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## **Transformation of Symbolic Communication Barriers in the Narratives of Young, Educated Residents of Podlasie**

*Abstract:* The aim of this article is to describe the impact of secularization processes in Poland on the transformation of symbolic religious boundaries in small local communities, as well as to offer an in-depth scholarly reflection on the mechanisms and consequences of these changes. The analysis focuses on a specific region in the eastern borderland, characterised by a high level of religious and ethnic diversity and a low level of urbanisation, which limits the influence of secularization processes. To verify the hypotheses, an analysis was conducted on research material obtained from semi-structured qualitative interviews with young, educated residents of Podlasie who grew up in villages and small towns but currently live in Białystok. The collected material revealed that respondents experienced a significant decline in religiosity, which began during adolescence and had a crucial impact on the redefinition of symbolic religious boundaries between believers and non-believers in their traditional hometowns. While the distinction between Orthodox Christians and Catholics was accepted, atheists often faced exclusion or social isolation.

*Keywords:* secularization, symbolic religious boundaries, Podlasie, atheism

### **Introduction**

In ethnically or religiously diverse border communities, symbolic boundaries are often perceived as fundamental markers of the existing social order. In a situation where processes such as globalization, technological revolution, or modernization have an increased impact on the border area, the question arises as to whether existing symbolic borders in border areas are strengthened or weakened. In this context, an important question arises: how does the process of secularisation, shaped primarily by individuals' personal quests and the resulting transformations in the sphere of values, influence the redefinition of symbolic boundaries and their significance in borderland communities? Do the aforementioned processes of redefinition of symbolic borders affect the everyday functioning and communication of the border area's inhabitants? In order to answer this question, it is important to analyse a specific case study. Our research interest focused on the area of the Polish eastern borderland, characterized by a high level of ethnic (Sadonowicz 2018; Bieńkowska 2019) and, above all, religious diversity, which is the result of the complicated history of the area. The multi-confessionalism characteristic of Podlasie, associated with the presence of a predominantly Orthodox minority and the

low urbanization of the area (GUS 2023), is conducive to the maintenance of strong symbolic boundaries based on the reproduction of collective religious rituals. In the eastern border area, identification with a Catholic or Orthodox religion is tantamount to the inhabitants being strongly rooted in the structure of traditional local communities. At the same time, the eastern border region is currently experiencing dynamic cultural changes, primarily determined by modernization processes and the increasingly intense secularization of contemporary Polish society (CBOS 2024). The secularization visible especially in the youngest cohorts of Poles is to a large extent related to the influence of progressing modernization, globalization, and access to modern information technologies, which impacts the growth of young people's sense of individualism and worldview pluralism (Voas 2009; Stoltz 2020), leading to a dynamic decline in religious practices (Voas 2020). This phenomenon is also evident among the young inhabitants of Podlasie. The clash between the universal processes of modernization and secularization and the local traditions of folk religiosity, perceived as a guarantee for the maintenance of social order in the eastern border region, provides an interesting space for analysing the dynamics of the transformation of communicative symbolic barriers.

The primary aim of this article is therefore to conduct an in-depth sociological reflection on how macro-level processes of secularization in Poland impact the transformation of symbolic religious boundaries within the small, culturally diverse local communities of the Podlasie borderland, by analysing research material obtained from qualitative interviews conducted with young, highly educated residents of Podlasie who now live in Białystok but grew up in villages and small towns. The analysed study focuses on their memories of growing up in these small communities in the eastern borderland, the gradual loss of faith during this period, and the ways in which communication with people of different religious beliefs and atheists was shaped in their local communities. The analysis will also include a diagnosis aimed at detecting the symbolic barriers that our researchers encountered in the sphere of communication between diverse religious groups and non-believers. Essentially, we are investigating how the young generation of Podlasie residents describes the changes in attitudes toward religion, collective rituals, and traditions of small local communities in the border area, and what impact this has on the redefinition of existing symbolic barriers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article establishes Polish secularization processes as its key theoretical framework, focusing on how these macro-level transformations challenge the long-standing religious norms that historically underpinned social order in small, culturally diverse communities within the Podlasie borderland. Furthermore, utilizing theories related to symbolic boundaries and communication, the research seeks to demonstrate precisely how contemporary shifts in religiosity influence communicative practices and redefine existing symbolic barriers across the multicultural context of Podlasie.

Podlasie is characterized by Catholic-Orthodox diversity and historically religious identity has functioned as primary symbolic boundary, often replacing national affiliations in defining "us" versus "them." This draws on symbolic interactionism, asserting that social

reality is constructed through symbolic communication, where shared meanings are carried by symbols, and reinforcing social norms and cohesion. In the past, shared religious rituals and symbols helped maintain strong interpersonal bonds and group identity. Secularization challenges the stable meaning assigned to the religious symbols as younger generation reject traditional religious engagement. This subsequently erodes the symbolic boundaries and alters social organization. The shift towards atheism impacts communicative practices and creates tensions between believers and non-believers within the traditional community.

### **Religious Traditions, Social Interaction, and Cultural Change in Podlasie: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective**

One of the most important principles of symbolic interactionism is the belief that humans construct and interpret their social reality through symbolic exchange. This exchange, also called symbolic communication, is the transmission of experiences and meanings in social interactions by means of symbols—gestures, attributes, and language, i.e. verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Initiated by G. H. Mead, symbolic interactionism is concerned with describing how people create symbols and how they communicate through them. Our behaviour and understanding of the world are shaped by the meanings we assign to reality, which in turn are shaped and negotiated in the course of our everyday interactions with others (Blumer 1969). However, symbols will only fulfil their communicative role in the processes of transmitting and reading information when they are equally understood and interpreted within a community.

Symbolic communication is also highly relevant to the sociology of everyday life, as one of the primary factors influencing the formation and perpetuation of social norms. The behaviour and beliefs of individuals are influenced by shared meanings, established in continuous, repetitive processes of interaction. Individuals adapt their roles, identities and communication styles to the perceived social signals and behaviours of others, enabling the dynamic evolution of social norms. Contemporary researchers are concerned with analysing not only face-to-face communication, but also technological communication, which over the past two decades has not only complemented face-to-face interactions, but sometimes replaces them (Carter & Fuller 2016).

Interpersonal interactions play an important role in small communities in Podlasie, as they contribute to maintaining social cohesion. In an environment where people know each other, relationships are based on more emotional ties than in large cities, where they tend to be less personal and more ephemeral. The frequency and emotionality of these interactions, as well as interdependence, lead to a close network of social ties. Less anonymity in small communities also facilitates social pressure to follow common norms and rules and promotes social control. On the other hand, frequent interactions can increase trust, support and allow for the development of a collective identity (Simmel 1950). Therefore, the quality of interpersonal communication is a direct indicator of social cohesion. The nature of social bonds in small communities can be determined by assessing the residents' daily communication, and the extent to which they are able to communicate with and understand one another.

