

WITOLD CHMIELEWSKI: *ZWALCZANIE WYCHOWANIA RELIGIJNEGO W SZKOŁACH W LATACH 1944–1950* [COMBATING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS BETWEEN 1944–1950], KRAKÓW 2017, p. 283

After the five-year Nazi occupation, the end of World War II meant for Poles not only freedom, but also the necessity to rebuilt the destroyed country. The reconstruction had a material and mental dimension, taking account of the provisions established during the Teheran Conference which set up a zone of political influence between representatives of Western European countries and the authorities of the USSR. By initiating education, the authorities set a new course for upbringing, as they wanted to create a citizen holding scientific beliefs, who was faithful to socialist ideals.

The work created by Witold Chmielewski consists of five chapters, the annex, bibliography, introduction and the conclusion. The author presented a slow liquidation of religious education in Polish schools between 1944–1950. In subsequent chapters, he presented the actions undertaken by the authorities, focusing on any kind of manifestations of implementing the scientific belief by diminishing, and finally eliminating religious education, for which there was no place in the new political reality in Poland. At the same time, he presented the reaction of society and officials of the Catholic Church to the manifestations of displacing the faith from social life.

The Polish Committee of National Liberation (Pol. Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego PKWN), representing new authorities on liberated territories, composed mostly of members of the Polish Worker's Party PPR, initially did not publicly disclose its intentions towards religion, however, as the author demonstrated, the idea of secularization of the Polish school was present in the plans of the ministry responsible for education and initially discreetly, but consistently was being implemented. Although the declarations of people in power presented during meetings on changes in the curriculum – in line with the new ideological direction – regarding religious education in schools emphasized *the integrity of the current state of teaching this subject in public schools*¹, they were, however, little cosmetic changes (just like establishing the John Paul

¹ W. Chmielewski, *Zwalczanie wychowania religijnego w szkołach w latach 1944–1950* [Combating religious education in schools between 1944–1950], Kraków 2017, p. 23–24.

II Catholic University of Lublin), the purpose of which was to hide real intentions. One of the first steps taken by the Polish Committee of National Liberation was to limit in schools the activities of non-school organizations related to the Catholic Church. Stanisław Skrzyszewski, who was responsible for the ministry, decided that introducing people related to the Polish Workers' Party to the educational institutions with an appropriate staff policy in the teaching environment at the same time, would bring the expected educational results. The smooth declarations of new authorities did not cloud the church leaders, as they expected further attempts to secularize the country in the near future, which was confirmed in the discussions of the participants of the Educational Congress in Łódź in 1945. Only the board of education in Lublin and opposition-minded teachers strongly opted for religion in schools.

W. Chmielewski rightly emphasized the role of three representatives of power – Stanisław Skrzyszewski, Żanna Kormanowa and Julia Brystygierowa – in destroying and eliminating religion from the Polish school. Their function in the ideological sphere, and the specific actions put these people among those who combated the most passionately any and all manifestations of religious education in People's Poland, attributing a bad and anti-democratic impact on youth to religion.

In the second chapter, the author presented the issue of religion in times of the transitional government, when the ministry responsible for education under the presidency of Czesław Wycech, identified by the members of the Polish Workers' Party as a member of the "London group", i.e. pursuing the predecessor's education policy without enthusiasm, even though with regard to the letter of Archbishop Adam Sapieha on prohibiting the Eucharistic Crusade and the Sodality of Our Lady in educational institutions, he upheld the negative position of his predecessors. Nevertheless, Żanna Kormanowa *found that the actions taken by Czesław Wycech as the minister of education are contrary to the communist ideology, and the clericalisation of schools which in her opinion is growing is scandalous*².

The next intervention of the authorities in matters regarding religious education concerned the revision of religion textbooks. The Polish Teachers' Union also joined the battle and was actively involved in the fight. During the Nationwide Conventions of Teachers of the Polish Socialist Party PPS, Teofil Wojeński demanded the liquidation of all catholic schools. The issue of adopting a resolution *W sprawie roli kleru (On the role of the clergy)* was a particular oddity. The clergy was accused in this document of a depravation role in the times of sanitation and the partitions of Poland³. The next step to limit religious education was to issue a circular letter, which completely banned activities of all organizations in schools, except for scouting and the Polish Red Cross. The number of hours of this subject in vocational schools was reduced as well.

² Ibid., p. 51.

³ Ibid., p. 57.

