Religion, Multiculturalism and Racism in Poland

An interview-based exploration among members of religious minorities

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Abstract

This thesis explores what members of religious minorities in Poland think about multiculturalism, the religious and ethnic homogeneity of Poland, and racism. The theoretical part includes discussion about the relation between Christianity and Polish national identity as well as the relation between Christianity and racism. The case study was based on the semi-structured interviews with five individuals representing various religious minorities.

The research conclusions, drawing upon the participants’ observations, are explored within a theoretical framework. The results suggest that the lack of exposure is seen as the foremost reason for racial and religious prejudice. Moreover, religion is identified to be more central than skin colour or other ethnic features when assessing “others”. In order to change minorities' position in Polish society, Poland needs social integration programmes designed together with members of minority communities, as well as the Church’s support in building unity.

Keywords: Poland, immigration, multiculturalism, religious minorities
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1. Introduction

While living in Sweden, I was struck by how multicultural Swedish society is. I began to wonder what are the differences between Swedes and Poles that the latter seem to refuse the idea of sharing their country with anybody else. My interest in religion inspired me to think that religion might be important in shaping people’s attitudes on these matters. Therefore I decided to ask members of religious minorities about their observations. I endeavoured to understand how their lives look in a relatively homogenous Polish society. I was interested in finding out what problems they face and what ideas they have for solving them, as I believe that their insightful reflections can help to understand the phenomenon of religious and ethnic prejudice in Poland.

According to a survey research study about attitudes toward other nations, conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) in 2010, Poles express particularly negative attitudes towards Arabs, Romanians, Turkish and Chechen people. On the other hand, the ethnic groups most liked by Poles were respectively Czechs, Italians, Spanish and French people. Such results might be surprising when analysing Poland’s history. Poland is often seen, together with neighbouring countries, as a homogenous country that finds it difficult to accept immigrants. As one analyst put it, “Eastern European nations threw off the Soviet yoke only a quarter-century ago, and are new to the values of liberal democracy. Ethnically homogeneous, they are unused to immigration. Hence, many suggest, this insularity and prejudice”. (Malik, 2015). Just before Second World War, one-third of the Polish population did not have any Polish descent, therefore cultural and ethnic diversity is actually not a new concept in Poland. However, the Second World War and Communism changed the Polish ethnic, social and religious landscape. Although as of 1931 one-fifth of all the world’s Jews resided in Poland, over 10% Polish population belonged to Greek Catholic Church or Eastern Catholic Churches, another 10% to Orthodox Catholic Church, and almost 3% were Protestants (GUSRP, 1931) under Communism religious diversity was replaced with domination by the Roman Catholic Church. Today a little over 7% of the Polish population belongs to a different religious organisation than Roman Catholic Church, or does not belong to any religious organisation at all.
1.1. Selected examples of racially and religiously motivated acts of intolerance

Over the last few years many racially and religiously motivated attacks took place in Poland. Although Jews and Romani people used to be the main targets of the racial violence in the past, now Arab and Africans are the most common targets, however they aren’t the only ones. The victims of racially and religiously motivated acts of violence are also Europeans. Over the summer of 2016 a visiting German researcher was verbally and physically attacked for having a conversation in German with his Polish colleague. In 2013 the government Council on combating racial discrimination and xenophobia (Rada do spraw Przeciwdziałania Dyskryminacji Rasowej, Ksenofobii i związanej z nimi Nietolerancji) had been established. Its role was to analyse and prevent racially motivated intolerance, but it was closed down by the government in 2016.

A journalist studying Jewish-Polish relations named Don Snyder has noted in his article “Anti-Semitism Spikes in Poland – Stoked by Populist Surge Against Refugees” (2017) that “More than 80 percent of Poles say they have never met a Jew”. In the same time, “Poles are increasingly unwilling to accept Jews as co-workers, neighbours, or as a member of their family” according to the study on this topic (Snyder, 2017). In autumn 2015, a puppet of a Jew was burnt on the main square in Wroclaw, during a demonstration against Middle East refugees. “The more people are anti-Muslim, the more they’re anti-Semitic” (Snyder, 2017), explained Michal Bilewicz, the director of Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw. According to a study conducted by the Center, an increase in negative attitudes towards Jews can be observed. Snyder has noted that the research, which covers the years 2014-2016, has shown, “anti-Semitic hate speech has become increasingly acceptable, and is growing in popularity on the Internet as well as on Polish television” (Snyder, 2017).

The case of a Tunisian cook stabbing young Polish man, in December 2016, sparked anti-migrant riots all over Poland. Shortly after the murder, Poles smashed the windows of the kebab restaurant in which the Tunisian man had worked. Soon after, similar acts of violence had occurred in other Polish cities – Warsaw, Wroclaw, and Katowice to mention a few. One of them took place in Lublin, where rioters had written offensive slogans on the door of the kebab restaurant owned by Hindu immigrants such as, “Fuck ISIS” or “Fuck Islam”, and threatened the owners (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2017). A Polish man, also in Lublin, has been
accused of racism “after setting up a kebab stand 'made by real Poles, not foreigners'”. (Telegraph, 2016). He argued that “he is not intolerant (...), but he explains he has tapped into a market for people who like kebabs, but refuse to get them from Turkish or Arab-owned establishments”. (Telegraph, 2016). Professor Rafał Pankowski has been studying racism in Poland, says that what had happened in Lublin “reflects growing xenophobia in Poland”, and “comes from a certain anti-Muslim, anti-Arab and anti-refugee climate in Poland”. He has stressed, “The climate is worsening even though the number of migrants – especially Muslim migrants – is tiny” (Telegraph, 2016).

Requests to accept Syrian asylum seekers in Poland, as a part of relocation programme, met with the resistance of many Poles. Even though Poland has accepted relatively small numbers of migrants, yet the country has some of the strictest opinions on immigration in Europe. According to research conducted by the Centre for Research on Prejudice in Warsaw, 69% of Poles do not want non-white people living in their country (Leszczyński, 2015). Although between 2009 and 2015, around 61 thousand foreigners lodged an application for international protection in Poland (USC, 2016), there was only 0.21 asylum seeker per 1000 citizens in 2014, according to the study by Eurostat.

Polish president Andrzej Duda said that accepting refugees might put Polish citizens in danger, hence the government’s role is to, “protect its citizens from refugees bringing in “possible epidemics” (Al Jazeera, 2015). He had added that the physical and financial security of Poles should be a priority for the government. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice (PiS), right-wing conservative nationalist party with a parliamentary majority, had claimed that migrants who arrive to Europe could spread “various parasites and protozoa, which don’t affect their organisms, but which could be dangerous here” (Guardian, 2016). PiS together with their right-wing allies, are accusing Western Europe of fanatical multiculturalism, and increasing risk of Islamic terror due to naïve migration policies (Guardian, 2016). Kaczyński argues that Poland doesn’t need to adapt to western values, and can still achieve economic development whilst “maintaining age-old traditional Polish values and remaining a homogenous white Catholic country” (Guardian, 2016).

