

KATARZYNA CZORNIK

**INCLUSIVE TOLERANCE AS POLES' ATTITUDE TOWARDS
RELIGIOUS MINORITIES**

Katarzyna Czornik

University of Silesia in Katowice, Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Social Science,
Katowice, Poland.

Email: katarzyna.czornik@us.edu.pl

Abstract: This paper demonstrates that Poles' attitudes towards religious minorities are characterised by a high degree of religious tolerance, primarily active tolerance, in which inclusion constitutes an integral component. Both historical experience (the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth as a “state without stakes”), the fact that Polish society has for centuries remained largely homogeneous in terms of religious affiliation (the dominance of the Catholic Church), as well as extensive and effectively enforced legal and institutional guarantees for religious minorities, have contributed to the embedding of inclusive tolerance within the Polish national identity. A short-term challenge, but not a threat, to the prevailing inclusive tolerance in Poland was posed by the destabilisation of Poland's immediate and broader international environment, including the intensification of jihadism, the migration and refugee crisis, the Belarusian regime's orchestration of Muslim migration at the Polish–Belarusian border, as well as the growing support for far-right political forces. The Muslim minority was perceived at that time as the greatest threat. The temporary dominance of passive tolerance, occasional xenophobia and Islamophobia constituted part of a political spectacle aimed at increasing the socio-political popularity of far-right forces in Poland.

Key words: Poland, religious tolerance, inclusive tolerance, religious minorities, Muslims, Islam.

1. Introduction

Poland can undoubtedly be described as a state that is tolerant towards religious minorities. This situation results from at least several factors. Firstly, the attitudes of religious tolerance among Poles have deep historical roots and have become a permanent element of Poland's strategic culture. Secondly, contemporary Poland is a religiously homogeneous state. The overwhelming majority of Poles (nearly 89% of adults) declare affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, there are few grounds for significant religious conflicts. Thirdly, as a democratic state, Poland has institutionally and legally regulated the status of religious minorities and granted them extensive rights and freedoms in the religious sphere. This is reflected, for example, in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997, the Act of 17 May 1989 on Guarantees of Freedom of Conscience and Religion, and the instruments of international public law to which Poland is a party. The guarantees of fundamental rights and freedoms afforded to religious minorities have been regulated in a clear and unambiguous manner. The Polish state fulfils its obligations in this regard, while religious minorities effectively exercise the rights and privileges granted to them.

The aforementioned factors have, for centuries, provided a solid foundation for inclusive (active) religious tolerance that is deeply embedded in the historically shaped Polishness and the national identity of the Polish people. The inclusive religious tolerance characteristic of Polish attitudes towards religious minorities extends well beyond passive (negative) tolerance. Nevertheless, the increasing destabilisation of both the immediate and broader international environment, emerging trends and the evolution and intensification of threats to national and international security (including the rise of jihadism, the migration and refugee crisis, the threat posed by the Muslim migration flows orchestrated by the Belarusian regime along the Polish–Belarusian border and the war in Gaza, which has contributed to perceptions of Israel as a criminal state), as well as the growing support across Europe for right-wing political forces of an extremist character, have also contributed to a concerning shift in attitudes towards religious minorities in Poland, particularly over the last decade. The balance is gradually moving from the prevailing inclusive religious tolerance towards passive acceptance of other faiths and, in extreme cases, even towards openly hostile and intolerant attitudes.

2. Methodological Assumptions

The research objective of this paper is therefore to diagnose the causes and identify the potential consequences of a complex process, namely the evolution of Poles' attitudes towards selected religious minorities in Poland over the past decade of the twenty-first century (with particular emphasis on Muslim and Jewish minorities). The research problem is formulated in the following question: does the inclusive tolerance embedded in Polish national identity, which has for decades dominated and characterised Poles' attitudes towards religious minorities, constitute a sufficient condition to prevent the process of radicalisation of attitudes and the gradual shift from active acceptance towards increasing social distance, the emerging elements of non-acceptance and even occasional narratives of hostility and xenophobic attitudes towards religious minorities in Poland?

