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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN POLAND, THE CZECH REPUBLIC, AND SLOVAKIA: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE



WYDZIAŁ TEOLOGICZNY
UNIWERSYTETU SZCZECIŃSKIEGO

Religious Education in Poland,
the Czech Republic, and Slovakia:
Past, Present, and Future

University of Szczecin
Department of Theology

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Part I. Introduction

Genesis of the Monograph

This monograph is the product of an intellectually stimulating and innovative international collaboration among three research institutions from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. The collaboration emerged from meetings of the European Forum for Religious Education in Schools (EuFRES),¹ which focus on religious education in schools across Europe, its origins, its current situation in a rapidly changing landscape, and the challenges and opportunities it faces. The joint project was initiated by scholars with extensive theoretical and practical experience in theological and pedagogical sciences. The main impetus for undertaking this endeavour was the need to compare the state of religious education for children and young people in these three Slavic countries, which, despite sharing a common history, exhibit significant differences in their approach to religious instruction. Many valuable monographs and articles on this topic have been created in the countries under analysis, the Czech Republic,² Poland,³

¹ For more information on the mission and activities of the forum, see EuFRES, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://eufres.org>.

² For example, see Stanislav Balík, Jiří Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989* [*The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1989*] (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2007); Markéta Jančarová, 'Právní úprava výuky náboženství v Českých zemích v 19. a 20. století' ['The Legal Regulation of Religious Education in the Czech Lands in the 19th and 20th Centuries'], *Revue církevního práva* 39, 1 (2008): 42–47.

³ For example, see Artur Mezglewski, *Polski model edukacji religijnej w szkołach publicznych. Aspekty prawne* [*The Polish Model of Religious Education in Public Schools: Legal Aspects*] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2009); Kazimierz Misiaszek, *Koncepcja nauczania religii katolickiej w publicznej szkole polskiej* [*The Concept of Teaching Catholic Religion in the Polish Public School*] (Warsaw: Towarzystwo Naukowe św. Franciszka Salezego, 2010); Andrzej Potocki, *Wychowanie religijne w polskich przemianach* [*Religious Education in Polish Transformations*] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo UKSW, 2007); Ryszard Czekalski, 'Rys historyczny nauczania religii katolickiej w Polsce' ['A Historical Outline of Catholic Religious Education in Poland'], *Studia Katechetyczne* 7 (2010): 99–125.

and Slovakia⁴ and these have become a reference point for the comparison undertaken. It is also worth mentioning the broader comparative studies of religious education in European countries that were undertaken in the first decade of the present century.⁵

Objective and Scope of the Study

This monograph aims to analyse religious education in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia from a comparative perspective. The authors focus on understanding how various historical, cultural, and political factors have influenced the current state of religious education in these countries. The scope of the study includes an analysis of the educational situation from the pre-communist period through the communist era to the present day. The level of secularisation and the specifics of local religious traditions are also considered. The work concludes with an attempt to suggest potential solutions for the future, although due to the topic and scope of the monograph, these are only preliminary and indicative in nature, aiming to outline perspectives for further research and development.

⁴ Empirical research on religious education in Slovakia is still in its beginnings and concerns conceptual rather than empirical research. We can mention here, in particular, Dana Hanesová, who is one of the few who has dealt with the concept of Religious Education in Slovakia and in the European context (Dana Hanesová, *Náboženská výchova v školách [Religious Education in Schools]* (Banská Bystrica: PF UMB, 2005); Dana Hanesová, *Náboženská výchova v Európskej únii [Religious Education in the European Union]* (Banská Bystrica: PF UMB, 2006). In addition, from an Orthodox perspective, Religious Education has also been addressed by Zozuláková and Zozulák (Viera Zozuláková, Ján Zozulák, 'Religious Education in Slovakia – the new challenges', *The International Journal of Educational Researchers* 3, 3 (2010): 43–56). In the last decade it has mainly been Tibor Reimer who has devised the theoretical foundations of religious education in Slovakia (Tibor Reimer, 'Religious Education at Schools in Slovakia', in *Religious Education at Schools in Europe, Part 1: Central Europe*, eds. Martin Jäggle, Martin Rothgangel, Thomas Schlag (Vienna: V&R unipress, 2016), 223–248); Tibor Reimer, 'Ethikunterricht und Religionsunterricht in der Slowakei. Eine Beziehung zwischen Zusammenarbeit und Konkurrenz' ['Ethics and Religious Education in Slovakia: A Relationship Between Cooperation and Competition'], *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum* 30, 1 (2022): 69–87). In recent years, however, other publications on religious education have been added, especially by Ondrej Kaščák and others (Ondrej Kaščák, Zuzana Danišková, 'For God and for Nation! The ideologisation of school and education under the changing relationship between Church and State in Slovakia', *Human Affairs* 32 (2022): 162–179); Ondrej Kaščák, Eszter Neumann, Zuzana Danišková, 'The Pendulum of Secularization and De-secularization: Nationalism, State-church Relations and Religious Education in Hungary and Slovakia', in: *Educational Secularization Within Europe and Beyond: The Political Projects of Modernizing Religion through Education Reform*, ed. Mette Buchardt (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2025), 261–286).

⁵ For example, see Hans-Georg Ziebertz, Ulrich Riegel, eds., *How Teachers in Europe Teach Religion: An International Empirical Study in 16 Countries* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2009).

Research Methodology

The monograph is based on comparative analysis and analysis of contemporary sources such as legal documents, curricula, scholarly works, and statistics on religious education. The authors employed a uniform research structure, which allowed for a systematic comparison of the situation in the three countries. An interdisciplinary approach combining theological, pedagogical, and sociological aspects was applied.

Structure of the Monograph

The monograph is divided into five main sections:

1. **Conditions of Religious Education** – includes an analysis of the historical and socio-religious context of religious education.
2. **Development of Educational Policy after the Fall of Communism** – presents changes in educational policy in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia since 1989.
3. **Legal Regulations Regarding Religious Instruction** – analyses the legal provisions in force in each of these countries concerning public schools and kindergartens.
4. **Curricular Foundations for Religious Education** – presents and compares documents regulating religious education (curricular foundations, teaching programmes), their objectives, and contents.
5. **Perspectives of Religious Education** – highlights possible future developments in religious education and potential challenges that may arise in the coming years.

This monograph makes an integral contribution to the research on religious education in Central European countries, and will be helpful both for researchers and practitioners involved in religious education, either in specific countries or from a European perspective.

Part II. Determinants of Religious Education

1. Historical Context

1.1. Poland

Following 123 years of partitions, Poland returned to the maps of Europe as a state in 1918 after the First World War. Religious education had already been taught in schools in the partitioned Austrian, Prussian, and Russian territories; however, the manner in which it was taught varied in each partition, and thus its analysis goes beyond the scope of this study.¹ In general, religion was taught in existing schools, but this was accompanied by extremely difficult circumstances, especially those related to Germanisation and Russification.²

The Interwar Period

The principle of compulsory religious education in schools was adopted during the First World War (1914–1918) and was later upheld in the March Constitution and, without changes, in the Constitution of April 23, 1935.³ The constitutional provisions stipulated that all pupils up to the age of 18 should receive religious education; this applied to churches and religious associations that were legally recognised in the Second Polish Republic. These associations designed curricula and designated religious education teachers for state approval.⁴ Despite the strong legal basis and compulsory nature of religious

¹ Misiaszek, *Koncepcja*, 63.

² Czekalski, 'Rys historyczny', 110.

³ Mezglewski, *Polski model*, 11–12; cf. Ryszard Polak, *Religia rzymskokatolicka w szkołach II Rzeczypospolitej* [*Roman Catholic Religion in the Schools of the Second Polish Republic*], (Lublin: Polihymnia, 2007), 139–142.

⁴ Albert Wołkiewicz, *Główne idee polskich programów katechetycznych* [*Main Ideas of Polish Catechetical Programmes*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UPJPII, 2018), 148.

education, there were also opponents of this teaching and proponents of the so-called secular school. Some argue that the issue of religious education in Polish schools was the most divisive and emotionally charged topic discussed at the Teachers' Sejm, held in Warsaw from 14–17 April 1919. This educational congress aimed to make decisions related to the future of education in newly independent Poland.⁵

Between 1918 and 1939, the school system allowed pupils to choose their religious confession under the conditions described earlier. However, it did not recognise the concept of non-religiosity. In practice, therefore, the principle of freedom of conscience and religion did not apply to non-believers, despite its inclusion in the Constitution.⁶ The vast majority of society identified as Catholic, although, depending on the region, this was associated with the Latin, Armenian, or Greek-Uniate rites.⁷

The measures that had been designed were largely disrupted and nullified by the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, as well as by the redistribution of power and spheres of influence after its conclusion. Systematic destruction of Polish education also occurred during the war; approximately 30% of Polish teachers perished during the war and as a result of it, and around 60% of the permanent assets of Polish schools were destroyed. It is worth mentioning that, on an unprecedented scale, organised secret teaching attempted to fill the educational gap during the war.⁸

The Period of the Polish People's Republic (1945–1989)

The upheavals in religious education in post-war Polish schools were related to the pressure exerted by the communist authorities and their convoluted policy towards the Catholic Church. These changes were fundamentally directed against the overwhelming majority of society. Despite the communists taking power in Poland after the Second World War, the solutions adopted regarding religious education were similar to those from the interwar period (1918–1939).⁹ However, the rupture of the Concordat with the Vatican in September 1945 was an attempt to limit the Church's educational and formative activities. Breaking this international agreement created a legal vacuum in the relations between the Church and the state. From then on, the state had no obligations towards the Church, but could issue legal acts that were binding on the Church.¹⁰

⁵ Misiaszek, *Koncepcja*, 64–70.

⁶ Mezglewski, *Polski model*, 36–37.

⁷ Magdalena Malik, 'Stosunki wyznaniowe w II Rzeczypospolitej (1918–1928)' ['Religious Relations in the Second Polish Republic (1918–1928)'], *Perspectiva* 22, 2 (2023): 87–88.

⁸ Wołkiewicz, *Główne idee*, 152.

⁹ Mezglewski, *Polski model*, 37.

¹⁰ Misiaszek, *Koncepcja*, 86.

In the early post-war years, religious education in schools was limited through various executive acts. The first of these was the Minister of Education's circular of 13 September 1945, which introduced the possibility to opt out of religious education in schools, thereby marginalising its role. From 1948 onwards, school prefects (priests) and religious persons were removed, and contracts with secular religious education teachers were not renewed. Despite the agreement signed by the state and the episcopate on 14 April 1950, which gave hope for the normalisation of religious education in schools, the 1950s saw the systematic removal of religious education from Polish schools, with an apparent thaw in 1956. By 1961, religious education had practically disappeared from schools, and the entire burden of religious education and formation fell on the parishes.¹¹

The transfer of religious education from schools to parish catechetical rooms did not mean autonomy and peace for those involved in teaching it. The 1960s and 1970s saw various attempts at repression towards parishes, parish priests, religious education teachers, and their supporters. Only at the beginning of the 1980s did a gradual change occur, when school principals were obliged to consult parish priests on timetables to enable children and adolescents to attend religious education classes. Religious education classes were also made available to children and adolescents staying in sanatoria, reformatories, and children's homes. In essence, religious education in catechetical rooms continued until freedom was regained in 1989, when the return of religious education to schools was one of the demands regarding the shape of a free Homeland.

1.2. Czech Republic

Located in the heart of Europe, the Czech Republic is an extremely interesting country with a rich and dynamic religious and cultural history. Since the dawn of history, Christian values have played an important role in the lives of the people of this region, and the adoption of Christianity was crucial in shaping national and cultural identity. However, the contemporary situation of this country is diametrically different, with secularisation becoming an increasingly widespread social phenomenon. Religious education has undergone many changes over the centuries, significantly impacting its current state. Although the nature and significance of religious education have changed, it is still a part of the education system. For a full understanding of the conditions that the Church must consider in the religious education process, the historical, social, and religious context of Czech society will be described. The aim of the following analysis is not to give a precise chronology of all events, but rather to highlight the significant trends and circumstances that have influenced the shaping of the mentality and attitudes of the Czech population.

¹¹ Potocki, *Wychowanie religijne*, 51–60.

The Mission of the Slavic Missionaries

The first significant event of strategic importance was the adoption of Christianity from Byzantium. In 863, the missionaries Constantine and Methodius first arrived in the Great Moravian State at the invitation of the Moravian prince Rostislav, and later at the command of Emperor Michael III. There, they taught in the Slavic language. During this period, Frankish missionaries were also active in areas that are now part of the Czech Republic. On 13 January 845, 14 Czech tribal rulers were baptised in Regensburg.¹² This resulted in a cultural and spiritual duality, with Moravia under the influence of Byzantine missionaries and Bohemia under the influence of German clergy. After Cyril and Methodius's deaths, their eastern approach was gradually replaced by Svatopluk's western Catholicism.¹³

The Hussite Movement¹⁴

The Hussite movement was one of the most significant events in the history of the Czech lands. Its influence on the formation of the Czech national and religious identity remains relevant in Czech society to this day. Jan Hus (1370–1415), a Czech theologian and rector of Charles University in Prague, criticised the Catholic Church for its abuses and departures from Christian principles. His teachings primarily focused on the necessity of Church reform, as well as issues of faith and morality.

Following his martyrdom in Constance in 1415, the Hussite Wars broke out (1419–1436), which were among the bloodiest religious conflicts in medieval Europe. The Hussite movement split into several factions, the most notable of which were the Utraquists and the Taborites. These divisions led to internal struggles and weakened the Hussite movement as a whole.¹⁵

The Reformation, arriving from Germany, quickly spread throughout Czech society. It reinforced egalitarianism, both in the religious sense of equality before God and in the secular sense within society. Although the Hussite movement ultimately failed to achieve its long-term goals, it had an enduring influence on the Czech lands. Hus's ideals had an impact on the formation of the Czech national identity.¹⁶ The legacy of

¹² Jaroslav Kadlec, *Přehled českých církevních dějin 1* [An Overview of Czech Church History 1] (Praha: Zvon, 1991), 9–34.

¹³ Kadlec, *Přehled*, 35–133.

¹⁴ For a more in-depth discussion, see Petr Čornej, *Světla a stíny husitství: (události, osobnosti, texty, tradice): výběr z úvah a studií* [Lights and Shadows of Hussitism: (Events, Personalities, Texts, Traditions): A Selection of Reflections and Studies] (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2011).

¹⁵ See Petr Čornej et al., *Dějiny země Koruny české I. Od příchodu Slovanů do roku 1740* [History of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown I: From the Arrival of the Slavs to 1740] (Praha, Litomyšl: Paseka, 2002), 153–202.

¹⁶ Kadlec, *Přehled*, 9–34.

Hussitism is evident in Czech literature and art, as well as in the religious practices of some contemporary Czech society.

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) also left a deep mark on the divided and wounded Czech nation. Emperor Ferdinand II's (1578–1637) victory in the Battle of White Mountain marked the beginning of a period of repression against Protestants and the onset of recatholicisation. The Jesuits played a key role in this process, establishing schools, colleges, and universities that promoted Catholic education. The Catholic Church systematically conducted intensive pastoral activities aimed at converting the population to Catholicism.¹⁷

The Habsburg Monarchy systematically sought to restore Catholicism as the sole state religion. Many Protestant leaders were executed and numerous Protestant families were forced into exile or conversion. The issue of Jan Hus's rehabilitation and the aggressive recatholicisation that followed remain, to this day, a great scar on the soul of Czech society.¹⁸

The Czech National Revivals

The 19th century was a key period for understanding contemporary Czech religiosity. This was the era of the Czech National Revival, which sowed the seeds of Czech distrust of institutionalised forms of piety. This period was pivotal in shaping Czech religious mentality, primarily through the adoption of Hussite ideas and their nationalist reinterpretation. Leading figures of the Czech National Revival, including František Palacký (1798–1876), Pavel Josef Šafařík (1761–1831), and Jan Kollár (1793–1852), were Protestant. Consequently, they promoted an anti-Catholic interpretation of Czech history, emphasising the anti-Czech nature of Catholicism and portraying the actions of the Catholic Church as detrimental to the Czech nation. In this way, a negative attitude towards the Catholic Church was cultivated systematically within Czech society. This negative

¹⁷ Tomáš Petráček, *Sekularizace a katolicismus v českých zemích: specifické rysy české cesty od lidové církve k nejateističtější zemi světa* [Secularisation and Catholicism in the Czech Lands: Specific Features of the Czech Path from Traditional Church to the Most Atheist Country in the World] (Ostrava: Moravapress, 2013), 29–30.

¹⁸ For example, see Jiří Kotyk, *Spor o revizi Husova procesu* [The Dispute over the Revision of Hus's Trial] (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2001), 160; Jiří Kejř, *Husův proces* [Hus's Trial] (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2000), 235; Jan Blahoslav Lášek, *Jan Hus mezi epochami, národy a konfesemi: Sborník mezinárodního sympozia, konaného 22.–26. září 1993 v Bayreuthu, SRN* [Jan Hus Between Epochs, Nations, and Confessions: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held 22–26 September 1993 in Bayreuth, FRG] (Praha: Česká křesťanská akademie: Husitská teologická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, 1995), 333; Miloslav Polívka, Jaroslav Pánek, *Jan Hus ve Vatikánu: mezinárodní rozprava o českém reformátoru 15. století a o jeho recepci na prahu třetího tisíciletí* [Jan Hus in the Vatican: An International Debate on the 15th-Century Czech Reformer and His Reception at the Turn of the Third Millennium] (Praha: Historický ústav Akademie, 2000), 163; Jaroslav V. Polc, 'Rehabilitovat Jana Husa?' ['Rehabilitate Jan Hus?'] *Studie* 115, 1 (1988): 41–54.

attitude was also directed at any institutional form of religiosity, as such institutions were fundamentally and programmatically perceived as restricting human freedom.¹⁹

According to the Catholic historian Tomáš Petráček, history had a profound resonance within Czech society during this period. The tragedy of Czech Catholicism lay in the shortage of educated Catholic elites, such as historians, who could skilfully interpret the history of the Czech nation from a Catholic perspective – much like Palacký did – while remaining more faithful to historical source materials than he was. However, such historians would also need to avoid being overly naive or excessively ‘pro-Habsburg’ in their interpretations.²⁰

The Period of the So-Called First Republic

Hostility towards the Austrian monarchy translated into hostility towards the Catholic Church. On 6 July 1915, a statue of Jan Hus was unveiled in Prague’s Old Town Square,²¹ while on 3 November 1918, the Marian Column in the same square was demolished.²² According to Protestant churches’ historical interpretations of this event, the column was erected in 1650 by Ferdinand III as a political monument. The statue of the Virgin Mary was used to commemorate the victory of Catholicism, represented by the Habsburgs, over the Czech nation, 90% of whom were Protestant.²³

After gaining independence in 1918, Czech society became highly anti-clerical. Although Catholicism remained the dominant religion, the contemporary political elite, led by President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), promoted a reformist movement inspired by anti-Catholic ideas of a national revival. Masaryk was a typical Czech humanist who identified with the ideas of socialism, Hussitism, the Reformation, and the national revival movement. He believed that some form of religiosity was beneficial for Czech society, but that it should take the form of a non-traditional, non-clerical Christianity.

In 1920 the Czechoslovak Church was established, and was renamed the Czechoslovak Hussite Church in 1971. By 1921, more than half a million people had declared their

¹⁹ Pavel Marek, *České schisma: příspěvek k dějinám reformního hnutí katolického duchovenstva v letech 1917–1924* [The Czech Schism: A Contribution to the History of the Reform Movement of the Catholic Clergy, 1917–1924] (Rosice u Brna: Gloria, 2000), 7–16.

²⁰ Petráček, *Sekularizace*, 63.

²¹ Jan Galandauer, *6.7.1915 – Pomník Mistra Jana Husa: český symbol ze žuly a bronzu* [6.7.1915 – The Monument to Master Jan Hus: A Czech Symbol in Granite and Bronze] (Praha: Havran, 2008), 162.

²² Petr Blažek, Vojtěch Pokorný, *Duchovní střed Evropy: dějiny Mariánského sloupu na Staroměstském náměstí v Praze 1650–2020* [The Spiritual Centre of Europe: The History of the Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague, 1650–2020] (Praha: Muzeum Karlova mostu, 2020).

²³ Veritas – The Historical Society for Updating the Legacy of the Czech Reformation, ‘The So-Called Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague: Information on Its History, Actual Significance, and Persistent Efforts for Its Reconstruction’, <https://veritas.evangel.cz/en/marian-column#history>.

affiliation with the national church in the census.²⁴ Separating from the Catholic Church contributed to the deepening of anticlericalism in Czech society. This separation also became a significant element of the Czechoslovak political system and a fundamental aspect of Czech national identity. The roots of the pronounced anticlericalism in contemporary Czech society can be traced here.

The process of secularisation in Czech society found fertile ground as it is the result of a long-standing distrust of religious institutions, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. From 1918 to the present day, the idea of Hussitism, the Reformation, and the national revival, distinctive to the Czech nation, has been recalled both symbolically and substantively. This is evident in the inscription of Jan Hus's motto, 'Truth will prevail', on the presidential banner.

The Period of Communism

Efforts to foster harmony and reconciliation between Catholicism and the Czech nation were disrupted by the outbreak of World War II and, subsequently, by the communist dictatorship. During this period, Czech society became distinctly divided along religious, ideological, and political lines. One of these factions, the most ruthless and ideologically extreme, seized power with the support of external forces, effectively launching a covert civil war against all those who advocated for democratic, Christian, and humanist values.²⁵

The communist takeover in 1948 did not immediately transform Czech religiosity, but it marked a turning point in state policy towards religion. Significant restrictions were imposed on religious freedom, and a system of state control over churches was introduced. In a heavily industrialised society with a relatively strong working class, laicisation and secularisation found a receptive audience.

The Catholic Church, viewed as a clear ideological opponent of the atheist regime, gradually became one of the most heavily targeted and infiltrated organisations.²⁶ This hostility was compounded by the Holy See's unequivocal condemnation of communism. Early attempts by the regime to establish a national church independent from the Vatican were thwarted by the opposition of both clergy and laity.

The marginalisation of the Church escalated through legal and administrative means. The Church was stripped of its economic foundations and placed under strict state supervision. The 1950s witnessed a wave of brutal repression: prominent and steadfast priests were subjected to staged trials for 'spying for the Vatican', while male and

²⁴ Tomáš Butta, *Církev československá husitská. 90 let Církve československé husitské* [*The Czechoslovak Hussite Church: 90 Years of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church*] (Praha: CČSH, 2010), 408.