The reaction of Polish authorities, regarding the refugee situation, has been widely criticized by western media, accusing Poland of being unable to integrate with the rest of the EU: “For many, Eastern Europeans’ lack of generosity toward refugees reflects (...) a fundamental
‘political and cultural gap’ that divides the Continent” (Malik, 2015). The political and cultural division between Western and Eastern Europe is observed as a result of “far-right movements, nationalism, racial and religious prejudices” (Lyman, 2015) in Eastern Europe. Moreover, economic arguments expressed by Eastern European governments stating that “they are less able to afford to take in outsiders than their wealthier neighbours” (Lyman, 2015), had widened the gap and caused tension within the EU. However, an attitudes survey, such as the 2005-09 World Values Survey, or the 2009 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, show that the attitudes differences between Eastern and Western Europeans towards immigrants are not significant. This may lead to a conclusion that the cultural and political gap “may just be that Western Europeans are more polished in the language of tolerance, while in reality being equally intolerant” (Malik, 2015).

Although Polish government did not publicly state that their concerns regarding refugees are in any way associated with a fear of ethnic or religious differences, Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, had said that latest refugee flow observed in Europe “has outraged the right wing” and, “If you scratch the surface, why are they so upset? It’s not about jobs or the ability to manage them, or social welfare. What it is really about, is that they are Muslim”. (Lyman, 2015). With almost 93% of Poles belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, Poland is often called a homogenous country. According to Andrew Stroehlein, European media director for Human Rights Watch, homogenous nations are “some of the most virulently against refugees” (Lyman, 2015) due to the lack of expose to other cultures and ethnicities, how it takes place in more diverse societies.

State’s indifference to the migrants’ situation, resistance to take part in a relocation programme, and cooperate with other European countries, is sometimes described as “shameful”. The Polish-American historian Jan Gross asked, “Have Eastern Europeans no sense of shame?” (Malik, 2015). According to Marcin Zborowski, the executive vice president at the Center for European Policy Analysis, the reason for such indifferent reaction can be the fact that Poland, unlike Germany, France or United Kingdom, has no history of colonialism and therefore “The attitude is: We didn’t meddle in these countries that are now sending the refugees, like other nations did, and so we have no sense of guilt about our obligation to deal with them”, Zborowski had stated (Lyman, 2015).
On the other hand, Polish diaspora, one of the largest in the world, consists of almost 20 million people (total Polish population is estimated at 55 million), which means that over one third of overall Polish population does not live in Poland. Over 10 million Poles live in the United States, around 2 million in Germany and 1.5 million in Brazil (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 2009).

1.2. Statement of purpose

The theme of this thesis is how the large religious and ethnic homogeneity of Polish society affects immigrants, especially those with a different ethnic and religious backgrounds, than majority of Poles, and how these minority groups are unable to integrate into society, because of being perceived as “other” by the citizens and authorities.

The aim of this thesis is not only to fill the academic knowledge gap, but also to give a voice to religious minorities in Poland, which might contribute to fuller understanding of problems and challenges they face in an ever growing multicultural Poland, and creating adequate integration programmes for immigrants as well as Polish citizens. Reflections and opinions of Poles raised up in Poland, yet not identifying themselves with Roman Catholic Church, might be beneficial and insightful not only from the theoretical academic perspective. Observations which minorities can share, might contribute to improving integration programmes, and developing new country-specific integration methods.

The aim of this thesis is to answer the following research questions:

- How do interviewed members of religious minorities view the idea of multiculturalism in Polish society?
- How do they access the social integration of Poles with immigrants from different religious and ethnic backgrounds than the majority?
- To what extent do they see the religion as sealant for matters of integration in Poland?

In addition to answering the research questions the aim of this paper is to discover how participants view their position in society, and whether they feel that their voice is being heard.
2. Theory

2.1. Religion in Poland

Religious beliefs are undoubtedly very difficult phenomena to be measured in any way due to its very personal and intimate nature. It is also very difficult to estimate the number of people who belong to the specific religious communities. Due to the peculiarity of Polish society, surveys about religious identity are only effective in estimating the percentage of Catholics within society. Relatively small number of non-Catholic religious denominations makes it impossible for researchers to provide reliable data for presenting the complete religious structure of Polish population. Most of the small religious groups are not recognized in studies which base their results on several thousand surveys (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2016b:2).

According to the religious organisations database, the number of religious organisations registered in Poland, had highly increased in the early 1990s – at the beginning of political transformations and liberalisation in Poland. Most of the organisations which registered at that time weren’t derived from the dominant Christian tradition, but rather culturally distant (like Buddhism or Hinduism).

In 2015 there were 179 registered religious organisations in Poland, including 108 Christian, 5 Islamic, 5 Jewish, 19 Buddhist, 8 Hindu, 5 Paganism and Modern Paganism, 21 other and 8 unclassified (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2016b:10).

According to the religious organisations research made in 2015 by Central Statistics Office of Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny), 92,8% of participants belong to the Roman Catholic Church, which means that participants who belong to religious minorities or those who do not belong to religious organisations at all are marginal. 0,7% of participants belong to Eastern Orthodox Church, 0,3% are Jehovah’s Witnesses, 0,2% are Protestants, 0,1% belong to Greek Catholic Church. 3,1% of participants said that they do not belong to any religious organisation, 0,5% couldn’t decide which organisation they belong to, and 2,2% refused to answer.
2.2. Racism in the Christian tradition

The dominance of Christianity in Poland indicates to investigators, the link between Christianity and racial intolerance. According to Roberts and Yamane (2016:260), “Christianity may have unwillingly contributed to racism through its meaning system, its reference group influence (belonging factors), or its organizational strategies (institutional factors)”.

Symbolically in Christianity, black and white represent respectively filthiness and purity, virginity and sin (Jordan 1968:7). Neither Bible nor Christian teachings, but this symbolic association and the fact that “Many people seem to be more comfortable with religious heroes who look like themselves” (Roberts & Yamane 2016:262) as a white skinned man with dark blond hair and blue eyes. Even though he would surely have had more of a Middle Eastern, or Jewish features and darker skin.

Dominative racism, based on the desire to control another group, and aversive racism, based on the desire to avoid contact with another group, are terms coined by Joel Kovel to differentiate two types of racism, based on the racial behaviour. Dominative racism was historically dominant in the southern US where white population had regular contact with black people, but power distribution was usually unequal in such relations. Aversive racism on the other hand, was more common in the North, where contacts between white and black people were very rare (Roberts & Yamane 2016:260).

Due to the concept of free will, which is a Christian cornerstone, many Christians “put the blame for disadvantage on those who are disadvantaged” (Roberts & Yamane 2016:263). Hence it makes it more difficult to recognize institutional discrimination. Such discrimination refers to policies which work to the disadvantage of the members within a certain group. Groups which are disproportionately represented may not be treated this way intentionally, or because of prejudices, but because of socioeconomic disproportion which influences discrimination. Institutional discrimination leads to further indirect discrimination, for example, when discrimination occurs in the educational market, it may lead to the discrimination in the job market, because of underrepresentation of the certain groups in a society (Roberts & Yamane 2016:263). “(...) Those who hold to traditional Christian doctrines of total free will, individual responsibility, and moral retribution (…) are more
likely to believe in rugged individualism and are less likely to work for the reduction of institutional discrimination” (Roberts & Yamane 2016:264). Therefore those people usually show no reaction for racial discrimination, however, they are more likely to justify it than cause it.

According to Glock and Stark (1966), Christian particularism – the idea that only one religion is legitimate and true, and only the members of this religious group “are expected to be saved” – is highly connected with anti-Semitism and antipathy towards atheists and agnostics. “Studies of attitudes in European countries have found religious particularism to be a strong predictor of prejudice against ethnic ‘others’.” (Scheepers et al. 2002 cited in Roberts & Yamane 2016:264). Research on prejudice and religion in Europe have showed that religious particularism is associated with a higher level of religious prejudice, even if not all prejudice is extreme (Roberts & Yamane 2016:265).