The adopted research assumption is that Poland successfully combines historical traditions of openness with contemporary challenges related to inclusive religious tolerance, while emerging attitudes of passive tolerance or incidental hostility and xenophobia are sporadic in nature and constitute an element of political spectacle aimed at gaining visibility or increasing socio-political popularity. However, changes and challenges occurring in the socio-political environment, both domestically and internationally, are not conducive to the consolidation of inclusive religious tolerance among Poles. The threat posed by radical terrorist organisations (jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as lone-wolf actors in Western Europe) has provided a sufficient basis for the development of attitudes of distrust towards Muslims among Poles. In turn, difficult historical experiences in bilateral relations, unresolved political issues, as well as the policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu towards the Gaza Strip, Lebanon and the Islamic Republic of Iran in recent years (acting from the position of an aggressor state), have significantly contributed to the strengthening of antisemitic attitudes. At the political level, these developments have provided a platform for the growing popularity of extremist and nationalist parties such as Confederation and the Confederation of the Polish Crown, which openly express views unfavourable to Jewish (and also Muslim) minorities. Consequently, Poles who support these political groups generally remain tolerant towards Christian religious minorities, however, their attitudes become colder or more negative towards religious groups originating from entirely different cultural circles, such as Muslims and Jews.

In order to address the research problem, the paper employs the

following research methods: 1) the historical method, used to examine the origins and sources of religious tolerance in Poland over the centuries, as well as Poles' attitudes towards national minorities over the course of Polish history; 2) the institutional-legal method, applied to identify the principal legal acts and state institutions that guarantee the legal protection of religious minorities in Poland; and 3) the causal analysis, used to diagnose the main factors underlying changes in Poles' attitudes towards religious minorities in Poland over the last decade and to identify the consequences of these changes in both the political and social spheres.

It should be emphasised that the research problem addressed in this paper is innovative in nature. There are, in fact, no studies examining the causes and consequences of the evolution of Poles' religious attitudes, particularly understood in terms of the distinction between passive and active religious tolerance, the essence of which is inclusion. The available literature consists primarily of the widely available historical studies describing the traditions of religious tolerance (Barkey and Laurence, 2026), as well as reports presenting statistical data on the religious sphere in Poland. However, there is a lack of a comprehensive study offering a thorough analysis, from a political science perspective, of the broadly understood causes and consequences of the evolution of Poles' attitudes towards religious tolerance. This study fills the identified research gap.

3. Historical Traditions of Religious Tolerance in Poland

The traditions of religious tolerance in Poland are exceptionally strong and can be traced back to the medieval period. Polish monarchs were renowned for pursuing the policy of religious tolerance (O'Brian 2016, 145-155). The first legal regulations concerning the status of Jews in Poland, as well as acceptance and support for their settlement on Polish lands, were introduced as early as August 1264. The relevant document, which was issued by Duke Bolesław the Pious, is known as the Statute of Kalisz or the Kalisz Privilege. It granted Jews personal freedom and security, including freedom of religion, freedom of movement, the right to engage in trade and choose their occupations, and observe Jewish religious holidays without restriction. The statute also guaranteed the establishment of Jewish courts, as well as special courts for cases involving both Jews and Christians. Furthermore, it prohibited the dissemination of false rumours about Jews. The provisions of the Statute of Kalisz were subsequently reaffirmed by successive Polish rulers. King Casimir the Great confirmed its provisions on three occasions – in 1334, 1364 and 1367 – followed by King Casimir IV Jagiellon in 1453 and King Sigismund I the Old in 1539 (Figurski 2024, 141–162). These confirmations not only granted new rights to Jewish

communities but also reaffirmed those that were already in force.