²⁵ Petráček, *Sekularizace*, 76.

²⁶ Stanislav Balík, Jiří Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989* [*The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia 1945–1989*] (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2007), 15–40.

female monastic life was abolished. Entire communities were interned and placed in ‘concentration monasteries’.²⁷ On 26 May 1950, the Greek Catholic Church was officially dissolved by law and forcibly merged with the Orthodox Church, in accordance with a decision by the Communist Party Politburo. This marked the start of a prolonged and aggressive anti-church campaign, which lasted until the fall of communism in 1989.

The regime also attempted to recruit collaborators within the clergy. This gave rise to a movement of so-called ‘patriot priests’ (*Pacem in terris*) composed of individuals motivated by career ambitions or material incentives. Others were coerced through blackmail or physical abuse. However, historical records indicate that the communist security services faced persistent difficulties in recruiting collaborators, particularly among monastic orders. In the end, only a small proportion of clergy collaborated with the regime.²⁸

With all these efforts, trust in religious institutions declined, anti-clericalism increased, and society did not seek alternative solutions in other religious movements or groups. Instead, traditional religiosity and the religious worldview gradually gave way to a more private, disengaged spirituality, which eventually faded into widespread scepticism and indifference toward religion. The communist authorities convinced people that anti-clericalism was a civic virtue and that religion should be rejected as a false ideology serving to legitimise class oppression.

The repression of the Church involved a wide range of measures: constant surveillance and intimidation, blackmail, the withdrawal of state approval for pastoral work, removal of non-compliant clergy from parishes, and imprisonment. Believers who openly practised their faith were harassed and intimidated. These policies effectively drove religion out of the public sphere and into the private domain, leading to a sharp decline in public religious life.²⁹

However, communism failed to eradicate religion altogether. Small, unofficial church communities and underground religious groups continued to operate. These resilient circles would eventually become the foundation for the spiritual and institutional renewal of the Church following the return of religious freedom after 1989.

²⁷ Václav Vaško, ‘Přehled a charakteristika církevních procesů padesátých let’ [‘Overview and Characteristics of the Church Trials of the 1950s’], in *Církevní procesy padesátých let [Church Trials of the 1950s]*, eds. Jan Stříbrný, Václav Vaško, Oto Mádr, Vojtěch Vlček, Jindřich Zdeněk Charouz, Stanislav Balík, and Jaroslav Cuhra (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2002), 11–36.

²⁸ Petráček, *Sekularizace*, 90–93.

²⁹ Vaško, ‘Přehled’, 11–36.

The Contemporary Period

After the fall of communism, the societies of the Czech and Slovak nations, ideologically and historically intertwined, went through a turbulent period marked by widespread debate. Politicians, academics (including historians, sociologists, cultural studies scholars, ethnologists, theologians, etc.), as well as ordinary people in both countries, engaged in intensive discussions about their shared future. This period culminated in an amicable divorce – on 1 January 1993, two independent states were officially established in Europe, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Today, significant differences in religious life and societal attitudes towards faith distinguish the two nations. Slovakia is seen as more rooted in tradition and the Christian faith, with the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches continuing to play a particularly dominant role. By contrast, the Czech Republic has experienced a far more pronounced process of secularisation. While there is no widespread hostility towards a belief in life after death or religious expression *per se*, Czech society is characterised by a complex secular outlook shaped by historical, geopolitical, and socio-cultural processes.

The renowned Czech theologian Tomáš Halík describes this phenomenon as *Něci-smus*, in reference to the faith of modern Czechs, who often believe in an unspecified transcendent reality, that ‘there is something beyond us’ but that there is no need to identify with a specific church or to practice religious life.³⁰ Halík also characterises the Czechs as a ‘nation of Zacchaeuses’,³¹ referring to a society that observes the Church with curiosity, yet also with distrust. This implies that the Church must approach individuals with a clear and understandable message of religious truths, free from prejudice, stereotypes, political baggage, or historical simplifications.

At the same time, strong and often irrational anti-clerical and anti-church sentiments persist in Czech society, particularly around issues such as the restitution of church property. The 2012 restitution law reignited long-standing grievances. Even today, more than six centuries after the burning of Master Jan Hus, and over a hundred years since the unveiling of his monument in Prague, and the destruction of the Marian column, Czech society remains deeply divided on religious matters. These divisions reflect the extent to which history continues to repeat itself.

³⁰ For example, see Tomáš Halík, ‘Otázky a pochybnosti’ [‘Questions and Doubts’], in *Český ateismus: příčiny, klady, zápory* [Czech Atheism: Causes, Pros, Cons], ed. Michal Kittá (Benešov: Eman, 2006), 47–54; Paul M. Zulehner, Tomáš Halík, *Wir teilen dieses Traum. Theologinnen und Theologen aus aller Welt argumentieren ‘Pro Pope Francis’* [We Share This Dream: Theologians from All Over the World Argue ‘Pro Pope Francis’] (Ostfildern: Patmos Verlag, 2019); Mariusz Kuźniar, ‘Wychowanie religijne w Czechach’ [Religious Education in the Czech Republic], in *Leksykon katechetyczny* [Catechetical Lexicon], eds. Jan Koček, Jerzy Kistorz (Kielce: Jedność, 2022), 753–757.

³¹ Tomáš Halík, Andrzej Babuchowski, *Zacheuszu! Kazania na niedziele i święta* [Zacchaeus! Sermons for Sundays and Feast Days] (Kraków: WAM, 2006), 20–30.

A symbolic example of these enduring tensions occurred on 15 August 2020, when the Archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Dominik Duka, solemnly blessed the new Marian column. The event reignited historical grievances and opened up old wounds. Historians, architects, conservationists, theologians of different denominations alongside ordinary citizens all voiced differing views, revealing that despite the significant changes in Czech society, historical disputes remain raw.³²

In this complex context, religious education faces a unique challenge. In order to meaningfully shape future generations, it must take into account all these cultural and historical dynamics.

1.3. Slovakia

The Slovak Republic lies at the heart of Europe. With an area of 49,037 km², it is one of the smaller Central European countries. Due to its location at the interface between Western and Eastern culture, it often plays the role of an intermediary between countries. It is a sovereign, democratic and legal state that is not bound by any ideology or religion.

The most significant event of the last 35 years was the fall of communism. The collapse of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia took place in November 1989, creating the Czechoslovak Federal Republic. Following a brief and somewhat tense period of coexistence, the common state of Czechs and Slovaks ceased to exist on 1 January 1993, with two separate states, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, being established. The Slovak Republic became a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2000, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 2004, and a member of the European Union on 1 May 2004. In 2009, it joined the countries of the European Union that have adopted the euro as their national currency.

³² Veritas – The Historical Society for Updating the Legacy of the Czech Reformation, ‘Odmítavé prohlášení ČČSH k obnovení sloupu’ [‘The Czechoslovak Hussite Church’s Rejection of the Column’s Restoration’], accessed 25 September 2024, <https://veritas.evangelnet.cz/mariansky-slop#ccsh>; Pavel Černý, ‘Mystifikace dějin kolem obnovy sloupu na Staroměstském náměstí. Názor emeritního předsedy Ekumenické rady církví na obnovu Mariánského sloupu’ [‘The Mystification of History Surrounding the Restoration of the Column on the Old Town Square: The Opinion of the Former Chairman of the Ecumenical Council of Churches on the Restoration of the Marian Column’], *Christnet*, 8 August 2012, accessed 25 September 2024, https://www.christnet.eu/clanky/4888/mystifikace_dejin_kolem_obnovy_sloupu_na_staromestskem_namesti.url.

As of 31 March 2024, the Slovak Republic had a population of 5.4 million inhabitants,³³ of whom almost 13% were children and young people under 15 years of age. It is one of the youngest countries in the European Union, with an average age of 41.³⁴

Half of the population lives in municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. This gives Slovakia a rather rural character, with a rich folk tradition and culture, but also persistent problems of industrial development and employment.

Between 1948 and 1989, the Church and religion in Slovakia were subjected to a particularly harsh attack by the communists, with religion being forcibly driven out of social life. Between 1949 and 1950 all diocesan seminaries and male and female monasteries were closed, the Greek Catholic Church was abolished and Czechoslovakia broke off all diplomatic relations with the Vatican. More than 71,000 Slovak citizens were imprisoned during the 40 years of communism as a result of this attack. The communist regime killed over a thousand people and forcibly displaced over fifteen thousand. More than 13,000 citizens were sent to forced labour camps in Slovakia.³⁵

Amid the communist regime's brutal clampdown on religious freedom, a paradoxical phenomenon emerged: this repression, while intended to destroy religious life, ultimately enriched at least part of the Church. During the Stalinist era, nearly all prominent figures in Catholic cultural life found themselves imprisoned or in exile. In prisons and labour camps, some of them underwent a strange metamorphosis: if they had previously lived in an insular Catholic environment, they now found themselves behind Communist bars in forced cohabitation with people with different worldviews – Christians of other denominations, socialists and even disillusioned communists who had fallen out of favour

³³ Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky [Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic], *Stav obyvateľov k 31. marcu 2024* [Population as of 31 March 2024], accessed 25 January 2025, [https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/products/informationmessages/inf_sprava_detail/!ut/p/z1/tZJRb4IwFIV_jY9NL7RAeaoAUc0jIHS6UgTDYtqIRt_37VZC9LFPew-9C0yTm3t98pFniNhZJ9_Sq7ulFyp8-ZsF8ij2DjseEBxiGBYP4YL_zJzPQSC68ugonHfeqEACz0LAi4nzy5ESHACRb3-OFKcbjPf0Mgbrf_5V9O3Kn2-zanztRYpsbQ_SkWWBSqa7stzpr8JLeoVKhWFZLv3Qj0pnuNc1elejUHmX_NQJ5LLZ1PwICLAd3U6GKuTmijBEQY9RB1HAtYpWFZRFs3L4t6g3OWEWAEsK00AVE84Kg3DZNVGxsJiu90PKMQ1wm5LEUxWGagpeaMwil4cEiSfT89oDg-UdwK9IhqHGpcKbBoIfJGQ5e9XX5gRN15rPD8R8f6gOeD2WjP2_9djgIrhNqVFd-dnj9HxG1-0TXnhH7aVo9jBfiW_FvQX5N5w!!/dz/d5/L0IHskovd0RNQUZrQUVnQSEhLzROVkuUvc2s!/">https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/products/informationmessages/inf_sprava_detail/!ut/p/z1/tZJRb4IwFIV_jY9NL7RAeaoAUc0jIHS6UgTDYtqIRt_37VZC9LFPew-9C0yTm3t98pFniNhZJ9_Sq7ulFyp8-ZsF8ij2DjseEBxiGBYP4YL_zJzPQSC68ugonHfeqEACz0LAi4nzy5ESHACRb3-OFKcbjPf0Mgbrf_5V9O3Kn2-zanztRYpsbQ_SkWWBSqa7stzpr8JLeoVKhWFZLv3Qj0pnuNc1elejUHmX_NQJ5LLZ1PwICLAd3U6GKuTmijBEQY9RB1HAtYpWFZRFs3L4t6g3OWEWAEsK00AVE84Kg3DZNVGxsJiu90PKMQ1wm5LEUxWGagpeaMwil4cEiSfT89oDg-UdwK9IhqHGpcKbBoIfJGQ5e9XX5gRN15rPD8R8f6gOeD2WjP2_9djgIrhNqVFd-dnj9HxG1-0TXnhH7aVo9jBfiW_FvQX5N5w!!/dz/d5/L0IHskovd0RNQUZrQUVnQSEhLzROVkuUvc2s!/.](https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/products/informationmessages/inf_sprava_detail/!ut/p/z1/tZJRb4IwFIV_jY9NL7RAeaoAUc0jIHS6UgTDYtqIRt_37VZC9LFPew-9C0yTm3t98pFniNhZJ9_Sq7ulFyp8-ZsF8ij2DjseEBxiGBYP4YL_zJzPQSC68ugonHfeqEACz0LAi4nzy5ESHACRb3-OFKcbjPf0Mgbrf_5V9O3Kn2-zanztRYpsbQ_SkWWBSqa7stzpr8JLeoVKhWFZLv3Qj0pnuNc1elejUHmX_NQJ5LLZ1PwICLAd3U6GKuTmijBEQY9RB1HAtYpWFZRFs3L4t6g3OWEWAEsK00AVE84Kg3DZNVGxsJiu90PKMQ1wm5LEUxWGagpeaMwil4cEiSfT89oDg-UdwK9IhqHGpcKbBoIfJGQ5e9XX5gRN15rPD8R8f6gOeD2WjP2_9djgIrhNqVFd-dnj9HxG1-0TXnhH7aVo9jBfiW_FvQX5N5w!!/dz/d5/L0IHskovd0RNQUZrQUVnQSEhLzROVkuUvc2s!/)

³⁴ Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky [Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic], *Indexy vekového zloženia – SR, oblasti, kraje, okresy, mesto, vidiek* [Age Structure Indices – Slovakia, Regions, Districts, Cities, Countryside], accessed 25 January 2025, http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosext/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeID%28%22iF41FA7A868E74315A56CF26B722E3A07%22%29&ui.name=Indexy%20vekoveho%20zlozenia%20-%20SR%2C%20oblasti%2C%20kraje%2C%20okresy%2C%20mesto%2C%20

³⁵ František Mikloško, 'Tri dvadsaťročia cirkvi na Slovensku (1948–2009)' ['Three Decades of the Church in Slovakia, 1948–2009'], *Impulz* 3 (2009), accessed 25 January 2025, <http://www.impulzrevue.sk/article.php?460>.

with the regime. And suddenly they found that many things – not just opposition to communism – united them. For non-believers, meeting priests and religious figures in such extreme conditions could be a profound experience. Many developed a positive relationship with religion, or at least a deep respect for it, the Church and priests. Paradoxically, Slovak Catholicism, at least in the thinking and attitudes of its most thoughtful representatives, began to come out of its former cultural ghetto. At a time of a general crisis of trust in institutions, the Church, stripped of its institutional supports, began to reach young people, especially in the form of grassroots communities. As the Church's formal institutional presence diminished, religious life spilled over into small lay-led communities, which became vital spaces for spiritual renewal, creativity and resistance.

Although the communist regime in Czechoslovakia tried to establish a 'national church' independent of the Vatican, a so-called 'secret church' began to emerge in Slovakia after 1969. This underground movement initially involved religious and cultural intellectuals, male and female religious orders, and later encompassed almost the entire lay community. Members began publishing *samizdat*, organised youth pilgrimages, started the first petitions against the regime, and even staged a hunger strike by seminarians at the theological faculty.

Despite the communist regime's aim of marginalising religion and the Church with its scientific atheism, it inadvertently created a deep and resilient centre of religiosity, which became a powerful force in the struggle against the authorities.³⁶ However, after decades of oppression, the Church was decimated and unable to immediately take its place at the forefront of social transformation. For years, it had been squeezed out of key areas of public life, such as education, health, media, communications, the political sphere, etc. – domains in which it needed to bring its experience and values. The Church had long operated within a clerical model. How should it now quickly open up space for the laity and adopt a more mature, collaborative pastoral approach? The fall of communism also marked the process of globalisation. According to Halík, Catholicism has the potential to play an important role in this new context. It could engage in meaningful dialogue with other world religions and with secular humanism, both of which share common values and concerns.

The key question remains: Is contemporary Slovak Catholicism capable of embracing this broader, more open vision of the Church's mission in the new millennium?³⁷

³⁶ Mikloško, 'Tri dvadsaťročia'.

³⁷ Tomáš Halík, 'Katolícka Cirkve v České republice po roce 1989' ['The Catholic Church in the Czech Republic Since 1989'], accessed 25 January 2025, <http://halik.cz/cs/tvorba/clanky-eseje/clanek/49>.

2. Socio-Religious Context

2.1. Poland

Among the countries of the former communist bloc, Poland is currently an exceptionally homogeneous state in terms of religiosity (unlike during the period of the Second Polish Republic 1918–1939). In 2020, 91% of Poles identified as believers or deeply religious, a figure that has changed only slightly since 1997.

Eighty-four percent of respondents declare themselves to be regular or irregular practitioners, with the number of irregular practitioners and those identifying as non-believers or non-practising increasing over the past twenty years. However, a 2023 global study on religiosity found that only 77% of surveyed Poles identified as believers. The vast majority of Poland's residents (92.2% in 2021, and 95.7% in 2000) identify as Roman Catholic. As recently as 2009, the percentage of pupils attending Roman Catholic religious education lessons exceeded 90% in every type of school. In 2018, PEW Research identified Poland as the fastest secularising country, at least among the younger generation. In the 2020/21 school year, 85.7% of pupils in all types of educational institution attended religious education classes. In general secondary this figure was 69.5%. Another interesting and concerning finding of the 2023 IPSOS study is the decline in religiosity among the Gen Z cohort (born between 1995 and 2010)³⁸ compared to previous generations. In Poland, this decline is as high as 24%. These data alone suggest that Poland has joined the ranks of pluralised societies operating in a complex religious landscape.

Following the political transformations of 1989 and Poland's restoration of sovereignty, the reintroduction of religion into schools was seen as an act of social justice and a return to normality, having been disrupted over the previous thirty years. However, there were also critical voices and concerns regarding the presence of religious education in the new vision for schools. Nevertheless, the fact that four public opinion surveys (May, September and November 1990, and March 1991) showed an increase in respondents supporting religious education in schools (60%, 62%, 70% and 74% respectively), while the percentage of those opposed to it decreased from 27–30% in 1990 to 22% in 1991,³⁹ is significant and indicative of a well-conducted information campaign, as well as the practicality of the proposed solutions. It also suggests a certain exaggeration in outlining the negative scenarios of a school with religious education.

³⁸ On the topic of Generation Z, see the following insightful work: Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

³⁹ Potocki, *Wychowanie religijne*, 143.

While the return of religious education to Polish schools was generally well received, there were also attempts to contest its legitimacy, including legal challenges before the Constitutional Tribunal. Complainants argued that religious education violated the secular nature of schools, and the principle of freedom of conscience and religion.⁴⁰ To avoid further misunderstandings, the issue of religious education was incorporated into the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland,⁴¹ as well as into the provisions of the Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland.⁴²

While the Constitution allows religious education to be organised in schools, the Concordat guarantees the state's role in organising this education, the Church's autonomy in developing curricula and textbooks, and the appointment of religious education teachers by the relevant ecclesiastical authorities who hold the qualifications required by the educational authorities. The Church has supremacy over teachers in terms of the content of teaching, while the state has supremacy over teachers, similarly to other teachers. These documents have firmly and permanently embedded religious education in the Polish education system.

In the following years, religious education in schools seemed to be socially accepted and constituted a kind of creative consensus. For instance, in 2007, nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) expressed a positive view of religious education in schools, while 24% held an opposing view.⁴³ This is a much higher level of support than in 1990, when religion was reintroduced to schools, which suggests that the measures had been effective and that the gloomy predictions of intolerance and a lack of respect from either side had not materialised.

The decline in attendance at religious education lessons, and consequently, the reduced acceptance of their presence in schools, has primarily occurred over the last ten years. While 93% of pupils attended these lessons in 2010, the highest percentage since religious education returned to schools, this number had decreased to 75% by 2016.⁴⁴ Research conducted in 2021 found that 54% of respondents participated in religious

⁴⁰ Witold Jedynak, 'Nauczanie religii w polskich szkołach. Sukces czy porażka?' ('Religious Education in Polish Schools: Success or Failure?'), *Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne* 32 (2018): 211.

⁴¹ See Rzeczpospolita Polska [The Republic of Poland], *Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z 2 kwietnia 1997 r.* [*The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997*], *Dziennik Ustaw* 1997, no. 78, item 483, art. 53, para. 4. This passage reads: 'The religion of a church or other legally recognised religious organisation may be taught in schools, provided that the freedom of conscience and religion of others is not infringed'.

⁴² See Stolica Apostolska i Rzeczpospolita Polska [Holy See and Republic of Poland], Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland, signed 28 July 1993, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1998, no. 51, item 318, art. 12, paras. 1–4.

⁴³ Jedynak, 'Nauczanie', 216.

⁴⁴ Jedynak, 'Nauczanie', 217.

education, while 54% of those surveyed believed that religious education lessons should take place in schools.⁴⁵ While this remains a majority, it is much smaller than the 72% recorded in the 2007 study.

The consensus around religious education in Polish schools and kindergartens lasted for over thirty years and seemed durable and independent of political changes. Parties that had previously campaigned for the abolition or at least the limitation of religious education in schools did not win significant numbers of votes. However, the situation is different now, following parliamentary elections on 15 October 2024. The coalition government formed as a result of these elections – consisting of the Civic Coalition, the New Left, Poland 2050, and the Polish People's Party – has consistently sought to minimise religious education in schools and to downplay its significance, particularly with the support of the Ministry of National Education.

The first step was to amend the Regulation on the Assessment, Classification, and Promotion of Pupils, in order to exclude the grade obtained in religious education or ethics from the grade point average.⁴⁶ This change did not require consultation or agreement with the churches, as it was not part of the Regulation on the organisation of religious lessons, which, according to the Education System Act, can only be amended in agreement with the church authorities and religious associations teaching religion education in schools.⁴⁷ As expected, this first change went virtually unnoticed, possibly because the same Regulation included provisions on the abolition of homework. At the same time, the Ministry announced further changes involving increasing group sizes, altering the rules for combining classes and moving religious education lessons to the first or last hours of the school day. In the longer term, religious education in schools would be reduced to one hour per week. Unfortunately, meetings held between the ecclesiastical authorities and the Ministry did not lead to an agreement or a joint position. In defence of religious education, the Chairman of the Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference repeatedly spoke out,⁴⁸ calling for changes to be made

⁴⁵ CBOS [Centre for Public Opinion Research], 'Polski pejzaż religijny – z bliższego planu' ['The Polish Religious Landscape – A Closer Look'], *Komunikat z badań* 91 (2022): 5.

⁴⁶ Minister Edukacji Narodowej [Ministry of Education, Poland], *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 22 marca 2024 zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie oceniania, klasyfikowania i promowania uczniów i słuchaczy w szkołach publicznych* [Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 22 March 2024 Amending the Regulation on the Assessment, Classification and Promotion of Pupils and Pupils in Public Schools], *Dziennik Ustaw*, 25 March 2024, item 438.