Ethnic and religious prejudice has been a persistent issue in Europe for centuries. There are several fairly recent cases of “ethnic cleansing”, with The Holocaust, and the civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s as clear examples. The terroristic attacks of 9/11 had resulted in an ever widening gap between Muslims and Christians. In some communities the attacks resulted in intensifying the polarities between “us” and “them” (Roberts & Yamane 2016:264-265). The interpretation of events has however, a bigger meaning than the events themselves. Religious communities have had an important role of delivering the message to their members – the message enhancing either peace building or xenophobia and bigotry.

Even though “official Christianity manifestly opposes racism and encourages a sense of the brotherhood, and sisterhood of humankind, certain beliefs may have the effect of increasing certain kinds of prejudice” (Roberts & Yamane 2016:267) there is no proof that negative attitudes towards different races and religions in Poland have any link with Christianity or with people’s level of involvement in religious practices.

Religion may also influence prejudice by its sense of belonging to the community, which is a very important aspect for believers. The need of acceptance develops a sense of “us” and “them”. Informal norms and rules of the community do not necessarily have to correspond with official religious policy. However, members of the community are likely to adhere to the informal norms, rather than to the official policy. This means that the reference group, the
community of believers, is often more powerful in shaping the ideas of the individuals than the religious ideology (Roberts & Yamane 2016:267).

According to the empirical study conducted by Eugene Hartley in 1946, nearly 75% of the participants, who were prejudiced against Jews and blacks, were also prejudiced against non-existent minorities. Therefore, prejudice is not caused by stereotypes, as it is not possible for the participants to be prejudiced against fictitious groups. Prejudice here is based on the tendency that people accept those who are similar to them, and are less likely to accept anyone who is “different”. Religious particularism causes the sense of superiority, which on the other hand, may lead to the distinction between “us” and “them”. “The level of prejudice against people with different beliefs (e.g., atheists or Jews), often surpassing prejudice against those of another race” (Roberts & Yamane 2016:268). Moreover, if a person with different beliefs also has different ethnic backgrounds, the level of prejudice is even greater. In societies or ethnic groups where members belong to more than one religious group, the risk of religiously motivated prejudice is significantly lower than in societies where all of the members have the same religious affiliation. Also in societies where members belong to different ethnic groups, racially based discrimination is less likely to occur (Roberts & Yamane 2016:274).

On the other hand, religion is not necessarily the direct reason for prejudice and bigotry, but often only reflects other issues within society, and is a result of other social conflicts. Moreover, open social systems of religious organisations may influence prejudice, not the religion itself. Accordingly, religious prejudice is often not the cause of bigotry but a consequence of other factors where religion may work as a justification of discrimination. When groups in question differ physically and culturally, it is common for the conflict over sacred resource such as education, jobs or housing “to be justified and highlighted in religious terms” (Roberts & Yamane 2016:272). Groups seeking control over sacred resources, which is an economic motivation, are likely to use religion as justification of bigotry and discrimination. In this case discrimination is economically motivated, and it is not a result of religious prejudice (Roberts & Yamane 2016:274).
2.3. **Christianity and Polish national identity**

The cross being considered a secular symbol in Poland, and invocation Dei in Polish constitution raise the question of the religion’s role in defining national identity. Historically in Poland, there was always a large minority of non-Poles. Interwar Poland was a multi-ethnic state made up of several nationalities. According to Polish census (*Powszechny Spis Ludności*) of 1931, over 30% of population did not identify themselves as Polish. The biggest minorities were Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Jewish, Belarusians and Germans. Ethnic diversity had also its impact on what the religious landscape had looked like. In 1931 only one-third of Polish population identified themselves as Roman Catholics. At the same time one-fifth of the entire world’s Jews had resided in Poland, making it the second largest Jewish population in the world (Marcus 1983:16-17).

According to Geneviève Zubrzycki, who studied Polish national identity and Christianity in Poland after the fall of Communism, the religious and national identity correlation is a relatively new concept in Poland, which had developed after Second World War, especially under Communism (Zubrzycki 2009:204). Two simultaneous processes – changes in the religious and ethnic landscape of Poland and Roman Catholic Church’s resistance to the Communism – had great influence in creating “the Polak = katolik equation” (Zubrzycki 2009:204). The strong bond between *Polishness* and the religion originates in the fact that the Church presented itself as a defender of Polish values, nation and its people, “the foot-soldier entrenched against an illegitimate, foreign, and colonialist party-state” (Zubrzycki 2009:205), and also as a victim of Communistic system. Therefore, the Church together with the victims, Poles, were on the same side in the conflict with Soviets. The Church and the nation untied against the foreign regime which formed a differentiation between “us” and “them”. Those who did not identify with the state identified with the church, and built their national identity based on religion. The fusion of religion and nation was, “largely taken for granted” (Zubrzycki 2009:208), therefore when there was no more common enemy against which nation and the Church could unite, the religion became influential in a different way. It became “the prism though which identities could be viewed and consciously constructed” (Zubrzycki 2009:208). Zubrzycki said, “the Polak-katolik” is “a specific construction of Polish national identity, closely related to the structural contexts in which it was first formulated, took root, and became naturalized as doxa” (Zubrzycki 2009:205).
However, Communism was just one of the “unwelcome foreign squatters” in Poland before the year 1989. Hence, the transitions after the Revolutions of 1989 were not only economic but predominantly social. Poland has regained its independence, and national identity. Although political borders of Poland under Communism matched with the ethnic nation, Poles believed that the state is not “truly Polish”, therefore Polish national identity is possibly less ethnically based than it appears to be. The state built by Poles since 1989 is a national state “of and for Poles”. “Unlike countries in Western Europe, which have long histories of accepting immigrants from diverse cultures, the former Communist states tend to be highly homogeneous.” (Lyman, 2015). Post-Communist era in Poland is the time when the redefinition of relations between the Church, the nation, and the state happened. Therefore, the nationalistic movements may be an attempt to go back to the national identity which is based on shared religion and ethnicity. Hence, the cross is used among civil society as a tool to differentiate “us” from “them”, and exclude from the nation those who do not identify with the idea of ethno-Catholic state, based on Christian values and traditions. It is a common idea in Poland that national identity is something which one inherits, therefore it often happens that those who oppose the right-wing ideology of national identity being a blood-based concept are deemed as “non-Poles” (Zubrzycki 2009:208-210).
3. Methodology

The approach to the fieldwork was qualitative. The choice of qualitative methods was based mostly on the fact that “people’s beliefs are diverse and multifaceted” (Stausberg & Engler 2011:310), which makes them very difficult to study with the use of quantitative methods. Moreover, “qualitative interviews result in rich, complex and nuanced data” and one of their main purposes is “to understand and interpret people’s thoughts, beliefs, ideas and conceptions” (Stausberg & Engler 2011:311), which makes them the most accurate tool in the study of religion, such as this study.

The chosen research method is semi-structured interviews conducted with five participants. Due to time and distance, there had been limitations, and therefore the interviews had been conducted by Skype. All the interviews were conducted in Polish, recorded and later transcribed and translated by me. They started with specific issues addressed to participants, but remained open for new themes and questions (Stausberg & Engler 2011:310). All of the participants agreed that I use their real names in this paper. It is important to note that all of the participants are of approximately the same age, which means that they represent only a certain segment of the society. This research is a case study of five participants, and results of it cannot be by any means used to make any generalized knowledge claims. The aim of the study is to analyse data from a diverse sample, rather than to collect statistically representative data.