Religious tolerance in medieval Poland, which was exceptional by European standards, applied not only to Jews but also to followers of other faiths. In 1341, King Casimir the Great granted privileges to adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy, including personal freedom and the right to practise their religion freely. In 1356, he extended the same privileges to the Armenian Monophysite community (Zamoyski 1988, 148-157).

Poland was the first multi-confessional state in medieval Europe. Religious tolerance in Poland encompassed not only Orthodox Christians, Armenians and Jews, but also Karaites and Muslims. The latter were primarily Tatars, who inhabited villages in Lithuania in considerable numbers. During this period, the only religious groups that were not tolerated in Poland were heretical movements that had emerged within Catholicism, most notably the Hussites (Warmińska 2017, 111-122).

A particularly significant moment in the consolidation of Polish traditions of religious tolerance occurred in the sixteenth century. While the European continent was dominated by religious conflicts, Poland was regarded as a bastion of religious tolerance and earned the reputation of a "state without stakes" (Tazbir 1973). Unlike the countries of Western Europe, where the consequences of the Reformation led to the outbreak of bloody religious wars, including civil wars, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth maintained peace and freedom of religion. This exceptional situation has been attributed primarily to the Warsaw Confederation of 1573.

The Warsaw Confederation was a pioneering and exceptionally advanced document guaranteeing religious tolerance, not only on a European scale but also in a global context. The principle of religious tolerance it established was not confined to the nobility but extended to the peasantry as well. Significantly, the Act of the Warsaw Confederation did not explicitly name any denomination or religion, thereby introducing the principle of freedom of conscience. It served as a model invoked by Protestant minorities in Catholic states and by Catholic minorities in Protestant countries. The text of the Warsaw Confederation was translated into Ruthenian, French and German. Owing to this document, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth emerged as a safe haven for religious dissenters facing persecution on religious grounds during the sixteenth century (Wyrozumski 2016, 9-19).

Religious tolerance, guaranteed by law and implemented in practice, constituted one of the fundamental features of the political system of the Commonwealth and served as a unifying factor within the increasingly consolidated Polish-Lithuanian union. In sixteenth-century Poland, the nobility enjoyed freedom of religion, which stood in marked contrast to the persecution of Protestants and Catholics in other parts of Europe. For

centuries, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth exemplified the peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures and faiths. It was renowned as a state open to Jews and as a place of refuge for religious dissenters, including Arians and Calvinists, as well as for religious nonconformists from other countries. Across the territories of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Islam and Judaism coexisted peacefully for a long period (Davies 1981, 321–372).

Taking into account the political and constitutional aspects of the First Polish Republic, Krzysztof Brzechczyn argued that religious tolerance constituted one of the elements of noble rights and liberties that formed the foundation of the Polish political system. Its implementation was determined by both pragmatic and theological considerations. The middle nobility, forming an executionist movement in the mid-sixteenth century, sought – against the interests of the magnates – to carry out state reforms. It did not wish to become further divided along religious lines. For this reason, members of the nobility, regardless of denomination, participated in *sejmiks* held in Catholic churches, were elected to the Sejm, and could hold offices as well as sit in judicial tribunals. For example, at the Sejm that in 1569 enacted the Union of Lublin, there were 58 Protestant senators, 2 Orthodox senators and 55 Catholic senators (including 15 bishops) (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006).

Emphasising the significance of the Warsaw Confederation in shaping the strong tradition of religious tolerance in Poland, it should be noted that the protection afforded to newcomers from other countries constituted not only a moral commendation of the Polish–Lithuanian state but also an important factor in its economic strength. In the sixteenth century, heretics from Italy, the Bohemian Brethren (Hussites), Catholics expelled from Ireland, Scottish Jesuits and Turkish and Tatar Muslims arrived in the lands of the Commonwealth. In return for the protection granted to them, they made a significant contribution to the growth of the Polish state's power in Europe. For example, the Irish developed trade, while Tatars and Turks became soldiers in the Polish army (Sarnecki and Niccolle and Embleton 2008). In turn, Germans fleeing the war-torn Holy Roman Empire established new towns and villages in the territory of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In conclusion, it should therefore be stated that the document of the Warsaw Confederation, sealed by 208 signatories, established the framework of religious life in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth for more than two centuries and exerted a significant influence on its political affairs until the Commonwealth's collapse in 1795, thereby contributing to the shaping of its so-called "Golden Age".

