

Article

Opting out of Religious Education and the Religiosity of Youth in Poland: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract: For several years now, a large number of secondary school students in Poland have given up Religious Education. The basic hypothesis is that the religiosity of young people is the main correlate with the abandoning of religion classes. In order to analyze this phenomenon, qualitative research was carried out in the form of in-depth interviews with secondary school students who had opted out of religion classes. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2022, with 29 students of randomly selected general secondary schools from various cities of Poland who had opted out of Religious Education. The technique called computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) was used. Young people were first asked about their reasons for giving up Religious Education, and then about their religiosity. The 16 questions in the interviews were divided into the following groups: attitude to Religious Education at school; and attitude to faith and religious practices, with reference to the Church and Catholic morality. These studies have shown that an increasing percentage of young people do not identify with the Catholic Church and do not want to participate in confessional Catholic Religious Education. The main conclusion of the study is to rethink the current concept of Religious Education in Poland so that it will be more open to students with different religious beliefs and worldviews.

Keywords: religious education; Poland; youth; religiosity

Citation: Mąkosa, Paweł Michał, Marian Zając, and Grzegorz Zakrzewski. 2022. Opting out of Religious Education and the Religiosity of Youth in Poland: A Qualitative Analysis. *Religions* 13: 906. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100906>

Academic Editor: Roberto Cipriani

Received: 10 August 2022

Accepted: 25 September 2022

Published: 28 September 2022

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1. Introduction

Poland is one of the most Catholic countries in Europe. Currently, 84.5% of Polish society belongs to the Catholic Church (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2021, p. 197). In recent years, however, the religiosity of Poles has been changing dynamically, especially when it comes to young people (Marianowski 2021). According to the latest research, 71% of Polish youth currently believe in God. On the other hand, 28.6% describe themselves as non-believers (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej 2021, p. 10). Notably, in 1992, when research in this area began, the percentage of religious youth was 93%. A particularly clear decrease in positive declarations regarding religious faith has been taking place since 2008. At that time, about 81% of young Poles were considered believers (Głowacki 2019, p. 154). An even greater crisis is related to religious practices. Currently, only 23% of Polish youth admit to regular participation in church services. In turn, a complete lack of religious practices is declared by 36%. Others practice irregularly. In this dimension of religiosity, a very strong downward trend is clearly visible. Suffice it to recall that the percentage of young people attending church services in 1992 was 69% (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej 2021, p. 10). An increasing percentage of Polish youth do not accept the principles of Catholic morality, especially those relating to sexuality (Dziedzic 2016). The crisis is also noticed in relations with the Church. Its authority is weakening, and fewer and fewer young people are involved in the life of this community (Tilles 2020).

The dynamic process of the secularization of Polish youth was confirmed by research conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018a, 2018b). The results of these studies show

that the secularization of young Poles is the fastest among many countries covered by the study (Pew Research Center 2018a, 2018b). Most often, however, secularization in Poland does not mean a complete rejection of religious needs, but rather their privatization. Polish youth more and more often claim that being religious does not require belonging to any church, accepting any doctrine or moral principles (Hervieu-Leger 2003, p. 166).

A specific manifestation of secularization among young people in Poland is in the opting out of Religious Education (RE) at school. This is undoubtedly a phenomenon on a European scale, because in many countries that are much more secular than Poland, almost all young people take part in RE. In Poland, however, the resignation from Religious Education is large, although it mainly concerns secondary schools. According to reliable data, in the school year 2021/2022, 91.99% of all students attended religion classes in primary schools, whereas only 69.66% did in general secondary schools (Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego KEP 2021). Therefore, it turns out that, in secondary schools, over one-quarter of young people do not attend religion classes. Such a large scale of withdrawal from religion classes is puzzling and requires explanation. For this reason, qualitative research was conducted in the form of in-depth interviews on the motives of giving up Religious Education. The basic research hypothesis is that the religiosity of young people is the main correlate with abandoning religion classes. The main aim of this research was to find out the motivations for young people opting out of religious lessons and to answer the question of whether and to what extent this is influenced by young people's religiosity. This study is one of the first concerning the opting out of Religious Education in Poland; thus, its contribution to the field is significant.