3.1. Limitations

This research is a small-scale study based on the interviews with five individuals. In regards to the limited nature of this research, I would like to emphasise that it is not possible to make universal conclusions about religious minorities in Poland, their role in the society and racism in relation to religion in Poland based on this study. This research portrays five different cases and it is not an attempt to generalize the phenomena of religious minorities or multiculturalism as a whole.

Other limitations of this research are connected to the availability and contact with representatives of religious minorities in Poland. Despite my efforts, only five individuals agreed to participate in the study. Although I did try to contact religious organisations, such as
community centres and culture centres, my attempts to speak to members were unsuccessful. Such difficult access to religious organisations might be a result of a different factors, such as religious prejudice in the society, unfavourable media narration, fear and unwillingness to let outsiders is. It would have been interesting to present opinions of participants in a different age, but considering the mentioned restraints, and my own experience, it is easier to contact young people as they are more trusting and less concerned about social prejudice. It is on the other hand important to let the youth express their opinion due to their important role in shaping society and the next generations. Although it would also be interesting to compare what young people think with what other age groups think.

3.2. Interviews

I chose my participants with regard to nationality and religious beliefs within certain constraints of availability. I had originally planned to conduct a few more interviews but due to several factors it was very difficult to find volunteers to participate. One of the main factors were the limitations in accessing religious minorities as an outsider. I came in contact with a few religious organisations, however, only one of them agreed to ask members if they are willing to participate in my study. People’s unwillingness to participate was another reason why finding more interviewees was difficult. The current political and social situation in Poland, influences the minorities’ comfort and freedom to express their beliefs. Therefore, the unwillingness to participate was a result of either lack of interest or trust towards outsiders who want to study minorities. Due to the mentioned obstacles, I contacted most of the participants though my friends and acquaintances, who firstly contacted interviewees, informed them about the study, and asked whether they agree to take part in it. I was introduced to my first participants by friends of mine. To find next participants I used the technique of snowball sampling (Jensen & Laurie 2016:99). I had asked the contacts I had to refer me to other contacts falling into the characteristics. This technique worked well in this particular study, as recruiting participants who have different religious affiliations, apart from Roman Catholic, would have been difficult with different recruitment method. Because of the way I found the participants, the relation between the researcher and participants was more casual than it would have been if we had been complete strangers. Therefore, interviews were similar to conversation between two individuals with mutual interests which resulted in honest and relaxed discussion because “a more non-hierarchal and intimate relation between
the interviewer and the interviewers contributed to richer material” (Stausberg & Engler 2011:311).

The five interviews were conducted in order to describe how representatives of different religious minorities view their role and position within Polish society, and how they view the situation of immigrants in Polish society. To answer the research question, I present and analyse participants’ personal experiences regarding integration within Polish society and the feeling of “otherness”. Starting with their own experiences participants express their views on multiculturalism, religious and ethnic homogeneity in Poland. The material presented in this thesis consists of both the interviews and theoretical data collected simultaneously though literature review.

A study of this kind cannot make strong claims regarding the population. Instead, as much of anthropological researchers, I am aiming to pick up on to offer a description of lived experiences of a few individuals, in particular members of minority communities. Their experience might be of interest to researchers whether or not they are representative of large numbers of people in the society.

3.3. Ethical considerations

According to Steve Mann (2016), the most important ethical considerations in the interview research include informing participants about the study, asking for their consent, guaranteeing them privacy, trying to predict what impact the interviews will have on the participants and ensuring that no harm will be done to them throughout the study process. When searching for the participants I informed each of the people I had talked to about the details and nature of the research. Moreover, before and after each interview, I had asked the participants whether they want to ask any questions about the interview or the research, or express their thoughts on anything what we spoke about, or we were yet to discuss. I informed all the participants that I am going to make the data available to them in case they want to have an access to the thesis or just to the subchapter about themselves.

One of the great risks of interviewing participants is creating the atmosphere of intimacy, especially when discussing personal matters. Expressing empathy in the contact with participant may result in oppressing him/her and putting in the vulnerable position where the
power distribution between researcher and participant is unequal. However, maintaining the distance between the researcher and the participant is not easy as interviews “are very similar to the empathic exploration found in good person-centred therapy” (Mearns & Thorne cited in Elliott & Timulak 150:2005). A caring approach of the researcher can have a negative effect on the research (might limit the data), and possibly lead to “unethical practices” (Watson cited in Mann 2016:162). Empathy may be even used as a tool to manipulate the participant. Researchers should not exploit the trust of participants to encourage them to reveal information which he/she would not share under different circumstances. On the other hand, empathy “is something which needs maintaining in interview interaction” (Mann 2016:162). It is therefore important to recognize the importance and impact of using (or not using) empathy in the relationship between researcher and participants. During the conversations with participants, I tried to avoid being empathetic in a way which characterise counselling.

It is important to note that I did not want to treat the participants as objects which are studied by me because of their “otherness”. I wanted them to be a part of the study process, and the interviews to have a form of conversations where both researcher and participants can change the topic or ask questions. I had tried not to impose my ideas and personal beliefs on the participants, however, that had been rather difficult given the conversation-like form of the interviews.
4. The interviews

The questions were mostly predetermined before the interviews, but participants were also free to talk about other related topics which they had found particularly interesting or important. The topics included religious identity, Polish society, religious and ethnic minorities, integration and reflection on current political and social situation in Poland in regard to refugees, immigrants and minorities. I asked both about participants’ personal experiences and their opinions, and observations.

Each interview started with an introduction when participants were free to share whichever information about themselves they found the most interesting and/or relevant. The latter part of each interview was based on the following questions:

1. Where do your religious beliefs originate? Is your family religious? If yes, do they belong to the same religious organisation as you do?
2. Did you experience any situations in which you felt that you are treated differently than others because of your religious beliefs?
3. Do you think that your level of integration with Polish society is different from the Christians’ level of integration?
4. Are people in Poland more likely to accept a neighbour or a family member from different ethnic background or from different religious background?
5. What is in your opinion the biggest obstacle for Poles in the integration with different nationalities or with people from different religious background than Catholic?
6. Is there a space in Polish society for everybody who lives in Poland right now?
7. Is Polish national identity based on the common ethnicity and religion?
8. Do you think that that your voice is heard? Is there a space for religious minorities in the public sphere in Poland?

After the last question, all of the participants were asked whether they want to share their thoughts and/or conclusions about the discussed topics or the research itself. The participants were also encouraged to ask additional questions.
4.1. Kasia

Kasia has lived in Warsaw since her parents moved there from Cracow when she was 5 years old. Kasia studies and teaches children French. She spent 10 months in Paris, where she worked as au pair, and 5 months in Belgium. She is 24 years old and currently writing her bachelor’s thesis. Kasia was the first participant I interviewed. I contacted her thanks to our common friend.

She is a Protestant, and belongs to Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland. She told me that she “inherited” the religion from her mother who used to be very involved in religious practices, and even wanted to become a priest, but during the process she had lost her faith. Although Kasia’s father is Catholic, and her mother doesn’t believe in God anymore. All her siblings, including herself, remained Protestant, mostly because of her grandmother’s influence.