⁴⁷ Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Sejm (Parliament) of the Republic of Poland], *Ustawa o systemie oświaty z dnia 7 września 1991 r.* [Act on the Education System of 7 September 1991], *Dziennik Ustaw* 1991, no. 95, item 425, art. 12.

⁴⁸ See e.g., Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski [The Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference], 'Oświadczenie Komisji Wychowania Katolickiego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski wobec zapowiedzi Ministerstwa Edukacji Narodowej o planowanych

in accordance with the law and with respect for the rights of pupils and parents, as well as with respect for the autonomy of churches teaching religion. The Polish Episcopal Conference also expressed its position.⁴⁹

In the 2024/25 school year, two amendments were made to the Regulation on religious education in public preschools and schools.⁵⁰ These involved removing religious education grades from the average and introducing a different mechanism for organising religious education groups (class mergers). These changes came into effect on 1 September 2024. Additionally, the number of hours has been reduced to one per week with religious education lessons timetabled at the beginning or end of the school day (except for classes where all pupils attend these lessons). These changes are planned for implementation starting from 1 September 2025. However, there is a legal ‘stalemate’ as the amendment to the Regulation (at least the first one, although a similar situation is expected with respect to the second) has been challenged by the Constitutional Tribunal. The Tribunal’s rulings are not recognised by the current authorities, however. The reason for the challenge is the lack of agreement with the churches that teach religion in the education system, even though such an agreement is required by the Education System Act.⁵¹ In response to the Ministry’s actions, the Presidium of the Polish Episcopal Conference issued a statement emphasising the importance of acting in accordance with existing legislation. The result of this situation is confusion, anxiety among religious education teachers regarding their professional future, and, more broadly, uncertainty about the future and structure of religious education in Polish schools.

zmianach w organizacji lekcji religii w szkołach z dnia 13 lutego 2024 r.’ [‘Statement of the Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference on the Ministry of National Education’s Announcement of Planned Changes to Religious Education in Schools, 13 February 2024’], accessed 12 October 2024, <https://opoka.news/oswiadczenie>; Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski [The Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference], ‘Oświadczenie Przewodniczącego Komisji Wychowania Katolickiego Komisji Episkopatu Polski z dnia 19 czerwca 2024 r.’ [‘Statement by the Chairman of the Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference, 19 June 2024’], accessed 12 October 2024, <https://opoka.news/oswiadczenie-przewodniczacego-komisji-wychowania-katolickiego-kep>.

⁴⁹ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [The Polish Episcopal Conference], ‘Stanowisko Konferencji Episkopatu Polski w sprawie zmian w organizacji lekcji religii w szkołach podejmowanych przez Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej z 12 czerwca 2024 r.’ [‘Position of the Polish Episcopal Conference on Changes to the Organisation of Religious Education in Schools Implemented by the Ministry of Education, 12 June 2024’], accessed 12 October 2024, <https://opoka.news/nauczanie-religii-w-polskiej-szkole- stanowi-wielkie-dobro-dla-młodego-człowieka>.

⁵⁰ See *Dziennik Ustaw* 2024, item 1158, and *Dziennik Ustaw* 2025, item 66.

⁵¹ Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Sejm (Parliament) of the Republic of Poland], *Ustawa o systemie oświaty z dnia 7 września 1991 r. (Act on the Education System of 7 September 1991)*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1991, no. 95, item 425, art. 12, para. 2.

2.2. Czech Republic

The communist era was a difficult time for many social groups, including those associated with Christian communities and churches of various denominations. Despite the restrictions of the time, Christians enjoyed a certain degree of trust, particularly among intellectuals. The fall of the regime and the transition to a democratic political system took place amid widespread euphoria. However, the emerging democracy also faced new challenges. The churches, focused inwards on rebuilding their structures and recovering their lost status quo, struggled to adapt. This impacted social attitudes towards the Church, with a shift from initial euphoria to cautious distrust.

In 1990, just one year after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Czechoslovakia became the second country of the former Eastern Bloc (after Poland) to be visited by Pope John Paul II at the invitation of President Václav Havel. This visit was met with great interest across Czech society. However, the Pope's subsequent apostolic visits in 1995 and 1997 did not generate the same level of enthusiasm. During his second visit, he canonised the martyr Jan Sarkander (1576–1620) in Olomouc, a move that strained ecumenical relations, as Protestant Churches opposed the Vatican's decision.⁵²

In 1999, President Václav Havel and his wife Dagmar, accompanied by the Minister of Culture Pavel Dostál, made their first official visit to the Vatican. During the meeting, Pope John Paul II expressed his regret over the cruel death of Jan Hus, praised his courage, and described him as the most enlightened master of Charles University. Havel, in turn, voiced his hope that Jan Hus would no longer be seen as a divisive figure.⁵³

A short-lived positive shift in attitudes toward the Church occurred during Pope Benedict XVI's visit in 2009, during which he enjoyed great respect, even from political leaders. President Václav Klaus described him as a great personality and intellectual, and publicly praised his unwavering faith, his courage in expressing views that were not always politically correct, and his firm adherence to the core ideas and principles on which both Christianity and Western civilization are built. Klaus considered the Pope's stance an inspiration and encouragement for Czech society and beyond.⁵⁴

⁵² Pavel Smetana, 'Odpověď papeži. Odpověď synodního seniora ČCE P. Smetany papeži Janu Pavlu II' ['Answer to the Pope: Response of the Synod Senior of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ČCE) P. Smetana to Pope John Paul II'], *Protestant* 6 (1995), accessed 8 August 2024, <https://protestant.evangelnet.cz/odpoved-papezi>.

⁵³ Internet Daily Aktuálně.cz, 'Papežské návštěvy od Havla po Zemana' ['Papal Visits from Havel to Zeman'], 13 February 2015, accessed 4 August 2024, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/prehledne-papezske-navstevy-od-havla-po-zemana/r-32d0f22eb1e411e49f60002590604f2e/v-sl:cd6ff6bec3ab5398f8cd93cc51b8695d>.

⁵⁴ Lukáš Dolanský, Bedřich Kratochvíl, 'Papež Benedikt XVI. okouzil Václava Klause' ['Pope Benedict XVI Charms Václav Klaus'], *Lidové Noviny*, 29 September 2009, accessed 3 August 2024, https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/papez-benedikt-xvi-okouzil-vaclava-klause.A090928_210802_In_domov_mev.

However, public trust in the Church has continued to decline. In 2012, the Public Opinion Research Centre of the Institute of Sociology at the Czech Academy of Sciences published the results of a survey titled ‘How Do People Trust Selected Public Institutions?’ Churches received only 30% trust, among the lowest-ranked institutions.⁵⁵ A follow-up survey in 2023 showed a further decline: only 28% of respondents expressed trust in churches, placing them near the bottom, alongside political parties and movements (24%).⁵⁶

Valuable insights into the role and significance of religion in Czech society can be found in the national census data. The censuses from 1991, 2001, and 2011 allowed individuals to voluntarily declare their religious beliefs or affiliations, regardless of membership of a specific church. While the 1991 census included a mandatory question on religious affiliation, failure to answer it was tolerated.

In both the 2001 and 2011 censuses, answering the question on religious affiliation was purely voluntary. By 2011, a trend had emerged – a popular response was ‘believing but not belonging to any church or religious denomination’. Nearly one-third of all respondents declaring their religious affiliation chose this option.⁵⁷ Leading up to the 2021 census, there was debate over whether to omit the question about religious affiliation entirely. Ultimately, the Czech Statistical Office chose to retain it, citing the importance of preserving sociological data. This decision was met with mixed reactions. The Roman Catholic Church opposed the inclusion, arguing that churches conduct their own statistics. On the other hand, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church demanded that the question either be made mandatory or eliminated entirely.⁵⁸

According to the 2021 National Census of Population and Housing, the Czech Republic had a population of 10,524,167. The voluntary question regarding religious

⁵⁵ See Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění AV ČR [Centre for Public Opinion Research of the Czech Academy of Sciences], ‘Důvěra některým institucím veřejného života – září 2012’ [‘Trust in Selected Public Life Institutions – September 2012’], 10 April 2002, accessed 3 August 2024, <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/institute-a-politici/1257-jak-obane-dvuji-nkterym-institucim-veejneho-ivota>.

⁵⁶ See Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění AV ČR [Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Academy of Sciences], ‘Důvěra k vybraným institucím veřejného života a mezilidská důvěra – duben/květen 2023’ [‘Trust in Selected Public Life Institutions and Interpersonal Trust – April/May 2023’], 9 June 2023, accessed 3 August 2024, <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/institute-a-politici/5676-duvera-k-vybranym-institucim-verejneho-zivota-a-mezilidska-duvera-duben-kveten-2023>.

⁵⁷ Český statistický úřad [Czech Statistical Office], ‘Náboženská víra obyvatel podle výsledků sčítání lidu: Lidé a společnost’ [‘Religious Beliefs of the Population According to Census Results: People and Society’], 27 February 2014, accessed 24 July 2024, <https://csu.gov.cz/produkty/nabozenska-vira-obyvatel-podle-vysledku-scitani-lidu-2011-61wegp46fl>.

⁵⁸ Tomáš Butta, ‘Nad zveřejněním prvních výsledků sčítání obyvatel 2021 ve vztahu k náboženství’ [‘On the Publication of the First Results of the 2021 Census in Relation to Religion’], *Český zápas: Týdeník Církve československé husitské* [Czech Struggle: Weekly of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church] 102, 5 (2022), accessed 24 July 2024, https://www.ccsch.cz/index.php?preview=1&option=com_dropfiles&format=&task=frontfile.download&catid=175&id=3951&Itemid=1000000000000.

beliefs was answered by 69.9% of the population. Of these, only 18.7% identified as religious and affiliated with a specific church or religious association.⁵⁹ Two-thirds (68.3%) identified as people ‘with no religious beliefs’. Meanwhile, 30.1% chose not to answer the question at all, a decrease from 44.7% in 2011. The total number of believers had increased by approximately 166,000 people. This growth was primarily due to the rise of individuals identifying as ‘believing but not affiliated with any church’, a group that had grown by 255,000 people since the previous census. However, the number of believers formally affiliated with a church had decreased by 89,000 people.

It is important to note that the information regarding religious beliefs was optional in the 2021 census. As a result, more than 3 million people (30.1% of the entire population) chose not to answer this question. This had a significant impact on the number of believers recorded. Based on the data, it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the majority of those who left the question unanswered are religious or non-religious. Similarly, it is unclear whether the lack of response to questions about religious beliefs was due to concerns over data confidentiality or simply a lack of interest in the subject of faith.

The largest group of respondents identified with the Roman Catholic Church, with 741,000 individuals (31.7% of all believers). However, there was a steady decline in the number of Roman Catholics, both in absolute and relative terms, with a decrease of over 341,000 people compared to the previous census. Another 236,000 people identified as ‘Catholic confession’ or ‘Catholic’ without specifying the exact denomination, suggesting that some may have been Catholics who did not provide the precise name of their church. Additionally, 71,000 people identified as Christians.

Among the other major churches, the number of adherents was as follows: the Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands had 40,700 members; the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, 32,600; the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, 23,600; Jehovah’s Witnesses 13,300; and the Brethren Church, 10,800. These churches make up no more than 1.7% of the total number of believers.

Another 27,100 individuals identified as belonging to a Protestant or Evangelical denomination without specifying which one. Furthermore, nearly 66,000 believers indicated affiliation with a church or religious community but did not provide the specific name. Notably, 21,000 individuals listed ‘Jedi’ as their religion, referring to the religious order and knightly community from the *Star Wars* saga. Unlike traditional religious

⁵⁹ See Český statistický úřad [Czech Statistical Office], ‘Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů – Pramenné dílo’ [‘Census of Population, Houses, and Apartments – Source Work’], 11 July 2024, 85–93, accessed 4 August 2024, <https://csu.gov.cz/docs/107508/3206501d-67cb-848c-ee52-2f59fcb12617/17200024.pdf>.

movements, which have a balanced representation of men and women, the Jedi group was predominantly male, at 78.3% of the group.⁶⁰

The following table presents a comparison of data from four censuses conducted after the fall of communism, focusing on the three main churches with more than 10,000 adherents.

Table 1. Population by Religious Beliefs in the Czech Republic (1991–2021)

(Data for 1991 and 2001 based on place of usual residence)

Year	Total Population	Religious Beliefs						
		Believers, Members of a Church or Religious Association ¹⁾	including			Unaffiliated Believers	Non-religious	Not Applicable
			Roman Catholic Church	Czechoslovak Hussite Church	Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren			
1991	10,302,215	4,523,734	4,021,385	178,036	203,996	–	4,112,864	1,665,617
2001	10,230,060	3,288,088	2,740,780	99,103	117,212	–	6,039,991	901,981
2011	10,436,560	1,463,584	1,082,463	39,229	51,858	705,368	3,604,095	4,662,455

⁶⁰ Český statistický úřad [Czech Statistical Office], 'Sčítání lidu', 85–95.

Year	Total Population	Religious Beliefs						
		Believers, Members of a Church or Religious Association ¹⁾	including			Unaffiliated Believers	Non-religious	Not Applicable
			Roman Catholic Church	Czechoslovak Hussite Church	Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren			
2021	10,524,167	1,374,285	741,019	23,610	32,577	960,201	5,027,141	3,162,540

¹⁾ In 1991 and 2001, including those who were believers but not affiliated with a specific Church.

Source: Český statistický úřad [Czech Statistical Office].

2.3. Slovakia

Slovakia is a relatively culturally homogeneous country. However, both historical and ongoing migration of ethnic groups from different parts of the world is creating an increasingly diverse society. Some of the more established communities have been granted the status of national minorities. These minorities make up approximately 16% of the population and include Hungarian (8.5%), Roma (2%), Czech (0.6%), and Ruthenian (0.4%) communities. However, demographic estimates and sociographic mapping suggest that approximately 300,000 Roma (i.e., up to 8% of the population) currently live in Slovakia. In recent years, the war in Ukraine has forced millions flee their homes. As a result, there are currently 156,881 Ukrainians living in Slovakia, making them the largest group of foreigners the country.⁶¹

The Slovak Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Currently, there are 18 registered churches and religious societies in Slovakia. A significant shift in church-state relations has been down to a mutual effort to define their cooperation contractually.

Since 2000, two significant agreement have shaped these relations. The first was the ratification of the Basic Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See,

⁶¹ International Organisation for Migration (IOM) UN Migration Slovakia, 'Migrácia na Slovensku' ['Migration in Slovakia'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://www.iom.sk/sk/migracia/migracia-na-slovensku.html>.

signed on 24 November 2000 in the Vatican. This treaty defines the legal status of the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches.⁶² The second was the approval of the Treaty between the Slovak Republic and Registered Churches and Religious Societies of 11 April 2002. This agreement regulates the legal status of eleven churches, including the Jewish religious community.⁶³

Slovakia's democratic system not only protects the freedom of worship but also supports the social, charitable, and educational activities of churches and religious societies. A democratic state has a natural interest in ensuring that these activities align with the legal system and contribute to social cohesion, promoting tolerance and mutual understanding.

According to the most recent 2021 census, 76.3% of the Slovak population identified with one of the churches and religious societies officially registered in the country. The majority are Roman Catholic (55.8%), followed by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran) at 5.3%, the Greek Catholic Church at 4%, the Reformed Church at 1.6% and the Orthodox Church at 0.9%. Approximately 24% of the population declared themselves as non-denominational.⁶⁴

Table 2. Religious Affiliation in Slovakia (as of 1 January 2021)

Churches and Religious Communities	1950 Census	1991 Census	2001 Census	2011 Census	2021 Census
Roman Catholic Church	76.2 %	60.4 %	68.9 %	62.0 %	55.8 %
Evangelical Church (Lutheran)	12.9 %	6.2 %	6.9 %	5.9 %	5.3 %

⁶² Slovenská republika a Svätá Stolica [Slovak Republic and the Holy See], *Základná zmluva medzi Slovenskou republikou a Svätou Stolicou* [Basic Agreement between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See], 326 (2001), accessed 25 January 2025, https://www.slov-lex.sk/ezbierky/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2001/326/#error=login_required&state=1f34fa8b-99b1-4ff6-8b8c-d7b000106022.

⁶³ Slovenská republika a registrované cirkvi a náboženské spoločnosti [Slovak Republic and Registered Churches and Religious Communities] 'Zmluva medzi Slovenskou republikou a registrovanými cirkvami a náboženskými spoločnosťami' ['Agreement between the Slovak Republic and Registered Churches and Religious Societies'], 250 (2002), accessed 25 January 2025, <https://www.aspi.sk/products/lawText/1/53619/1/2/zmluva-c-250-2002-zz-medzi-slovenskou-republikou-a-registrovanymi-cirkvami-a-nabozenskymi-spolocnostami/zmluva-c-250-2002-zz-medzi-slovenskou-republikou-a-registrovanymi-cirkvami-a-nabozenskymi-spolocnostami>.

⁶⁴ Štatistický Úrad Slovenskej Republiky [Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic], *Počet obyvateľov podľa náboženského vyznania v SR k 1.1.2021* [Population by Religious Affiliation in Slovakia as of 1 January 2021], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://www.scitanie.sk/obyvatelia/zakladne-vysledky/struktura-obyvatelstva-podla-nabozenskeho-vyznania/SR/SK0/SR>.

Churches and Religious Communities	1950 Census	1991 Census	2001 Census	2011 Census	2021 Census
Greek Catholic Church	6.6 %	3.4 %	4.1 %	3.8 %	4.0 %
Reformed Church	3.3 %	1.6 %	2.0 %	1.8 %	1.6 %
Orthodox Church	0.2 %	0.7 %	0.9 %	0.9 %	0.9 %

Source: Štatistický Úrad Slovenskej Republiky [Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic].

Part III. Development of Educational Policy after the Fall of Communism

1. Poland

Following democratic changes in Poland after 1989, reforms were also undertaken in the education system. These reforms had ambitious goals aimed at improving the quality of schools, equalising educational opportunities and increasing access to secondary and higher education.¹ The reform efforts can be divided into three stages. The first stage involved adapting the education system to the values and principles of a democratic state with a free-market economy (1989–1999); the second involved restructuring the school system by introducing lower secondary schools (*gymnasia*) and implementing modernisation reforms within the new educational framework (1999–2015); and the third involved restoring the structure of the education system to its state prior to 1999.² These three stages will be summarised below.

One of the most important issues in the first stage was the introduction of the Education System Act of 7 September 1991.³ The fundamental educational ideas can be encapsulated in the ‘democratisation’, ‘decentralisation’, and ‘socialisation’ of education. The new law made the establishment and operation of non-public schools possible, defined the structure of religious education in schools, and transferred competences related to

¹ Marta Zahorska, ‘Sukcesy i porażki reformy edukacji’ [‘Successes and Failures of the Education Reform’], *Przegląd socjologiczny* 58, 3 (2009): 119.

² Natalia Stępień-Lampa, ‘Główne reformy oświatowe w III RP. O wpływie polityki na edukację’ [‘Main Educational Reforms in the Third Republic of Poland: On the Impact of Politics on Education’], *Studia Humanistyczno-Społeczne* 18 (2017): 156.

³ See Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Sejm (Parliament) of the Republic of Poland], *Ustawa z dnia 7 września 1991 o systemie oświaty* [Act of 7 September 1991 on the Education System], *Dziennik Ustaw*, 1991, no. 95, item 425.

managing educational institutions to local government units. The issue of educational subsidies was regulated, and work began on the curriculum framework, culminating in 1996.⁴ In terms of the pedagogical model, which also underwent transformation during this period, there was a shift from the radical-structural model characteristic of Marxist pedagogy to the functional-liberal model corresponding to education in Western Europe and the United States.⁵ This transition was not without its difficulties, but among the most significant positive outcomes were the removal of ideologically driven content from the curriculum, the elimination of so-called ‘white spots’ by supplementing texts of Polish and foreign literature that were previously absent from the canon, and the inclusion of historical events that had previously been overlooked, as well as the reinterpretation of events that had been presented in a biased manner. Additional significant steps were intensive teacher training and the gradual replacement of the education management staff. Among the factors that delayed this period of reform were a lack of financial resources and the excessively slow pace of educational decentralisation.⁶

The second stage of the reform was characterised by a comprehensive approach. Almost simultaneously, a new school system, new principles for managing and financing educational institutions, a reformed curriculum, a new examination system, a reform of teachers’ statutes and changes to how schools function were introduced.⁷ The new school system comprised four stages of education: integrated teaching (Years 1–3 of primary school), block teaching (Years 4–6 of primary school), subject-based teaching (three-year *gymnasium*), and specialised education (three-year specialised high school or a two-year vocational school with the option of continuing education in a supplementary two-year high school), with the aim of preparing pupils for vocational qualifications or higher education.⁸ It was also significant that external exams were introduced at the end of primary school, *gymnasium*, and high school (a modified school leaving exam, i.e., the *matura*).⁹ One of the goals of this reorganisation was to increase the percentage of pupils in secondary schools passing the *matura*, while reducing the number of *gymnasium* graduates entering vocational schools to about 20%. Another aim was to broaden the range of vocational high schools, which were intended to prepare pupils both for higher education and for direct entry into the labour market.¹⁰

⁴ Stępień-Lampa, ‘Główne reformy’, 155–156.

⁵ Piotr Tomasik, *Religia w dialogu z edukacją* [*Religion in Dialogue with Education*] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Salezjańskie, 2004), 105.

⁶ Tomasik, *Religia*, 106.

⁷ Zahorska, ‘Sukcesy i porażki’, 120.

⁸ Tomasik, *Religia*, 107.

⁹ Stępień-Lampa, ‘Główne reformy’, 157.

¹⁰ Zahorska, ‘Sukcesy i porażki’, 121.

The education system reform did not take place in isolation from other reforms undertaken in the country, which also reflects its comprehensiveness. It was most closely associated with the administrative reform that was also implemented during that period. As a result, additional levels of local government were created, such as districts and marshals' offices at regional level. From then on, municipalities became responsible for managing primary schools and *gymnasia*, while districts were tasked with overseeing secondary and special schools, as well as educational and vocational counselling centres. The regional authorities became responsible for managing teacher training and professional development institutions, as well as centres for practical and continuing education. Education inspectors, operating within the framework of the central government administration, remained responsible for pedagogical supervision.¹¹

Another important aspect of the reform was also the introduction of the General Education Curriculum Framework (*Podstawa Programowa Kształcenia Ogólnego* – PPKO), which specified the reform's objectives for each stage of education, the roles of schools, the teaching content, and the expected pupil outcomes. Work on this document progressed in stages. In 1999, the PPKO for the new primary school (six-year), *gymnasium*, and old-type secondary schools was published. In 2001, the document was supplemented to include the new type of specialised secondary school. In 2002, it was amended to create a coherent and complete package for the reformed school system.¹²

As mentioned above, the document defines educational objectives; in the case of primary school, these primarily included fostering cognitive curiosity, motivating pupils to acquire knowledge, and enabling them to explore the world, while taking into account the appropriate level of activity for the age group in question.

