The communities providing religious education and catechesis to Polish immigrants in England and Wales

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Published online: 21 Jul 2014.

To cite this article: Paweł Małkosa (2014): The communities providing religious education and catechesis to Polish immigrants in England and Wales, British Journal of Religious Education, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2014.923376

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2014.923376

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The communities providing religious education and catechesis to Polish immigrants in England and Wales

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Since Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004, hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens have arrived in the UK in search of work, of which the majority landed in England and Wales. This process, although not as fast now, is still ongoing. The majority of immigrants from Poland are young people who start families and have children. Many of these children are born in the UK. For this reason, it is increasingly common for the children of Polish immigrants to be covered by the local school system. In addition to general knowledge, they also have the right to religious education and catechesis. This article presents a summary of the communities providing religious education and catechesis to Polish migrants living in England and Wales. It describes the specific features of religious education in state-run schools, Catholic schools and Polish Saturday Schools. The objectives of parish catechesis conducted by the Polish Catholic missions operating in England and Wales are also outlined. The primary objective of this discussion is to present the various options for religious education and catechesis for the children of Polish immigrants living in England and Wales.

Keywords: religious education; faith schools; multi-culturalism; Polish immigrants

Introduction

The phenomenon of migration is one of the greatest challenges facing today’s world. The International Organisation for Migrants has revealed that migration currently involves more than 3% of the global population, i.e. about 214 million people (IOM 2013, 19; UNSCEBC 2013, 77). It is also estimated that by 2030, the number of migrants will rise by another 30 million (IOM 2013, 30). The United States of America and Western Europe have the largest number of immigrants. In total, about 70 million immigrants live in Europe (Przewieślik 2013, 206). Depending on the immigration policy of host countries, immigrants either obtain lawful residence status with related rights or they are staying illegally, having no civil rights

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and risking deportation. In this context, migration between EU Member States is different. One of the foundations of this organisation (the EU) is the free movement of persons and the possibility of living and working in any Member State. Lawful residence status certainly helps immigrants find their place in their new reality, but it does not tackle all adaptation issues. Cultural barriers persist many years after arrival and a lot of focused effort is required to leave them behind and integrate with the local community. On the other hand, every person has the right to maintain his or her own cultural identity, particularly national and religious. Therefore, it is vital to provide immigrants and their children with the appropriate conditions for patriotic education and religious formation. Patriotic education primarily involves learning the history, culture and language of one’s homeland. For apparent reasons, patriotic education outside of the homeland is possible only in families and in ethnic (national) educational communities. In turn, religious education is of a more universal nature and can be carried out both by state organisations and religious associations in the country of current residence of the aforesaid immigrants. The right to receive religious education and catechesis is one of the fundamental human rights. This publication aims to show the opportunities of exercising this right by numerous Polish immigrants residing permanently or temporarily staying in England and Wales. Therefore, this article will show how varied the religious needs of immigrant communities are and how they can be answered comprehensively by providing religious education and catechesis in various environments.

The origins and scale of Polish migration after 2004

Due to Poland’s turbulent history, the many wars that have ravaged the country, the devastating times of Communism and the significantly worse economic situation as compared to Western Europe, we can speak of several waves of Polish emigration to the UK. The first wave consisted of Poles who stayed abroad after Second World War ended. A large part of these were Polish soldiers who fought the Nazis and did not return to Poland for fear of the Communist authorities. In 1949, the number of Polish immigrants in the UK was estimated at over 160,000 (Sword, Davies, and Ciechanowski 1989, 447; Szmidt 1998, 10). This group is now very small and usually closely integrated with their local communities. The second wave of Polish emigration occurred in the 1980s and was linked with the ‘Solidarity’ anti-Communist movement. It is estimated that between 1980 and 1989, about 1.1–1.2 million people emigrated from Poland due to political reasons (Dzwonkowski 2007). Most of them settled in Germany, however, and only about 43,000 Poles reached the UK at that time (Żebrowska 1986).