2. Qualitative Research Method

Qualitative research for the purposes of this study was carried out in January and February 2022. In total, interviews were conducted with 29 students at general secondary schools from various regions of Poland who had opted out of Religious Education. These people were selected on the basis of random criteria to ensure the greatest possible credibility of the study. First, five regions of Poland were selected. These included those with a very high number of pupils opting out of RE. In each region, six schools were randomly selected. The technique called CAWI (computer-assisted web interview) was used. For this purpose, a research tool in the form of questions for in-depth interviews was placed in one of the Internet environments. Then, the headmasters of each school were asked to forward the link to a random student who had opted out of Religious Education. As a result, 29 students answered the questions. This number of respondents was sufficient in this qualitative study. This selection of the research sample ensured the anonymity and reliability of the results. All the required standards were complied with in the conducted research. University ethics committee approval required for human research was also obtained. Among the respondents there were 19 girls and 10 boys, aged 16 to 19, from all high school grades. The number of girls was significantly greater than the number of boys, because this was the representative gender ratio of high school students selected for the study. For the same reasons, a significant percentage of respondents (18) were city dwellers. The rest were villagers, although they attended school in towns, because secondary schools are usually located in larger towns. During the interviews, the young people were asked 16 questions, each of which comprised several more detailed issues. The questions were divided into the following groups: attitude to Religious Education at school; and attitude to faith and religious practices, with reference to the Church and Catholic morality. The first group of questions mainly concerned the reasons for resignation from these activities. The next two groups of questions aimed at learning the basic parameters of youth religiousness during the analysis of individual parts of the research; verbatim statements of the youth are quoted. For this purpose, individual interviews were numbered, taking into account the gender of the respondents.

3. Motives for Resigning from Religious Education

The aim of this part of the study was to obtain information on how long young people had not attended religion classes, their opinion of these classes, if they have attended them in the past and, above all, the reasons for unsubscribing from the classes. The interviews confirmed that only 3 out of 29 respondents had never attended RE. The rest attended these classes in elementary school and dropped out in high school, most often in the first grade. Those who attended religion classes in the past could be divided into two groups. The first, to which one-third of the respondents belonged, assessed religion classes quite positively, emphasizing the teacher's friendly attitude and interesting topics: "I liked the teacher's open approach to faith and the possibility of free speech" (Girl 2); "I liked most of the things about religion. I liked these classes, I was interested in these topics. After a while, however, I began to notice that this is not where my place is" (Girl 10). The second group, to which the majority of the surveyed youth belonged, critically evaluated religion classes, pointing primarily to the inconsistency of the content with their own beliefs, as well as the sense of wasted time. The following are examples of such statements: "I did not like the fact that each lesson was based on the pursuit of the superiority of Catholicism over other faiths" (Girl 5); "Religion classes wasted my time and I disagreed with much of the teacher's announcement" (Girl 13); "I didn't like judging whether I go to church or not. Other religions have been demonized by both teachers and textbooks. Throughout the year, there were maybe 2 or 3 classes that recognized that not only Catholics exist after all" (Girl 16). Some also pointed to the low methodological level of religion classes: "We had a teacher who practically did not teach us religion. He once played a film about the pope that we watched for six months" (Girl 19). The research results prove that the confessional and catechetical–evangelistic concept of Religious Education does not suit many young people. They critically evaluate the curriculum of RE, which shows the Catholic Church as privileged in relation to other religions and denominations. If some people evaluate religion classes positively, they do so only in situations where the teacher is open to other views and allows for discussion on the topic.

During the research, young people were asked a direct question about the reasons for withdrawing from religion classes. Among all respondents, only 4 admitted that the main reason for giving up Religious Education was to save time and spend it on extracurricular activities, e.g., sports or music. On the other hand, the other students admitted that the main reason for their resignation was the inconsistency of their beliefs with the content of RE. Most of the youth who dropped out of these classes did not consider themselves religious and did not agree with the teaching of the Catholic Church on doctrinal and moral issues. The following statements are examples of opinions on this subject: "I resigned because I don't believe in God" (Girl 11); "I resigned because I don't think the Church is a place where I feel wanted. I disagree with many of the Church's principles, such as on abortion or LGBT people" (Girl 6); "The reasons for my resignation are the politicization of the Church, pedophile scandals, attitude to sexual minorities, socialist economic views, lack of tolerance" (Boy 8); "Illogical inculcation of ideologies and stereotypes, hate towards LGBT people, topics discussed during these classes, illogical system of assessment and testing, inability to express one's opinion" (Girl 15). Young people give up religion classes because they do not agree with the content and consider them a waste of time. Very often, young people give the negative attitude of the Church towards LGBT people and intolerance towards broadly understood otherness as the main reasons.