Kasia said that she did not experience any situations in which she was treated differently than others because of her religious identity. She did not attend religious education in school [in Poland religious education refers to the teaching of a particular religion – Catholic Church – rather than religions in general], however, she had not suffer any form of discrimination or bulling from her peers or teachers because of that. The only significant difference between Kasia and her Catholic friends, is that some excluded her from being potentially their children’s’ godmother, as godmother is responsible for religious and spiritual guidance for the child. Nonetheless, at the time when her mother was at the primary school her peers were told by their parents to not play with her because she wasn’t Catholic.

I asked if she feels that her level of integration with Polish society is any different because of her religious background than it would be if she was Catholic. Kasia answered: “I am also Christian. There are, of course, differences between Catholics and Protestants, and there is actually quite a lot of them, but on the other hand the differences aren’t so huge and visible as they would be in case of some other religion”. She said that religion does not influence one’s tolerance that much as she herself knows both religious people who are liberal and open for others and religious people who stand against everything what is different for them. Accordingly, Kasia thinks that her ability to integrate with Polish society is not determined at all by her religious identity.
When asked whether Polish people are more open to accept a neighbour or a family members who has different religious background or who has different ethnic background, Kasia said: “Well, that’s a good question… I think nowadays most of the people would more likely accept a person who is ethnically different rather than for example a Muslim. But if you had asked me five years ago I am not sure if my answer would have been the same”. She explained that the persecution of Muslims which takes place today in Poland makes it impossible for majority of people to accept someone in hijab as their neighbour. I asked her about her stay in France and Belgium, about how social view on immigrants there differs from what we observe in Poland and whether issues concerning this group are addressed in some other way. The number of immigrants differs a lot, she said. She moved to describe the problem of intolerance in Poland:

I have always thought that it is much easier to be tolerant and not be racist in Poland than somewhere else, because in Poland there is really no one we could not tolerate. For me personally skin colour, nationality and religion don’t have any influence on how I see people. However, when I had lived in Paris I was staying in the neighbourhood with a very high number of black immigrants, and I was accosted by them on the street quite often. Still that did not change the way I see the black people. But I know everybody reacts differently. (…) If you have contact with just one person from a certain ethnic group automatically that person represents the whole group to you. And in case that person isn’t a good “ambassador” you easily judge the whole ethnic group based on what that one person did.

The biggest obstacle in the process of integration in Poland is Poles’ lack of interest and lack of will to socialise with foreigners, Kasia argued. She added that such luck of interest in new things results in the situation in which Poles do not understand the importance of integration with newcomers. The will to integrate, although very natural in some societies, does not come from nowhere. Social awareness is built and developed both by individuals, and those in charge – government, public organisations etc. She also pointed out that it is not easy to integrate with someone you don’t have any contact with, and the most of Poles don’t know any immigrants. Based on people’s reactions on her religious background Kasia thinks that when Poles come in contact with something foreign for them, they have a chance to get to know it, to accept and even to like it. The problem seems to be the lack of expose to those
“new things” which in Kasia’s opinion leaves a faint chance that Poles will ever change their attitudes, as they tend to not seek the contact with “others” on their own. Although Kasia wishes it to be different, in her opinion not all of the people, especially refugees and non-European immigrants, have space in Polish society meaning that they aren’t treated the same way as Poles – they don’t get for example the same work opportunities or salary. She told me about an interview with a volunteer from a refugee camp in Greece she had read:

She [the volunteer] said that no one really wants to go to Poland because they [refugees] are aware that they are unwelcomed and unwanted here, they heard about anti-immigrant demonstrations which took place in Poland and they just don’t wanna come. Not because in Germany they will get better social aid, but because they know no one wants them here.

She strongly disapproved the fact that anti-immigration comments she hears come often from people her age which is, in her opinion, a warning sign.

Answering my question about pillars of Polish national identity she said that common ethnic and religious backgrounds are very important for Poles because “people are afraid of things they don’t know” so accordingly they feel safe “when everybody has the same skin colour and goes to the same church”.

Even though Kasia told me that she doesn’t feel discriminated or treated differently because of not being Catholic, she still feels that her voice is not heard, and religious minorities are not present in the public sphere. “There is too few of us to be heard. The only religious minority present in Polish media and public sphere nowadays is Muslims due to the immigration crisis and other factors.”

4.2. Kamila

I was referred to Kamila by our common friend. She comes from Southern Poland. She had lived four months in Scotland, one year in Jordan and one year in the UK, where she studied at the university. She had to discontinue her studies due to the financial reasons. She went to Jordan for a volunteering project shortly after graduating from secondary school. During her stay there she had learned about Islam which soon started to fascinate her. She had converted
to Islam nearly two and a half years ago. She comes from a rather conservative small town Catholic family, as she described it herself. Therefore, I had asked about their reaction on the conversion. Kamila said that people, including her family, often keep distance or dislike things or phenomenon they aren’t familiar with, hence her becoming a Muslim was a chance for her family to confront their stereotypes and prejudice. She, however, did not describe any details about her family’s reaction nor express her feelings about it.

When talking about her ability to integrate with Polish society, Kamila told me that Polish culture is strongly connected to drinking alcohol which is not allowed in Islam. Although she told me that she is in many ways excluded from the cultural life, because she does not drink, she did not seem to be bothered with her friends’ or family’s reaction. “I am treated differently, for example my grandfather’s wife treats me differently because I didn’t attend my grandfather’s funeral ceremony in the church” she said, sounding confident with her choice to skip the ceremony. Kamila was sure that Polish national identity is built on a common religion and culture and those two are mutually dependent. She ended this topic with asking a rhetorical question whether culture or religion is dominant in Poland and which of them influences and shapes the other.

Despite that Kamila doesn’t feel that her sense of unity with Polish society is any different than it used to be before she had converted to Muslim, she told me that she isolates herself a bit from Polish society, for example by not attending such events on which drinking alcohol is compulsory. I asked her if her circle of friends had changed because of it: “Since I have become Muslim I surround myself with different people than before. It is a natural change”. She told me that there was nothing wrong with her old friends, but they just don’t keep in touch anymore: “I just spend time with people who have similar interests. I don’t think I have lost anything”. Even though she doesn’t talk to her old friends anymore she got to know new people who she shares more with: “They understand that I go to the party and don’t drink alcohol because I am a Muslim and I can’t drink. They don’t try to persuade me to ‘at least have some beer’ like other people did”. Kamila told me that even though she did not encounter any unpleasant situations in which she would be treated differently than others while for example searching for a job, she read hostile comments about herself on the internet. She said also that people often ask her if she’s Polish, assuming that a person in hijab must be a foreigner. She found this uncomfortable and called such experiences negative.
“Poles are less afraid of those who look like themselves” therefore, she said, it is much easier to be unseen, hence not judged if you are a Muslim man rather than a woman. She argued also that it is more likely to be accepted as a family member or a neighbour in Poland if one is visually similar, even if he or she has different religious background than majority of Poles. Accordingly, a white German Buddhist has bigger chance of being socially accepted than a black French Christian.

The integration process is mutual and takes both sides to work on it. “We have to be the change”. Kamila explains that there is no good integration programme provided by the government or public organisations therefore people have to be engaged.

You firstly need to be educated yourself to spread the knowledge. Education about Islam is necessary in order to talk about our rights and for people to understand that we do not stand against Polish culture. The issue is that Muslims in Poland are not engaged enough to make our voice heard.