Without a doubt, the largest wave of emigration was the one that came after Poland’s accession to the European Union on 1 May 2004. The primary push factors were high unemployment and low wages. The UK’s pull
factors included job opportunities, higher wages, better social assistance and family reunification (MORPE 2007, 7). The large scale of the most recent wave of emigration can be seen in the fact that for the period from May 2004 to March 2009, there were over 620,000 registrations by Polish people (Home Office 2009, 8). According to the report of the Polish Central Statistical Office, between 2004 and 2010, there were about 560,000 Poles in the UK (GUS 2011, 3). The largest group of Poles settled in England and Wales. According to the data quoted by Drinkwater and Garapich, in the years 2002–2011, up to around 900,000 Polish migrants could have come to England and Wales; however, according to the Census, the population of Polish born people increased by around 525,000 (Drinkwater and Garapich 2013, 2). However, this figure does not include the self-employed or people working in the grey economy. Many Polish migrants are uncertain about their long-term plans, but the Institute of Public Policy Research has determined that emigration is continuing, but is slower than in the previous years. The number of Poles in the UK will most likely continue to grow in the coming years (Sales et al. 2008, 6).

The identity of Polish immigrants

Most of those who have emigrated from Poland after 2004 are young people. The vast majority of those people are under 40 years of age and more than one-third of them are under 25. None of the previous waves of emigrants was so young. A large proportion of emigrants are children under 15 (Dzwonkowski 2007). Polish immigrants into the UK usually perform jobs requiring limited skills (e.g. agricultural labourer, housekeeper, waiter, construction worker, cook, babysitter or carer). At the same time, some of them found employment in elite professions such as dentist, surgeon, anaesthetist, computer scientist, etc. (MG 2007, 10). Joanna Fomina lists the following three categories of Polish emigrants:

(1) the world of the well-educated, self-assured Poles who are confidently climbing up the social ladder; (2) the world of the less resourceful Polish immigrants, stuck in one place, which is often considered equivalent to certain socially marginalised groups, even though it includes both honest factory workers and petty criminals; (3) the world of the post-war Polish Diaspora, keeping their distance, looking critically at all newly arrived compatriots. (Fomina 2009, 24)

Among the most difficult challenges faced by Polish immigrants, especially at the beginning of their stay in the United Kingdom, is their poor command of the English language. Despite the fact that in all schools in Poland classes in this language have been in place for many years the average English skills are poor, although there are numerous exceptions. Although emigrant children and adolescents manage to learn English quite
quickly, adults often never learn anything more than several basic phrases, despite staying in the UK for a long time. The lack of a sufficient command of English has a number of consequences. These mostly include the necessity to accept jobs below the person’s qualifications and the reluctance to function outside a small group of acquaintances from Poland. Another problem of Polish immigrants in the United Kingdom is the increasingly intense hostility experienced from UK residents and even from government authorities. The immigrants are most often accused of taking the jobs of UK citizens, contributing to the decreases in wages and taking advantage of social benefit payments, which lays burden on the budget of the state that has received them. Leaving the validity of these accusations aside, they lead to an unfriendly atmosphere in which immigrants feel like intruders, and, in consequence, they do not get involved in the life of the local communities (Fomina 2009, 11–20; Hickman, Crowley, and Mai 2008, 150–152).

Yet another challenge for Poles staying in the UK is the ubiquitous ethnic and religious pluralism, which initially causes adaptation problems. This state of affairs is completely different from that in Poland, where people representing other nations and religions constitute a low percentage of the population. Despite the fact that pluralism in the UK is for Poles some sort of attraction and inspires them to get to know other cultures, they often feel lost in the new circumstances. The problems mentioned result in a very slow integration of Polish immigrants into British society. The lack of English language skills, hostility towards immigrants and the ever-present cultural pluralism make Poles create their own hermetic groups (See: White 2011, 5). As a consequence of these problems, Polish religious communities enjoy great popularity, being places where immigrants can speak Polish and feel accepted.

Another serious problem associated with emigration is broken families and the so-called euro-orphans. A considerable part of the population of immigrants staying in the UK left their spouses and children in Poland. This initially results in longing for the family and the growing sense of alienation, which can even lead to suicide. On the other hand, many families in which one of the spouses emigrated often fall apart after many years of being separated. The reasons cited usually are the lack of everyday contact, disagreements and finding new partners. It also frequently happens that both spouses go abroad, leaving their children under the custody of their grandparents or other relatives. This is referred to as the problem of ‘euro-orphans’, which is a widely debated issue in Poland. Such experiences have a very negative impact on the education and future of the children.