One of the foundations of mutual understanding in small towns is the sharing of a common fabric of meaning. In Podlasie's small towns and villages, communication based on rituals and shared symbols allows for the preservation of norms and the creation of a sense of belonging, serving pro-social functions. Maintaining networks of interpersonal contacts and daily interactions help sustain traditions, rituals, and historical narratives that are important in these communities. These practices contribute to the creation of a common group identity while also enabling the management of intergroup relations, which is particularly important in the multicultural Podlasie (Barwiński 2017; Kisielowska-Lipman 2002). Familiarity with the cultural and especially religious codes of other groups, such as respecting each other's festive periods, allows smooth navigation between intercultural differences and fosters mutual understanding.

However, the role of symbolic communication in Podlasie is primarily to build group identity and strengthen social ties within particular groups. In Podlasie, group identity and distinctiveness is primarily shaped by religion and local traditions (most often of religious origin). Familiarity with cultural and religious symbolism, as well as participation in religious rituals are essential for these communities to maintain group identity in conditions of coexistence with several groups. It is also a way of marking group membership and at the same time differentiating themselves from other religious or ethnic communities (Pawluczuk 1972, 2008). Understood in this way, religiosity becomes a regulator of social relations. On the one hand it reinforces intergroup boundaries, on the other hand it allows for their negotiation and creative reinterpretation.

A boundary is an ambiguous yet essential concept in sociology, defining cultural affiliations and positioning of racial and ethnic groups. It can signify physical barriers separating areas or groups, it can also be an imagined construct that expresses symbolic divisions, while social boundaries can express themselves in unequal access to social resources (Lamont & Molnár 2002). Symbolic interactionists understand boundaries as physical, symbolic or social barriers created during social interactions. Central to this research strand is the notion of symbolic boundaries existing between social groups, which, through the establishment of shared rules, beliefs, cultural and social norms, isolate and highlight differences between groups while contributing to the construction of social identities and the strengthening of in-group bonds. The multi-level significance and action of boundaries is particularly evident in border regions, where they act as physical and political borders of the state and, through processes of constant construction of otherness, make national identities on both sides of the border real and conscious (Lamont & Molnár 2002).

A borderland, on the other hand, is an area along a territorial border, separating two or more nations from each other, where economic, cultural and social influences intermingle (Kisielowska-Lipman 2002). It can also be seen as a historically variable region close to the border, peripherally located in relation to the centre of a specific state, and developing its own culture and tradition (Nikiforova 2010: 128). It is a transitional area, shaped by historical changes in nationality and related changes in national borders (Barwiński 2017), and can therefore be characterised by cultural, linguistic, social and religious diversity, which results from territorial proximity (Miluska 2018: 49).

Contemporary concepts and definitions of borderlands draw attention to their structural complexity and high level of variability, resulting from the influence of both global

and local processes. Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (2013) emphasizes that contemporary borderlands are enmeshed in changing networks of influence from economic, political, and cultural structures. In this sense, the specific culture of borderlands, the identities of the people living in the area, and the communication between diverse groups are the result of dynamic interactions between people's daily activities and complex factors of the social context (Brunet-Jailly 2013: 29). These processes have influenced the contemporary redefinition of the concept of territorial, cultural, and symbolic borders (Brunet-Jailly 2005: 633). According to David Newman (2003), borders today are highly flexible, reflecting new, more complex, and changing behavioural patterns of their inhabitants (Newman 2003: 13). Thus, it appears that in contemporary border areas, the notion of borders can be linked both to their perception as lines that need to be protected to maintain a high level of social integration and, conversely, as gateways to experiencing diversity and building a tolerant society (Deleixhe et al. 2019). The theory of symbolic borders effectively explains the complex processes taking place in contemporary border areas. This is because symbolic borders generate a strong sense of community and collective identities in the complex reality of borderlands by creating the need to constantly create, adapt, and recreate in collective actions the lines separating the self from the stranger (Krstić 2022: 64).

An example of such a borderland is the Podlasie region, located on Poland's eastern border, where Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Tatar, Jewish and many other ethnic groups have clashed for centuries, making this region one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse regions in Poland. Present-day Podlasie is inhabited by Eastern Slavic national minorities (Belarusians and Ukrainians), the majority of whom are Orthodox, as well as by Muslim Tatars and Lithuanians. It is a borderland area that has belonged to various states over the centuries and where religions, nations and ethnic groups coexisted, historically including Jews, Russians and Germans, in addition to those mentioned above. The counties of Hajnówka, Bielsk, and Siemiatycze are described as the most ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse area of post-war Poland (Barwiński 2014; Szwed 2010). In addition to Poles, these counties are inhabited by Belarusians, Ukrainians, Russians, and Ruthenians (Statistics Poland 2023a), and both Belarusian and Ukrainian are spoken there, alongside numerous dialects.

Furthermore, it lies at the junction of and is shaped by the influences of both Eastern and Western Christianity, the division between which is considered to be one of the most solid borders on the European continent (Komornicki & Miszczuk 2010; Plit 2014). In 2004, following Poland's accession to the European Union, Poland's eastern border became the border of the European Union, which introduced new divisions, including an intra-European, Polish-Lithuanian border and an external, Polish-Belarusian border. The associated change in visa policy had a negative impact on contacts between Belarusians, who, living on both sides of the border, had fewer opportunities for contact (Kisielowska-Lipman 2002). This contact, however small, was almost completely prevented after the closure of most border crossings between Poland and Belarus following the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Podlasie is characterised by a rather conflict-free and peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups and religions, and no barriers that would separate them have emerged. On the contrary, the 'borderland inhabitant' living in Podlasie draws on the cultural identity of the

region, often speaks several languages and belongs to different nationalities, and knows people of different religions (Plit 2014; Barwiński 2017). However, this does not mean a completely conflict-free neighbourhood; historical memories of past conflicts, linked to a different interpretation of history, are still alive. An example of one of the most intense such conflicts in recent years is the one related to the armed anti-communist underground operating in the Podlasie region after 1944 (Dobrosielski et al. 2023). Inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts as well as socio-economic differences complicate and hinder symbolic communication in the area.

The most important dividing line between the inhabitants of Podlasie is between Orthodox and Catholics. It is denominational differences and identity rather than national identity that have been the basis for building identity and determining who is 'other' (Barwiński 2017; Sadanowicz 2018; Sajewicz 2008). 'It is religion that is the most important integrating factor, and at the same time the one that marks the boundaries between our own and strangers; the fundamental cultural, social, political division runs along the Catholic-Orthodox line, not Poles-Belarusians or Poles-Ukrainians' (Barwiński 2014: 298). On the other hand, more important than religiosity itself is religious culture and upbringing in a particular environment (Wiśniewski 1980). It is religious differences that constitute the main axis of political, cultural and social divisions in the region.

Religiosity in Podlasie is an example of the 'religion of fate,' and its persistence and cultural strength are evidenced by the popularity of terms such as 'Orthodox atheist,' which indicate the strong identification with the religion inherited from one's family, even despite a later change in personal belief (Pawluczuk 2008).

The Podlasie region is a religiously distinctive area within Poland. In the eastern part of the Podlaskie Voivodeship there are municipalities where Orthodoxy is the dominant religion. Here 'representatives of a minority religion on the scale of Poland constitute the majority of citizens' (Nikitorowicz 2014: 109) The municipalities with the highest proportion of Orthodox residents are: Czyże in the Hajnówka district (83%), Dubicze Cerkiewne in the Hajnówka district (74%), Orla in the Bielsk district (70%) (Statistcs Poland 2023b).