There are many negative opinions in the media about the Catholic Church in Poland (Pokorna-Ignatowicz 2002). Taking into account the power of the media coverage, young people were asked about its influence on their personal relationship to the Catholic Church and the decision to withdraw from religion classes. Out of 29 people, 10 admitted that the media had a significant impact on their attitude towards the Church and, indirectly, on unsubscribing from religion classes: "The media coverage helped me learn about the past and present activities of the Church that contributed to my decision to deviate from the faith" (Girl 4); "The impact was big. Interviews, articles, the position of the Church on many

political issues made me realize that this is not for me and I do not want to identify with it" (Girl 7); "I get most of my knowledge from objective websites, books and conversations with others, and it was the broadening of my knowledge that influenced the formation of my views and the realization that I do not want to be part of the Church. It can be said that the Internet has largely influenced my unsubscribing from religion" (Girl 18).

The Polish legal system provides ethics classes for all students who wish to do so. Participants in ethics classes are usually people who have dropped out of religion classes, although the law allows both religion and ethics to be attended. At the same time, there is currently no obligation to attend religion nor ethics classes (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej 2020). All participants in this study chose this option. None of the surveyed students attended ethics classes after giving up religion classes. Some of the respondents explained this as due to a lack of time and willingness to learn the subjects needed to pass the secondary school leaving examination. Others spoke directly of their unwillingness to participate in such activities, believing that they would add nothing to their lives.

The youth were also asked the following question: "Under what conditions could you attend religion classes again?" Half of the respondents completely excluded this possibility and said that no matter what, they would not participate in school religion classes. In turn, the other half allowed such a possibility, but under many conditions. Some argued that they would attend religion classes as long as their conception was changed and they became more like religious studies: "I could participate in Religious Education if such classes involved the study of all religions without claiming that Catholicism is the best" (Girl 7); "I would like to participate in 'religions and cultures of the world'-style classes. The point is that we learn general information about different beliefs so that everyone can find something that suits them and not have one thing to believe in" (Girl 10); "If it weren't a God-worshipping lesson beginning with prayer, it would only turn into something more like religious studies" (Girl 16); "There would have to be a gigantic, almost unrealistic change in the Church" (Boy 6). It turns out, therefore, that half of the youth would be willing to participate in religion classes provided that their subjects were different religions and there were radical changes in the teaching of the Catholic Church, especially in moral matters.

Our research shows that the main reason for opting out of religion lessons is the contestation of the confessional and catechetical–evangelistic concept of Religious Education in Poland. More and more young people do not want to participate in such lessons, which present only a Catholic point of view.

4. Selected Parameters of Youth Religiosity

Another issue raised in the interviews related to the religious identity of students who had dropped out of Religious Education. It could be assumed that the main reason for this resignation was not identifying with the Catholic faith. Indeed, in the interviews, most pupils declared that they did not consider themselves Catholic. A significant proportion of the respondents (20 people) described themselves as people who did not believe in the existence of God. The rest of the interviewees could be divided into three groups. The first was people who defined themselves as agnostics. The following is an example of statements from students who perceived themselves in this way: "I am an agnostic, I don't know if God or any higher power exists, and I don't think humanity is able to answer that question at the moment. Most of the issues around us are explained by science or scientific theories. With the passage of time there is less and less room for God" (Boy 9).

Another group of respondents believed in the existence of a force majeure, some deity, but it was not a Christian God. The following statement can serve as an example: "I believe in a power that helps people, shows them the way, and illuminates their minds if they are ready. Nobody knows what/who this force is. I also believe in smaller holy beings, something like angels, helpers. I do not consider myself a follower of any religion, but this topic is very interesting to me. I am very interested in the whole question of faith and am still looking for purpose and fulfillment" (Girl 10). The next statement presents a similar position: "I am at such a stage in my life that I am not sure yet what faith I feel best in and

what lifts me up. I believe that there is ‘something’ above us. I have a need for spirituality, just like every human being, but I do not identify with the Catholic Church. I do not believe in the Church, priests. However, I believe that there is someone above us who helps, directs me to the right path. For me, faith is above all a loose conversation with God, which is to give me strength. In the Church, I do not feel it is a suitable way for me to develop my faith” (Girl 7). The third group of respondents was people who defined themselves as Christians but who did not identify with the Catholic Church. The following statement is an example: “I believe in God, I am a Christian, but I do not believe that there is a God in whom I believe in the Church” (Boy 6). Therefore, it turns out that the vast majority of students who dropped out of religion classes did not consider themselves Catholics. Most often they define themselves as persons who do not believe in God. Some recognized the existence of an undefined force majeure. Only a few considered themselves Christians, but did not identify with the Catholic Church. Consequently, they did not see the need to participate in confessional, Catholic Religious Education.

