there is a great deal of Catholicism-inspired provisions, such as subsidiarity, solidarity, and social justice principles, which are deeply rooted in Catholic social teaching (Wigura et al. 2019). These organise the social security system in Poland in a specific way to emphasise the importance of family and intermediate and neighbourly communities for providing social protection. As a result, they have contributed to shifting responsibility for social policy efforts in the public sector from the state level to the local-government level.

### 3.4. Healthcare

Access to free healthcare is guaranteed under the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (Dz.U. 1997). In this domain, too, the management of most public healthcare institutions, and hospitals in particular, has been delegated to local governments, which often do this task poorly. In keeping with neoliberal socioeconomic policy, healthcare contributions have been charged at relatively low levels; as a result, in 2019 they corresponded to only 4.5% of the GDP. For comparison, in Germany, this was 9.5%, while in Denmark, 8.8% (Wigura et al. 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic saw the adoption of a law that provided for the increase in healthcare expenditure of 7% within a few years (7% GDP for healthcare 2022).

Since the early 1990s, the underfunding of the healthcare system in Poland has created a great demand for the involvement of NGOs and also communities such those provided by churches. Laws governing healthcare in Poland encourage cooperation with NGOs and religious organisations, including the Catholic Church. For Catholics, this is an important part of charitable activity, which is also institutionalised.

In particular, the Catholic Church is engaged in running family nursing centres, home-based and inpatient hospices, organisation of long-term healthcare facilities, and addiction therapy counselling (Zajac 2013). In the light of recent reports, there are many aspects of the extensive charitable efforts by the Church intended to provide assistance to the sick. These include efforts made by the Church itself and by its related institutions.

Church institutions, in their narrow sense, run 11 hospitals, 39 inpatient hospices, 61 home-based hospices, 42 care and treatment facilities for adults and 6 for children, 11 outpatient clinics, and 10 rehabilitation centres for people with disabilities.

However, this is but one element of Catholic involvement in healthcare in Poland. Important roles are also played in this area by female and male orders. The former run 2 hospitals, 3 hospices, 25 doctor's and therapy surgeries, 28 care and treatment facilities for adults, and 6 rehabilitation facilities. When it comes to the male orders' contribution to the Polish healthcare system, they manage 7 hospitals, 12 hospices, 16 outpatient clinics and healthcare centres, 14 herbalism centres, and 3 rehabilitation centres (Przeciszewski 2021).

Healthcare efforts and initiatives by the Church and its associated organisations can be considered to be of significant importance for the Polish model, which is egalitarian but rather ineffective. The Church provides complementary services in this area.

### 3.5. Education

Religious institutions are recognised among organisations that contribute to the increase in human capital (Gugin and Pliszka 2009). One of the fundamental values that they bring is their involvement in education and schools. This can be observed at different levels of education. The Polish education system is also based on universal access to educational services (Dz.U. 1997). In addition, it is more flexible than, e.g., its German counterpart, where people need to make decisions about their professional career relatively early, and these are difficult to change later on.

In the Polish education system, important roles are played also by institutions managed by Catholic organisations. For centuries, the Church in Poland has been very important for, and has significantly influenced, the development of education (Sadłoń 2016). Until 1991, there had been only 24 Catholic schools in Poland, all at the secondary level. From 1991, changes in legislation facilitated a dynamic development of Catholic schools. In 2019, there were as many as 259 primary schools, 140 general secondary schools, 16 technical secondary schools, 7 first degree trade schools, 10 art schools, 55 special schools for students with special educational needs. According to 2021 data, 487 Catholic schools in Poland were attended by 70,000 students (Królak 2021). The Catholic school status is regulated by educational law and church law. Various types of Catholic schools are considered non-public schools and can be ran by dioceses, parishes, orders, associations, and private persons. Such schools have their enrolment criteria, including any educational fees, defined by their authorities and receive public subsidies corresponding to 75% of normal funding (Czupryk 2009). A school can be recognised as a Catholic school only when the relevant diocese bishop approves this.

In Poland, there are also Catholic universities. These can have various legal statuses. In addition to seminaries, which operate under separate church laws, the Church or its associated entities can run universities to provide education to students through a variety of programmes, which until recently were mainly in the humanities or social sciences. Universities such as the Catholic University of Lublin, the Pontifical University of John Paul II, and the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw all operate as public universities. Catholic universities also include Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków, Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław, and the Catholic Academy in Warsaw. In addition, Theological Faculties can be found on six state universities.