Podlasie is also an example of a region where there are tensions between traditional ways of living and thinking and modern secularization trends. Historically in Podlasie, both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches enjoyed strong religious communities and were the most important disposers of truth and values (Romanowicz 2015). Nowadays, however, the role and position of the Churches are changing, religious commitment is declining and the religious consciousness of the faithful is changing.

The processes of social change associated with the departure from traditional models among Orthodox Christians in Podlasie were described as early as the 1970s by Włodzimierz Pawluczuk (1972). Nowadays, widespread access to education and technology leads to greater religious awareness, but at the same time less religious commitment. A decline in parish participation and church activity can be observed among young people. Migration from the countryside to the city has resulted in the weakening of parish structures based on religion and tradition and, consequently, social ties (Romanowicz 2015). Furthermore, the concept of a 'religion of fate' is giving way to a 'religion of choice,' which is particularly evident in the prevalence of mixed marriages and informal unions. The changes in

social dynamics are effectively overturning the religious-ethnic barriers that have existed up to now, affecting also communication barriers. These changes have been accelerated by Poland's integration into the European Union and the opening up to religious models from Western Europe. These processes are transforming the structures of societies once based on traditional models of religiosity, bridging religious-ethnic differences and divisions and contributing to the gradual disappearance of social borders based on religion.

### **Secularization in Contemporary Poland: Generational Change, Cultural Boundaries, and the Persistence of Folk Religiosity in Local Communities**

Nowadays, in the light of the secularization processes existing in Western countries and developing particularly intensively in Poland, changes may be taking place in the communication processes between adherents of Orthodoxy and Catholicism in Podlasie. Research shows that changes in communication patterns in local communities affect religious expression, especially among representatives of younger generations. The importance of maintaining a stable religious identity can be seen especially in rural communities, although the means by which this stability is maintained are changing, and the social role of centres such as churches is becoming increasingly important. Young generations are adapting their religiosity to new social conditions, taking particular care of those elements of tradition that enable pro-sociality and the development of social skills and values.

According to data from the Pew Research Center, Poland is the fastest secularising country among the 108 countries respondents and the country with the largest gap in religiosity between older and younger generations (Pew Research Center 2018). Over the past 30 years, Poles' level of religiosity has fallen from 94% in 1992 (CBOS 2021) to 78% in 2024 (CBOS 2024). Secularization, resulting from the progressive modernisation of Polish society, is evident in the decreasing intervention of Catholic Church institutions in everyday social practices and the rapid decline of religiosity among younger generations (Stolz & Voas 2023). Researchers indicate that changes related to secularization intensified in Poland after joining the European Union, which influenced both religious and national identity (Bożewicz & Boguszewski 2021). The younger generations, generation Y (also known as Millennials), born between 1980 and 1996, and generation Z, born in or after 1997, are becoming particularly intensely secularised. There is a decline in the level of participation in religious practices among younger Poles and a growing number of people declare themselves as non-believers, whose number in 2021 was 12.5%. The decline in religiosity is accompanied by growing criticism of the Catholic Church (Pieniężny 2024), concerning, among other things, the Church's links with the state, paedophile scandals involving priests, or the functioning of the Church itself (Dąbrowska-Prokopowska et al. 2023; Boguszewski et al. 2022).

Our approach to qualitative research was grounded in an interdisciplinary scientific framework and key theories concerning secularization processes, as adopted within the context of an international research grant—specifically, the EEA-Norway project 'Religion, Ideology & Prosociality: Simulating Secularising Societies.' We drew upon the theoretical

foundations laid by D. Voas (2009), as well as the analysis of the relationship between existential insecurity and religiosity developed by P. Norris and R. Inglehart (2011). Voas argues that the decline in religiosity across Europe has proceeded at a constant rate since the beginning of the 20th century (Voas 2009: 167), and that secularization processes follow a consistent pattern across all European countries (Voas 2009: 155). Secularization occurs in three consecutive phases: a decline in the number of religious individuals, an increase in the proportion of the population exhibiting moderate religiosity (referred to as “Fuzzy Fidelity”), and, ultimately, a rise in the number of secular individuals (Voas 2009; Stoltz 2020). Norris and Inglehart (2011), in turn, develop the theory of existential security. They examine the impact of both subjective feelings of security and objective indicators (such as the Gallup Lived Poverty Index) on changes in levels of religiosity. Their research, based on analyses from over 130 countries, demonstrates that increasing levels of existential security in developing societies, including Poland, lead to a diminishing role of religion in people’s everyday lives.

Jörg Stoltz observes that modernisation fosters a heightened sense of economic security, higher levels of education, and the expansion of pluralism and competition from secular ideologies vis-à-vis religion. As a result, religious attitudes are transmitted less frequently by parents, teachers, and other influential figures. Even children raised in religious households increasingly perceive religious socialisation as less attractive, less relevant, and less realistic (Stoltz 2020: 180). Consequently, secularization largely follows a cohort effect—each successive birth cohort tends to be less religious than the previous one, as reflected in religious affiliation, practices, and personal prayer. Numerous studies support the cohort-based nature of secularization processes (Molteni & Biolcati 2022; Voas & Chaves 2016; Voas & Doebler 2011; Wolf 2008). Secularization is not a process that is unequivocally synonymous with the level of advancement in modernisation, but rather a transition from a state of equilibrium in a highly religious society to a new equilibrium in a highly secular one (Stoltz et al. 2024).

It is, however, important to stress that we do not consider secularization processes to be linear or deterministic. In line with the analyses of Stoltz and Voas (2023), the persistence or even revival of religion can be observed even under conditions of advancing modernisation. Their approach identifies five mechanisms that help explain such phenomena: crisis, reaction, transformation, state intervention, and socio-demographic composition. Several key conclusions emerge from their analysis. Firstly, many instances of religious revival are rooted in the use of religion as a means to reinforce social cohesion and national identity in the face of emerging or intensifying threats. Secondly, the various mechanisms that contribute to both religious revival and the deepening of secularization are not mutually exclusive but often coexist. In practice, it is the complex interplay of these mechanisms within specific communities that increases the likelihood of religious resurgence. Thirdly, these mechanisms are not deterministic in nature (Stoltz & Voas 2023). A severe crisis does not necessarily lead to religious revival—it may just as well result in social unrest or increased migration. Moreover, for religion to regain a central role in the daily lives of a population that has undergone dynamic secularization, additional contextual factors are required, such as the presence of charismatic leaders, institutional networks (Corcoran & Wellman 2016), or deeply rooted religious traditions.

Accordingly, we argue that the analysis of secularization processes in Poland, especially in relation to younger cohorts raised in traditional local communities where religion historically served important integrative functions, requires careful consideration of complex socio-cultural conditions. This process is neither unequivocal nor inevitable, and its trajectory may shift in response to specific contextual variables. Therefore, the possibility of a religious revival among our research participants cannot be ruled out. Notably, the vast majority of respondents who currently identify as atheists underwent an intensive process of religious socialisation in the past. These experiences have left lasting marks on their worldviews, often in the form of internalised religious or spiritual beliefs (Tyrała 2013). In favourable circumstances, for example, in times of crisis or social transformation, these internal resources may serve as a basis for the reactivation of religious attitudes. Consequently, we contend that future changes in religious attitudes within the group under study remain a distinct possibility and should be considered within the broader context of the dynamic nature of secularization processes.