In the context of religious education, the essential factor is the religious identity of Polish immigrants in the UK. In this respect, it should be recognised that more than 93% of these people consider themselves members of the Roman Catholic Church (CBOS 2012, 3). The stereotype that Poland is a Catholic country through and through, and that Poles are very religious, is also widespread in the British mass media. In fact, however, the percentage
of practising Polish immigrants is not high and it is definitely lower than in Poland. According to the data published on the official website of the Polish Catholic Mission in England and Wales, about 10% of Polish immigrants go to Mass every weekend (PKMAW), although there are opinions that this percentage is around 30% (Fomina 2009, 17). There are still no reliable large-scale surveys on this issue. The above facts bring into question the condition of religious education and catechesis among Polish immigrants in the UK, especially in relation to children and young people. The conducted analysis concerning England and Wales, which are the most popular immigration countries of the UK chosen by Poles, suggests that four basic communities providing Polish immigrants with religious education and catechesis can be distinguished. These are state-run schools, Catholic Schools, Polish Saturday Schools and the parishes of the Polish Catholic Mission. These are described below.

**State-run schools in England and Wales**

The vast majority of schools in England and Wales are state run, even though the religious schools are also funded by the state. For this reason, most children of Polish immigrants also attend state-run schools. The report prepared by the Social Policy Research Centre at Middlesex University (Sales et al. 2008) mentions the large scale of Polish immigration into the UK, particularly into London, and the problems and opportunities generated by the presence of Polish children in English schools. Young Poles attending state-run schools have the same right to religious education as all other students because all maintained schools are required to teach RE and to have daily acts of collective worship. No research has been conducted to date regarding the percentage of Polish children and young people in this type of education although it can be assumed that the vast majority of them take part in religious education. This is confirmed by the situation in Poland, where 96% of children attend religion classes in primary schools, while in middle and secondary schools this figure is over 80% (KWK KEP 2013). The majority of Polish society is therefore in favour of teaching religion, and most probably Polish emigrants have a similar attitude towards religious education.

However, religious education in Poland is of a strictly confessional nature and is referred to as ‘school catechesis’ (II PSP 2001, 51), while state-run schools in England and Wales provide a different kind of religious education, which is primarily concerned with religious studies. It is aimed at learning about and understanding Christianity, but also other religions which have a place in the local society (Jackson and O’Grady 2007, 222):

The approach to religious education in state community schools in England and Wales is open and liberal, intending neither to promote nor to erode faith. It could be said that the particular approach to multiculturalism reflected in
the syllabuses reflects the particular history of civil religion in the UK, and Britain’s particular history in becoming a multicultural society (Jackson 2004). Religious education is thus potentially an arena for dialogue between pupils from different religious and secular backgrounds. (Jackson and O’Grady 2007, 236)

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority states:

Religious education seeks to develop pupils’ awareness of themselves and others. This helps pupils to gain a clear understanding of the significance of religions and beliefs in the world today and learn about the ways different faith communities relate to each other. (QCA 2004, 8–9)

This kind of religious education adopts both ‘Learning about religion’, which involves getting to know various faiths, moral codes and the rituals of various religions and confessions, and also ‘Learning from religion’, which is aimed at helping students find their own religious identities. This means that the very concept of religious education in England and Wales is different from that applied by Polish schools. We might assume that due to this it does not satisfy the needs of a certain group of parents and children. However, Polish immigrants definitely need education on the issues of multiculturalism and tolerance, as they come from communities which were homogenous in terms of nationality and religion.

Polish national identity has been constructed around identification with Catholicism and a myth of homogeneity, a myth which belies the diversity of its history. Contemporary Polish society is predominantly white, with 98% of the population ethnic Poles. […] This lack of acknowledgement of the diversity of Polish society means that many children arriving in Britain have limited experience of dealing with other cultural or religious groups. (Sales et al. 2008, 7)

In describing religious education in England and Wales, we should also mention the surprising and disconcerting issue brought up by the British residents themselves, regarding its low effectiveness in teaching about Christianity and other religions. Vexen Crabtree conducted a study which ‘shows that the vast majority of British children, as well as British adults are uneducated about even the basics of Christianity (let alone other faiths). Most cannot name the four gospels, etc’. (2012). This calls into question the quality of religious education in British state-run schools, which are attended by most children of Polish immigrants.