### 3.6. Role of NGOs

The Catholic Church is considered a powerhouse when it comes to charitable activities. The Institute for Catholic Church Statistics' data shows that there are almost 900 charitable

institutions operating within the Catholic Church, with 5000 active projects and nearly 3 million beneficiaries (Sadłoń 2015). These activities are very broad and cover the aforementioned healthcare efforts. It is important to note the Church's involvement in what is known as the Third Sector is the expression of following the subsidiarity principle, which is heavily emphasised in Catholic social teaching. Under this principle, any tasks or problems need first to be addressed by oneself or with the support of grassroots organisations, and only as a last resort by the state. Such efforts are made at two levels, nationwide and local. What makes the latter so important is that efforts by parish Caritas and other groups carry out *ordo caritatis*, or the order of charity (Bartoszek 2017). Through efforts at the parish level, charitable support is offered to more than 600,000 people (Sadłoń 2015).

Charitable activities by the Church can themselves be perceived in different ways. They are frequently described as having deep theological roots (July 2017), as constituting a challenge for parish structures, but also approached from sociological or even economic perspectives. In addition, as such, they contribute to building valuable social capital (Sadłoń 2014). In addition, charitable efforts by the Catholic Church in Poland add to its social credibility, also among individuals who do not consider themselves believers.

According to *motu proprio* issued to 2012 *Intima Ecclesiae natura* (Benedict XVI 2012), Catholic organisations mean: (1) legal persons of the Catholic Church (dioceses, orders, parishes, Caritas Poland); (2) religious organisations (diocese entities, monastic foundations, etc.); (3) social organisations and associations (civil-law entities); (4) parish organisations (having no legal personality). According to 2019 data, there were 891 Catholic charitable organisations in Poland (Sadłoń 2021b, p. 10). In addition, of those, 23.2% were nationwide or subject to diocese jurisdiction, 49.9% were ran by female orders, and 26.8% by male orders. The total number of projects was 6524. The largest proportion (65.4%) was carried out by nationwide and diocese-level organisations, while female (16.7%) and male (17.9%) order jurisdictions accounted for smaller proportions.

What is impressive is the number of assistance units provided by Catholic organisations: 4,090,643 (Sadłoń 2015). When it comes to absolute values concerning the provided support, diocese and nationwide organisations take the lead. The largest of these is Caritas Poland, which has been operating in its current legal form since 1989. Its operations include 44 Caritas branches across Polish dioceses. It is involved in 127 programmes and nationwide projects and provides support to 635,000 beneficiaries.

As part of its operations, it relies on the work of 40,249 employees and 223,870 volunteers. Catholic charitable organisations operate especially in food- and equipment-related aid (1,767,167 support units), ad hoc and general aid (1,107,276), medical aid and services (512,306), support for homeless people (248,433), and support for children, teenagers, and mothers (131,637) (Iżycki 2020).

### 3.7. Migration and Natural Environment Challenges

Migration and environmental challenges are now particularly vital for supporting the vision of the welfare state. At least in regard to migration problems, the Pole-Catholic's narrative appears Janus-faced: on the one hand, it opposes otherness; on the other hand, its good-Samaritan approach to strangers is part of the Catholic ethos. Migration, and even more so exile, is nothing new, for both the Catholic Church as an institution and for Catholics in Poland. The Catholic Church has celebrated the World Migrant Day every year since 1914. Later, this topic was addressed in famous pronouncements by Popes Pius XII and Paul VI.

Recently, migration and refugee-related matters have resurfaced as a result of three processes:

1. The European migration crisis of 2015: Polish government opposed the system proposed at that time by the European Union to relocate refugees to individual Member States, with a rather significant public support for such efforts. Reluctance to take in migrants increased from 21% in May 2015 to 61% in April 2016 (Badora 2016). What significantly influenced this attitude towards the phenomenon were media reports, risk of terrorist attacks, and the social structure of migrant populations;

2. Demand for workforce within Polish economy: In Poland, the number of work permits issued to foreigners has been growing steadily. In 2015–2019, it grew by as much as 379,000 to ultimately reach 444,700. However, this was still insufficient. The majority of economic migrants were Ukrainians, followed by growing numbers of Nepalese, Belarusian, Moldovan, Chinese, and Vietnamese nationals ([Górczyńska 2020](#));
3. Migrants, and recently also refugees, coming to Poland from Ukraine. Ukrainian nationals have been coming to Poland for economic or educational reasons. As a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2014, migrants were joined by de facto refugees and people who were afraid of war. Ukrainians suffered another tragedy on 24 February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale attack on their homeland. This war caused huge emigration. According to UNHCR data, 3.14 million people crossed the Polish–Ukrainian border over the span of just a few weeks ([UN News 2022](#)). They were provided basic assistance, which was initially spontaneous. In accord with subsidiarity and solidarity principles, society and Third Sector organisations responded quicker than the state. Church-affiliated organisations also played an important role.