Religious practice was another issue that was the subject of interviews with young people. The idea was not only to obtain information about the current behavior of young people, but also about previous experiences. On the basis of various studies, it could be concluded that the severance of relations with the Church most often occurs after receiving the sacrament of confirmation (Zakrzewski 2021, p. 73). Young people who gave up Religious Education at school were asked if, and if necessary, what sacraments they received in the Catholic Church and what their prayers and participation in church services currently looked like. The research found that only three students had never had any connection with the Catholic Church and did not receive any sacraments. One of them was quite radical on this matter: “I have never been to a Catholic church and I never will be” (Girl 9). The remaining respondents admitted that they had received at least two sacraments—baptism and the Eucharist. Moreover, the majority, 17 respondents, had also received the sacrament of confirmation. Therefore, it turned out that most of the students were baptized in the Catholic Church and received all the sacraments of Christian initiation. Only after receiving the sacrament of confirmation, at the beginning of high school, did they distance themselves from the Church. This is confirmed by the following statement: “As a child I went to church, was baptized, went to First Communion, but I have always not found happiness or satisfaction in it. I went to confirmation and this period was the moment of my ‘spiritual awakening’. It was then that I began to perceive the world differently” (Girl 10). Some respondents, however, claimed that they received the sacraments unconsciously, because it was not their personal decision but that of their parents. Additionally, they had never personally accepted or practiced the Catholic faith: “I do not go to church. I was baptized unknowingly and communicated unconsciously as well” (Boy 1).

Although the majority of respondents had received the sacraments in the Catholic Church in the past, they currently do not practice religion. A complete lack of religious practice was declared by 21 students. This percentage is much higher than the average for the entire population of Polish youth (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej 2021, p. 10). The following words are an example of what this group of respondents said: “My religious practices do not exist. I don’t pray, I don’t go to church” (Girl 9). Some of the respondents confirmed that they had stopped practicing after confirmation: “I do not go to church for 2 years, since I finished the tiring preparation for confirmation” (Girl 13). However, the remaining eight people performed religious practices although in different ways and with different frequency. Some admitted that their only religious practice was personal prayer, albeit in an original way: “I do not like to pray the ‘classic’ way, with ‘poems’. It does not appeal to me. My prayer is casual conversation, reflections, momentary thoughts during the day” (Girl 7). It also turned out that some of the respondents took part in Catholic services. Such a declaration was made by six people, although only two people declared regular participation in the services. Others only went to church during the biggest holidays or family celebrations. Some admitted that they were not doing it out of an inner need, but

because of social expectations, especially of their parents: “I don’t pray. I go to church more out of force to avoid conflicts with my parents, but I do not receive communion” (Girl 5). In her statement, one of the girls also gave a general reason why she stopped attending church services: “Ever since I heard the words that hurt me during the mass, I decided not to attend the masses. I only prayed at home, alone or with my family, but then I stopped.” (Girl 17). In conclusion, it can be said that students who have opted out of religion classes usually do not pray and do not attend church services. Those who undertake religious practices usually do so sporadically and due to social expectations, not internal beliefs (Kiełb and Paweł 2021).

Another question young people were asked about was the reference to Catholic moral principles. This is an important parameter of religiosity that also influences the relationship to Catholicism and Catholic Religious Education. The interviews conducted show that as many as 24 people reject the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. Among the statements on this subject, one can cite those that emphasize the alleged anachronism of Catholic morality: “I am not guided by Catholic moral principles in my life. I believe they are out of date. The exceptions are the rules that follow from natural human morality” (Girl 4); “They are old-fashioned. I do not consider them to be any point of reference when making decisions” (Boy 7); “I don’t think the rules imposed by the Church are good. All Catholic religion is based on the Bible, a very old book that has been translated, transformed and interpreted in various ways. This is not something credible for me. I believe that everyone should find their own way in life that will make them happy. It should not be based on imposed values and rules” (Girl 10).