In lower secondary school (*gymnasium*), the goal was to introduce pupils to the world of academic knowledge, foster independence, and support early career orientation, understood at this stage as helping pupils make informed choices about their next level of education. In upper secondary schools (high school and technical schools), focus was on building on the previous stages by developing pupils' ability to apply knowledge

¹¹ Zahorska, 'Sukcesy i porażki', 120.

¹² See Minister Edukacji Narodowej [Minister of National Education, Poland], *Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego* [Core Curriculum for General Education], Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 15 February 1999 on the Core Curriculum for General Education, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1999, no. 14, item 129; cf. *Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego* [Core Curriculum for General Education], Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 21 May 2001 on the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education, General Education in Various Types of Schools, and the Curriculum in Specialised High Schools, *Dziennik Ustaw* 2001, no. 61, item 625; *Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego* [Core Curriculum for General Education], Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 26 February 2002 on the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education, General Education in Various Types of Schools, *Dziennik Ustaw* 2002, no. 50, item 458.

in real-life situations and creating conditions that support their comprehensive personal and social development.

In vocational schools, the goal was to teach pupils to express themselves clearly (both orally and in writing), acquire a solid foundation for further education, understand the content being taught, recognize conceptual connections, and grasp the principles of personal and social development.¹³

The reform provoked considerable controversy, with criticism aimed at the concept of *gymnasia*, which grouped pupils at a particularly challenging developmental stage into a single school, and at the short, three-year duration of general upper secondary education in high schools.¹⁴ One of the reform's major shortcomings was the haste with which it was implemented. Rather than being phased in gradually from the first year of primary school, it was introduced 'from the middle', from the *gymnasia*. On 1 September 1999, sixth-grade primary school pupils advanced not to the seventh grade, but to the first grade of the new *gymnasia*.¹⁵ The rush also affected the preparation of curricula, which contained errors and omissions, as well as textbooks, some of which were not delivered to pupils on time. A systemic flaw was the failure to adapt the teaching programmes to the new three-year high school model: existing content and requirements were largely retained, despite the reduced time available for instruction.¹⁶

In response to these concerns and shortcomings, modernisation efforts were initiated in 2008, primarily focusing on developing a new National Core Curriculum (PPKO).¹⁷ The core aim was to better integrate the curricula of lower and upper secondary education, preventing the repetition of content pupils had already met, as had previously been the case. In addition, the concept of specialised high schools (*licea profilowane*) was abandoned due to their relatively low academic standards and their declining popularity.¹⁸

Despite the critical voices, it is important to note that the main objectives of the reform were largely achieved. The most tangible outcome was the broad expansion of access to secondary schools offering the high school leaving exam (*matura*). In the 1990/91 school year, only 18.6% of pupils from the relevant age group attended general secondary schools, but by 2007/08, this figure had risen to 44%. Over the same period, enrolment in vocational schools declined from 34% to 13%. The percentage of pupils

¹³ Tomasik, *Religia*, 119–120.

¹⁴ See Natalia Stępień-Lampa, 'Główne reformy', 157.

¹⁵ Zahorska, 'Sukcesy i porażki', 124.

¹⁶ Zahorska, 'Sukcesy i porażki', 120.

¹⁷ See Minister Edukacji Narodowej, *Podstawa programowa*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 2009, no. 4, item 17; cf. *Podstawa programowa*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 2012, item 977.

¹⁸ Stępień-Lampa, 'Główne reformy', 158.

entering higher education also rose significantly, from 9.8% to 39.7%.¹⁹ These figures alone demonstrate the extent to which the reforms addressed the educational needs of a society undergoing democratic transformation. The reforms also raised standards for teacher education, both for those entering the profession and for those already practising. However, one drawback of the school network reorganisation was that many teachers from closed or restructured primary schools found employment in the newly established *gymnasia*. As a result, they often brought with them teaching styles and methods more suited to younger children. This ran counter to the reform's intent and frequently led to difficulties in engaging this specific age group.²⁰

The final stage of the education reform began in 2015 and introduced several significant changes. One of the first acts of the newly elected parliament was an amendment to the education system law, which reversed an earlier decision to make schooling compulsory for six-year-olds. The next step involved the elimination of the sixth-grade exam and the introduction of an appeals process for both *gymnasium* and *matura* exam results. However, the most consequential element of this phase was the abolition of *gymnasia* and the return to an eight-year primary school and a four-year secondary school. These structural changes required the creation of a new National Core Curriculum (PPKO) along with updated teaching programmes and textbooks.²¹

The latest stage of the education reform has been mired in controversy. Criticisms range from the reform's deconstructive nature – which negated previous reforms rather than reforming the education system – to its top-down approach and lack of support from key stakeholders, including teachers, educators and parents.²² Similar concerns have been raised about the abolition of *gymnasia*, which had already become well integrated into the education system and the public consciousness by the time they were removed. The only obvious beneficiaries of the changes, however, are the high schools, which reverted to a four-year structure. The three-year model introduced in the previous stage of the reform perhaps never truly gained acceptance.

The year 2024 marked another change in power in Poland. With it has come further announcements of changes to the education system. It seems that this time, the changes will be more programme-related than structural. A new National Core Curriculum (PPKO) is planned for 2026, with the aim of 'streamlining' the curriculum content

¹⁹ Zahorska, 'Sukcesy i porażki', 128.

²⁰ Tomasik, *Religia*, 127.

²¹ Stępień-Lampa, 'Główne reformy', 159–160.

²² Stępień-Lampa, 'Główne reformy', 159–160; for more on the changes and their assessments, see Katarzyna Błaszczuk, 'Szkola na miarę czasów... tylko których? – o reformie szkolnictwa z 2017 roku' ['A School for the Times... But Which Ones? – On the 2017 Education Reform'], *Polonistyka. Innowacje* 12 (2020): 93–108.

and adapting it to the aptitudes of contemporary school pupils. Alongside the PPKO, the Ministry will also create a graduate profile, which will aim to address potential expectations for those leaving the education system.²³

2. Czech Republic

The term ‘educational policy’ is commonly used but can be ambiguous. In academic literature, it is defined in both narrower and broader ways. The narrower definition limits educational policy to the core principles and norms that directly shape the education sector.²⁴ In contrast, the broader definition views it as a wider societal field, encompassing aspects such as funding, legislation, and strategic goals.²⁵

Between 1948 and 1989, Czechoslovakia was under the control of the Communist Party, which exerted influence on all aspects of social life, particularly education, where a high level of ideological control was evident. This had a negative impact, especially in the social sciences, and also resulted in highly centralised control and a state monopoly over schooling.

Despite this, by the 1980s work had begun on a new curriculum for primary schools. The plan involved a complete set of exercise books for various subjects across both the first (Years 1–4) and second (Years 5–8) stages. Following the fall of communism, this programme was revised in 1991. The main changes focused on removing ideological and inappropriate content, but there were no significant or profound shifts in teaching methods or core subject matter. A lengthy process of substantive discussions about the concept of education was initiated, aimed at drafting new education laws and curricular documents. While changes in education management were implemented relatively quickly, the broader discussions on reforming the education system were complex, as various social groups sought to influence the new education law.

Primary and secondary education (often referred to as ‘regional education’) were regulated by the Education Act of 1984 (Act no. 29/1984 Coll.) and the Act on School Infrastructure (Act no. 76/1978 Coll.). After the collapse of communism, the Education Act underwent numerous amendments.

²³ Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Gov.pl], ‘Profil Absolwenta i Absolwentki – zaczynamy ogólnopolskie konsultacje, 24 September 2024’ [‘Graduate Profile – We Are Starting Nationwide Consultations, 24 September 2024’], accessed 3 August 2024, <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/profil-absolwenta-i-absolwentki-zaczynamy-ogolnopolskie-konsultacje>.

²⁴ Jaroslav Kalous, Arnošt Veselý, eds., *Vybrané problémy vzdělávací politiky* [Selected Issues in Educational Policy], (Prague: Karolinum, 2006), 6.

²⁵ Vlastimil Pařízek, ‘Perspektivní varianty vzdělávací politiky’ [‘Prospective Variants of Educational Policy’], *Pedagogika* 43, 2 (1993): 115.

The 1990 amendment laid the legislative foundations for the first significant systemic changes in the Czech education system,²⁶ introducing:

- the de-politicisation of education,
- decentralisation in the education system management,
- the recognition of the rights of pupils (and their parents) to choose their method of education based on their abilities and interests,
- the de-monopolisation of schooling, permitting the establishment of private and religious schools.

A 1995 amendment (Act no. 138/1995) addressed preschool, primary and secondary education, and higher vocational schools. Notably, it divided primary school into a five-year first stage and a four-year second stage. It set the duration of secondary school education at four, six, or eight years, and abolished all state-funded forms of post-secondary education. The amendment introduced higher vocational schools into the education system. It also mandated state authorisation for schools to operate, requiring registration in the Register of Non-Public Schools and Institutions, following the approval of the appropriate educational documentation and curriculum.

Higher education is systematically governed by Act no. 111/1998 Coll. on Higher Education. This law defines the types and status of higher education institutions, the organisation of studies, accreditation processes, and more. Internal regulations, such as the study regulations, define the specific rules that apply within a given higher education institution.

Significant changes to the Education Act also stemmed from the new territorial administrative arrangement, in accordance with Act no. 132/2000 Coll. (effective 1 January, 2001) and Act no. 284/2002 Coll. These laws altered competencies in education and the education management system, which were reflected in the Education Act. In January 2005, new laws came into effect, forming the legal basis for reforms in regional education. Key legal documents included Act no. 561/2004 Coll. (covering preschool, primary, secondary, higher vocational, and other education) and Act no. 563/2004 Coll. (concerning pedagogical staff and amendments to other laws).

The Education Act contains provisions that promote greater democratisation of education and align the education system with European standards. It also reformed how education is financed, introducing a normative principle of funding based on the

²⁶ Libor Boček, 'Vývoj české vzdělávací politiky a porovnání jejích klíčových témat se vzdělávací politikou Evropské unie v období 90. let' ['The Development of Czech Educational Policy and Comparison of Its Key Themes with European Union Educational Policy in the 1990s'], *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity, Řada pedagogická* [Proceedings of the Faculty of Arts, Brno University: Pedagogical Series] 50, 7 (2002): 111–118, accessed 13 August 2024, <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104701>.

number of pupils. Schools gained legal personality and greater autonomy in terms of educational content and management.

In 2006, the Act no. 179/2006 Coll. was adopted to facilitate the recognition of further education outcomes. This law enabled adult to acquire certificates of further vocational education and skills outside the formal education system, including foreign qualifications, officially recognised as equivalent to the relevant Czech certifications.

The Basic Conceptual Materials

The first significant document articulating the Ministry's new educational policy was the 'Quality and Responsibility' programme of 1994. The document was conceptualised around the central idea of the education system's mission and the profound significance of education for both society and the individual.

In 2001, the Czech Republic's Council of Ministers approved a key conceptual document, the *National Programme for Educational Development* (White Paper),²⁷ which outlined crucial ideas, general objectives, and development programmes intended to guide the mid-term evolution of the education system. The White Paper was intended to serve as a binding foundation for developing strategies in education and schooling, with a strong emphasis on its broader role in socio-economic development. It was also designed to be an open document, subject to critical analysis and regular updates to reflect changes in the social landscape. Crucially, it laid the groundwork for establishing a new education system and outlined the fundamental principles for high-quality education. The White Paper set new directions for both educational and programmatic policy, while also delineating the structure and role of programme documents, which are created at two levels, national and school-based.

At the national level, Framework Educational Programmes (RVP) are developed, based on the White Paper. At the school level, schools create their own School Educational Programmes (ŠVP) based on the mandatory RVP framework tailored to a specific education focus. This dual-level approach allows individual schools to expand their curriculum according to their own goals, for example, by broadening the teaching of certain subjects or by focusing more on various specialisations within a given field.²⁸

²⁷ Federálne zhromaždenie Českej a Slovenskej Federatívnej Republiky [Federal Assembly of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic], *Národní program rozvoje vzdělávání v České republice* [National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic], 'Bílá Novela zákona 29/1984 O sístave Základných a stredných škôl zo dňa 1.9.1990' ['White Amendment to Act 29/1984 on the System of Primary and Secondary Schools of 1 September 1990'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://www.autora.sk/zz/1990/171/19900601>.

²⁸ Jana Straková et al., *Analýza naplnění cílů Národního programu rozvoje vzdělávání v České republice (Bílé knihy) v oblasti předškolního, základního a středního vzdělávání* [Analysis of the Fulfilment of the Goals of the National Education Development Programme in the Czech Republic (White Paper) in

In 2007, the government approved a lifelong education strategy whose main objectives included the recognition and transferability of learning outcomes, equal access to education, the development of functional skills, the promotion of social partnerships, the stimulation of demand, the improvement of quality, and effective guidance.

In early 2009, the government adopted an implementation plan for the period 2009–2015. However, no evaluation of the strategy's implementation was carried out.

At the turn of 2013, another key policy document was introduced: the Strategy of Education 2020 (hereinafter S2020),²⁹ which served as the main educational policy document for the years 2013–2020. It also enabled the use of European Union funds to support its goals. S2020 set out three main priorities: reducing inequalities in education, supporting high-quality teaching and teacher training, and ensuring the responsible effective management of the education system. An external team of experts later evaluated S2020 and concluded that the strategic priorities defined in strategy remained relevant and timely. However, they also found that most of the main objectives had not been achieved. The experts also recommended that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport significantly improve the quality of education management at all levels and enhance communication among all stakeholders.

On 19 October 2020, the government approved a new strategic document for the following decade: the Strategy for Educational Policy of the Czech Republic to 2030+ (hereinafter S2030+).³⁰ This key document was created in response to the findings from the evaluation of S2020. S2030+ aims to modernise the Czech education system across regional education, extracurricular and non-formal education and lifelong learning, which will allow it to address the previous shortcomings and to better respond to new challenges. S2030+ seeks to modernise and equip schools, provide methodological guidance, introduce digital technologies, stimulate innovation, reduce the content load of the curriculum, and implement new teaching and assessment methods to deepen and develop pupils' cognitive, functional, and social competences. It also aims to improve initial teacher training, support the continuing education of current teachers, increase

Preschool, Primary, and Secondary Education] (Prague: MŠMT, 2009], accessed 16 August 2024, <http://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/strategie-a-koncepcni-dokumenty-cerven-2009>.

²⁹ Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy [Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports], 'Strategie vzdělávací politiky 2020' ['Education Policy Strategy, 2020'], accessed 16 August 2024, 'Strategie vzdělávací politiky 2020', accessed 16 August 2024, https://www.edu.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Strategie_vzdelavani_2020.pdf.

³⁰ Jindřich Fryč et al., *Strategie vzdělávací politiky České republiky do roku 2030+* [Education Policy Strategy of the Czech Republic to 2030+] (Prague: Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, 2020), accessed 16 August 2024, https://msmt.gov.cz/uploads/Brozura_S2030_online_CZ.pdf; Miroslav Hřebecký, *Jak se nám daří naplňovat Strategii 2030+?* [How Are We Doing in Fulfilling the 2030+ Strategy?], accessed 16 August 2024, <https://www.eduin.cz/clanky/strategie2030>.

of level of professionalism among school leaders and reduce the administrative burden on schools.

3. Slovakia

Education in Slovakia before 1989 was closely tied to the communist school policy, which was shaped by a centralised and above all ideological approach to both formal and informal education. This situation changed radically after November 1989. The immediate post-revolution period was marked by the of de-ideologisation of education, as well as a drive for decentralisation and democratisation. Over time, this phase of transformation gave way to a search for greater stability within the education system, accompanied by a push for innovation. This led to the first reform proposals, which ultimately culminated in the adoption and implementation of a new school law.³¹

The historically revolutionary political, social and economic changes that took place in Slovakia after November 1989 also necessitated fundamental reforms in education – legal, pedagogical-organisational, and especially ideological-pedagogical. In particular, changes to the content and organisation of education and training were aimed at ensuring that the curriculum and teaching processes reflected objectively verified, up-to-date scientific and technological knowledge, while eliminating one-sided ideological content. At the same time, the first legislative interventions were introduced to support democratisation procedures, aimed at restoring plurality and diversity within the school environment.

In 1990, amendments were made to the primary and secondary school system. These reforms included several key changes: the establishment of nine years of compulsory primary education, a prohibition on the presence of political parties and movements within schools, and the legal recognition of private and religious schools.³² This amendment disrupted the uniform school system and introduced differentiation according to pupils' abilities.

In 2000, the *Concept of Further Development of Higher Education in Slovakia for the 21st Century* was approved, which became the basis for the new Higher Education Act (2002). That same year, a new Concept of Education, *Millennium – the National Programme of Education for the Next 15–20 Years* was also adopted, providing the ideological and substantive basis for a new school law on primary and secondary schools education.³³

³¹ Beáta Kosová, Štefan Porubský, *Transformačné premeny slovenského školstva po roku 1989* [*Transformational Changes in Slovak Education Since 1989*] (Banská Bystrica: PF UMB, 2011), 25.

³² Federálne zhromaždenie Českej a Slovenskej Federatívnej Republiky [Federal Assembly of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic], 'Bílá Novela'.

³³ Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky [Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic], 'Projekt Milenium' ['Millennium Project'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://www.noveskolstvo.sk/upload/pdf/MILENIUM.pdf>.

In 2008, the National Council of the Slovak Republic approved Act No 245/2008 Coll. on Education (the School Act), which entered into force on 1 September 2008. This Act created the legislative framework for a comprehensive reform of regional education. It formally established the Slovak school system, aligned the education system with international ISCED standards, and introduced a two-tier model of education. This model allows schools greater flexibility to shape their educational profiles in accordance with regional needs and their own institutional capacities.³⁴

New Reform of Primary Education (2023)

In 2019, the State Pedagogical Institute began implementing a new model for the development of curriculum documents, which in 2023 resulted in the reform and innovation of the State Educational Programme for Primary Education. Subsequently, the preparation of support materials and new textbooks for schools commenced. The first schools began implementing the new curriculum in the 2023/24 school year. Support and training for teachers will be gradually strengthened to ensure that from the 2026/27 school year, all primary schools will be ready to introduce the new educational content and methods.

The curricular reform aims to improve the quality of primary education by providing a coherent and comprehensive foundation of general education. Its purpose is to equip all pupils with the essential skills to understand the world around them, acquire tools for learning, and develop a basic orientation in life. It fosters cultural literacy, promotes motivation for further education and lifelong learning, and shifts the focus from the mere transmission of knowledge to the development of pupils' comprehensive competences.

The internal structure of the new basic education curriculum is organised into three successive, interrelated learning cycles. This structure allows for gradual progression while reflecting the diverse learning pathways of pupils. Each cycle sets out the expected learning outcomes in specific learning areas and sub-areas (performance standards at the end of each cycle) as well as the content to be taught (content standards). Literacy is broadly understood and includes multiple types linked to various educational domains – literacy in reading and literature, mathematical, scientific, civic, and religious literacy among others).³⁵

³⁴ Národná rada Slovenskej republiky [National Council of the Slovak Republic], *Zákon o výchove a vzdelávaní (školský zákon)* [Law on Education (School Act)], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/ezbierky/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/245>.

³⁵ Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky [Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic], 'Vzdelávanie pre 21. storočie. Východiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania' [Education for the 21st Century: Foundations for Changes in the Primary Education Curriculum'], *Bratislava: ŠPÚ, 2022*, accessed 25 January 2025, <https://vzdelavanie21.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Vychodiska-zmien-v-kurikule-zakladneho-vzdelavania.pdf>.

A key principle of the reform is the clearly defined and consistent development of learning areas across all levels of general education, from nursery to secondary school. Each educational area serves as a core component of educational content and forms the basis for the progressive fulfilment of general education objectives.

The educational domains in basic education: Language and Communication, Mathematics and Information Technology, People and the World of Work, People and Society (which includes Ethics and Religious Education as compulsory electives taught in alternation), Art and Culture, People and Nature, and Health and Movement.³⁶

These learning areas are designed to be interconnected and mutually supportive in terms of both objectives and content. Each area's objectives are defined as competences to be achieved by the end of each learning cycle. The objectives are further specified through more detailed learning standards that lead to their achievement. The national curriculum then translates these learning domains into individual subjects. In the first two learning cycles, where necessary, the learning area is identical to the subject to support the development of specific competences.

The national curriculum for primary education will specify the breakdown of learning areas into specific subjects within the framework curriculum. Especially in the first cycle, priority will be given to integrating educational content and enabling flexible teaching approaches, moving beyond the traditional subject-hour structure. In the third cycle, schools will be offered the option to either integrate the learning content fully within a single area or maintain a structure of separate subjects, allowing them to adopt the model that best aligns with their educational vision and objectives.³⁷

Currently, the Slovak school system consists of pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education (Years 1–9), secondary education (upper secondary schools such as grammar schools, vocational secondary schools, conservatories, vocational training centres), universities, adult education and training institutions, out-of-school education establishments, and special schools. Schools in Slovakia can be run by the state, churches or private entities. In the 2024/2025 school year, more than 448,000 children attended primary schools in Slovakia, while approximately 215,000 pupils were enrolled in secondary schools.³⁸

³⁶ Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky [Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic], 'Štátny vzdelávací program pre základné vzdelávanie (2023)' ['National Educational Program for Primary Education (2023)'], accessed 25 January 2025, https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/11808_statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-zakladne-vzdelavanie-cely.pdf.

³⁷ Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky, 'Štátny vzdelávací program (2023)'.

³⁸ Centrum vedecko-technických informácií SR [Slovak Centre for Scientific and Technical Information], 'Štatistická ročenka – základné školy' ['Statistical Yearbook – Primary Schools'], accessed 25 January 2025, https://www.cvtisr.sk/cvti-sr-vedecka-kniznica/informacie-o-skolstve/statistiky/statisticka-rocenka-publikacia/statisticka-rocenka-zakladne-skoly.html?page_id=9601.