An important factor reinforcing the religiosity of Poles, while simultaneously hindering young people from permanently adopting atheistic attitudes, is the strong linkage between national identity and Roman Catholicism. Polish national identity, shaped over the course of prolonged historical processes, developed primarily in opposition to oppressive states rather than within democratic regimes (Casanova 1994). In this context, the Catholic Church in Poland played a crucial role in constructing symbolic meanings that reinforced patriotism, thereby creating a coherent model that closely intertwined religiosity with Polishness (Osewska, Stala & Bochenek 2022).

The significance of collective religious rituals as mechanisms legitimising the existing social order has long been explained by Polish researchers through the phenomenon of so-called folk Catholicism. It manifested itself in religious nationalism, the socio-national character of religious worship, and the strong integration of religion with everyday life (Modrzejewski and Potulski 2022). Folk Catholicism also encompassed naïve attitudes intertwined with magical ritualism, fulfilled the need to gain social status through religion, and was characterised by deeply rooted traditionalism and ritualism.

It is important to present the contemporary controversies surrounding the notion of folk religiosity, described by many scholars. Izabella Bukraba-Rylska takes a critical stance towards the way in which folk religiosity functions within contemporary academic discourse. She points out that this phenomenon is often described in numerous academic papers in terms of sensualism, ritualism, particularism and religious nationalism (Bukraba-Rylska 2008). Anna Niedźwiedź also speaks critically about the concept of folk religiosity, emphasising that it is worth reflecting on the legitimacy of using this term, which has largely exhausted its scholarly interpretative potential in relation to the complexity of contemporary religious phenomena (Niedźwiedź 2014: 334). Instead of the simplified and idealised notion of folk religiosity, the researcher proposes the use of the concept of religious culture. This term makes it possible to consider two essential elements of religious phenomena: firstly, the functioning of meanings of religious doctrines deeply rooted in social norms within local communities, and secondly, the living religious practices that inhabitants cultivate in their everyday lives.

The adoption of the perspective of lived religion means paying attention to what people actually do, what they believe in, and how their practices genuinely shape collective identity. From this perspective, religion is an everyday, re-enacted and individually experienced practice, whose essential dimension lies in the physical experience of the sacred and its symbolic manifestations. Within this conceptual framework, religion is described as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by the situational experiences of individuals living in a specific socio-cultural context (Niedźwiedź 2014: 332). Folk religiosity, which reduces the experience of faith to repetitive collective rituals, proves insufficient in the face of the contemporary transformations taking place in small local communities in Podlasie. A research perspective based on the concept of lived religion constitutes a more effective tool for describing the complex and fluid forms of religious communication in these communities, which are increasingly experiencing the strong influence of secularisation processes in Poland. As Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska (2023) observes, studies on Polish religious phenomena must be well grounded in a specific social, historical and cultural context. Theoretical concepts developed in secularised and modernised Western societies, which assume a clear boundary between secular heritage and lived religion, do not fully apply in countries where Catholicism remains strongly present in public life and serves as an important factor of social integration (Baraniecka-Olszewska 2023: 139).

In this article, we assume that the most effective approach to analysing the changing symbolic boundaries in the social communication of small local communities is to combine both perspectives: the international approach to secularisation processes based on David Voas's cohort analyses (Voas 2009) with consideration of the specific Polish and Podlasie cultural determinants of the phenomenon of lived religion (Niedźwiedź 2014). As a result, the theoretical framework outlined above enables an analysis of how traditional religious forms—particularly in rural areas and small towns of the Podlasie region—shape collective identity and the boundaries of local communities. This becomes especially evident when contrasted with contemporary secularising trends that challenge culturally embedded religious norms in Polish society.

The individualisation of faith, the rise of atheist attitudes and religious pluralism in Poland have created new cultural boundaries in social interactions. Traditional Podlasie communities with well-established and internalised roots of Catholic and Orthodox religiosity, religious institutions had a significant impact on moral as well as social norms. The emergence of new attitudes lead to divisions and communication barriers between religious people and those who reject religious practices and principles and institutions based on these principles (Borowik 2019).

Difficulties in communication processes and even conflicts may also arise between religious people and atheists. Atheists in such communities sometimes face the fear of ostracism. Some choose to participate in religious ceremonies for family reasons, not wanting to isolate themselves from their family, while others reject religious practices and traditions altogether. These newly created cultural boundaries are particularly evident during festive periods, such as Christmas, which is traditionally a time devoted to family meetings in Poland. It can make it difficult for atheists to reconcile family expectations and personal convictions when they have to choose between their beliefs and being accepted by a community with a different worldview (Dąbrowska-Prokopowska et al. 2023).

### The Methodology Adopted in the Study

The fundamental aim of the qualitative research was to analyse changes in religiosity among young, educated people from rural areas and small towns in Podlaskie Province. Additionally, it was important to diagnose the specifics of communication between diverse religious groups and non-believers in small local communities. The key objective of the research was to describe, from the respondents' perspectives, the extent to which cultural and symbolic barriers related to communication between diverse religious groups and the growing number of non-believers exist in their villages and small towns.

The study was carried as part of the international grant 'Religion, Ideology & Prosociality: Simulating Secularising Societies' under the direction of Professor Konrad Talmont-Kaminski. The qualitative study considered three theoretical determinants of religious transformation: respondents' retrospective narratives of religiosity at the age of 14, during their studies, and at present, the multiculturalism and religious transformation of Podlasie, and secularization processes in Poland. The main hypothesis assumed a decline in the respondents' religiosity, beginning around the age of 14. The second hypothesis assumed that the respondents observed an intensification of communication barriers between believers and non-believers during adolescence in small local communities. The third hypothesis assumes that, according to the respondents, relations between Catholics and Orthodox Christians in these communities remained unchanged during their formative years and were assessed as rather positive or neutral. The study employed a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured individual interviews (Horton et al. 2004). The ethics committee of the Faculty of Sociology of the University of Białystok has agreed to conduct the qualitative study. Some questions included retrospective inquiries about respondents' upbringing in small local communities and their period of study in Białystok. The study was conducted using purposive sampling.

The criteria for selecting respondents were in accordance with the research assumptions in the grant (Puga-Gonzalez et al. 2022; Dąbrowska-Prokopowska et al. 2023). The selection of individuals for the purposive sample was based on choosing the cohort of Generation Z, who, according to the findings of D. Voas, experienced a personal decline in religiosity during adolescence and then stabilised their level of religiosity roughly between the ages of 25 and 30 (Voas 2009; Kiszkiel et al. 2024). The sample selection was therefore based on empirically validated assumptions. In general, it can be expected that people become more religious with age, and as societies are ageing, one might anticipate a general increase in religiosity in recent decades. However, in European countries (with the exception of Israel), a marked decline in religiosity has been observed (Voas & Chaves 2016). The explanation for this decline lies in the fact that the observed relationship between age and religiosity is a statistical artefact resulting from generational replacement: older individuals represent earlier generations, and it is their generational affiliation—rather than their age per se—that accounts for their higher levels of religiosity (Kościelniak et al., 2024; Kiszkiel et al. 2024).