Some respondents dismissed Catholic morality primarily because of its strict sexual ethics: “I agree with most Catholic moral principles, but those regarding premarital sex, masturbation, contraception, abortion and sexual orientation are pointless to me” (Girl 13). Additionally, the attitude of the Catholic Church towards LGBT people is often indicated by young people as one of the reasons for rejecting Catholic moral principles and a reason for contesting the Church. On this point, some respondents even say that the Church teaches contrary to Revelation: “I believe that Catholic morals violate the laws that God made. God said to love every human being as he is. On the other hand, the Church treats ‘others’ as something terrible and people who should not be loved” (Boy 4). Moreover, there have been several opinions that Catholic morals are harmful and limit human development: “I absolutely disagree with the commandments preached by the Church. In my opinion, they limit me a lot, and the attitude of those who practice the principles of the Church sometimes hurts other people” (Girl 6); “Catholic morals are very restrictive. In my opinion, they do not allow personal religious development” (Girl 12); “I think they limit people and some people get it wrong. I try to live the things I believe in and help others as much as I can” (Girl 17). On the other hand, some young people accept only general principles, such as the Decalogue, while rejecting the Church commandments and other detailed moral principles: “I consider the Decalogue to be correct, but when it comes to other principles proclaimed by the Church, I have doubts” (Girl 5).

Another subject of interviews with young people was their attitude towards the Catholic Church. Young people who opted out of religion classes were asked about their attitude toward the Catholic Church, personal experiences with the Church and priests, their sense of connection with the Church, opinion about it, and participation in the life of the Church. Only two students declared a fairly positive attitude towards the Catholic Church and a sense of bond with this institution. Interestingly, however, they also pointed to the problems noticed in the Church: “I feel part of the Church. I go to mass on Sundays and holidays, but not all the behavior and opinions of priests are correct in my opinion” (Girl 3); “My personal experiences are quite positive. I have no objections to the priests I met. However, the whole Church as an institution, in my opinion, does not function properly. The Church should be a meeting place with God, and it becomes a profit-making company. The numerous crimes committed by clergy are swept under the rug. I think the Church could be a great institution, bringing together many wonderful people, but

everything went wrong and instead of bringing people together, the Church divides them” (Girl 10). Seven students described their attitude to the Church as indifferent. They declared that they had no negative experiences related to the Church or the clergy, but they did not take any part in the life of this institution. The following words are an example of such a statement: “I do not feel, nor am I part of the Church community. My attitude towards her is neutral” (Girl 1); “I have neutral experiences with the Church, not negative ones. I do not identify with it. Currently, I do not take part in the life of the Church and parish.” (Girl 7).

The remaining interviewees (20 people) declared a negative attitude towards the Catholic Church. Some of them limited themselves to expressing a general opinion on this subject, but a large group of respondents indicated the reasons that determined the negative attitude towards the Church. Examples of such statements are as follows: “I describe my attitude towards the Catholic Church as completely negative. Experiences related to the Church are negative, both in terms of substance and psychology. I do not feel part of this institution” (Boy 8); “I consider the Catholic Church to be very hypocritical. I did not have many experiences with priests, however, from religion classes in primary school, which I attended sometimes, I can say that they often cross borders that should not be exceeded and are not an example for children who are around them” (Girl 12); “In my opinion, the Catholic Church has little to do with religion and focuses on politics and its own material benefits. I don’t have any special experiences with the Church and priests. I don’t feel like part of the Church. I rate it very negatively and I don’t like the way it is conducted. I do not take part in the life of the Church or my own parish” (Girl 13).

Based on the qualitative research conducted, it can be concluded that the vast majority of young people described their attitude towards the Church as negative. The changes that have taken place in the perception of the Church by Polish youth are stunning. There was a dynamic transition from the Church: fighting the communist system in the 1980s, through the triumphant Church of the 1990s under the leadership of the Polish pope, to the Church at the end of the 2000s, torn by secularization and scandals (Bożewicz 2020, p. 6). An indirect consequence of the negative attitude towards the Church is the opting out of Religious Education.

Our research shows that the weakening Catholic religiosity of young people is the main reason for opting out of Religious Education. More and more young Poles do not believe in God, do not follow religious practices, and do not identify with the Catholic Church. For these reasons, they do not want to attend Catholic religion classes.