Part IV. Legal Regulations on Religious Education

1. Poland

Legal Framework for Religious Education in Polish Schools and Preschools

Religion returned to schools in 1990, with the most significant document specifying the teaching conditions and methods the 1992 regulation of the Minister of National Education (teaching had been introduced to schools one year previously based on an instruction that was a temporary solution). This regulation has been amended multiple times (most recently in 2020),¹ and remains in force today.² Notably, this document not only concerns the teaching of the Roman Catholic religion, but also the religions of churches and religious associations that function in accordance with the law in Poland and wish to teach religion in the education system. Furthermore, although not reflected in its title, the regulation also addresses the teaching of ethics. During the 2023/24 school year, 22 churches and religious associations took advantages of the opportunity to provide school-based religious education. The current regulation enables four options for participation in religious or ethics classes: religion, ethics, religion + ethics, or none of the above. Often raised is the demotivating character of the last option, which also negatively affects attendance at religion lessons. The ministry conducted work to allow

¹ Recently, two attempts have been made to further amend the regulation in 2024 and 2025; however, they raise serious legal doubts, which will be addressed in the text.

² See Minister Edukacji Narodowej [Minister of National Education, Poland], *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 14 kwietnia 1992 r. w sprawie warunków i sposobu organizowania nauki religii w publicznych przedszkolach i szkołach* [Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 April 1992 on the Conditions and Methods of Organising Religious Education in Public Preschools and Schools], *Dziennik Ustaw* 2020, item 983.

for choice only within the scope of the remaining three options; however, these efforts were not finalised.

The regulation classifies religious education as a non-obligatory subject, meaning that it is optional but becomes mandatory once chosen. The regulation establishes the conditions for choosing religious education and for changing this decision. It also determines group size, the weekly scope of two school or pre-school lessons, the qualifications, duties, and rights of religion teachers, the responsibility of the Church (churches) for the teaching content, curricula, and textbooks, the organization of three-day Lenten retreats, and the competencies for supervising the work of religion teachers. In terms of the qualifications of religion teachers, it was decided that these would be established through an agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Conference of the Polish Episcopate. This agreement has been renewed multiple times to gradually align the required qualifications and the process of obtaining them with the standards set for teachers of other subjects.³

In summary, the last thirty years have seen the fruitful implementation of religion lessons in Polish schools, along with well-crafted legal regulations governing this education. Beyond the pessimistic view that these lessons are of no benefit and reduce the number of children and young people engaged in the life of Polish parishes and the overly optimistic view that these lessons fulfil all of the Church's aspirations for religious formation, a voice of reason has emerged. This perspective acknowledges the value of school-based religious education, while also recognising its structural limitations and the necessity to supplement its content with parish and family catechesis. One of the most dangerous misconceptions about religious education in schools is the belief that it exempts parents from their inalienable duty to be their children's first catechists,⁴ as well as the belief that they do not require engagement in the life of the Church community, i.e., the parish.

³ Minister Edukacji Narodowej [Minister of National Education, Poland], 'Porozumienie pomiędzy Konferencją Episkopatu Polski oraz Ministerstwem Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 3 kwietnia 2019 r. w sprawie kwalifikacji zawodowych wymaganych od nauczycieli religii' ['Agreement Between the Polish Episcopal Conference and the Ministry of National Education of 3 April 2019 Regarding Professional Qualifications Required for Religious Education Teachers'], accessed 12 October 2024, https://e-dziennik.men.gov.pl/app/uploads/2019/04/Porozumienie-poz.-9_2019.pdf.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2020), nos. 227–228.

2. Czech Republic

Legal Regulations for Religious Education in the Czech Republic⁵

In November 1989, Czechoslovakia underwent significant social and political changes. As early as December of that year, the criminal code was amended by Act no. 159/1989 Coll., which removed anti-church provisions. Additionally, Act no. 16/1990 Coll. of 23 January 1990 repealed §7 of Act no. 218/1949 Coll., which had provided state economic security for churches and religious associations. As a result, the state ceased to interfere in the internal affairs of churches.

The new religious law is based on the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, an annex to Constitutional Act no. 23/1991 Coll. Article 16 allows for the free practice of religion and the independent management of churches and religious associations. Paragraph 3 of Article 16 stipulates the conditions for religious education in public schools.⁶

The next law, Act no. 308/1991 Coll., the Freedom of Religion and the Status of Churches and Religious Associations Act, guarantees the right to freely manifest one's religion or beliefs. Paragraph 1 addresses religious education. For children under the age of fifteen, their legal representatives make the decision on religious education. The state defines the legal conditions for registering churches and religious associations, recognising only those that are registered in accordance with this law. A list of registered churches and religious associations is included in the annex to this law. According to Art. 5, para. 1, letter C, this law enables religious education in public schools. Believers have the right to raise their children in a religious manner, including teaching religion in accordance with the internal regulations of churches and religious associations, provided they comply with applicable legal provisions.⁷

Constitutional Act no. 542/1992 Coll. addressed the legal issues related to the dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, establishing an independent Czech state. The first laws published were the Constitution of the Czech Republic and the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (no. 1/1993 Coll. and no. 2/1993 Coll.). Since the Czech Republic adopted the existing constitutional order, all legal norms continued to apply.

⁵ Zaboř Horák, *Církev a české školství* [Churches and Czech Education], (Prague: Grada Publishing, 2011).

⁶ Eliška Wagnerová et al., *Listina základních práv a svobod. Komentář* [Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms: Commentary] (Prague: Wolters Kluwer, 2012), 398.

⁷ Markéta Jančarová, 'Právní úprava výuky náboženství v Českých zemích v 19. a 20. století' ['Legal Regulation of Religious Education in the Czech Lands in the 19th and 20th Centuries'], *Revue církevního práva* 39, no. 1 (2008): 42–47.

An amendment to the Education Act no. 138/1995 Coll. introduced higher vocational schools into the Czech education system, which allowed churches and religious organisations to expand religious education into. An amendment to the Public Administration and Education Management Act (no. 139/1995 Coll.) re-regulated the inclusion of newly established institutions into the network of schools, kindergartens, and educational institutions, as well as their potential removal from the network.⁸ Church schools were exempt from having to submit a new application for inclusion in the network and were recognized as already included by virtue of the new law.

The change in the financing for church schools occurred alongside the establishment of regions, as outlined in Acts no. 129/2000 Coll. and no. 131/2000 Coll, which amended and repealed certain laws related to the Acts on Regions, Municipalities, District Authorities, and the Capital City of Prague, also amended Act no. 564/1990 Coll. on Public Administration and Local Government in Education. According to this law, regional educational authorities were no longer responsible for allocating financial resources to church schools and educational institutions. This responsibility was transferred to the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports.

The Freedom of Religion Act no. 3/2002 Coll. repealed and replaced the earlier Acts on Freedom of Religion and the Status of Churches and Religious Associations (No. 308/1991 Coll.) and Act no. 161/1992 Sb. on the Registration of Churches and Religious Associations. This law regulates the principles of registering churches and religious associations and obtaining permits to exercise special rights,⁹ such as the right to establish church schools and teach religion in public schools. It also established the rules for acquiring ecclesiastical legal personality.¹⁰

Religious education in public schools is currently regulated by the following legal provisions:

⁸ Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy [Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, CR], *Rejstřík škol a školských* [Register of Schools and Educational Institutions], accessed 23 August 2024, <http://rejskol.msmt.cz>.

⁹ Parlament České republiky [Parliament of the Czech Republic], *Zákon č. 561/2004 Sb. (školský zákon)* [Act no. 561/2004 Coll. (the Education Act)], accessed 23 August 2024, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2004-561> (hereafter ŠZ, 2004); Jaroslav Benák, 'Zvláštní práva církví' ['Special Rights of Religious Communities'], in *Právna politika a legislativa v oblasti konfesního práva* [Legal Policy and Legislation in Religious Law], ed. Michaela Moravčíková, (Bratislava: Wolters Kluwer, 2020), 263–270; Stanislav Příbyl, 'Pojetí tzv. 'zvláštních práv' církví a náboženských společností podle zákona č. 3/2002 Sb' ['The Concept of So-Called 'Special Rights' of Churches and Religious Communities under Act no. 3/2002 Coll.'], *Revue církevního práva* 27, no. 1 (2004): 7.

¹⁰ Ministerstvo kultury České republiky [Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic], *Rejstřík registrovaných církví a náboženských společností vedený Ministerstvem kultury ČR* [Register of Registered Churches and Religious Societies Managed by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic], accessed 23 August 2024, http://www3.mkcr.cz/cns_internet.

- Act no. 561/2004 Coll. on Preschool, Primary, Secondary, Higher Vocational, and Other Education (the Education Act), with subsequent amendments (the latest of which is effective from 1 September 2018), §15, which specifies the conditions for religious education in public schools:¹¹
 - (1) Religion may be taught in schools in accordance with the educational principles and objectives referred to in paragraph 2. Religion may be taught by registered churches or religious associations that have been granted the right to teach religion in public schools. If necessary, this teaching may be done jointly based on a written agreement.
 - (2) In public primary and secondary schools, religion is an optional subject. The minimum required number of pupils is seven, while the maximum number of pupils in a class is thirty. Pupils enrol in the subject annually through the specific church or religious association. Religious education may be conducted in combined groups of pupils from different classes within the same school. Based on an agreement, religious education may also be conducted in combined groups of pupils from different schools. This agreement also regulates financial matters.
 - (3) A religion teacher or catechist may teach religion based on an agreement with a specific school. Authorization to teach religion (canonical mission) is issued by the governing body of the church or religious association.
- Act no. 563/2004 Coll. on Pedagogical Employees and Amendments to Certain Laws, with subsequent amendments, §§3, 4, 14 [22], and 32.¹²

Paragraph 3 of this Act defines the conditions necessary for performing the duties of a pedagogical employee. A pedagogical employee may be an individual who meets the following preliminary requirements:

- (1) possesses full legal capacity,
- (2) holds professional qualifications to perform activities directly related to the teaching duties,
- (3) has an impeccable reputation,
- (4) is in good health,
- (5) demonstrates knowledge of the Czech language.

Paragraph 14 outlines the requirements for religion teachers. Religion teachers acquire professional qualifications through higher education in accredited master's degree programmes in:

- (1) theological sciences,
- (2) educational sciences, with pedagogical preparation for teaching religion,
- (3) educational or social sciences, or

¹¹ ŠZ, 2004, accessed 23 August 2024, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2004-561>.

¹² ŠZ, 2004, accessed 23 August 2024, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2004-563>.

(4) higher education obtained through accredited bachelor's degree studies in educational sciences with pedagogical preparation for teaching religion, or through accredited continuing education provided by a higher education institution (theological, pedagogical) with a programme for pedagogical preparation for religion teachers.¹³

- Act no. 17/2006 Coll. on Freedom of Religion and the Status of Churches and Religious Associations, §7, paragraph 1, letter a).
- Decree 256/2012 Coll. on Primary Education and Certain Requirements Regarding Compulsory Schooling, amending Decree 48/2005 Coll., §§15 and 16.
- The school's educational programme (ŠVP). If religion is taught as an optional subject at the school, the religion teacher must submit the subject's curriculum to the school principal, who will incorporate it as part of the School's Educational Programme (ŠVP).

3. Slovakia

The Status of Religious Education in Schools

Religious education in schools is still understood by many leaders of the Roman Catholic Church as school catechesis. This view is reflected in various Church documents. For example, the Pastoral and Evangelization Plan of the Catholic Church in Slovakia (2001–2006) confuses religious education with catechesis and seeks to replace religious education with catechesis in the parish.¹⁴ The manifestation of this mistaken view is the fact that many parishes carry out preparation for the sacraments of initiation (First Holy Communion and Confirmation) through school religious education and not through targeted parish catechesis. This misguided view of religious education stems from the absence of a well-thought-out concept of parish pastoral care for individual groups.

After 1989, the state passed laws allowing all state-recognized churches to fulfil their mission by teaching religious education in schools. Religious education entered in schools first as an optional elective and later as a compulsory elective subject. However, it was

¹³ Parlament České republiky [Parliament of the Czech Republic], *Zákon č. 563/2004 Sb., Zákon o pedagogických pracovnících a o změně některých zákonů* [Act No. 563/2004 Coll., Act on Pedagogical Employees and Amendments to Certain Acts], accessed 23 August 2024, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/translation/cs/2004-563?langid=1033>.

¹⁴ Konferencia biskupov Slovenska [Slovak Episcopal Conference], 'Pastoračný a evanjelizačný plán Katolíckej cirkvi na Slovensku' ['Pastoral and Evangelisation Plan for the Catholic Church in Slovakia'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/dokumenty-a-vyhlasenia/p/dokumenty-kbs/c/pastoracny-a-evanjelizacny-plan-katolickej-cirkvi-na-slovensku-2001-2006>.

not until the school education reforms that religious education received opportunities for development.

Based on the 2008 school reform, a new curriculum for the subject of Roman Catholic religious education was devised and approved by the Slovak Episcopal Conference in 2010. According to the new curriculum, Catholic Religious Education shapes a person's religious thought, conscience, belief and personal faith as a personal expression of religious thought and an integral part of their identity. It offers access to the biblical message and to the teachings of the Church, opening up the possibility of living life with the Church.¹⁵

The new curriculum emphasises the development of the key competences necessary for pupils' personal and social lives. According to the authors, a new system of education was needed in the educational process, which also required a change in the structure of the curriculum.

They considered a spiral structure to be the most appropriate, as it allows for a gradual deepening of the curriculum in subsequent years, with each year building on the last. In the linear structure, dividing the curriculum content into substantial lines was necessary in order to deepen the cognitive, affective and psychomotor objectives necessary for pupils to acquire key competences in subsequent years.¹⁶ These linear areas are then deepened within a spiral comprising thirteen levels. These areas are repeated throughout the spiral, resulting in a gradual broadening and deepening of the curriculum that is appropriate for the age of the pupils. The first year of primary school focuses on joy and enthusiasm for life and for all creation. Through this, pupils come to know the One who loves them infinitely and learns to trust (Year 2). This path of trust leads to faith in Year 3 and Year 4 sees faith bring hope to life. Those who live with hope open themselves to life and are able to engage in dialogue with other people and God (Year 5). Through dialogue with the One who transcends us, pupils discover truth (Year 6). Truth liberates humans (Year 7), who become aware of their dignity (Year 8) and their responsibility for themselves and for others (Year 9). Secondary school pupils begin to make their own choices and build their own relationships (Year 10) and determine their own values (Year 11). By building relationships responsibly and choosing the right values,

¹⁵ Katolícke Pedagogické a Katechetické Centrum [Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre], 'Kurikulum predmetu náboženstvo/náboženská výchova' ['Curriculum of the Subject Religion/Religious Education'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://kpkc.sk/kurikulum-predmetu-nabozenstvo>.

¹⁶ Jana Hurajtová, *Kurikulum predmetu katolícke náboženstvo/náboženská výchova pre základné školy, stredné školy, štvorročné gymnáziá a osemročné gymnáziá, dvojročné nadstavbové stredné školy* [Curriculum for the Subject of Catholic Religion/Religious Education for Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, Four-Year Grammar Schools, Eight-Year Grammar Schools, and Two-Year Post-Secondary Schools], Spišská Nová Ves: KPKC, 2010, 13–14.

young people discover their identity (Year 12) and their human mission to live a life of love, in a deep relationship with other and with God (Year 13).¹⁷

The goals of the new curriculum emphasised the acquisition of pupils' key competences, so the educational process was geared towards actively involving pupils in learning through experience, while also connecting it to real life. 'It is therefore necessary for religious education to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church, as well as with the knowledge of secular sciences. Teaching in context fosters critical thinking – it teaches pupils to reason and critically evaluate positives and negatives, as well as causes and consequences. It is a means of preventing manipulation and teaches pupils to link information from different scientific disciplines. Integral theology is concerned with making connections between the various theological disciplines. This educational process leads to the standardisation of the basic educational content needed to understand truths in context.'¹⁸

Four years after the school reform, the State Pedagogical Institute upgraded the state education programmes. Thus, as of 1 September 2015, the Revised State Educational Programme came into force, which also applies to religious education. The Revised Educational Programme Framework defines new performance and content standards for religious education.¹⁹

Since 2017, the Roman Catholic religious education curriculum has undergone further reform, with religious education now being viewed as a means of developing pupils' religious literacy. The Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre (KPKC) has devised a new Roman Catholic religious education curriculum for primary schools that is oriented towards developing religious literacy. The curriculum was approved by the President of the Slovak Episcopal Conference in 2023. This innovative model for Roman Catholic religious education is detailed in the competence model, which specifies pupils' religious competences.²⁰

The main goal of religious education is for pupils to develop their religious literacy and have the opportunity to acquire and deepen their personal and responsible Christian and religious identity. Religious literacy is the ability to engage responsibly with one's

¹⁷ Hurajtová, *Kurikulum*, 14–15.

¹⁸ Hurajtová, *Kurikulum*, 15.

¹⁹ Katolícke Pedagogické a Katechetické Centrum [Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre], 'Inovovaný štátny vzdelávací program pre náboženskú výchovu' ['Updated State Educational Programme for Religious Education'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://kpkc.sk/inovovany-svp-2015>.

²⁰ Katolícke Pedagogické a Katechetické Centrum [Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre], 'Kurikulum katolíckeho náboženství ZŠ a SŠ – pracovný materiál' ['Curriculum of Catholic Religion for Primary and Secondary Schools – Working Material'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://kpkc.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/KURIKULUM-KATOLICKEHO-NAB-ZS-A-SŠ-def-verzia-jún-2020.pdf>.

own and others' religious beliefs. Pupils' religious literacy is developed through acquired religious competence. At the same time, religious education also develops pupils' ethical and value-based understanding, which is also a focus of ethics education. Thus, religious education contributes to the holistic education of primary school pupils.²¹

Competence-oriented teaching is characterised by a clear focus on the skills that pupils have acquired by the end of each cycle. Religious competence is pupils' ability to understand the Christian religion correctly, express it, and live their own faith, based on religious content and knowledge. Pupils acquire religious competence by relating, evaluating and applying religious knowledge to each other in specific life situations. Religious education oriented towards developing religious competence is an educational process that focuses not only on religious knowledge but also on the ability to perceive reality religiously, understand and communicate through religious language, act according to one's religious convictions and express one's faith through a religiously motivated life.

The Roman Catholic Religious Education curriculum develops religious literacy by covering the following content components: God and Humankind; Jesus Christ; Sacred Scripture; Church and Sacraments; and Christian Life. These components are specified in each cycle through performance and content standards. The content standards represent the knowledge pupils have acquired and their level of understanding. Through the definition of content, the standards can become the themes of specific lessons.

While religious education focuses on acquiring knowledge, it also focuses on the ability to perceive reality religiously, understand and communicate through religious language, act on one's religious convictions, and express one's religiosity and faith by living a religiously motivated life.

Religious competence develops pupils' personal capacity to deal responsibly with their own religiosity and is this is reflected in the performance standards during the teaching process. Religious learning is the process by which pupils themselves actively develop and extend their own abilities, developing their religious literacy through basic religious competence.

Religious competence is expressed through active verbs that reflect the various dimensions of religious competence being developed. These competences form the basis of the religious education curriculum, which aims to encourage pupils to observe and perceive religious reality, develop religious knowledge and understanding, understand and communicate through religious language, reflect and act upon their own religious convictions, and express their faith through religiously motivated action and life.

²¹ Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky [Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic], 'Štátny vzdelávací program pre základné vzdelávanie' ['State Educational Programme for Primary Education'], accessed 25 January 2025, https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/11808_statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-zakladne-vzdelavanie-cely.pdf.

Religious literacy develops gradually in primary school. In the first cycle (Years 1–3), religious education introduces pupils to religious literacy. In the second cycle (Years 4–5), pupils demonstrate their mastery of these foundations. In the third cycle (Years 6–9), they build on this foundation. The achievement of religious competencies and content standards is defined as competency at the end of each cycle.²²

Learning is therefore an individual process of construction, whereby pupils actively develop and extend their abilities, acquiring religious competence through basic knowledge. In doing so, religious knowledge is integrated into the context of everyday life, reaching multiple dimensions of the pupils simultaneously. Knowledge therefore requires not only understanding and reinforcement, but also application to personal life.

The Practice of Confessional Religious Education in Schools

Currently, religious education is a compulsory elective subject, with grades awarded in all years of primary school and the first two of secondary school. This means that once chosen, it becomes compulsory for the pupil for the whole school year, and it is not possible to transfer to the alternative, which is ethics education. Therefore, the school must ascertain whether parents wish to enrol their child in religious education. It remains an optional subject in pre-schools and in the last two years of secondary school. As part of the curriculum reform, it is included in the People and Society strand of education. The minimum weekly allocation is one hour.

The position of religious education in Church schools is distinct. Here it is a compulsory subject in all years. According to the regulation of the Episcopal Conference, religious education is taught in all Catholic schools with a two-hour weekly allowance, and pupils can graduate with this subject.

Of the total number of primary school pupils (450,861 in 2020), approximately 60% (305,009) attend Roman Catholic religion classes. The highest number of pupils attending religion classes is in the Žilina region (almost 75%), with the lowest proportion in the Bratislava region (44%). This suggests that rural environments still influence a higher participation in religion classes, whereas participation is lower in big cities. Although these numbers are still relatively high, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of pupils enrolling in religious education in recent years, especially in large cities such as Bratislava.

²² Tibor Reimer, 'Sprievodca zmenami vo vzdelávacích oblastiach. Človek a spoločnosť, Rímskokatolícka náboženská výchova/náboženstvo' [A Guide to Changes in Educational Subjects: People and Society, Roman Catholic Religious Education/Religion'] (Bratislava: NIVAM, 2024), 7, accessed 25 January 2025, https://vzdelavanie21.sk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Clovek-a-spolocnost_RKC.pdf.

Table 3. Number of Pupils Enrolled in Religious Education in Slovakia

Region	Total No. of Pupils	Pupils With Religious Education	% of the Total
Bratislava	56,946	25,337	44%
Trnava	44,671	28,573	64%
Trenčín	44,415	28,248	64%
Nitra	51,409	32,329	63%
Žilina	59,911	44,779	75%
Banská Bystrica	50,225	26,006	52%
Prešov	74,959	51,580	69%
Košice	68,325	34,141	50%
Total	450,861	305,009	60%

Source: Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky [Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic].