Twenty interviews were conducted with people from Catholic and Orthodox families aged 25–30 and currently living in Białystok. The sample was divided into two groups, reflecting the dominant religious denominations in Podlasie. The research sample con-

sisted of 20 individuals from Catholic and Orthodox families. The participants included 14 women and 6 men. Most of the respondents (thirteen) came from small towns, while the remaining seven were from rural areas.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and were conducted in a comfortable environment for the respondents. Participants were informed about anonymity, voluntary participation, and the possibility of withdrawal at any stage of the study. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed in detail in accordance with the principle of respondent anonymity. The analysis of the material was carried out using a dual coding method (Seale 2011: 386). Both deductive and inductive coding were utilized (Fife & Gossner 2024). Deductive coding involved the use of pre-established analytical categories derived from sociological and psychological theories, as well as the research objectives set out within the framework of an international grant. These categories served as a starting point for the initial organisation and interpretation of the collected research material, from the perspective of verifying the proposed research hypotheses. In this study, this stage was treated as preliminary coding, where the categories representing individual codes were drawn from the relevant literature and previous research findings (Gibbs 2011: 90). In such cases, before proceeding with the analysis of the qualitative data, a list of key themes was compiled. Coding then consisted of marking excerpts from participants' statements that reflected the applied preliminary analytical categories.

List of sample deductive codes applied in the analysis:

- Secularisation: decline in religious participation, decline in religious identification, cessation of individual prayer privatisation of faith, criticism of religious institutions, rationalisation of worldview, relativisation of religious norms, individualisation of religiosity, religious syncretism, new forms of spirituality
- Intergroup relations: intergroup trust, stereotypes, identity boundaries
- Boundaries: symbolic boundaries, permeability of boundaries, mental boundaries, strengthening / weakening of boundaries.

Subsequently, inductive coding was carried out. This phase had an exploratory nature and enabled the emergence of new content directly from empirical data, independently of prior assumptions underlying the deductive coding. This approach is often referred to as open coding, as the process begins with the data, from which observed phenomena are identified and analysed. Hypotheses are then formulated and tested against empirical cases (Konecki 2005: 269). Such an approach to the analysis of research material is adopted by proponents of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 2009). In this framework, all theoretical conclusions emerge directly from the data and are grounded in them.

All transcripts obtained from the individual qualitative interviews were therefore subjected to a coding procedure in line with the three successive stages described by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Firstly, open coding was applied—often referred to as labelling—where the researcher, while reading the interview transcripts, identified and distinguished various categories. Next, focused coding was conducted, which involved refining and detailing the identified categories by searching for interrelations among them, using the method of constant comparison. The resulting codes allowed for the organisation of data within the adopted analytical categories, but at the same time served as a basis for their modification through continuous comparison. This

process was further supported by the researcher's memo-writing (Charmaz 2009). In the final stage, selective coding was employed, which was of a theoretical nature. At this point, a core category was identified, around which other categories were grouped in accordance with the adopted theoretical framework.

The use of dual coding allowed us to verify our hypotheses and discover new phenomena related to changes in the religiosity of young inhabitants of Podlasie.

## Research Findings

### *Transformations of Religiosity among Young and Educated Residents of Podlasie: Factors Behind the Decline in Religious Involvement*

The analysis of the data collected from the qualitative research allowed us to formulate important observations concerning changes in religiosity among the young and educated residents of Podlasie. The obtained results indicate that the majority of the respondents declared significant changes in their level of religious identification over the last 10–15 years. In the case of the majority of the respondents (17 people), a decrease in religiosity was noted in comparison to the period of adolescence in small local communities. A detailed analysis of the results indicated that the ages of 14–16 were defined by the respondents as the key moment when their religiosity began to decline. It is important to note that, at the time of their departure for studies in Białystok, most of our respondents declared a very low level of religiosity, which later decreased even further. During their education in junior high school and high school, the respondents gradually began to question the religious identifications, previously treated as natural, and to reject the need to participate in collective religious rituals. Participation in collective religious practices was very often perceived by the respondents as an “empty ritual,” that was an expression of social control imposed by adults. Many emphasized that the moment they became aware of the superficiality of collective religious practices in which they had to participate, had a fundamental impact on the loss of their authentic spiritual commitment. Collective religious rituals understood in this way were only a dimension of conformist adaptation to local norms and values, rather than a space for authentic spiritual experiences.

I used to be very devout, but a turning point came when a close family member fell ill. That was when my mind started connecting the dots, and things no longer made sense. It was a breakthrough period, and by the time I was in upper secondary school, I was an atheist (A19, M, At).<sup>1</sup>

When I was a kid, my parents told me to go, so I went to the church. But I gave up the scouts on my own and looked for a place where I could find myself. I started going to Oasis, and that's where I, in turn, started practising. Now, I do not participate in religious practices at all (A2, F, Rn).

I don't know if I identify with it. I was brought up in Catholicism. It is just a tradition (A5, F, At).

I used to identify as a Christian. I was very devout and practising, but that changed. Now, I don't identify with any religion. Life showed me that religion brought me no good, and I disagree with what its teachings. So, I decided to live life my own way (A20, F, At).

<sup>1</sup> A1—Interview Code

**Gender:** M—Male, F—Female

**Level of Religiosity:** At—Atheist, Rn—Non-practising Religious, Rp—Practising Religious.

I think it's partly because I'm an adult now and no one pressures me, but this has been going on for a while. I stopped attending religious classes at the end of lower secondary school because I felt they were unnecessary, even harmful (A11, F, At).

I used to feel obliged to participate. I was probably afraid—maybe of my parents—because they insisted I attend services and Mass (A16, F, At).

In the respondents' statements, several factors can be identified that were presented as significant in the decline of their religiosity during adolescence in local communities. The first factor referred to the respondents' expression of opposition to compulsory participation in collective religious practices, such as processions and Masses. The conformist approach to participation in religious practices was primarily adopted by the parents, teachers and neighbours of the respondents. However, this was not always overt pressure, more often, it took a more hidden and subtle form, relating to the strong internalization by the respondents of the sense of "naturalness" of participation in religious rituals. Another important factor related to the decrease in the religiosity of the respondents was the growing awareness of the negative influence of the Catholic Church on politics in Poland and the controversial behaviour of the clergy. The last significant factor in the decrease in the respondents' religious involvement was the rise in their critical thinking regarding traditional religious dogmas, the perception of the lack of usefulness of religious moral principles, and the opportunity to gain insight into the content represented by different religious denominations, which is widely available on the Internet.