Kamila said that Poles need to open up more, and take the initiative to get to know others more often. The biggest problem in integration with the Polish society, in Kamila’s opinion, is the attitudes of Poles who are afraid of differences. “When people get naturally exposed to something new and unknown for them, and they don’t have any chance of escaping, they begin to understand and thus accept” she said, referring to her family’s reaction on her becoming Muslim. But Kamila mentioned other important factors making integration very difficult. She said that the media can be very harmful. They present a distorted version of reality that people believe in because of no possibility or will to confront “the truth” presented by media with the actual truth. She complained that one individual case presented in the media is often seen as representative of entire nation, or group of people, which is very dangerous and leads to biases and discrimination.

“Refugees are persecuted by Polish authorities. They [Polish authorities] are deporting refugees nowadays, they don’t do anything to protect people from racism. There is even a consent of authorities to offend and attack foreigners” Kamila stated and added that even Ukrainians, which are so similar to Poles in many ways, including the culture and ethnic background, are being treated badly by employers. Ukrainians, she explained, don’t get the same salaries as Poles. She expressed a frustration that while job offers are available for
everybody and everybody can apply for a certain position, it is much more likely that a Pole will be the one chosen for the job by the employer. I asked if the mentioned acts aren’t in her opinion breaking the international law, and therefore those who committee such acts could be prosecuted. Kamila answered: “This government doesn’t care what other countries or international organisations say. They don’t care about the law either”.

4.3. Daria

She is a 21 years old Jew with Russian descent. She was born in Poland where her parents moved from the Russian city of Perm. She has lived her whole life in Poland, and due to the long distance Daria visited her parents’ city just three times. She is a member of the Jewish Community Centre in Warsaw where she coordinates a cooking programme called Boker Tow. She studies history of art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. It took quite a long time for Daria and I to contact each other, due to the technical difficulties, but we managed to eventually speak.

One of Daria’s grandmothers was a Polish Jew, the other one belonged to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Both of them influenced Daria’s religious believes and had an important role in its development. She told me that she had always liked to emphasise her Jewish descent while talking to others, even though she initially did not really know what that means. As a child Daria was raised up in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. She used to go every week to the church with her grandmother. However, from time to time she used to attend Jewish events with her second grandmother. Everything changed when Daria was in the middle school: “I lost my interest in religion. I lost my faith in God and I didn’t want to take part in [Eastern Orthodox Christian] religious life anymore”. In the middle school Daria had met a friend engaged in the Jewish community who invited her for a Jewish summer camp: “This way I have met more and more people. I was attending parties and meetings for Jews and I have got involved this way”.

I asked Daria if she has ever felt treated differently because of being Jewish. She answered that her Jewish background has been rather appealing for people around her, and she has never encountered any negative reactions. She said that she has even tried to point out the differences between Jewish and Christian traditions to others because she found it interesting. However, she did mention that she has experienced anti-Semitic jokes directed at her, “but
only from random people” who she had limited contact with and, “did not care about how they treat her”. Daria feels that she is a part of Polish society, and the fact that she belongs to the religious minority does not influence this. She said that she takes part in the religious life in Poland same as Christians even though she does not belong to the Church but other religious organisation.

When asked about intercultural and interfaith relationships Daria answered: “I think that relationships between Christians, even those from different Churches, are much more accepted than relationships between for example Christians and Muslims”. She argues also that Poles are less likely to accept a neighbour or co-worker with different beliefs rather than a person with different ethnic background: “I feel that we are more likely to trust people who practice the same religion as we do. People who have the same values. If you see a European person who chose some ‘other’ religion it seems quite suspicious”. She said that she wishes that all the immigrants in Poland were treated fairly and had a chance to find space for themselves in the society. Although, she does not think that most of the newcomers are treated the way they should. She argued also that nothing is being done to help immigrants to integrate with the society, accommodation and financial aid provided by the country is not near enough, and government’s role shouldn’t end here: “Nothing is being done to allow newcomers to feel that they belong here”.

I asked Daria what is the biggest obstacle in the integration process of immigrants who come to Poland:

Fear which comes from the lack of information, and media manipulates information is a huge part of the problem. Immigrants are portrayed as parasites that steal jobs from Poles, and impose their own values. People are also afraid of newcomers, because among them there might be some terrorists. They think that every second immigrant from the Middle East blindly believes in Islam and follows everything what Quran dictates. Moreover, immigrants are seen as rude and loutish people who wouldn’t respect Christian values and would harass Polish women and girls. This is what people think about immigrants from more ‘exotic’ places but even Ukrainians don’t have it easy here.
She said that there is a historically motivated hatred towards Ukrainians and Russians. But also the fact that the majority of immigrants from Ukraine in Poland are blue-collar workers makes Poles treat Ukrainians with contempt. Stereotypes and biases were identified by Daria to be the most powerful in shaping Poles’ perception of immigrants.

I asked Daria whether there is a relation between Polish national identity and Christianity: “I cannot really say how it is everywhere in Poland because I live in a big city, but whenever I travel I am stunned at just how attached people are to the religion and tradition, and how hostile they are towards everyone who is different”. Moreover, she said that most of the people, in her opinion, are not aware that it is possible to be a Pole and be black in the same time. She also told me a story of how she witnessed a group of white Polish men verbally attacking a man of colour on the train: “They firstly just fooled around but when I interfered they started telling me that ‘they’ [people of colour, immigrants] come here and steal our jobs. They seemed to be just ordinary people though”. Daria observed that even though the majority of Polish society is religiously involved there is a trend nowadays of walking away from the church: “This is politically motivated I think. During the changes in the past two years, politics got mixed up with religion, and this turns many people off”.

Daria seemed to be confident that her voice is heard and that Jewish culture is deeply rooted in Poland. It is worth noticing that she mentioned several examples of how Jewish and Christian traditions are being equally respected by Polish authorities: “For example each year the President invites representatives of Jewish community to celebrate Hanukkah”. She argued that there is no religious discrimination, at least in Warsaw where during the past few years a mosque and an Eastern Orthodox church were built. “Most probably it wasn’t funded by the city or the country but still… such places exist”, she added and summed up that religious minorities are “respected and noticed” in Poland.

4.4. Karolina

Karolina is a 22-year-old Muslim. She lives in the small city in the south of Poland. As a child Karolina had lived in Germany for five years but as she admits she does not remember much from that period. She studies programme in food technology. Karolina spoke to me whilst being at the campus of her university, due to the limited internet access in the dormitory, where she lives together with her husband. She has been married to a Turkish man for the past
6 months. At the very beginning of this interview, Karolina told me about her husband’s struggle for temporary residence permit card in Poland. She explained that even though he has the legal right to reside in Poland because of his relationship with Karolina who is a Polish citizen he encountered many issues with obtaining a residence permit. She argued that a few years ago the rules were different and spouses of Polish citizens were automatically getting a residence in Poland, but now she said the rules had changed. “The woman at the immigration office had told me, that she is not very happy that some foreigner will be living in our city” Karolina said and added, “The way she had looked at me… it was the worst experience ever”. She had also experienced hostile reactions even from her professors at the university, because of her “contacts with Muslims”. Moreover, Karolina said that all of her friends turned their backs on her and the only people she talks to now are her colleagues at the university, yet even some of them had called her a “Turkish whore”. “It is difficult, I had been through a lot already. I have my husband and I have no one else apart from him. And there are of course some things I cannot talk to him about. There are some things that he cannot understand because he is not a woman”, she described. Karolina and her husband visited a mosque in Warsaw, and even tried to get to know people within Muslim community there but she said, “there are a lot of Arabs there and they did not seem to like us at all”. On the other hand, she thinks also that being a Muslim or being married to a Muslim in a small town in Poland, is more difficult than it would have been if one lived in the capital city.