Religious education in schools is taught according to the curricula and syllabuses approved by the registered church or religious society, following review by the Ministry of Education. Although twelve churches have the right to teach religious education in Slovak schools through agreements with the state, only six have an approved curriculum for confessional religious education. These are the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Catholic Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church, the Reformed Church, the Orthodox Church and the Church of the Brethren.

The subject of religious education remains quite popular in Slovak schools, especially at the first level of primary education. Various studies show that religious education is the second most popular subject after physical education: over 70% of pupils report that they enjoy it and consider it important for their lives. At this stage, pupils tend to be interested in all the topics presented in religious education, despite the prevalence of less creative activities such as reading and writing. However, the popularity of religious education wanes as pupils move into the third cycle of primary school. While physical education remains the most popular subject, religious education declines in popularity and ceases to be relevant to pupils' lives. This shift can be explained both by the arrival of puberty but also by inappropriate and less interactive teaching methods. As a result, more passive activities dominate, making the subject less attractive to older pupils.

Relationship to Ethics Education

In Slovakia, the only alternative to religious education is ethics. As with religious education, ethics is a compulsory elective subject throughout primary and secondary school, although at the secondary level it is offered only in years three and four.

Ethics emerged as a school subject in Slovakia in the early 1990s, initiated by a group of experts, primarily from the Catholic community.²³ Its original aims were to prevent the moral decline of young people, to foster the development of their personalities and and identity formation, and to counteract socio-pathological phenomena.

The subject was first piloted in 1990 in sixty schools across the country. Owing to the experiment's success, participation expanded rapidly, and by 1992 around 300 schools were involved. The original intention was to make ethics an optional subject available to all pupils, regardless of their denominational or philosophical orientation, and to position it as a complement to religious education. This aim, however, was not achieved. Following a political decision, ethics became a compulsory elective in direct competition with religious education on 1 September 1993. For many years thereafter, the two subjects existed in parallel, often perceived as opposing alternatives. Ethics lessons came to be regarded as an 'atheist' alternative for pupils without religious convictions, in direct competition with religious education.

The introduction of a compulsory choice between ethics and religious education in Slovakia was questioned by some experts from the outset, on the grounds that it deprives pupils of the opportunity to benefit from the positive elements of the other subject. The authors of the Slovak ethics education curriculum themselves considered both subjects to be complementary. Lencz, for example, viewed the promotion of pro-social behaviour as a concept shared by both Christians and non-religious individuals. He argued that religion should not be seen as rival but an ally of ethics education in fostering prosociality. Since ethics education in Slovakia follows Christian traditions in accordance with the Constitution, he maintained that the two subjects have identical aims and are not in conflict.²⁴

Other educators criticised the forced choice between these subjects, as if they were inherently opposition to each other, as an irresponsible approach. Hanesová and others proposed addressing this tension through the creation of an integrated subject – multicultural education – which would incorporate the principles of prosocial education alongside multireligious instruction, with a focus on identity, tolerance and dialogue.²⁵

In practice, however, ethics has not always proved a viable alternative to religious education. According to statistics from the Slovak School Office, more than two-thirds of all primary and lower secondary school pupils (68.1%) participate in religious education,

²³ Ladislav Lencz was a teacher at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Trnava, while Oľga Krížová and Eva Ivanová were teachers at the Roman Catholic Faculty of the Comenius University in Bratislava.

²⁴ Ladislav Lencz, *Metódy etickej výchovy [Methods of Ethical Education]*, (Bratislava: Metodické centrum, 1993).

²⁵ Dana Hanesová, *Kľúčové princípy etickej výchovy v náboženskej výchove [Key Principles of Ethical Education in Religious Education]*, (Banská Bystrica: PF UMB, 2009), 82.

compared with only 28.5% in ethics. Participation rates in both subjects at these levels has remained relatively stable in recent years, although the proportion of pupils taking religious education declines slightly after the fifth year: on average, 70% of Year Four pupils attend religious education, compared with 65% of Year Nine pupils. However, at the upper secondary level – grammar schools and other institutions – only around half of all pupils participate in religious education.

There are also marked regional differences. In the Bratislava region, for instance, 50.5% of pupils participated in religious education and 46.1% in ethics during the 2014/2015 school year. By 2019/2020, participation in religious education had fallen to 48.2% attendance at ethics classes had risen to 50.7%. In contrast, in the Prešov region, 87.3% of pupils attended religious education and only 9.5% ethics 2014/2015. Interestingly, this ratio has changed little in recent years; in 2019/2020, 87% of pupils participated in religious education, compared to 10.5% for ethics. These pronounced regional variations largely reflect differences in local religiosity and indicate a consistently high level of interest in religious education among pupils.

By denomination, 88% of pupils enrolled in religious education follow the Roman Catholic programme, 4.5% the Greek Catholic, 4.5% the Evangelical (Lutheran), 1.5% the Reformed Church and 0.8% the Orthodox curriculum, while 0.7% of pupils participate in programmes offered by other religious communities.²⁶

²⁶ Tibor Reimer, 'Ethikunterricht und Religionsunterricht in der Slowakei. Eine Beziehung zwischen Zusammenarbeit und Konkurrenz' ['Ethics Education and Religious Education in Slovakia: A Relationship Between Cooperation and Competition'], *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum* 30, 1 (2022): 70.

Part V. Curriculum Foundations for Religious Education

1. Poland

Framework Documents for Religious Education in Polish Schools and Preschools

Once the framework for religious education in schools had been defined, the next step was to articulate its substantive concept from the perspective of the Church. This process culminated in 2001 with the publication of three key documents for religious education in Poland: *The Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*,¹ *The Core Curriculum of the Catechesis of the Catholic Church in Poland*² and *The Religious Education Curriculum*.³

The first of these, *The Catechetical Directory*, was tailored to the Polish context. It expanded upon the more concise *General Directory for Catechesis* by providing concrete guidelines suited to Poland's specific circumstances. The most significant issue it addressed was the relationship between school-based religious education and catechesis. As previously noted, opinions on this matter had long been divided: some equated school religious education with catechesis, while others called for a strict separation. The Directory sought a balanced approach, stating: 'Religious education in schools and catechesis

¹ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [Polish Episcopal Conference], *Dyrektorium katechetyczne Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce* [*Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2001) (hereafter PDK).

² Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [Polish Episcopal Conference], *Podstawa programowa katechezy Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce* [*The Curriculum of the Catechesis of the Catholic Church in Poland*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2001) (hereafter PPK 2001).

³ Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego KEP [Commission for Catholic Education of the Polish Episcopal Conference], *Program nauczania religii* [*Religious Education Curriculum*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2001) (hereafter PNR 2001).

mutually complement each other. In the Polish context, considering historical conditions and the tradition of catechesis established over the last decades, school religious education should be treated as part of catechesis, i.e., as a specific form of catechesis.⁴ This view implies that the term ‘school catechesis’ is inappropriate. While it may sometimes be used inadvertently, it can also reflect unrealistic expectations of school religious education, which in turn may lead to frustration when these expectations are not met. The Directory nonetheless offers two reasons for considering school-based religious education a form of catechesis. First, the Church retains autonomy over the design of curricula and textbooks. This allows the incorporation of formative and evangelising elements – catechetical in nature – into the educational content. Second, the Church also determines who may teach religion in Polish schools. While teachers must meet the qualifications required by state educational law, they must also hold a canonical mission (a written appointment) from the diocesan bishop. Without this authorisation, even a fully qualified teacher cannot conduct religious instruction in Polish schools. This dual requirement ensures that religious instruction is delivered by individuals who are both professionally competent and ecclesiastically approved, reinforcing the catechetical character of their teaching.

The Directory further emphasises that, while school-based religious education forms part of catechesis, it cannot by itself constitute catechesis in its entirety. For catechesis to be complete, what happens in school must be complemented within the home and parish. A positive step in this direction has been the shift of sacramental preparation – particularly for the Eucharist, Penance and Reconciliation, and Confirmation – from schools to parishes. This change has been accompanied by increased efforts to involve parents in the process, encouraging them to take responsibility their children’s formation, with support from pastors or catechists.

The remaining two documents address the teaching of religion in schools. They reflect the educational standards of the time, as shown by the creation of a curriculum framework comparable to those of other subjects and linked to the general education curriculum. The creation of this framework marked an important stage in the evolution of the Polish education system as it encouraged greater creativity in the design of teaching programmes, including original programmes whose content had to comply with the framework. This methodology also introduced pluralism into religious education, with the programme authored by the Catholic Education Commission (KEP) serving as a model, a proposal for use or inspiration in creating original programmes.⁵ As with other school subjects, these had to be in accordance with the framework in order to be approved.

⁴ PDK, 82.

⁵ PPK 2001, 7.

The set of documents regulating the teaching of religion in schools has been updated twice, in 2010 and 2018. These revisions were linked to the reform of the education system, which included extending provision to preschools, restructuring schools (the abolition of *gymnasia*, the return to an eight-year primary school and a four-year general secondary school), and adapting content and requirements to the new circumstances. Each edition of these documents emphasises the need for terminological consistency with wider educational documents, making them comprehensible not only to the theologically trained religion teachers but also to teachers of other subjects, school heads, and pedagogical supervision staff. Work is currently in progress on the fourth edition, together with a renewed Polish catechetical directory, which will refer to the *2020 Directory for Catechesis*.

A distinctive feature of the Polish approach to religious education in schools is the emphasis on incorporating an evangelical dimension. This is not intended to turn religious lessons into evangelisation, but to ensure that they retain an evangelical character. The authors of the 2010 curriculum explain: ‘A characteristic feature of school religious education is that pupils participating in these lessons display a varied level of interest in the Gospel, and consequently, varying levels of engagement with religious life. It can also be observed that many individuals attending religious classes have not yet reached an age-appropriate level of maturity. This hinders them from making significant life decisions and complicates the conduct of the lessons. Therefore, religious education in schools often takes on more of an evangelising form, focusing on initial interest in Jesus Christ and His Good News, rather than catechesis for Christian initiation.’ The most recent curriculum also refers to evangelisation in religious education, reminding us that religious education in schools is part of the Church’s catechetical activity. This calls for a reconsideration of priorities and for a greater outreach to the world and to humanity.⁶

To understand the logic behind the curriculum, it is helpful to look at its most recent version – currently taught in schools and preschools – and which forms the basis for contemporary religious education programmes and textbooks. In its introduction, the authors recall and update the idea from the *Directory for Catechesis*, placing school religious education within the framework of the Catholic Church’s catechetical mission. They write: ‘The concept of catechesis in Poland is the result of adopting what is valuable in the Polish catechetical tradition: the clash of views describing the challenges the world faces and a realistic judgment of the possibilities for proclaiming the Gospel in different environments. That is why, in addition to religious education in school, it assumes pastoral catechesis in the parish and support for family catechesis. These actions

⁶ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [Polish Episcopal Conference], *Podstawa programowa katechezy Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce* [Core Curriculum for Catholic Religious Education in Poland] (Częstochowa: Edycja Świętego Pawła, 2018) (hereafter PPK 2018), 10.

should not be opposed to each other. In fact, care should be taken to ensure that they complement one another.⁷

Religious education in preschool follows the theme *Introduction to Religious Life*, which captures perfectly the essence of this stage. It serves as an introductory phase for later stages, focusing on establishing the anthropological and theological foundations of faith. Even at this stage, the emphasis is on ‘God who is present, close, caring for humanity, full of love for people.’⁸

The essence of religious education in preschool is defined by the catechetical goals for this stage:

- Discovering the mystery of the personal God who reveals His love to humanity
- Presenting Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born of Mary
- Introducing the key events of Jesus’s life as celebrated in the liturgical year
- Cultivating love for God and fostering relationships with others grounded in that love.⁹

At first glance, the guidelines for preschool religious education may seem minimal or intentionally light on content. This is a deliberate choice, taking into account the psychophysical capabilities of preschool-aged children. The simplicity of the curriculum supports the goal of gently introducing children to structured religious learning, which will be developed in school-based religious education. A notable example is the model proposed by the Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Episcopal Conference, considered innovative at this stage. Entitled *Meeting Jesus*, it revolves around recurring thematic units:

- People meet the Lord Jesus
- The Lord Jesus is born in Bethlehem
- The Lord Jesus dies on the cross
- The Lord Jesus rises from the dead
- The Lord Jesus remains with people.¹⁰

The same biblical passages and liturgical events are revisited in subsequent years. As the authors explain, ‘Such use is supported by the natural need of the child to return to familiar events. At different stages of preschool education, they are presented with varying levels of detail and interpretation, depending on the developmental abilities of the child,

⁷ PPK 2018, 9–10.

⁸ PPK 2018, 20.

⁹ PPK 2018, 21.

¹⁰ Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski [Commission for Catholic Education of the Polish Episcopal Conference], *Program nauczania religii rzymskokatolickiej w przedszkolach i szkołach* [Curriculum for Roman Catholic Religious Education in Preschools and Schools] (Częstochowa: Edycja Świętego Pawła, 2019) (hereafter PNR 2018 – although the programme was published in 2019, it was adopted by the Commission for Catholic Education of the Polish Episcopal Conference on 19 September 2018), 14–32.

and are recorded in the expected outcomes.’¹¹ This approach reflects an understanding of early childhood development, allowing religious education to grow with the child, while reinforcing key messages through repetition and familiarity.

The first stage of primary school education (Years 1–4) differs slightly from other subjects, where early childhood education typically covers Years 1–3. However, this division was retained because it had been previously planned for the national education system, and also because Year 3 was dedicated to preparation for First Holy Communion, with Year 4 serving as a follow-up to logically complete the cycle from a mystagogical perspective. This stage is guided by the theme *Catechesis of Initiation into the Sacraments of Penance and Reconciliation and the Eucharist*, with the following objectives:

- Preparation for the sacraments of Penance and Reconciliation and the Eucharist
- Presenting God’s love in the gifts of life, baptism, and faith
- Introduction to the mysteries of the liturgical year
- Formation of conscience
- Encouragement of personal prayer and encounters with God
- Educating for communal life in the family, school, and parish
- Forming Eucharistic attitudes and the attitude of Christian witness.¹²

The next stage (Years 5–8 – in other subjects, this stage covers Years 4–8) is entitled *Mystagogical Catechesis: Introducing into the History of Salvation*. Its objectives are:

- Helping pupils discover God’s presence and the role of faith in a full human life
- Introducing the history of salvation and its relevance in both the liturgical year and daily life
- Deepening understanding of the sacraments and their role in Christian life
- Preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation
- Continuing the development of moral conscience.¹³

The final stage of formal religious education takes place in secondary schools. Following the most recent education reform, the standard model is the four-year general secondary school (*lyceum*), based on which the five-year technical schools and three-year first-degree vocational schools were established (with the option to continue in a two-year second-degree vocational school). Religious education at this level follows the theme *Catechesis of Christian Identity*. Its objectives are:

- Supporting pupils in reaching maturity in faith
- Deepening knowledge of the Bible and Church Tradition
- Discovering the Word of God as a source of answers to life’s existential questions
- Establishing a hierarchy of values rooted in Divine Revelation

¹¹ PNR 2018, 13.

¹² PPK 2018, 31–32.

¹³ PPK 2018, 57–58.

- Guiding pupils in the discovery of their Christian vocation
- Forming a sense of ecclesial identity
- Preparing for active participation in apostolic work.¹⁴

The curriculum also includes dedicated provisions for children and young people with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. This is a deliberate and necessary distinction, as those with mild disabilities – who most often attend mainstream schools – can generally be taught using an adapted version of the standard curriculum, while those with profound disabilities require highly individualised programmes tailored to their abilities and needs.

An important feature of the curriculum is the set of correlation guidelines for each educational stage. In preschool, religious education is aligned with general preschool learning. In primary and secondary schools, it is linked with Polish language, history, music, art, civics, geography, biology, natural sciences, computer science, languages, physical education, family life education, and safety education. These correlation guidelines support the view that religious education is not an isolated or incompatible subject, but an integral part of a holistic human-centred education.

Alongside the school curriculum, the programme includes topics for parish catechesis meetings. As noted previously, parish catechesis is an essential complement to school religious education, not only in the context of direct preparation for receiving the sacraments. For preschool, this includes suggested meetings with parents focused on religious upbringing, the liturgical year, practices of faith, prayer, and religious signs and symbols.¹⁵ For primary school, the proposals include meetings with pupils focused on the liturgical year, the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation (Years 1–4), as well as on the essence of faith, the relationship with God, conscience, and spiritual maturity (Years 5–8).¹⁶ The parish catechesis for secondary school pupils is the most developed in conceptual terms. It draws on the insights of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, who highlighted the different roles of the four Gospels in the early Church, treating them as stages of Christian maturity.¹⁷ This framework provides a thoughtful, progressive structure for accompanying young people on their journey of faith.

¹⁴ See PPK 2018, 99–100.

¹⁵ PNR 2018, 35.

¹⁶ PNR 2018, 81–82, 156.

¹⁷ PNR 2018, 347–352.

2. Czech Republic

Core Curriculum for Religious Education

The instructions on catechesis issued by the Czech Episcopal Conference in 1994¹⁸ were the first official document from the Czech Church after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. This document addressed the broad topic of religious education and catechesis for children in parishes. Due to the situation in some regions of the Czech Republic, the document did not recommend introducing school-based catechesis methods different from those used in parish catechesis.

To ensure that no area of catechesis was overlooked, the instruction recommended using the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It also highlighted the importance of the Holy Scriptures, teaching materials, audiovisual aids, and mass media. From the beginning of formal education, pupils were to be encouraged to attend catechesis regularly, in line with the curriculum approved by the Czech Episcopal Conference. When religious education formed part of the curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Czech Republic, the ministry's regulations were also to be followed.

Faith education for school-age children in matters of faith could take place in two ways:

- As an elective subject taught on school premises, or
- As part of parish catechesis.

Since conditions varied across dioceses, the location and method of catechesis had to respond to local circumstances. Catechists were to be sensitive to the environment in which they taught, as well as to the readiness and age of the pupils. They were encouraged to reflect on their own strengths and choose teaching methods to make the catechesis accessible.

The second document, issued by the Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference in 1996, was the *Religious Education Curriculum for Primary Schools*.¹⁹ This programme employed didactic methods common in Europe in the second half of the 20th century. It was designed to convey a substantial amount of religious knowledge to children and young people in an age-appropriate manner, while integrating various aspects of everyday life. It outlined topics, assumptions, and objectives for each lesson.

¹⁸ Sekretariát České Biskupské Konference [Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference], *Katechetické směrnice České biskupské konference* [Catechetical Directives of the Czech Episcopal Conference] (Prague: Sekretariát ČBK, 1994).

¹⁹ Sekretariát České Biskupské Konference [Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference], *Osnovy náboženské výchovy pro základní školy* [Curriculum for Religious Education in Primary Schools] (Prague: Sekretariát ČBK, 1996).

School-based religious education in schools covered four main thematic areas:

- The Bible
- Principles of faith
- Prayer and liturgy
- Christian life

The progression of topics by year was structured as follows:

- Year 1: To Know that God Loves Us
- Year 2: To Know God Better
- Year 3: Understanding God's Signs in the Sacraments, How God Comes to Each of Us
- Year 4: To Show New Life with Jesus
- Year 5: The History of Salvation
- Year 6: The Christian Profession of Faith
- Year 7: Sacraments as Holy Signs of God's Grace
- Year 8: Life in Christ (Moral Education)
- Year 9: Living by Faith.²⁰

In public primary schools, religious education was offered as an optional subject, while for church schools it was mandatory, with a requirement of 1 to 2 hours per week.

In 2004, the Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference issued another key document, the *Religious Education Curriculum of the Roman Catholic Church for Years 1–9 of Primary School*, which remains in effect to this day.²¹ This programme was approved by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic on 2 June, 2004, under reference number 20 924/2003-22.

This programme governs the content of school-based religious education. It defines the subject as optional, with a weekly duration of one hour. While primarily intended for children from Christian families, it is open to all pupils who are interested, based on a registration form signed by their legal guardians. The subject aims to offer a basic insight into Christian teaching, tradition, and values. It presents human life as a gift and promotes pupils' engagement in building healthy interpersonal relationships. It encourages a positive attitude towards life, fair self-evaluation and empathy for others, including those in marginalised or disadvantaged situations. Pupils are also introduced to the Catholic Church's perspectives on questions about God, humanity, and the world, while

²⁰ See Ludmila Muchová, 'Osnovy náboženství na českých státních školách v současnosti' ['The Religious Education Curriculum at Contemporary Czech State Schools'], *Studia theologica* 6, 1 (2004): 74–89, accessed 24 August 2024, https://www.studiatheologica.eu/artkey/sth-200401-0007_Osnovy_nabozenstvi_na_ceskych_statnich_skolach_v_soucasnosti.php.

²¹ Sekretariát České biskupské konference [Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference], *Osnovy k výuce náboženské výchovy římskokatolické církve v 1.–9. ročníku základní školy* [*Curriculum for Teaching Religious Education of the Roman Catholic Church in Years 1–9 of Primary Schools*] (Prague: Sekretariát ČBK, 2004).

being given space to explore their own values and beliefs. They are introduced to other cultures and religions, guided towards accepting differences as a gift that can inspire and enrich. The overarching aim of religious education is to inspire pupils to seek truth throughout their lives. The content for each age group is divided into thematic units that are revisited and deepened cyclically.

Each year's objectives are divided into theological and anthropological areas which are symbolically represented as follows:

- Year 1: Recognize that God is with Us – symbol: a gift
- Year 2: Recognise God's Love – symbol: the cross
- Year 3: Understand how God Comes to Us in the Sacraments – symbol: bread and wine
- Year 4: God is with Us on Our Life Journey – symbol: a journey
- Year 5: Learn to Build the Kingdom of God Together – symbol: a house
- Year 6: Discover Faith Together – symbol: a wheel
- Year 7: Grow Together in Faith – symbol: a tree
- Year 8: How to Shape Life – symbols: a rainbow and a bridge
- Year 9: How to Believe and Live – symbol: a door.

Educational and Upbringing Strategies

In Religious Education, the following methods support the development of key pupil competencies:

Competences in Learning Skills

Religious Education provides pupils with enough content to pose meaningful questions about fundamental values, attitudes, and life decisions. It helps them seek answers by using biblical teachings, the teachings of the Church, and Christian tradition. The curriculum fosters pupils' ability to reflect on personal experiences, interpret life events, and draw insights that contribute to their personal growth and understanding.

Communicative Competences

The subject emphasises teamwork and collaborative learning. It enables pupils to express their own views, present personal outcomes, and provides sufficient space for self-expression. Opportunities are provided for independent oral and written presentations, including projects and moderated discussions. Where appropriate, information technology is integrated into the learning process.