I consider myself a believer, but when it comes to the whole structure of the church, I am very far from it. Someone once said that it's like being a cyclist but not riding a bike. I don't agree with that. No matter how strongly you believe or what you believe in, you can be anywhere and you can talk to him anywhere. I do not practise it. I have never felt comfortable in church. As a little girl in our hometown, there were always Masses in the morning. I remember that my mother, who is very religious, sometimes too much so, always forced me to go to church. For me as a young child, church felt like a chore. I didn't know what it was about, I was bored, and I wanted it to stop. Another thing was that when my family, friends, or anyone came back from the Mass, they didn't talk about the sermon, they just talked about who was wearing what and who came with whom. At a young age I created an image for myself: 'aha, so that means the church is where everyone can come—the ones who misbehave, the ones who talk back, and those who don't sincerely believe.' I don't fully accept the church. Also the priests—this is a very broad topic. I'm talking about hiding marriages, paedophilia, the fact that they are materialistic (A3, F, Rn).

It changed quite a lot. There was a time when I went to the temple daily and I remember it fondly—it made me happy and brought peace. But then I started reading about the clergy and what was happening in the Church. Orthodox teachings themselves weren't the issue, but it was linked to what was going on in the Catholic Church (A12, F, Rn).

I was never very devout. I really disliked the preparation for confirmation and confession. Because why should I be told to go to confession every first Friday and collect stamps and the priest's signature? I should go when I feel the need, not because I'm forced to. It made no sense. I even learned to forge signatures so I didn't have to go. They think they're helping, but it makes things worse (A5, F, At).

I attended services and prayed until the third year of primary school, but my catechist really put me off. She was very unpleasant and couldn't teach properly (A10, F, At).

The obtained research results indicate the complexity of the secularization processes in the analysed small local communities. This is mainly revealed in the diverse social and

cultural factors influencing the decrease in religiosity among the respondents during their adolescence. On the one hand, there is an increase in individualism and critical thinking towards religious dogmas, on the other hand, there is a desire to rebel against participation in “empty religious rituals.” During adolescence, respondents in a homogeneous local community, often through contact with the pluralism of worldviews in schools and diverse content on the Internet, began to strive to redefine their individual identities. In this process, communication based on symbols began to play an important role. Young people in this period of rebellion gradually began to reject the significance of religious symbols and related collective religious rituals in shaping their social identities. The respondents emphasized that during adolescence, they began to notice the fact that communication based on religious symbolism in their towns was a way of perpetuating the existing social order.

The impact of modernization and secularization processes on everyday functioning in small local communities caused young residents to notice that traditional symbolic boundaries were being redefined. Paradoxically, religious symbolic boundaries have become more visible in villages and small towns in Podlasie, as they have sharpened the dividing lines between believers and the increasingly numerous group of non-believers. Symbolic boundaries, most often revealed during participation in collective religious rituals, serve both as determinants of belonging to the group of believers and as a means of emphasizing the distance from residents who do not participate in them. They constitute a specific form of communication within one’s own group and the rejection of individuals described as outsiders. Crossing these boundaries by young residents, mainly by avoiding participation in collective religious practices, is an expression of their rebellion and a significant decrease in religious identification. As a result, going beyond the boundaries of the religious group and rejecting the symbols associated with it is most often met with social exclusion and stigmatization. Essentially, it shows how deeply rooted religious beliefs and symbols are in local tradition and how they are treated as the main determinants of social order. In this context, it is important to diagnose the extent to which religion has played a pro-social role in Podlasie villages and small towns. It is also crucial to describe how, from the perspective of the respondents, the relationships between diverse religious groups and the increasingly numerous group of young atheists changed.

#### *Ritualised Religiosity and Mechanisms of Social Conformism in the Local Communities of Podlasie*

Describing their experiences of growing up in villages and small towns, the respondents indicated that religion, and especially participation in collective practices, was an important element in maintaining social integration. They noted that participation in various religious rituals was regarded in their towns as a significant aspect of the everyday life. Symbolic communication during these rituals was associated with the public use of specific words or gestures by residents; the use of such elements served as an important signal of conformist acceptance of social norms. In this context, participation in rituals such as processions, carols, or Mass was not merely an expression of individual religiosity or spirituality, but primarily an indicator of belonging to a local community. Essentially, religious symbols

used during the ceremonies, such as a cross, a wafer, or a holy picture, fulfilled their communicative role by generating the belief among the inhabitants that there was a uniform interpretation of them. The respondents' statements often indicated that an additional function of participating in collective religious rituals was not only their spiritual but, above all, their social dimension. These events integrated a small local community, where a significant part of the residents' social life centred around the church or Orthodox church.

In the village, social gatherings before and after Mass were very important. When the priest came around for carolling, the family would walk him to the next house. A week before, people would arrange who the priest would visit first. The church and religion had a major influence (A1, M, At).

Of course. In the village, everyone goes to church, and everyone knows who didn't show up. Missing one service is fine but if someone never attends, they get labelled as non-believers (A4, M, At).

It's a small town, mostly Orthodox, with many religious people." (A10, F, At).

It's a small village so people notice who attends services and who doesn't (A13, F, Rn).

The respondents indicated that in Catholic, Orthodox, and mixed families, an important element of children's socialization in families was their unconditional adaptation to existing social norms. Social control was implemented through social signalling by young people of their participation in religious practices. The presence of children at Masses, in processions, or during Christmas carols was a visible signal of the families' conformity to social expectations. Lack of participation in religious rituals often led to social stigmatization, aimed at regulating the behaviour of residents of small towns. Additionally, young people were subjected to systematic evaluation not only by their families but also by representatives of local social institutions: priests, teachers, catechists. Our respondents often emphasized that religiosity in their towns took on a ritualized and superficial form, based on the almost automatic fulfilment of imposed duties rather than on genuinely felt spiritual needs.

We had to go to church or the temple every Sunday. We had to bring money for the collection. I didn't understand it at first—my grandmother sent me, and since I'm from a mixed family, I didn't know they collected money. I left the church because I didn't know what to do (A7, F, Rn).

I lived close to the church all my life, so I went because I had to. All the big events, like Corpus Christi, happened right outside my house. It's a really small town and religion played a big role. We always had carolling and the priest would bring us a schedule for services and holidays. There was even a Mass for our street's patron saint (A17, F, Rp).

***Superficial Religiosity, Secularisation, and the Symbolic Boundaries  
between Believers and Non-Believers in the Small Communities of Podlasie***

In the respondents' narratives, religiosity was often presented as an "empty" social obligation rather than as a result of individual choice or deeper reflection. The religiosity of young people in small towns or villages was not a matter of choice, but merely a conformist adaptation to the existing social order. The reason for this situation was indicated by the respondents' limited possibilities for communication between parents and children on the subject of religious faith or morality. This led to a superficial treatment of religious practices by adolescents, in line with the expectations of adults. As a result, young people

in adolescence began to perceive religious practices almost exclusively as a form of imposed obligation, devoid of deeper moral meaning. This way of understanding religion and faith by the respondents served as a justification for their rejection of religious identification later in life. An important moment that accelerated the secularization of the young people respondents was the period of junior high school and high school. In a situation of reduced parental control, young people began to notice the diversity of religious attitudes among their peers. This was a significant moment when many respondents not only began to question their previous religious beliefs but also began to notice alternative beliefs or ideologies. Particularly interesting in the respondents' statements were the differences in the perception of people of other faiths compared to atheists during their upbringing in small social communities. While Orthodox or Catholic people were quite widely accepted, those openly declaring atheism often experienced stigmatization. In the local communities studied, these boundaries were particularly visible in the relations between Catholics and Orthodox Christians and between believers and atheists. The strength of these boundaries often led to the exclusion of atheists, who were treated as rebels that did not respect the dominant norms in local communities and threatened the existing social order.