**English and Welsh Catholic schools**

In addition to state-run schools, the education system in the UK includes faith schools. There are just over 20,000 maintained schools in England and Wales, of which almost 7000 are faith schools. Around 68% of maintained
faith schools are Church of England schools and 30% are Catholic (DfE 2011). Currently, about 10% of all schools in England and Wales are Catholic schools, which means that in the 2013/2014 school year as many as 2257 schools are Catholic, with 838,000 children attending (CES 2013). This is a much larger figure than in Poland, where only 1.5% of schools are Catholic (RSKP 2012). The Catholic schools have a different approach to the concept of religious education from state-run schools and it is more akin to that applied in Polish schools, where religious education lessons are in a form of confessional catechesis, constituting a kind of preparation for sacraments. This is the type of religious education that Polish immigrants are used to and that which they expect in the country of emigration. In fact, the concept of religious education in the Catholic schools goes even further, as it assumes that it is the keystone of the whole education.

Religious Education Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools and Colleges in England and Wales of 2012 states:

> Religious Education is central to the curriculum of the Catholic school and is at the heart of the philosophy of Catholic education’, and further, ‘The primary purpose of Catholic Religious Education is to come to know and understand God’s revelation, which is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. It teaches about the faith in the context of a school which proclaims the Gospel, and invites the individual to respond to the message of Christ. As the individual responds to this invitation, growth in faith and knowledge helps the pupil to respond to the call to holiness and understand the fullness of what it is to be human. For some, then, Religious Education will also be received as evangelisation, and for some, catechesis. (CBCEW 2012, 3)

The Bishops of England and Wales are also aware of the differences between RE and the catechesis specified by the Catholic General Directory for Catechesis, and emphasise that:

> The relationship between Religious Education and Catechesis is one of distinction and complementarity. What confers on Religious Education in schools its proper evangelising character is the fact that it is called to penetrate a particular area of culture and to relate to other areas of knowledge. (CBCEW 2012, 3)

Within this approach, religious education cannot be associated with catechesis, because its purpose is different; it constitutes rather some form of pre-evangelisation and evangelisation aimed at inspiring students’ interest in religious life and making them familiar with the basic notions of Christianity. In school practice, however, it is difficult to separate religious education addressed to all people of good will, regardless of their beliefs, and catechesis addressed to believers and practising Catholics. In spite of these ambiguities and practical problems with the preparation of content for religious education for all students with different religious background, in British
Catholic schools, it seems the most similar to its Polish counterpart, barring the fact that in Poland, this type of religious education is provided by state-run schools. For this reason, the Polish clergy working with emigrants and Catholic bishops in the UK openly encourage Polish parents to send their children to Catholic schools and even prepare information on these schools in Polish (DofP 2013). However, such schools are often difficult to get into, due to the large number of applicants. In practice, then, most Polish children and young people attend state-run schools in England and Wales and participate in the religious education provided by these institutions.

**Polish Saturday Schools**

The Poles are a nation characterised by a strong national and religious identity and a concern for preserving these values. For this reason, the previous waves of Polish migrants to the UK have already created their own education system. As early as in 1953, the Polish Educational Society (Polska Macierz Szkolna), an organisation supporting Polish schooling by operating Polish Saturday Schools, was established. Currently, there are 121 Polish Saturday Schools registered with the Polish Educational Society within the UK (PMS 2013). London alone has 18 such schools (PSL 2013). The children of Polish immigrants (who pay a small fee) can attend these schools on Saturdays, studying the Polish language, history and geography, often also religion, folk songs and dances (Polonia UK 2008). After many years of stagnation, these schools have been experiencing an unprecedented growth since the new wave of immigration from Poland started. Many of them currently have no places for new students.