Karolina told me, that due to the problems with finding a job which her husband experiences in Poland, they are thinking of moving to some other country. I asked her about the reason of her husband’s difficulties, Karolina answered that the biggest problem seems to be the fact that her husband does not know Polish and the racial biases amongst employers: “They just don’t give foreigners a chance”.

Both Karolina’s mother and grandmother were converts. Her grandmother converted to Islam shortly before her death at the age of 40. “My family has been, in general, Christian but my grandmother changed her religion a few times. She had always searched for something. My mom had converted as well, more than once. But my father and my brothers are Christians.” Karolina was a Christian herself before she has converted to Islam a few years ago. Karolina is married to a Muslim and her family knows about it, but she still did not tell anybody in her family about converting to Islam. Karolina expressed her insecurity, and told me that she is afraid of their reaction, because of what she experienced after telling her friends about
becoming Muslim. She told me also that it was already “very difficult” for her brothers to accept the fact that she had married a Turk. However, Karolina’s mother who converted twice before, talks often to her daughter about Islam, “maybe Islam is what she also needs, what she is searching for”, Karolina summed up.

Karolina told me that she doesn’t feel well-integrated with Polish society, because Christians who are the majority of the society, tend to isolate themselves from non-Christians and atheists:

People in Poland have a huge problem with accepting something which is different for them. If they are white Christians, they accept just white Christians. Last year, there was a Muslim girl in hijab in Poland on the Erasmus exchange. A bus driver in Wroclaw did not allow her to enter the bus just because she was veiled. Therefore, I think that Poles don’t like differences, they don’t like when something is different.

I asked Karolina what is a bigger issue for Poles – difference in the religious backgrounds, or difference in the ethnic backgrounds (for example skin colour): “I think religion, especially right now because of the terroristic threats”. She sees the Polish politicians and Polish media as the most influential reasons of the prejudice. Karolina argued that Polish national television channels are biased as the content they present is not comparable to what Western media show.

I asked Karolina whether she thinks that there is a place in the Polish society for everybody who lives in Poland right now. “Of course”, she responded quickly, her tone of voice suggested that there is no chance she doubts that Polish society is able to take in newcomers. “I am just not sure if they will fit in. I think that Poles are just not able to share their space with others, not right now”, she continued with a less confident tone, “I think we are heading towards ‘Poland for Poles’ kind of society. I think it is worse than it used to be”. Karolina distances herself from the Polish society, by calling the members of it “they” rather than “us” hence, I asked her whether she feels that her voice is being heard:

I don’t think my voice is heard. But there was a moment in the past when my opinion mattered. I used to talk to others, not only friends or family, and
express my beliefs. But I do not do that anymore. (...) Even few years ago people used to value my opinions, ideas but they don’t do that anymore. I don’t know why everything changed but maybe it is because of the relationship with my husband.

It is interesting that Karolina thinks that in order to be heard she needs to speak. No one, especially minorities, will be heard unless they are intending to speak up. She added, that authorities do not respect the needs of minorities. As an example, she gave the lack of multifaith prayer rooms at public places, such as universities or airports.

4.5. Grzegorz

Grzegorz is a 24 years old atheist who was a Protestant “for the most of his life”. The conversation with him was the longest out of all in this study. Grzegorz is interested in social and religious studies, therefore he had a lot of theoretical knowledge, which he had shared with me during the interview. He talked to me from his university dormitory. He moved to Warsaw from his hometown of Cracow. He studies social work at the Christian Theological Academy which is, as he told me, a very diverse school where representatives of all Christian denominations work and study. He had lived two years in Amsterdam and several months in the UK.

Grzegorz was raised up in the Lutheran tradition. His mother was the one who mainly introduced him to the religious practices. Most of the members of Grzegorz’s family belong to the Roman Catholic Church. He told me that, when he used to be a Protestant he experienced intolerance, especially during his school years when both peers and school staff expressed their prejudice towards all sorts of “others” including students with different ethnic and religious backgrounds: “They hated every ‘otherness’”. The expression of prejudice was mostly intensified in the primary school, as Grzegorz grew older he heard fewer comments regarding his religious beliefs. Grzegorz thinks that prejudice expressed by people in his environment was not based on the hatred or the will to exclude minorities, but on the lack of knowledge and education.

Grzegorz thinks that everybody is equal, no matter what he or she believes in, and therefore he has always tried to surround himself with other people who think the same way, hence he
does not feel that his integrity/integration with Polish society was in any way different than the integrity of those who belong to the majority (ethnic, religious, etc.). However, he thinks that his experiences differ from what is considered “normal” in Poland, and is particularly influenced by the people he has met: “Whenever I felt like people were intolerant and biased I just stopped talking to them. (…) Of course, that is not a norm in Poland that people are so tolerant. You just need to analyse the political situation in Poland right now, this regime-like system”. Grzegorz argues that most of the people do not mean to spread hate and their negative attitudes are not influenced by the ideology, but quite the opposite – the ignorance and “the lack of common knowledge”. People’s prejudice originates in “the fear of the unknown, the fear of all sorts of ‘otherness’”.

Grzegorz argues that Poles associate Ukraine mainly with the events of Volhynia massacre, and thus the attitudes are not based on the “rational” arguments and personal experiences but rather on the historically based prejudice. He concluded that the educational system should have been changed after the political transformations in Poland, like it had been done in Slovakia and the Czech Republic: “(…) the biggest obstacle on the way of understanding cultural and religious differences is the education, or the lack of it”. The education provided in Poland, consists mostly of delivering the knowledge with no space for reflection, and thus young people don’t get any moral guidance: “the lack of social pedagogy and social education is the problem in Polish schools, students don’t learn how to accept others and respect the differences”. He expresses also his disapproval of “extreme domination” of Catholic Church in all aspects of life. He, however, acknowledged that “Christian extremists” damage the image of the other Christians who are being misjudged. He added, that the number of extremists is growing, and the far-right movements have become stronger over the last few years: “Those people want to belong somewhere”. The need to identify with “something” that is perhaps the force increasing the popularity of nationalistic movements.

“People’s opinions on Islam are simply not valid unless they have read Quran. Media escalate the fear and people often cannot filter or compare the information delivered by media.” Grzegorz gave several examples of what he views as people’s ignorance and prejudice based on the false or unverified information. I asked him about his opinion, as to why people do not want to be informed, and why are they, as he had mentioned, not interested in the world around them: “Because it is easier to just make assumptions based on the newspapers’ titles. People read that an immigrant pushed someone down the stairs, and they automatically start
thinking that all immigrants can push someone down the stairs. Those patterns are made to make people’s life easier”. Whilst explaining the role of stereotypes, Grzegorz used the word ‘stigma’, he thinks that stereotypes can be both positive and negative whilst stigma is always a bad thing that functions to mark those who are undesired within the society.

He told me that people tend to have a more of a negative attitude towards his religious beliefs since he had become an atheist than when he belonged to the Lutheran church:

> When people hear that some calls himself an atheist, they assume that he or she is an atheist activist. But for me the term ‘atheism’ means disbelief in the existence of God. I am, however, very neutral. I love Jewish culture. I have always had lots of Jewish friends. I respect all the religions as long as they do not impose their values and moral principles on others.