If someone believed in God, everything was fine. Either there were no atheists, or I just didn't know about them (A7, F, Rn).

Were there people of other faiths or atheists in your town? Probably not, or no one admitted it (A3, F, Rn).

Definitely Orthodox and I think there were a few atheists. Orthodox people were treated equally but atheists were stigmatised by believers. People would say, 'How can they not go to church? How can someone live without practising? That's not normal' (A2, F, Rn).

Some respondents indicated that, during their junior high and high school years, talking about faith or atheism was treated as a taboo subject. Young people were neither able nor willing to talk about religion, despite struggling with serious doubts, mainly concerning participation in religious practices. As a result, any doubts related to religion were perceived as an almost exclusively individual matters, rather than forms of internal dialogue of acceptable elements of discussion between people with differing views. Some respondents also noted that any form of rebellion by young people in small local communities, aimed at openly declaring atheistic attitudes, very often encountered a lack of acceptance and negative reactions. Consequently, rebellion against religion by our respondents was almost exclusively limited to individual reflections and the search for alternative beliefs or ideologies during their adolescence.

There were Orthodox and Catholics. There were far fewer Orthodox. If there were non-believers, I didn't even know. Actually, no. My close family, my cousins, were non-believers but I found out much later. Everyone attended religion classes. That was kind of the marker because back then people didn't talk about faith. Even if a child had doubts, they didn't talk about it (A16, F, At).

In middle school, yes—I met people who rebelled and even unenrolled from religion classes because they didn't want to attend. Teachers of other subjects didn't interfere, but for example, the homeroom teacher, priest, or catechist treated those students differently. I unenrolled from religion classes in middle school. The principal even called my mom asking why I didn't want to attend and kept pressing; there was definitely some different treatment (A13, F, Rn).

I come from a small town, and as you can imagine, everyone knows each other. If you didn't show up in church on Sunday, people would always ask, 'Why isn't he there?' or 'Where is he?' (A18, M, Rp).

Some of the respondents emphasized that in their schools, there was quite a general acceptance of people of other religions and atheists. Although diversity of beliefs was tolerated, this topic was not raised in formal discussions or analysed more broadly among young people or teachers. In practice, acceptance of diversity was based mainly on the absence of negative sanctions against people with different religious views, as well as the lack of active engagement in the topic of religion or its absence in everyday conversations. This type of approach meant that issues related to faith and atheism were largely ignored and not openly discussed in the school environment. Expressing atheistic views was tolerated, but rather treated as a purely private matter, not requiring confrontation with accepted social norms. As a result, although diversity was accepted, the lack of open dialogue between students and teachers meant that it was not an important element of social life in the school. Superficial communication between believers and atheists played an ambivalent role, contributing only to the blurring, but not the transformation, of existing social boundaries. The tacit acceptance of non-believers alleviated potential tensions and the need to transform the existing order, albeit at the cost of deeper integration between the diverse groups. As a result, clearly outlined boundaries between believers and non-believers were still present in small towns in Podlasie, but they often took a more subtle form acceptable in a more modernized society. According to the research results, the phenomenon of superficial religiosity, focused on participation in collective religious rituals, was one of the key factors leading to secularization. As our respondents matured, they began to question the sense of participating in obligatory religious practices and to reflect on their own identity and needs. In some cases, this led to a complete rejection of religion, in others to its significant limitation to religious identification only.

Yes, most of my class was Orthodox, there was a handful of Catholics, and about five people didn't attend religion classes because they were non-believers.

Were they treated differently by you, your friends, or teachers?

No, I think it was considered normal. They weren't discriminated against (A10, F, At).

Were there people of different faiths or atheists?

Back then no one paid attention to that. I don't remember anyone openly stating it.

Were there such people in middle school?

It's hard to say, though I suspected some people. I had a friend who showed such views (A8, M, Rnp).

I had a non-believing friend who took ethics classes and had to pass some assignments but he wasn't treated worse (A6, M, At).

Podlasie represents a specific area for analysing the power of secularization processes. The multicultural character of the borderland shows that the boundaries between religious groups are deeply rooted in local tradition (Babiński 1994: 25). Despite the existence of religious differences, the inhabitants of Podlasie were able to form integrated local communities in the past, even though the boundaries of these communities were often transformed under the influence of historical events (Wojakowski 2022: 24). The current acceleration of secularization processes in Poland plays an important role in intensifying

the clash between religious values and modern worldviews, particularly visible in small local communities. In fact, among the inhabitants of rural areas and small towns, we can increasingly observe a departure from religious practices, mainly among the youngest generations. As a result, the decline in religiosity in these communities leads to a weakening of social ties, often based on shared religious rituals. In addition, the impact of macro-structural processes of secularization on local communities in Poland is becoming a reason for the increasingly frequent tensions between those who are deeply religious and those who are leaving the faith. According to our respondents, their secularization was also associated with technological advances and greater access to diverse sources of information that enabled them to critically analyse traditional religious doctrines (Wilkins-Laflamme & Thiessen 2020). Over time, these new sources of knowledge became alternative symbols to religious ones for the respondents, which had a fundamental impact on their interpretation of social reality. Essentially, all of the above factors influenced the process of gradual transformation of the existing boundaries of social communication between residents in small local communities. Indeed, the increasing polarization of worldviews between generations often led to the creation of new, more subtle symbolic boundaries.

## Discussion

Research by the Pew Research Center (2018) points to a large intergenerational gap in the religiosity of Poles, accompanied by rapid secularization processes. Secularization, the individualization of faith (Mazurek 2019: 35) and the rise of atheistic attitudes (Borowik 2019) are leading to the formation of new cultural boundaries. At the same time, according to the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, humans create their social reality and communicate with others through symbols (Hałas 2003: 14–15). This symbolic exchange and communication is proving to be increasingly difficult under the conditions of fast-paced social changes experienced by the respondents communities in Podlasie. Younger generations often perceive religious symbols and behaviour as meaningless, incomprehensible and unnecessary, seen even as a tool of oppression. The implication is that the meaning attributed to religious symbols and practices varies from generation to generation, undermining their communicative role.

The results of the study described above reveal complex patterns in the religiosity of young adults from Podlasie, people who grew up in small towns and now live in Białystok. At the age of 14–16, they began to question their religious identifications and their religious commitment began to decline. At the same time, they faced a lot of social and family pressure to continue participating in religious rituals. This caused them to perceive their participation in religious practices as conformist, “empty” motivated by the expectations of others more than by their personal faith needs. Such social pressure may be one of the reasons for intensifying secularization processes, as young people begin to perceive and define religion primarily in social rather than spiritual terms.