Polish Saturday Schools are based on a special curriculum published by the Polish Ministry of National Education for immigrants (MEN 2010). Most, but not all Polish Saturday Schools also provide religious education, although there are no formal guidelines imposed in this respect, and in practice, it is the teacher who decides about the content and method of religious education and potential textbooks. As there are no other models, this is usually done using a similar concept that is in place in Poland. The Directory for Catechesis of the Polish Catholic Church in Poland presents the position that religious education is a specific form of catechesis, which, in addition to education, should also serve the purposes of initiation (PDK, 82–83). Therefore, religious education in Poland assumes that it should lead to ‘the love for and clinging to God’ (II PSP 2001, 51). Religion classes applying this concept often feature prayer, the formation of religious attitudes and celebration (PDK, 82–83). This means that religious education in Polish Saturday Schools is effectively school catechesis. Some schools even provide preparation to the First Holy Communion, standing in for parish communities.
Polish Catholic missions

The Catholic Church in Poland has for years accompanied emigrants, regardless of their destination, and has established pastoral service centres, or the so-called ‘Polish Catholic Missions’ for them. The first such mission appeared in London as early as in 1894 (EP PWN 1996, 228). Currently, 99 Polish priests work as ministers in this area (PMKAW 2013). There are 69 Polish missions in England and Wales operating as personal parishes, which means that believers must file a special declaration of joining. The Catholic Holy Mass is celebrated in 207 towns and cities in England and Wales. In many places, Holy Mass in Polish is celebrated every weekend, in some, fortnightly, and in others, only once a month.

Every Polish Catholic Mission conducts sacramental catechesis in a similar way to how it is done in the homeland. Polish catechetical documents present the view that religious education ‘does not fully achieve the objectives of catechesis’ (PPK 2010, 10) and due to this, they recommend that catechesis be also provided in the parish. Parish catechesis must not, however, replicate the content of religious education at school, even if it is of a confessional and catechumenal nature. The fundamental objective of parish catechesis methodology is also the application of methods which focus on imparting knowledge, but at the same time, shape religious attitudes. These include liturgical and Biblical methods, celebrations, Bible courses, praying schools, pilgrimages and Lenten Retreat (PNR 73, 107, 139).

Still, Polish Catholic Missions in England and Wales usually conduct only catechesis to prepare pupils for their First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Selected missions also provide premarital counselling courses. Children of about 9 are admitted to First Holy Communion preparation courses. The number and frequency of catechesis meetings depend on the parish priest, and varies depending at his discretion. In some missions, preparation for the First Holy Communion lasts just about six months, while others organise 11 meetings. Candidates for Confirmation are between 13 and 14. This catechesis is also organised in a variety of forms. Sometimes these are limited to eight meetings.

Providing a clear-cut distinction between religious education at school and parish catechesis is also a challenge, as it is often the case that parish catechesis, in spite of the official guidelines, is no different from religion classes at Polish schools, and uses the same textbooks. As a result, it is possible for a child to attend a Catholic school, a Polish Saturday School and parish catechesis, all together. This means that a child can be taught the same content three times. On the other hand, it might be that the children of Polish immigrants participate in religious education only in state-run schools and in direct preparation to the First Holy Communion and Confirmation in their parishes.
Conclusion

Several hundred thousand Polish immigrants currently live in the UK, including a few dozen thousand children and young people of school age. A large majority of them live in England and Wales. In addition to gaining general knowledge, they have the right to religious education and catechesis. This publication was intended to show how varied the religious needs of immigrant communities are and how they can be comprehensively answered by providing religious education and catechesis in various environments. Owing to the diversity of the English and Welsh education system and the elaborate system of Polish schooling and evangelism, there are a number of communities in which instruction and formation can take place. This article was an attempt to provide summary information on these communities and to present the specific characteristics of each. It analysed religious education in state-run schools in England and Wales, English and Welsh Catholic schools and Polish Saturday Schools. It also presented the objectives of the catechesis provided in Polish Catholic missions operating in England and Wales. The primary conclusion of this discussion is that both the education system of England and Wales and the Church give Polish immigrants numerous opportunities to exercise their right to religious education. Polish organisations in immigration and the Polish ministry support these rights as well. This way, children of Polish migrants in the UK can have a number of possibilities to participate in religious education and catechesis. The role of parents and children themselves is to choose the community and the form of education which they see as optimal for them.

The analyses carried out in this article do not meet all the needs for research on the religious life of Polish immigrants in the UK. First of all, it seems necessary to conduct reliable empirical research on the immigrants’ religiousness and their needs in this respect. It would also be desirable to investigate the content, forms and methods of religious education in Saturday schools and Polish parishes. The results of such research could be used to develop an overall concept of the religious education and upbringing of Polish immigrants, encompassing both traditions learned in their homeland, and the religious, cultural and social aspects of emigration.

Notes on contributor

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