He argues that, most of Poles do not seem to acknowledge the growing problem of intolerance in Poland, due to their limited knowledge and interest in the topic. A lot of people believe that what media presents is the whole, whereas in fact, what media presents is always an extreme example of a certain phenomenon. He added:

> Religious diversity in Poland is rather pathetic. The simple-minded people are most likely to accept a Christian immigrant from let’s say Anatolia or even Mongolia... or Kenya. People find it more difficult to accept newcomers with different cultural backgrounds than those with different skin colour. For example, Muslims are lately perceived the same way as Jews were perceived in the 1930s.

I asked Grzegorz whether cultural background equals religious background, as other Slavic ethnic groups, for example Russians, are often seen as the most culturally related to Poles, Chechens fleeing the Russian Federation are predominantly Muslims. And Islam, on the other hand, is seen in Poland as a “foreign” religion. He answered that those who are heard the most in the media, (usually politicians) are extremely xenophobic, and treat every sign of otherness as a possible threat hence it does not matter whether differences are culturally or religiously based. “Poland is not an empathic country”, he summed up. Regardless of this, Grzegorz
thinks that although nationalistic and far-right movements are present in Poland, the majority of the citizens is tolerant.

According to Grzegorz Communistic regime changed Poland from one of the most diverse places in Europe, into the one of the most homogenous. He explained that, “Polish national identity has been historically based on the idea of multiculturalism”. Moreover, he argues that the voice of religious minorities is not heard anymore since right-wing Law and Justice party won the elections in 2015: “Poland is the only country in Europe where 500th anniversary of the Reformation is not celebrated. Simply because it is not a Catholic event. But that would not happen in the past when there was a different government”. Catholic means ‘universal’, although the Polish government’s idea of a nation based on the exclusion of, minorities and oppositionists, is far from the Catholic values.
5. Conclusions and discussion

The following chapter presents the findings of my empirical research and my observations accommodated with the findings of another researchers. However, the presented conclusions will not cover all of the topics discussed with the participants during the interviews. The discussion is focused mainly on the aspects which I have found especially significant.

Prejudice due to the lack of exposure

One’s ethnicity is one of the sociopsychological identities (Priest 2007:98) helping people to define where they belong. The concept of ethnicity as a base of social identity is built on the idea that ethnic group one belongs to has inherited similarities. According to Robert Priest (2007) racism comes from the idea that ethnicity is biologically inherent. He argues that the limited contact and lack of deep relationships with “others” leads to positive notions. When talking to the participants, I had noticed that they think quite the contrary. Most of them has thought that the limited contact with “others” leads to prejudice. They see the lack of cross-cultural contact as the reason for racial and religious biases. They describe the fear of “otherness” as a strong factor in the development of biases which later lead to the discrimination. The reason of the fear is suggested to be the limited education and exposure to other cultures and religions.

Religion more important than skin colour

All of the participants, apart of Kamila, shared the opinion that for Poles the religion is more important than skin colour or other ethnic features representing “otherness” in the contact with other nationalities. They had agreed that it would be significantly easier for the most of Poles to accept a neighbour or family member from different ethnic background than someone who has different religious beliefs than them. For some of the interviewees, it seemed to be obvious, that even though Poles are perceived as racially prejudiced they are exceptionally biased towards those with different religiously-specific moral principles rather than those who are physically different. It is worth noting that the morals (or values) and religion are not the same thing. However, it is very difficult to distinguish morality from religion. When asked about what’s more important to Poles, religion or ethnicity, Daria answered: “I feel that we are more likely to trust people who practice the same religion as we
do. People who have the same values”. The acquired differences are according to most participants of this study of a bigger importance for Poles than innate ones. In this context Poles are believed to have deeper religious rather than ethnic identity. People, however, tend to prioritize different social identities at the different situations. Priest (2007) explains that whenever there is a conflict of two or more identities, in this case of ethnic and religious identity, “people choose one identity at the expense of other”.

**Media influence**

According to the participants’ observations it is common that Poles exaggerate the number of immigrants they think live in Poland. Such exaggeration is influenced by media which tend to emphasize foreigners’ presence. Kasia, Grzegorz and Kamila argued that media play a big role in shaping biases and prejudice in the society. They explained that due to media’s selective coverage of events people are likely to think that individual cases represent the whole group or nation. For example, the story of one Muslim terrorist might lead people to conclude that all Muslims are terrorists. This phenomenon can be explained with the theory of availability heuristic, the term identified in 1973 by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. It states that, the easier it is for one to think of an example of a certain event or thing, the higher he or she estimates the probability of it. Differences and similarities are used in societies as markers for people to give us “identities as persons in social context” (Priest 2007:97). Social identity and social category are built on the concept of differences between “us” – society and “them” – everyone outside the society. Defining “them” helps to define “us”. In Poland religion and ethnicity are equally an important part of identity foundation for many people. At the same time Poland is relatively ethnically and religiously homogeneous. Therefore, “they” are easy to spot in the society and stories about “them” in media are more distinctive. For this reason, people are most likely to remember examples of Muslims, blacks or Jews they have encountered.

Throughout the study the discussion about media as a factor leading to prejudice came up several times with different participants. As Ogan, Willnat, Pennington and Bashir (2014) noted in their study on prejudice in Europe and the United States, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim attitudes, are mainly associated with negative media coverage. The mentioned study showed that “media exposre to Muslim-related issues might have an impact on attitudes toward Muslims, and Islam in general”. According to the observations of the participants in
my research, many of them identify media as “harmful” and “destructive” for the integration process, and the development of multiculturalism. They argue that those groups of Poles who are not exposed to “others” rely their knowledge on what they hear or read about them in media. The lack of ability to confront these information delivered by media leads to biases and stereotypes which might linger in the society.

**Homogeneity**

Zubrzycki’s analysis (2009) of Polish national identity presented earlier in this paper correlates well with the findings of this research. All of the participants agreed that Polish national identity is connected, and/or based on the idea of shared ethnic and religious backgrounds, at least to some extent. Some of them noticed that Polish society used to be ethnically diverse in the past, hence Poles have mixed origins, which seems to be forgotten today and intentionally ignored. Therefore, it can be assumed that a large segment of homogeneity within Polish society, is a relatively new concept, originated after Second World War, and therefore it cannot, and should not be seen as an innate characteristics of Poles.

**5.1. Further research and policy implications**

Further research on how the role of minorities, and their position within the society develops would be interesting, perhaps comparing the experiences of older people regarding multiculturalism and racism with what young people experience today. Further research built on this study could be useful in creating more complex portrait of minorities in Poland, possibly to identify characteristics specific for each religious community. Moreover, further discussion on multiculturalism in post-communist Poland is also important from the perspective of entire nation as regardless prevalent prejudice, and negative attitudes Poland is slowly becoming more and more diverse, hence more research on this topic seems to be very relevant and needed.

It is important to further problematize the social integration issues which minorities, both ethnic and religious, face in Poland. Even though changing public policies in a more tolerant direction is out of the question at the moment it is worth noticing what the most of the participants suggested, that the education is a main factor in reducing prejudice as well as raising social awareness. Social integration programmes for newcomers and Polish citizens
could be a successful tool in building relationships of unity. Including members of religious minorities in creating such programmes would be beneficial both for the members, as participating in creating such project would be empowering for minorities, and for everyone who takes part in it as religious minority communities can offer unique insights on topics of multiculturalism and integration.

The Church’s role in shaping Polish society is crucial. Therefore, the Church, due to its powerful position and the impact it has both on Christians and the rest of the society, should put an effort into present and promote unity with others as a foremost virtue. However, the highly politicised position of the Church at the moment, sharpens religious and ethnic identities, rather than encourages Christians to see others through a prism of common humanity.
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