Problem-Solving Competence

Pupils are guided to think critically and make informed, ethical decisions through argumentation, questioning, and analysis. They learn to evaluate different outcomes and base

their decisions on sound reasoning aligned with Christian ethical values. The subject sensitises pupils to the complexity of social life, teaching conflict-avoidance strategies and fostering tolerance towards differing views.

Personal and Social Competences

Religious Education supports the development of personality and social engagement through a systematic focus on the Christian principle to ‘love thy neighbour’. It encourages values such as empathy, cooperation, and mutual support, fostering the principle that ‘the older and stronger helps the younger and weaker’. Pupils often work in pairs and small groups, learning what creative cooperation entails. They participate in setting group rules and are expected to follow them consistently. Work formats are chosen to value group diversity as a mosaic of complementary traits, enabling mutual inspiration and shared learning.

Civic Competences

The subject guides pupils to adopt tolerant attitudes towards members of other religions and different Christian denominations, and those from secular or non-religious backgrounds. It presents role models whose Christian values have positively influenced society and encourages pupils to apply these traits in their own lives. Pupils are introduced to the Judeo-Christian roots of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms*, developing a sense of responsibility towards themselves, other people, the world, and God. Freedom is taught as a gift from God, and pupils are invited to explore the relationship between religion and culture, both within Christian culture and in dialogue with other world religions.

Professional Competences

The subject fosters healthy attitudes towards the demands of contemporary society. Pupils are encouraged to see work not only as a means of earning a living but also as a vocation for contributing to the common good. They are given opportunities to co-create educational materials and present the results collaboratively.

Between 1997 and 2005, under the initiative of Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, the Plenary Synod of the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic was held. It concluded with the final document *Life and Mission of Christians in the Church and in the World*, which also referred to catechesis. It is important to distinguish catechesis from religious education as a school subject. Given the highly secularised nature of Czech society and the lingering

influence of a post-communist mentality in schools, it is essential to offer opportunities for a deeper understanding of Christianity and the Church in all schools.²²

In 2015, the Czech Episcopal Conference issued the *Document on the Orientation of Catechesis and Religious Education in the Czech Republic*,²³ updating its 1994 *Instructions on Catechesis*. This document outlines the general principles for catechesis and religious education in the Czech Republic, inspired by the catechetical documents of the universal Church. It also leaves room for adaptations to local circumstances in individual dioceses. Its final form evolved gradually over several years of discussions among catechetical department staff and experts in the field. The document serves as the foundation for future catechetical materials, which contain a specific vision and plan for the development of catechesis and religious education for various target groups within the Czech context. New methodological resources, tools, and professional development standards for catechists and religious education teachers are to be developed accordingly.

The Church's involvement in all types of schools is a vital aspect of its mission in the Czech Republic. Within each diocese, the bishop is responsible for religious education in public schools, while the parish priest oversees work at the parish level. Religious education is denominational and subject to state regulations regarding implementation and teacher qualifications.²⁴

Catholic schools are intended to be environments where the Church is 'authentically experienced'. This is possible only when the school is organically connected to the pastoral care of the Christian community. A key part of this mission is the school chaplain, who is a member of the teaching staff, and who supports the school's mission and pastoral plan, helping to organise religious education in alignment with the school's mission and educational goals. The pastoral plan also includes a catechetical vision for pupils and appropriate teacher training. The diocesan authorities regulate the organisation of religious education in Catholic schools; its specific format is part of the school's educational programme. When denominational religious education is offered as a compulsory or elective subject for all pupils, its content must be approved by the competent diocesan

²² Jiří Kašný, ed., *Život a poslání křesťanů v církvi a ve světě: závěrečný dokument Plenárního sněmu katolické církve v ČR* [*The Life and Mission of Christians in the Church and in the World: Final Document of the Plenary Synod of the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic*] (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2007), 69, no. 207.

²³ Sekretariát České biskupské konference [Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference], *Dokument o směřování katecheze a náboženského vzdělávání v ČR* [*Document on the Direction of Catechesis and Religious Education in the Czech Republic*] (Prague: Sekretariát ČBK, 2015); Tomáš Petráček, 'Proměny uskutečňování a vnímání synodality v dějinách katolické církve: Tři české synodální procesy 19.–21. století' ['Changes in the Implementation and Perception of Synodality in the History of the Catholic Church: Three Czech Synodal Processes of the 19th–21st Centuries'], *Verba theologica* 21, 2 (2022): 15–20.

²⁴ Sekretariát České biskupské konference, *Dokument o směřování katecheze*, 41–42.

authority. Religious education teachers and catechists working in the school must hold a canonical mission, and their work is overseen by the diocesan catechetical department.²⁵

The most recent document on children's religious education in the Czech Republic²⁶ presents a framework programme for evangelisation and systematic catechesis for school-aged children. It builds on the 2015 document,²⁷ providing general guidelines for catechesis and religious education in the Czech Republic while recognising the need for more detailed lower-level documents tailored to specific groups. These guidelines reflect current social conditions and respond to the teachings of Pope Francis and the new 2020 *Directory for Catechesis*, which emphasises the kerygmatic nature of catechesis.

Christian formation of children in the Czech environment takes place within families, parishes, in schools through the optional subject of religious education, and occasionally within parish groups. The document does not evaluate the Christian formation system in the Czech Republic. However, given the possibility of implementation in schools, it has been formally designed to align with the *Framework Curriculum for Primary Schools*. As such, it can serve as a basis for incorporating the religious education into the local curriculum. Methodological support is provided by the Diocesan Catechetical Department.

The document outlines the basic assumptions and catechetical content. Individual parishes may adapt these to suit their circumstances, setting annual goals and teaching programmes for each year or class. These programmes are created following the diocesan catechetical department's methodological guidelines and in accordance with diocesan and parish pastoral plans.

The educational content is structured in terms of expected outcomes and a teaching programme. The teaching programme is divided into two levels. Within the first level, the educational content is further divided into Period 1 (Years 1–3) and Period 2 (Years 4–5). Expected outcomes specify pupils' anticipated ability to apply their knowledge in practical, everyday life by the end of Years 3, 5, and 9. Teaching content is divided into four thematic areas, which are interwoven throughout each teaching unit:

- The Basics of Christian Teaching
- The Bible and Its Message
- Christian Lifestyle
- The Basics of Christian Worship

These are not treated as separate topics but as four perspectives that should be present within each unit.²⁸ The central focus of each unit is the kerygma (The Basics of Chris-

²⁵ Sekretariát České Biskupské Konference, *Dokument o směřování katecheze*, 42.

²⁶ Sekretariát České Biskupské Konference, *Dokument pro náboženské vzdělávání dětí v České republice* [Document for the Religious Education of Children in the Czech Republic] (Prague: Sekretariát ČBK, 2021).

²⁷ Sekretariát České Biskupské Konference, *Dokument o směřování katecheze*, 42.

²⁸ Sekretariát České Biskupské Konference, *Dokument o směřování katecheze*, 3–4.

tian Teaching), illuminated by biblical texts (The Bible and Its Message), nurturing the pupil's spirituality (The Basics of Christian Worship), and leading to a change in lifestyle (Christian Lifestyle). To achieve the intended learning outcomes, appropriate teaching methods are essential. Lessons should not consist solely of lectures but focus on collaborative learning and discovery, group discussions, and shared exploration. The catechist acts as a guide, supporting pupils throughout the learning process. Pupils are encouraged to analyse information critically, articulate their views, and engage in respectful dialogue. Discussions aim to deepen knowledge and foster its creative application in personal and social contexts. The overarching goal of the Christian formation of children is to nurture a personal relationship with God and a friendship with Christ.²⁹

Each diocese in the Czech Republic has its own catechetical department responsible for training catechists, granting canonical missions, and offering didactic and methodological support.

At the national level, the Catechetical Department within the Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference functions as a body for inter-diocesan cooperation. Its tasks include monitoring and initiating collaboration across dioceses in catechesis and religious education, coordinating these activities, and carrying out tasks assigned by the Plenary Session of the Czech Episcopal Conference. These tasks include publishing and updating standards for ongoing education and formation of catechists and religious education teachers. The Catechetical Department works closely with the Department of Catholic Education, also part of the Secretariat of the Czech Episcopal Conference.

3. Slovakia

The new Roman Catholic religious education curriculum for primary schools, which focuses on developing religious literacy, was designed by the Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre (KPKC) and approved by the President of the Episcopal Conference of Slovakia in 2023. This innovative model is grounded in a competence-based framework that specifies the religious competences pupils are expected to develop.³⁰

The main goal of religious education is to foster pupils' religious literacy, giving them opportunities to form and deepen a personal and responsible Christian and religious identity. Religious literacy is understood as the comprehensive ability to deal responsibly with one's own religiosity and the religious beliefs of others. It is cultivated through

²⁹ Sekretariát České biskupské konference, *Dokument o směřování katecheze*, 3–4.

³⁰ Katolícke Pedagogické a Katechetické Centrum [Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre], 'Kurikulum katolíckeho náboženství/náboženskej výchovy pre ZŠ a SŠ – pracovný materiál' ['Curriculum of Catholic Religious Education for Primary and Secondary Schools – Working Material'], accessed 25 January 2025, <https://kpkc.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/KURIKULUM-KATOLICKEHO-NAB-ZS-A-SŠ-def-verzia-jún-2020.pdf>.

the development of religious competence – skills and abilities that allow pupils to relate religious knowledge to real-life contexts, evaluate it critically, and apply it meaningfully. In parallel, religious education also supports the ethical and moral development of pupils, which is common to the subject of ethics, and thus contributes to integral education in primary schools.

Competence-based teaching emphasises the acquisition of skills to be attained by the end of each cycle. Religious competences refer to the pupil's ability, based on religious content and knowledge, to understand the Christian faith accurately, express it clearly and embody it in everyday life. Pupils acquire these competences by linking, evaluating and applying their religious knowledge in everyday life. This educational process is not only focused on religious knowledge, but also on pupils' capacity to perceive reality through a religious lens, to understand and communicate through religious language and speech, to act according to personal religious convictions and to express that faith in a religiously motivated life.

The curriculum fosters religious literacy through five key content areas:

- **God and Humanity:** This component addresses fundamental questions about the meaning of life and the existence of God. It introduces pupils to the core expressions of faith and religion, encourages understanding of different faiths and helps them grasp the foundations of their own Catholic faith, particularly regarding God as the Creator of the world and of humanity.
- **Jesus Christ:** Pupils are introduced to the Good News of Jesus Christ's life and mission, with the aim of developing a personal relationship with Him.
- **Sacred Scripture:** This component gives access to the Bible, helping pupils understand its relevance to their lives and appreciate the diversity of approaches to Scripture.
- **The Church and the Sacraments:** Pupils are invited to encounter Christians in the Church and in the community, recognise the universality of the Church and its saving mission, and to understand the sacraments as visible signs of salvation available to every believer.
- **Christian Life:** This component encourages pupils to engage with practical expressions of faith in both personal and communal contexts. It provides ethical and moral guidance, promotes responsibility in striving for justice, peace, and care for creation, and contributes to values education.

Each component of the curriculum is specified in each learning cycle through both performance and content standards. Content standards define the knowledge and understanding that learners are expected to know and understand. These standards provide the basis for lesson topics through the definition of content.

While religious education focuses on the acquisition of knowledge, it also aims to cultivate the ability to perceive reality through a religious lens, understand and use

religious language, act according to religious convictions, and express personal religiosity and faith in daily life. Religious competence enhances pupils' personal capacity to engage responsibly with their own religiosity. This competence is made concrete through performance standards in the teaching process. Religious learning is an active process through which pupils develop and extend their abilities and build religious literacy by engaging with core religious competences. Each religious competence is expressed through active verbs that reflect the different dimensions of development. These competences constitute the core aims of the religious education subject:

- Perceiving and observing religious reality (Religious Perception Competence): Pupils learn to recognise and respond to what touches them in the world around them. This foundational competence is both the starting point and goal of religious education, characterised by actions such as *perceiving, observing, realising, and reflecting*.
- Developing religious knowledge and understanding (Religious Cognition Competence): Cognition allows pupils to make sense of their sensory experiences and to transform them into living knowledge. This means understanding information in various forms, including pictorial and symbolic, and relating religious realities to their own lives. Key actions include *identifying, recognising, naming, understanding, and assimilating*.
- Understanding and communicating religious speech and language (Religious Communication Competence): Pupils are taught to engage in respectful and meaningful dialogue, articulating feelings, thoughts, experiences, and learning, thereby refining and expanding their understanding. Key actions include *understanding, dialoguing, sharing, and expressing*.
- Reasoning and acting in accordance with one's religious convictions (Religious Reasoning Competence): Pupils form judgments through evaluative thinking. New experiences and knowledge encourage them to expand or revise their perspectives, think critically, and make informed decisions. Key actions include *asking questions, confronting, accepting, identifying, thinking critically, and taking a standpoint*.
- Living out one's faith through religiously motivated action (Competence to Live a Religiously Motivated Life): Pupils develop personal convictions that guide participation in religious practice and ethical living. This competence supports responsible engagement with self and others, fostering active participation in social, communal, and religious life. Key actions include *taking responsibility, carrying out tasks, acting according to one's judgement, and living faithfully*.

Religious literacy develops progressively and systematically throughout primary school. In the first cycle (Years 1–3), Religious Education introduces pupils to religious literacy. Pupils begin to recognise the uniqueness of human beings and their place within the family, express joy in God's creation and show Him reverence. They become familiar

with key events in the life of Jesus Christ, begin to compare their behaviour with the Ten Commandments, understand prayer as an expression of a relationship with God, learn to formulate simple prayers and recognise the temple as a place of prayer and celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

In the second cycle (Years 4–5), pupils begin to demonstrate mastery of the basics of religious literacy. They grow in self-awareness, recognising their own gifts and talents, and apply the commandment of love in concrete terms. They come to understand the Bible as the Word of God and use it to explore the message of creation. Their relationship with God – as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is deepened. Pupils learn different forms of prayer, become familiar with the liturgical seasons, and can describe the sacraments and explain their importance in Christian life.

In the third cycle (Years 6–9), pupils consolidate and deepen their religious literacy. They express ideas about God and take personal stances on issues of Christian faith, including in dialogue with other religions. They demonstrate an understanding of the relevance of the Holy Scriptures, justify the historical existence of Jesus Christ, identify key stages in the spread of Christianity, describe the nature and mission of the Church in contemporary society, and understand the meaning and purpose of the various sacraments. Furthermore, they formulate their own set of values, compare their lives with the Ten Commandments, and reflect on their life as a personal vocation.

The religious competences and content standards attained are defined as cycle-specific competences and serve as reference points for pupils' development at the end of each educational stage.³¹

³¹ Tibor Reimer, *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií* [*Religious Education as the Development of Religious Competencies*] (Bratislava: Don Bosco, 2020).

Part VI. Perspectives on Religious Education

1. Religious Education in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia – a Comparison

Religious education in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia constitutes a significant part of the education system in all three countries. It reflects a common historical heritage along with contemporary challenges and social expectations. For a more meaningful and substantive comparison of the religious education system in these three countries, it is important to consider both the similarities and the differences arising from their distinct socio-cultural and political contexts.

1.1. Common Features of Religious Education

The Impact of Globalisation and Social Change

Contrary to appearances, the process of globalisation has had a profound impact on the shape of religious education in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Since joining the European Union on 1 May 2004, all three countries have experienced a natural convergence of societal lifestyles with those of Western Europe. This includes the adoption of similar patterns of behaviour and values, such as consumerism and individualism, as well as the widespread use of streaming platforms, international retail chains, and increased levels of migration.

These and other factors have significantly influenced the diversity of school environments and the way religion is perceived in both social and personal life. As a result, contemporary reality must be understood as multifaceted. Mutual interdependencies

increasingly arise between issues and domains that were previously treated separately but now demand an integrated and holistic approach.¹

A relatively large influx of people, including refugees from Ukraine, has also led to changes in the demographic structure of these countries, prompting the need for adaptation within education systems, including religious education. Alongside rising social individualism, there is also significant pluralisation in religious, spiritual, and cultural offerings, many of which now extend beyond traditional and historical denominational structures. The Polish theologian Andrzej Draguła insightfully described these processes in his work *Kościół na rynku* [The Church in the Marketplace], where he highlights the progressing personalisation and diversification of formative options available in contemporary society.²

Religion in Educational Systems

In all three countries, religious education is integrated into the education system as a denominational subject. Responsibility for its curricular content lies with the respective churches and religious associations. This represents one of the models of religious education present in Europe – often referred to as *learning religion*. Alongside this model, other approaches exist, including *learning about religion*, which adopts a religious studies perspective, and *learning from religion*, which emphasises the Christian cultural heritage of European countries. By contrast, France (excluding Alsace and Lorraine), Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Slovenia exemplify the *learning without religion* model, where religious education is absent from the education system.³

Legal regulations concerning the status of religious education teachers and the organisation of lessons are broadly similar across Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In all three, the Roman Catholic Church, in addition to supporting religious education in both public and church-run schools, also promotes parish catechesis as a means of supplementing and deepening school-based religious education. However, the relationship between parish catechesis and school-based religious education is perceived and implemented differently in each country.

¹ Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2020), nos. 320–321.

² Andrzej Draguła, *Kościół na rynku. Eseje pastoralne* [The Church in the Marketplace: Pastoral Essays], (Warsaw: Biblioteka Więzi, 2020), especially pp. 42–45.

³ See Luzio Uriarte, Lidia Rodríguez, ‘Religion at School in Secular Europe’, *Religions* 14 (2023): 700; cf. Radosław Mazur, Remigiusz Szauer, ‘Confessional Religious Education at School in the Face of Contemporary Challenges Based on the Polish Experience’, *Religions* 15 (2024): 1387; Andrzej Kielian, ‘Modele nauczania religii w Europie’ (‘Models of Religious Education in Europe’), in Jan Kochel, Jerzy Kostorz, eds., *Leksykon katechetyczny* [Catechetical Lexicon], (Kielce: Jedność, 2020): 441–446.

1.2. Differences in Religious Education

Teaching Time and Subject Structure

Differences between individual countries are most evident in the time allocation and organisation of religious education:

- In Poland, religious education is offered for two hours per week. However, the Ministry of National Education is currently planning to reduce this to one hour per week.
- In the Czech Republic, religious education is optional. A minimum of seven pupils is required for a class to be offered. If provided, it consists of one hour per week. Ethics is also available in primary schools as an additional, non-compulsory subject.
- In Slovakia, primary school pupils may choose between religious education and ethics, each offered for one hour per week.

These differences in lesson structure reflect varying societal attitudes towards the role of religion in education. In Poland, religious education is traditionally deeply rooted in the education system. In the Czech Republic, however, its presence is minimal, almost symbolic. Slovakia offers a model based on choice between religion and ethics, reflecting compromises between different social perspectives.

The Influence of Historical Context

The distinct traditions of religious education in these countries stem from historical backgrounds. In the Czech Republic, the limited role of religion in public life results from the legacy of socialism and the extensive secularisation of society. Slovakia, although it also experienced a communist regime, maintained a stronger attachment to its Catholic heritage. In Poland, the Catholic Church's prominent role in social structures has translated into religion's dominant position within the education system.

Religion and Pupils' Choice

There are notable differences in the extent to which religious education is voluntary:

- In Poland, pupils may opt out of religious classes, but must do so through a formal written declaration.
- In Slovakia, although there is a choice between religious education and ethics, in practice, participation in one of the two is compulsory.
- In the Czech Republic, religious education in public schools is voluntary, and as a result, only a small percentage of pupils typically choose to attend.

Summary

Religious education in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia reflects broader European trends while also embodying specific national characteristics. Common features include the presence of religion as a denominational subject. However, differences arise in the amount of time allocated for religious education, the degree of voluntariness, and the perceived social role of religion within the educational process.

Each country proposes a model based on similar principles, yet differing in terms of how they are implemented. This reflects the unique needs, histories and cultural traditions of their respective societies.

2. Historical and Social Context – a Comparison (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia)

2.1. Historical Context – a Comparison: the Impact of Christianisation on the Development of Religious Education

The Beginnings of Christianisation

Poland: The Christianisation of Polish lands began in 966 with the baptism of Mieszko I. Historically, this event marked a pivotal moment in the formation of Polish national and religious identity. The adoption of Christianity also meant the acceptance of the only effective model of state organisation in the 10th century. Through this act, Mieszko I ensured that the emerging Poland would have an equal place among the Christian states of Europe, thereby opening it up to the influences of Western civilisation. From the outset, the Church played a fundamental role, particularly in education, as evidenced by the establishment of monastic and cathedral schools.

Czech Republic: Poland adopted Christianity from the Czech lands, primarily through the marriage of Mieszko I to Dobrawa (Doubrava), a Czech princess from the Přemyslid dynasty. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the Christianisation of the Czech state preceded that of Poland. The key influence was the mission of Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century. These Byzantine brothers introduced the Slavic liturgy, which contributed to the development of local culture and religious spirituality. Paradoxically, however, the Czech lands soon came under the strong influence of Western Christianity, which also shaped the form and methods of religious education.

Slovakia: During this period, Slovakia was part of the Great Moravian Empire. Christianity was introduced there in the 9th century, also through the missionary efforts of Cyril and Methodius. Their work had a profound influence on both language

development and religious culture. Following the fall of Great Moravia, Slovakia came under the control of the Kingdom of Hungary. This transition brought the dominance of the Latin rite, which played a decisive role in shaping Slovak Catholicism and the development of religious education.

The Period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation

Poland: The Reformation in Poland was relatively limited in scope and local in character. While Protestantism gained some support in the 16th century – mainly among the nobility and urban populations – it did not achieve widespread influence. As a result, the Catholic Church easily regained its dominant role. During the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits introduced a highly organised educational system, through which Catholic education was promoted extensively via their schools and colleges.

Czech Republic: The Reformation took root in the Czech lands nearly a century earlier than in Poland and followed a different path. Its origins are closely linked to the Hussite movement. Jan Hus (1370–1415), rector of Charles University, was a pioneer of the Reformation in Central Europe. Unfortunately, the subsequent Hussite Wars and the later Counter-Reformation brought about significant and long-lasting social and religious changes. Under the Habsburgs, Catholicism was forcefully promoted at the expense of other denominations. This had a significant impact on religious education, which during this period was neither tolerant nor open to ecumenical dialogue.