The dualism of responses to migrants and refugees shows that the Pole–Catholic’s narrative is alive. It is likely to have influenced the excessive reluctance to take in migrants in 2015, but also the generous support for the war-torn refugees from Ukraine in 2022. Some of those refugees will most likely stay in Poland permanently or continue to work here. They were provided immediate assistance across key areas of social security, free educational opportunities, healthcare, and legal work on a par with Polish citizens ([Dz.U. 2022](#)). The Church in Poland has supported these decisions, while expressing its surprise at papal diplomacy, which, especially during the initial weeks of the conflict, seemed to support whataboutism and adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

Today, the protection of the natural environment is part of welfare. The Church plays an important role for supporting a specific approach to sustainable growth. This approach is mainly about advocating moderate anthropocentrism and balance between natural, social, and economic domains. This has been the case since Paul VI, and has gained in prominence during the papacy of Pope Francis, whose position on the matter is expressed in encyclical *Laudato Si’* ([Franciscus 2015](#)).

The contributions made by the Church in Poland in relation to popularising its recommendations are fairly limited. Perhaps this is because, as a result of no efforts in the spirit of muted vibrancy, this topic was not recognised as one of the key social issues. There has been a noticeable increase in interest in sustainable growth, but there are still relatively few tangible initiatives by members of the Church in Poland. At the same time, some major conservative Catholic magazines, such as “Niedziela” and “Polonia Christiana” are sceptical about sustainable development. They criticise especially political efforts and initiatives to make radical moves related to animal suffering (bans on caged hens, ritual slaughter, etc.) or against non-sustainable forestry ([Michaluk 2019](#)).

#### 4. Conclusions

The fairly homogenous religious structure of Polish society is not fully reflected in the practical implementation of its welfare state model based on the principles of Catholic social teaching. While those principles were included in the Polish Constitution during post-communist systemic transformation, the introduced laws were dominated by liberal elements. The result was a hybrid model ([Fel 2005](#)), which has been adjusted over time whenever political power shifted towards those embracing Catholic social teaching. Social protection-related efforts by the Church and Catholic institutions, and especially the attitude of Polish peoples towards war refugees from Ukraine, have deep cultural roots in Catholic social teaching. This seems to confirm the theory of primary and secondary ideologies as grassroots initiatives, especially in relation to former communist states, continue to support the Pole–Catholic’s narrative, and statutory solutions are inspired by other ideologies and interest groups.

At the same time, the role of Catholicism in Poland is still significant, despite rapid secularisation. The Church has not abandoned its strong support for traditional ideological postulates. While there are certain efforts in Poland in the spirit of muted vibrancy, there is a considerable polarisation on the matter. The involvement of the Church and Catholics in the welfare state is significant and one of their key activities in the social sphere. The developments of recent years to some extent support the claim that the level of religiosity in a state influences welfare state expenditure (Scheve and Stasavage 2006).

In addition, the type of the welfare state adopted in Poland after 1989 left a lot of room for development, which was filled by the Catholic Church and Catholic organisations across a number of spheres related to social security. The institutional aspects of those efforts concern social protection, the educational system, charitable activities, healthcare, and matters related to environmental protection and migration. The impact of religion-inspired institutions in Poland is unequal across these areas. The Church is a powerhouse when it comes to charitable efforts, plays a significant role in the educational system, and is indispensable when it comes to the functioning of some underfunded areas in healthcare. In addition, the involvement of Catholics in the other areas is also notable.

In practice, the influence of the dominant religion on the functioning and transformation of the welfare state in Poland is, therefore, quite obvious. Even though no socio-economic model was adopted in 1989 that would clearly follow from the principles of Catholic social teaching, the durability of, e.g., the Pole–Catholic’s narrative has proven to be rather considerable. Over the course of some complex domestic political games, the idea to expand the welfare state resurfaced and has been consistently implemented. At the same time, the welfare state will have to change to provide society with protection against completely new, or recurring, threats; this is confirmed, e.g., by migration-related issues and the COVID-19 situation (Ebbinghaus et al. 2022).

In reality, without the institutional support of the Catholic Church and Catholicism-inspired institutions, the spheres specific to the welfare state could hardly function. This includes, for instance, hospices operating as part of the healthcare system. However, the Catholic Church in Poland still does very little to make these efforts recognised and appreciated by the public. Scientific literature emphasises the need for building the image of the Church in society similarly to those of some well-known contemporary brands (Ignatowski et al. 2020).

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