5. Discussion

Religious Education in Poland is confessional in character. It consists of the fact that the Catholic Church decides the content and methods of teaching religion as well as about who can be a teacher of RE. The Church is therefore the author of the assumptions and textbooks, and also grants the canonical mission to teachers. Religious Education in Poland can also be called catechetical and evangelizing. It is assumed that it will perform all the functions of catechesis appropriate for ecclesial communities: teaching, upbringing, and Christian initiation. In this approach, it is not only about teaching students religious knowledge or even shaping socially desirable attitudes in life, but also to lead an awakening or deepening of faith, to introduce regular sacramental life, and to adhere to Catholic moral principles. Thus, teaching religion in a Polish school is, in its very assumptions, a form of catechesis. The core curriculum of Catholic Religious Education assumes that the entire deposit of the Catholic faith will be discussed twice in primary school and once in high school. Participants in religion classes will become acquainted with Catholic faith, Catholic liturgy, Catholic moral teaching, and Catholic forms of prayer. Moreover, every religion teacher is obliged to be not only a teacher and educator, but also a witness of faith and participant in the active life of the Church.

Current data confirm that every fourth young Pole does not participate in Religious Education. In the qualitative research, an attempt was made to explain the reasons for resignation from these classes. On the basis of in-depth interviews, it was proven that

religiosity is the main correlate to abandoning religion classes. The concept of Religious Education implemented in Poland means that it is addressed primarily to believing and practicing Catholics who want to deepen their faith and belonging to the Church (Małosa 2015). Young people give up such Religious Education primarily because they consider themselves non-believers, not belonging to the Catholic Church, and disagree with the teachings of this Church on faith and morals.

The research confirms that the model of Religious Education adopted in Poland encounters a number of problems related to increasing religious and ideological pluralism. For this reason, confessional, catechetical, and evangelizing classes are increasingly being contested by young people. As a consequence, an increasing percentage of secondary school students quit Religious Education. The Polish education system, as well as the Polish Catholic Church, are faced with a dilemma—whether to maintain the current assumptions and systematically lose young people, or to change the concept of Religious Education. It seems that, in the near future, it will be necessary to change the model of religion classes in Polish schools towards a model that will take into account contemporary cultural changes and the pluralistic attitude of participants (Alberich 1982, p. 217). Such an approach does not assume the formation of religious attitudes but the transfer of information on different religions and education to religious and ideological tolerance (Potocki 2007, pp. 101–36).

6. Conclusions

This study attempted to analyze the phenomenon of young people dropping out of religion classes in Poland. In order to show the scale of the phenomenon, reports from the latest statistical research have been cited. In turn, in order to answer questions about the reasons for the resignation, qualitative research was carried out. The religiosity of young people was considered to be the main correlate of unsubscribing from religion classes. The research confirmed that the main reason for abandoning Religious Education is a rejection of Catholic truths of faith and moral principles. Due to the confessional and even catechetical and evangelizing model of Religious Education, a large percentage of young people decided to resign from these classes. They do not identify themselves with the Catholic Church and do not want to participate in activities aimed at deepening the Catholic faith or converting non-believers to Catholicism. This phenomenon is a great challenge for both the school and the Church. It seems that a change in the model of Religious Education is inevitable.

This article is one of the first analyses of the studies on young Poles opting out of Religious Education. The qualitative research conducted in the form of in-depth interviews makes it possible to answer the questions of the motives for opting out of religion lessons. They also confirm the hypothesis that the main correlate of such behavior is the increasingly weakening religiosity of young people. Nevertheless, there is a need for further research on this topic. It would be worthwhile, for example, to conduct a survey representative of the entire population. It would also be worthwhile to perform research on students' suggestions for religious lessons, which would allow a new curriculum to be prepared.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.M.M. and M.Z.; methodology, P.M.M.; software, G.Z.; validation, P.M.M., M.Z. and G.Z.; formal analysis, P.M.M.; investigation, P.M.M. and G.Z.; resources, M.Z.; data curation, M.Z.; writing—original draft preparation, P.M.M.; writing—review and editing, M.Z.; visualization, P.M.M.; supervision, G.Z.; project administration, P.M.M.; funding acquisition, M.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The article is a part of the project funded by the Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Poland, “Regional Initiative of Excellence” in 2019–2022, 028/RID/2018/19, the amount of funding: 11 742 500 PLN.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (protocol code 3/2021/KEBN WT KUL, date of approval: 26 November 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting reported results can be found at <https://repozytorium.kul.pl/> (27 July 2022).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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