Slovakia: In the Slovak territories, the Reformation also had a significant impact on religious education, facilitated by the presence of substantial German and Hungarian populations. As in the Czech lands, the Habsburgs and the Catholic Church – especially the Jesuits – played a crucial role in the development and strengthening of Catholic education.

The Impact of Communism on Religious Education

Poland: The communist era was a difficult chapter in Polish history. In the post-war years, religious instruction was systematically eliminated from public schools. The communist regime pursued a policy of repression and hostility towards the Church. Major changes occurred after 1989, with the collapse of communism. Religious education was reinstated in public schools, marking an important aspect of the Poland's political and societal transformation.

Czech Republic: During the communist period, the Czech Republic – then part of Czechoslovakia – experienced an aggressive anti-religious policy. Religion was systematically removed from the public sphere, and the Church, including the Catholic Church, was subjected to continuous government control. Many clergy were persecuted,

sometimes brutally. Religious education was reduced to a bare minimum, contributing to widespread secularisation across society.

Slovakia: As part of Czechoslovakia during this era, Slovakia underwent similar repressive measures. The regime persecuted the Church and curtailed religious education. A notable event was the so-called ‘pseudo-synod’ in Prešov on 28 April 1950, during which the Greek Catholic Church was dissolved and forcibly incorporated into the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church. Following the fall of communism, religious education was reinstated in public schools and remains an essential part of the education system for younger generations. The Catholic faith continues to play a vital role in Slovak social and cultural life.

2.2. Socio-Religious Context – a Comparison

Denominational Structure of Societies

Poland: According to official statistics, a significant percentage of the Polish population identifies with the Catholic Church. The 2021 census revealed that approximately 92% of the population declared themselves as Catholic. However, this figure contrasts with a noticeable decline in the number of people regularly practising religious life.

Czech Republic: The Czech Republic has long been considered one of the most secularised countries in Europe. According to the latest census, only 18.7% of the population reported affiliation with a specific church or religious denomination. Among Christian churches, Catholics form the largest group.

Slovakia: The situation in Slovakia differs significantly from that of the Czech Republic and aligns more closely with the Polish experience. A majority of Slovaks declare affiliation with the Catholic Church. Despite the repression during the communist era, the Greek Catholic Church still plays a significant role, especially in the eastern regions. It is the third-largest denomination, following the Roman Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

Level of Secularisation

Poland: Despite the high level of declared religiosity, Polish society is undergoing gradual secularisation, particularly among the younger generation. Participation in religious education and public religious observance is steadily declining.

Czech Republic: Czech society is undergoing an advanced process of secularisation. According to the 2021 census and other significant religious surveys, the majority of

the Czech population identifies as non-religious. Religion plays a marginal role in public life; it is more often regarded as a private matter.

Slovakia: Secularisation trends are also evident in Slovakia, although to a lesser degree than in the Czech Republic but more pronounced than in Poland. While the majority of Slovaks declare affiliation with the Catholic Church, there is a noticeable decline in regular participation in various religious practices.

Current Social Attitudes towards Religion and Religious Education

Poland: Public attitudes towards religion and religious education are increasingly diverse. While the majority of the population still supports the presence of religion in public life, an increasing number of people advocate for a separation between Church and state. The current government has proposed reducing the number of religious education lessons in public schools.

Czech Republic: Czech society is characterised by widespread religious indifference. Although religious education is available in public schools, it is optional and attracts limited interest. Public opinion strongly favours a clear separation between Church and state.

Slovakia: Slovak public attitudes are similar to those in Poland and are more favourable towards religion than in the Czech Republic. Religious education, combined with ethics lessons, is broadly accepted. The Catholic Church continues to play a visible role in social and cultural life, although its influence is not always welcomed by political leaders.

These observations highlight the complex interplay of historical, political and social factors shaping religious education in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Despite their shared cultural and geographical proximity, each country's distinct history continues to shape contemporary attitudes towards religion and religious education.

3. Perspectives and Challenges for Religious Education (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia)

In all the countries studied, Roman Catholic religious education participates as a regular educational subject in the basic tasks of school, which focuses, among other things, on personal development, social responsibility and participation in a democratic society. In our opinion, it is important to note that school education is incomplete without the teaching of religion, because it is the teaching of religion that contributes not only to the understanding of the existential questions of the individual, but also to the cultural-historical, anthropological and social role of the school: to give meaning and purpose to the world around us. And these are values that will continue to prove indispensable in the future.

As can be seen from the above analyses, despite the diversity of the countries studied, the current trends of secularisation of society, as well as the reform attempts of education and schooling, are facts that allow us to outline some of the challenges and possible perspectives of religious education in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

3.1. Complementarity between Religious Education in the School and Catechesis in the Parish and Emphasis on Catechesis in the Parish Community

Considering the religious background in the three countries – with the exception of the Czech Republic – it seems essential to continuously emphasise the relationship between religious education in school and catechesis in parishes as distinct in complementarity. This necessity appears to be particularly important in Poland and Slovakia, where there is still a risk of not distinguishing between these educational activities. The new Directory for Catechesis emphasises that, where this distinction is unclear, there is a danger of both losing their identity.⁴ In this context, also the Czech Republic reflects this necessity with its emphasis on the kerygmatic orientation of catechesis. This therefore requires a focus on catechesis in the family and in the parish community. The distinction between religious education and catechesis, however, does not imply exclusivity, opposition or competition. Properly understood, distinction and complementarity can become a real opportunity for the realisation of a true educational alliance between Church and school. In this way, they complement each other, interconnect and each in its own sphere contribute to the integral development of the young person.

In the Czech Republic in particular, the development of the Christian formation of children and young people within parish communities appears to be particularly important because of the small number of pupils who participate in religious education and the eventual possible separation of the Church from the State. This is to some extent supported by the very good organisation of catechetical offices within the individual dioceses within the Czech Republic. This need not mean abandoning religious education in school altogether, but encouraging the development of catechesis for children and young people in the context of Christian initiation and accompanying children, adolescents and young people to a personal encounter with Jesus in Christian community. In this context, it is important to understand catechesis as a systematic and integrated journey, divided into stages, which, in its essential form, introduces children and young people

⁴ Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2020), no. 313.

to all the mysteries of the Christian life, to conduct themselves according to a moral conscience, and is attentive to the living conditions of children and young people.⁵

3.2. Cooperation between Religious Education and Other Subjects in the School

The school reforms in the countries studied provide an opportunity for religious education in school to be seen as an integral part of school education. This is particularly visible in Poland and Slovakia. For example, the education reform in Slovakia emphasises the educational field of which religious education is a part. The development of domain but also cross-cutting literacies is changing the role of teachers in school, who cease to be so-called ‘subject teachers’, narrowly oriented to conveying the factual content of their subject, but become teachers who are focused on the comprehensive and holistic development of the pupil. In this way, it is possible to create a much stronger link between, for example, language, history, geography and religious education. At the same time, this means that religious education also takes care of the development of reading and communication literacy, in art class of the development of social and emotional literacy, etc.

In addition, the situation in the Czech Republic, given the low interest in religious education in state schools, where religious education fulfils mainly a cultural function, provides yet another opportunity to deepen the cooperation of religious education with other subjects in school, namely the creation of a new elective subject for all pupils, which would rather focus on the foundations of Christianity or the foundations of Christian faith and culture. In the Czech Republic, therefore, there is an effort to create alternative curricula for religion or the foundations of Christian faith and culture, the content of which is not directly religious education in the sense of catechesis, but familiarisation with the basic content of religion and its reflection in the history and culture of the Czech (also Moravian and Silesian) country. This would also help to remove the often negative connotations of the subject of religious education, which gives the impression that it is a subject intended exclusively for children from families who regularly attend religious services.

At the same time, the development of alternative religious curricula in terms of the foundations of Christian faith and culture in the Czech Republic provides the possibility of new programmes for the further education of teaching staff, given their weak awareness of Christianity in the pedagogical environment of public schools.

⁵ Sekretariát České Biskupské Konference, *Dokument o směřování katecheze a náboženského vzdělávání v ČR* [Document on the Direction of Catechesis and Religious Education in the Czech Republic], 15.

3.3. Confessional-Cooperative Religious Education

Given the growing pluralism in the three countries, the future of religious education in schools may lie in a particular form of confessional-cooperative religious education. This model involves different religious denominations collaboratively designing, delivering, and developing religious education over time.

This concept of denominational cooperation extends beyond situations in which pupils of one Christian denomination participate in the religious education of another. It is also distinct from ecumenical religious education, which seeks to present a form of Christian religious education that transcends denominational boundaries.

Confessional-cooperative religious education aims to bring the differing confessional perspectives of participating religious communities into the classroom in a way that is both recognisable and clearly differentiated. In this context, the new *Directory for Catechesis* also highlights the importance of providing religious education to pupils from various Christian denominations. This applies whether teaching delivered by representatives of a specific denomination or by teachers who do not belong to any particular one.⁶

Such teaching is of ecumenical value if Christian doctrine is presented authentically. In this sense, the desire for dialogue – even if more challenging to achieve – should also inform relations with emerging Christian religious movements inspired by the Gospel.

3.4. Religious Education Adequate to the Challenges of the Present (and Future)

Given pupils' diverse backgrounds, conditions, and capabilities, religious education must go beyond the mere transmission of theoretical knowledge. It should offer a multisensory dimension into the educational process, where different senses are engaged in the teaching process, enhancing pupils' retention of knowledge. A key element of modern religious education is its performative aspect, emphasising action, expression, role-playing, and experience-based activities such as religious theatre, pantomime, simulations, and role-playing games. Another significant challenge for religious education is the effective integration of interactive teaching methods. While technology and active learning approaches that promote pupil engagement and self-directed discovery are available, their use in religious education remains relatively limited. Furthermore, the vast array of unverified educational materials complicates the process of selecting high-quality, methodologically sound resources. An educational response to these contemporary needs could be interactive quizzes, games about the history of the Church or papal teachings,

⁶ Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2020), no. 316.

and the use of VR technology to explore important religious sites (e.g., St. Peter's Basilica, the Holy Sepulchre, the Basilica of Santiago de Compostela).

The growing popularity of e-learning platforms that provide access to teaching materials, videos, and online discussions can enhance the appeal of religious education, support learning beyond the classroom, and benefit those in home education. These platforms also encourage self-directed learning and foster curiosity about faith. Many promising innovations in this area emerged during the pandemic and continue to be used today. Therefore, introducing multisensory, performative, and interactive elements to religious education can make religious education more engaging, relevant and effective. As a result, it becomes a dynamic experience with a lasting impact on the spiritual, social, and moral development of children and young people. However, it is important to recognise that an overemphasis on sensory experiences may risk sidelining deep, analytical engagement and lead to superficial understanding. Such methods should therefore be treated as a means, not an end in itself.

Religious education should also raise awareness of social issues such as poverty, violence, gender equality, and human rights. In schools, the Catholic Church's approach to religious education seeks not only to impart knowledge but also to shape the moral and social attitudes of pupils. The theory of synergy suggests that coordinated efforts between different actors lead to outcomes greater than those achieved individually. In the context of Church-led education, this means building morally grounded, cohesive communities capable of collectively solving problems and striving for the common good. This can be achieved in several ways:

- By teaching values such as solidarity, love for one's neighbour, and social responsibility.
- Through regular classroom interactions, and pupils' participation in parish life, which foster social bonds that are essential for the healthy functioning of local communities.
- Most importantly, by organising extracurricular initiatives within schools – such as retreats, volunteer work, youth groups, and charitable actions – that significantly contribute to the development of local communities.⁷

Improving the communicative clarity of religious education is crucial for helping pupils better grasp complex doctrinal teaching and feel more engaged in the learning process. Sociological research indicates that young people often struggle to fully comprehend Church teachings. They often find moral and ethical issues difficult to accept or unclear, and perceive doctrine as unapproachable or irrelevant. Despite many identifying with the Church, their understanding of dogma is often superficial. They rarely explore theological nuances and tend to view dogma as distant from everyday life.⁸

⁷ See Radosław Mazur, Remigiusz Szauer, 'Confessional Religious Education at School in the Face of Contemporary Challenges Based on the Polish Experience', *Religions* 15 (2024): 1387.

⁸ Joanna Operacz, ed., *Kościół w Polsce. Raport [The Church in Poland: Report]* (Warsaw: Instytut Dziedzictwa Myśli Narodowej im. Romana Dmowskiego i Ignacego J. Paderewskiego, 2023), 31–44.

A key challenge, therefore, is to make both the message and the doctrine communicative. This involves contextualising the doctrine, so that explanations of the teachings refer to contemporary issues and real-life situations with which pupils can identify, thereby facilitating the understanding of abstract concepts. It is also crucial to ensure that the language used is not perceived as judgmental or exclusionary. Instead, it should be inclusive, encouraging understanding and acceptance. Creating space for questions and doubts foster a sense of acceptance and reduce feelings of judgment. Discussions can play a significant role, allowing pupils to express their opinions and reflections. Such dialogue not only acknowledges societal pluralism but can also help defuse tensions and reduce the sense of alienation pupils may feel regarding Church teachings. Analysing moral or ethical dilemmas can further help pupils understand how Catholic doctrine applies to their daily lives, making it more tangible and meaningful.

Personalising the message is equally important, given the diversity of pupils' life experiences, sensitivities, and levels of understanding. Instead of imposing rigid interpretations, educators should offer critical thinking and reflection. Open-ended questions that stimulate discussion and exploration can help pupils to come to their own conclusions. Referencing contemporary media, literature, and art can also bridge the gap between Catholic doctrine and pupils' everyday experiences.

All the above supports the goal of fostering an open religious identity that enables individuals to function in a pluralistic society without abandoning their own identity.⁹ This process involves:

- Developing one's own religious identity
- Educating towards religious values as essential to life
- Providing reliable knowledge of religions and denominations, especially those pupils may encounter in their environment
- Promoting sensitivity and understanding towards religious diversity
- Fostering respectful attitudes towards both one's own and others' religion
- Teaching skills for interreligious dialogue
- Encouraging universal values
- And equipping pupils with the ability to make informed decisions and choices.¹⁰

⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of the research results, see Aniela Różańska, *Edukacja religijna młodzieży w warunkach pluralizmu religijnego w wybranych krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (Grupa Wyszehradzka: Polska, Czechy, Słowacja, Węgry) – studium porównawcze* [*Religious Education of Youth in Conditions of Religious Pluralism in Selected Countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Visegrád Group: Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary) – A Comparative Study*] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2015); cf. Radosław Mazur, 'Katecheza w sytuacji pluralizmu i złożoności' ['Catechesis in a Situation of Pluralism and Complexity'], *Studia Katechetyczne* 17 (2021): 175.

¹⁰ Mazur, 'Katecheza', 181–184.

Conclusion

1. Summary of Research Findings

The analysis of religious education in three neighbouring European countries – the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia – reveals both differences and similarities. Often, these similarities are deceptive, while the differences are less significant than they might initially appear. The character of religious education in each country is shaped by historical, religious, and social factors. An essential consideration is the relationship between the homogenisation of religious education and existing local traditions. A clear example of both similarities and differences is the experience of communism. On one hand, these experiences were broadly similar, reflecting the post-war inclusion of these countries within the Soviet sphere of influence. On the other hand, they varied in intensity, in the methods used to suppress religion and religious education, in societal resistance, and in the determination of the authorities. The shared historical trajectory and the unique experiences of each country produce intersecting conclusions that are somewhat ambivalent but emerge clearly from the analysis.

Following the restoration of freedom, the three countries embarked on a path of democratisation and active participation in a united Europe. This process brought them closer together, as well as to other European nations, including in matters of religiosity, faith practice, and approaches to religious education. Looking at current challenges, the questions posed by those responsible for shaping religious education – whether state or Church authorities – in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, as well as the answers they provide, appear increasingly similar. This convergence raises questions about whether such homogenisation might overlook the historical development of religious education in each country, ignore the specific conditions and realities of the individual nations, or even disregard the differences within regions that are not homogeneous or

directly comparable. Alternatively, it may reflect an unavoidable contemporary context to which we must all respond.

This monograph traces the development of religious education in the three countries. The path has a beginning, a course with intersections and dead ends, sometimes shared – as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia during the existence of Czechoslovakia – but more often separate, leading to the point at which we find ourselves today. Understanding this journey illuminates the present and also defines perspectives for the future of religious education. The primary goal is to ensure that religious education retains its specificity and potential to speak about faith that ‘seeks understanding’, while also remaining relevant and meaningful to contemporary and future pupils.

2. Recommendations for Further Research

The research and analyses conducted for this monograph suggest potential areas for further study, which may not only systematise knowledge but also encourage reflection on common practical solutions.

A first area for research is the comparative analysis of documents that structure religious education in each country. The episcopates of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia have developed curricula and programmes that guide religious education and form the basis of educational materials for teachers and pupils, including textbooks, methodological guides, worksheets, exercises, and multimedia resources. Each country has a dedicated episcopal body responsible for preparing these documents and monitoring their implementation. Comparative analysis can provide insight into the underlying concepts of religious education in each country and the translation of these concepts into educational outcomes. Of particular interest is how religious content interacts with cultural, historical, ethical, or religious studies content, and the results this produces in practice.

Another promising research area is the analysis of the educational packages themselves. These translate content, requirements, and educational goals into practical methodologies, including the structure of lesson units, teaching methods, exercises, illustrations, and layout. These serve not only a decorative but also an educational role, revealing the knowledge of the textbook authors regarding the subject matter and the developmental needs of pupils. Research could identify common features, differences and their causes, fostering mutual inspiration and improving the quality of textbooks and other educational resources. Comparing the review and approval process for these materials also presents a valuable area of study.

A further area of research concerns the models of teacher training for religious education, both initial training for primary school teachers and continuing education to enhance professional competencies. Analysing these models can support the exchange

of experiences, avoid the repetition of previous errors, and assist the development of effective solutions to meet the content, personal, and spiritual needs of those engaged in religious education.

The research scope could also be expanded to include additional neighbouring countries. Hungary and Germany, given their religious structure and shared historical experiences, could provide broader comparative insight. From a Czech perspective, which differs somewhat from Polish or Slovak experiences due to higher levels of secularisation and scepticism towards religious education, comparison with the French model could also be informative. These societies share similarities in terms of factors related to religious identity and practice.

These areas highlight the continued potential for research in this field. Paradoxically, they reflect not a deficiency in inquiry but rather the validity and openness of the work undertaken, contributing to a deeper understanding of religious education and encouraging reflection on its future challenges.

In conclusion, the Church in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia should not implement models of religious education from other countries, even those with similar sociological or religious contexts. Instead, it should develop solutions tailored to the specific socio-religious needs of each country. The aim is not to create a unified, homogeneous model, but to foster mutual inspiration and learning from each other's experiences.

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Streszczenie

Edukacja religijna w Polsce, Czechach i Słowacji: przeszłość, teraźniejszość i przyszłość

Autorzy niniejszej monografii skoncentrowali się na porównaniu koncepcji edukacji religijnej Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w Czechach, Polsce i na Słowacji. Jest to próba zasadna ze względu na występujące podobieństwa, głównie związane z wspólną historią po II wojnie światowej, doświadczeniem komunizmu i drogi do wolności, ale i różnice stanowiące o niepowtarzalnym doświadczeniu każdego z badanych krajów. Pierwszym etapem jest wskazanie na uwarunkowania historyczne edukacji religijnej, związane z burzliwymi meandrami historii w tej części Europy.

Kolejny etap to ukazanie teraźniejszości edukacji religijnej, z podstawowym elementem wspólnym, jakim jest obecność lekcji religii w czeskich, polskich i słowackich szkołach. Wspólna jest obecność, jednak przyjęte rozwiązania praktyczne i programowe, a także tendencje przemian związanych z tą obecnością są już różne – zarówno z perspektywy dokumentów państwowych, jak i co do programowania nauczania religii przez stronę kościelną. Całości dopełniają uwarunkowania katechezy parafialnej, bo przecież nauczanie religii w szkole jest tylko jednym, choć znaczącym, elementem edukacji religijnej.

Na końcu autorzy podjęli próbę spojrzenia w przyszłość i namysł nad tendencjami i wyzwaniem stojącymi przed edukacją religijną. Owa perspektywa, szanując odrębność i doświadczenia w analizowanych krajach, wydaje się być coraz bardziej wspólna, chociażby ze względu na procesy globalizacyjne i sekularyzacyjne, podobne nie tylko w tych krajach, ale i w całej Europie. Wzajemna wymiana doświadczeń, a także pomysłów i inspiracji może ubogacić pozostałych, a także uchronić innych przed popełnionymi, często nieświadomie, błędami. W systemie edukacji europejskiej niezmiennie jest przestrzeń na wyznaniowe nauczanie religii, jednak nauczanie to również musi ewaluować i odpowiadać na „znaki czasu” i realne potrzeby zarówno kościołów, które je prowadzą,

państwa, które profiluje kształt działań edukacyjnych, jak i uczniów, którzy poszukują odpowiedzi na niezmiennie i ponadczasowe pytania.

Słowa kluczowe: katecheza, nauczanie religii, dokumenty katechetyczne, edukacja religijna

Abstract

The monograph examines and compares the concept of religious education in the Roman Catholic Church in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. This comparison is justified by the significant similarities among the three countries, rooted primarily in their shared post- World War II history, their experience under communism and their subsequent paths to freedom. At the same time, it recognises the distinctive features that shape the unique experiences of each country.

The study begins by outlining the historical circumstances of religious education, shaped by the turbulent course of history in this part of Europe. It then turns to the present state of religious education, noting the common feature of religious instruction in schools across the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. While this presence is shared, the practical and curricular approaches – as well as the trends in how religious instruction is evolving – differ both in terms of state policies and the programmes developed by the Church. The analysis also considers the condition of parish catechesis, acknowledging that religious instruction in schools is only one – albeit significant – component of the religious education framework.

Finally, the authors look to the future, reflecting on the trends and challenges facing religious education. This perspective, while respecting the differences and experiences of the countries analysed, is increasingly influenced by globalisation and similar societal shifts not only within these nations across Europe as a whole. A mutual exchange of experiences, ideas, and inspiration can be enriching for all parties and help avoid repeating mistakes often made unintentionally. There remains a place for denominational religious education within the European education system, but such education must continually assess and respond to the ‘signs of the times’ and the real needs of both the Churches that provide it, the states that shape educational policy and the students seeking answers to enduring and timeless questions.

Keywords: catechesis, teaching religion, catechetical documents, religious education

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