The change in religious attitudes among the respondents has been heavily influenced by the Internet and modern technology, opening up access to information for young people (Łuszczek 2022: 226). Exposure to new content and the juxtaposition of this content

with previous information provided within their own communities has made it possible to compare and critically analyse, and even question, previous religious beliefs and practices. It has also become possible to learn about alternative ways of thinking and valuing. These information and worldviews accelerated the processes of young people moving away from religion, while becoming new reference points for religious beliefs and changing interpretations of social reality. This view is in line with broader research on the impact of technology on young people's religiosity (McClure 2020), with the effect becoming particularly apparent in communities that have historically been more closed to differing viewpoints.

Our research also shows that religious practices, especially those involving the community and not just performed individually, can exist primarily as activities that bind these communities together and oblige individuals to conform. Those respondents described their participation in rituals as "empty," perceiving these rituals as contributing nothing to their lives and not driven by their religious needs. In addition, the subjects felt urged to behave religiously against their actual needs, and when they succumbed to persuasion, they felt they did so to conform to social expectations rather than to their own faith needs.

Institutions, primarily religious institutions such as churches, but also secular institutions such as schools, played a large role in maintaining the existing mechanisms of social control in the localities studied (Klimski 2021: 47). The influence of these institutions consisted of exerting overt or subtle social pressure, building and maintaining the role of authority figures, which included both priests, catechists and teachers. Surveillance was exercised not only by religious institutions, everyday social interactions were also affected; absence from church could lead to questions and, in the long run, even stigmatization.

The research also revealed particularly interesting processes of different attitudes toward religious diversity and atheism in smaller localities in Podlasie. Those respondents stress that social relations between Orthodox and Catholic people living in the same locality are positive. However, religious tolerance and mutual acceptance does not translate to people who identify themselves as non-believers. Atheists faced social stigma, a sense of isolation and various, usually subtle forms of exclusion. In the narratives of those interviewed, it can be seen that atheism was treated in their hometowns as a form of social rebellion, rather than a fixed and legitimate worldview. Young people in these communities thus felt compelled to hide their views, which created an atmosphere of shameful secrecy and led to tabooing topics that could be seen as sensitive or inflammatory. Open discussion of worldview and religious differences was impossible. These social dynamics indicate that not only is the reinforcement of religious behaviour a way to preserve religious homogeneity in small communities, this goal is achieved through various forms of social exclusion, or even the threat of such exclusion.

As can be observed, new communication barriers related to religious beliefs have emerged in the localities studied. In the past, there were tensions between adherents of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, based on historical memory, among other things (Moroz 2016), and minority groups were also often stigmatized (Czykwin 2000), but research shows that younger generations no longer feel the same negative effects of belonging to national or religious minorities as their parents did. On the other hand, another religious

minority group is emerging—atheists—whose presence introduces new conflicts and taboos into small communities, as topics related to religious issues have become such. Young people in the study described a “forced silence” around religious affiliation, as well as other faith-related issues, and they also pointed to a lack of dialogue and openness within the family or older generations. This communication vacuum exacerbates social and intergenerational divisions, and young people lack a sense of social support in their immediate communities.

In addition, the changing meanings attributed to religious practices also affect shifts in social boundaries. The values and principles that define symbolic boundaries in society contrast social groups and influence identity construction (Lamont & Molnár 2002). New attitudes of rejection of religiosity by younger generations in Podlasie contribute to the crossing of these boundaries, as religious symbols and practices served to maintain social order and the status quo in the communities studied. In addition, and this is particularly important in the multi-religious communities in Podlasie, adherence to religious principles and clear self-definition as a religious person (Catholic or Orthodox) also allowed the boundaries between these faiths to be drawn. The lack of such self-determination at the individual level can lead to numerous social sanctions, exclusion and integration problems, while at the social level it can lead to the marginalization of certain groups and conflicts, but can also be a catalyst for social change.

On the other hand, the increasing number of atheist attitudes among young people may lead to the emergence of new groups, new identities whose status in these small communities is not yet defined, it may even be perceived as a threat to existing groups among which interpersonal communication is already based on established rules. The atheist identity can be a challenge to these traditional forms of communication, as the lack of symbols defined and accepted by all groups prevents effective symbolic communication (Ledgerwood et al. 2007; Ramli 2024).

The research material obtained in our qualitative study fills an important gap in the existing analyses within the sociology of religion in Poland. This is particularly significant in the context of multicultural, complex, and dynamically transforming eastern borderland regions such as Podlasie. It is worth emphasising that the main current of Western, international research on secularisation has focused primarily on cohort-based quantitative analyses, which have made it possible to capture the broad scale of the phenomenon and to replicate studies in other countries, including those of Central and Eastern Europe. We assume that such quantitative studies provide an important point of departure for analysing the transformations of religiosity among young Poles living in specific local communities, by illustrating the influence of global and macrostructural contexts shaping the processes of secularisation. However, this approach is not sufficient to describe the dynamic transformations of religiosity that occur in the context of individual experiences of residents of small communities, which are influenced by complex local social and cultural factors.

Our research allows us to examine the complex processes of secularisation through the lens of the dynamics of social communication among the diverse inhabitants of small local communities in Podlasie. From this perspective, and based on the individual narratives of young residents, we analyse how their understanding of religiosity is being redefined—in the context of the transition from folk religiosity to lived religion. This shift

marks a movement away from engagement in traditional collective rituals towards a more reflective and individual spiritual experience, which—paradoxically—often leads to the rejection of religiosity perceived mainly as “empty” collective ritualism.

Adopting a more complex research and theoretical perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how contemporary social transformations affect not only individual religious experiences, but also intergenerational relations and the redefinition of symbolic boundaries between believing residents and young non-believers in small local communities. These phenomena result from the dynamic interplay between processes of secularisation and local forms of religiosity, which continue to serve as the main integrating factor within small communities.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of young people’s narratives indicated a noticeable decline in religiosity among the young generation, which can be understood primarily in the context of their functioning in an increasingly pluralistic social reality and a weakening of intergenerational religious transmission (Flatt 2023), rather than being solely attributed to modernisation processes. In addition, a far-reaching transformation of the symbolic barriers existing in the Polish-Belarusian borderland in Podlasie can be seen. Redefinitions of symbolic boundaries between believers and non-believers have created new communication challenges in traditionally religious communities.

The results of our research indicate a marked shift in the perception of religion among young respondents in the Podlasie region—from the traditional, inherited ‘religion of fate,’ through a more individualised ‘religion of choice,’ to increasingly common expressions of atheistic attitudes. This transformation reflects broader social changes and plays a key role in how individuals—particularly the younger generation—construct and negotiate their identities within the region. The decision to redefine one’s relationship with religion, rather than merely inheriting it passively, contributes to the reconfiguration of its meaning and function in the everyday lives of respondents. At the same time, symbolic religious and cultural boundaries in small local communities continue to play a significant pro-social role in maintaining social order, even in the face of secularisation and modernisation processes (Krstić 2022: 64). As a result, while religious differences between Orthodox and Catholic individuals were generally accepted, atheists were often subject to exclusion or social isolation.

Besides, research points to dynamic and new interactions between common modernisation and local traditions stemming from religiosity and cultural customs. It can be expected that as secularization proceeds in Poland, these changes will further redefine symbolic communication processes in small towns in Podlasie, influencing the formation of new individual and collective identities.

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