Further initiatives taken to limit religious education were discussed by the author in the third chapter. After the elections to the Sejm in 1947, Stanisław Skrzeszewski – an opponent of religious education and church practices of young people – took up a position of the Minister of Education again. The result of the cooperation between the ministry, the Secret Political Police (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa UB), and the Educational Department of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party was the fact that the officers of the Secret Political Police infiltrated Catholic organizations and promoted the completely secular Workers Association of the Friends of Children (Pol. Robotnicze Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci), while making agitators aware that *the primary goal is to educate the young generation in a secular and socialist spirit*⁴. At the same time, it was ordered to review the teaching staff and remove “uncertain elements”, and to pay attention to teacher training centers.

The church's response to the ongoing secularization process was the circular letter written by Juliusz Bieniek, Bishop of Katowice, in which he prohibited parish priests and catechists from cooperating with political organizations, and recommended taking care in raising qualifications of methodical catechists. For this purpose, permanent or holiday forms of professional training of catechists were organized in many dioceses. At the same time, an application was sent to the Committee of Theological Studies concerning introducing such subjects as catechetics, pedagogy and psychology to the curriculum of the theological seminaries. Aware of the fact that young people got their basic religious knowledge at home, catechetical courses for parents were organized in Silesia.

Under this policy, the next goal of the educational authorities was to limit the days off from practicing religious cult and to introduce secular visits to religion lessons, which was in contrast to the concordat concluded with the Holy See, the March Constitution and the circular letter issued by Kazimierz Bartel. As W. Chmielewski wrote: *1947 was a preparatory period for undertaking a decisive fight against religion in schools*⁵.

The next chapter is dedicated to methods the authorities applied while controlling the religious education of children. Under the guise of protecting the supreme principles of upbringing to be found in the draft regulation written by Ż. Kormanowa, regarding curricula and religion textbooks, it was suggested to reduce the number of hours of religion, to introduce supervision and approval of the Minister of Education as far as textbooks and their content are concerned, and to reduce the participation of students in church services only to Sundays and holidays. The content of prayers was to be agreed upon with the school authorities before and after classes. Catholic associations, boarding schools run by religious orders, and activities conducted by Caritas fell victim to repressions, as financial resources allocated to their activities were limited and thus, very modest.

⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

Władysław Gomułka claimed that the Vatican City was an instrument of American imperialism, but on the other hand he believed that in the current political situation not religion, but the politicized representatives of clergy should be under fire⁶. The ministry responsible for education tried to formulate a reliable view in this matter through visits. Supervisory bodies in school were obliged to visit not only lessons, but also camps or day-camps, according to the predetermined guidelines. Priests and catechists, as well as Catholic periodicals came under special observation of the authorities.

The last chapter of the publication concerns the programmed limitation and elimination of religious education of children and young people. The author focused his attention on the protests of parents in connection with the educational policy of the authorities regarding the liquidation of religious education (prohibition of receiving holy communion collectively by the pupils three times a year). Some MPs in the Sejm also expressed their indignation about the absence of religion at schools for adults, general reduction of its hours, reduced subsidies for educational and care centers, and the general principles of religious education. The Catholic Church also took a firm stand to defend the upbringing of young people in a religious spirit. The progressing propaganda of the scientific view of the world, which excluded God from the mental sphere, resulted in the appeal of the Polish bishops, who stated that *the Church cannot agree to educate Catholic young people without God, by ignoring his teaching, and rejecting his commandments*⁷. By addressing young people through the pastoral letter, the bishops raised awareness that apart from acquiring knowledge, one should take care of spiritual development and react in a calm way to press publications promoting the so-called scientific beliefs. Despite the increasing intrusive propaganda of socialist morality, after October 1948 – especially in Lower Silesia – there were acts initiated by students which consisted in defending the crosses being removed from the walls in classes at the request of the authorities, and protests of their parents which were supported by Rev. Bolesław Kominek. They demanded restoring a proper number of hours of religion. The bishops indicated that in the existing reality, the responsibility to provide proper spiritual development of the young generation was borne by the family. Establishing the Polish United Worker's Party (Pol. Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotników PZPR) strengthened the combat against all forms of religious education. The Decree of the Council of Ministers on the freedom of conscience and religion contained statements which made surveillance of catechists possible. Stefan Wyszyński, Primate of Poland, when addressing the students who did not have religious classes, asked them not to *lose the treasure of the holy faith*⁸.

⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

⁷ Ibid., p. 164.

⁸ Ibid., p. 221.

It seems that the struggle of the authorities with the Catholic Church to educate young people in the spirit of their religion, despite the repressive measures, was lost as confirmed by a high percentage of young believers. The attitude of Polish society and attachment to the faith of the ancestors were stronger than the materialistic beliefs. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the book includes annexes, which contain both documents from the ministry responsible for education and those regarding religious officials, as well as a detailed list of prefects who were under surveillance. The position is cognitive with regard to its source and factual data.

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