Nevertheless, despite broad religious tolerance, in the seventeenth century, under the influence of religious wars and the Counter-Refor-

mation, religious freedoms began to decline. Signs of growing hostility towards religious dissenters emerged. The second half of the seventeenth century was a period of wars fought by the Commonwealth against Protestant Sweden, Orthodox Russia and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. It was also a time of Cossack uprisings, partly resulting from the policy towards adherents of the Orthodox faith. In the context of repeated invasions, Polish religious dissenters were accused of maintaining contacts with invaders of the same faith, and these accusations were often grounded in fact. This resulted in increasing restrictions on the rights of non-Catholics and legislative changes favouring adherents of Catholicism. The Sejm constitutions of 1668 and 1673 introduced penalties for apostasy and stipulated that ennoblement could be granted only to Catholics. The Silent Sejm convened by King Augustus II the Strong in 1717 adopted provisions restricting non-Catholics' access to public offices. These events were soon exploited by neighbouring powers (Cieszyńska 2009, 269-282). The Treaty of Potsdam of 1720, concluded by Russia and Prussia, obliged them to defend the rights of religious dissenters in Polish lands. In the 1760s, under the pretext of defending the rights of dissidents, Russian forces entered the territory of the First Polish Republic, hindering attempts to reform the political system. They compelled the Sejm to adopt new cardinal laws confirming the *liberum veto*, free election and equal rights for religious dissenters. The Constitution of 3 May 1791 established Roman Catholicism as the dominant religion while restoring religious freedoms to other denominations. Unfortunately, the weakening of the Polish state, combined with the aggressive policies of Russia, Prussia and Austria, led to Poland's disappearance from the map of the world for 123 years (Zamoyski, 2015, 58-77).

A new and highly significant chapter in the development of religious tolerance in Poland began only with the regaining of independence in 1918. Legal guarantees for religious minorities in the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939) were based on the March Constitution adopted in 1921, international treaties and specific regulations governing relations between the state and the church. The main principles included freedom of conscience, equality of religious denominations and the right to establish their own religious institutions. Both public and private practice of religion was permitted, and religious associations were guaranteed autonomy. In accordance with the provisions of the Minor Treaty of Versailles of 1919, Poland undertook to ensure full protection of life and freedom for all inhabitants, regardless of religious affiliation. Religious minorities, particularly Jews and Muslims, were granted the right to establish their own educational and social institutions. It may therefore be concluded that the Second Polish Republic created innovative and modern legal frameworks for religious pluralism, based on the principle of equal treatment of Polish

citizens (Davies 1982, 207-225).

After the Second World War, a markedly more challenging period began for the protection of religious freedoms in Poland. In a state that had fallen within the Soviet sphere of influence and emerged as a member of the Eastern Bloc, opportunities for the free exercise of religion were significantly limited, including among the predominantly Catholic population. The legal guarantees afforded to religious minorities in the Polish People's Republic (PRL) evolved from the repressive policies of the immediate post-war period to their formal recognition only in the late 1980s. It should be emphasised, however, that throughout the existence of the PRL, freedom of religion was formally guaranteed, yet in practice religious minorities, much like the Catholic Church, were regarded as ideological adversaries and remained subject to state control. The legal status of churches during the PRL era remained largely unregulated (Curtis 1994, 89-100).

A fundamental change occurred only following the political and systemic transformations of 1989. As a democratic, open and tolerant state, the Third Republic of Poland established and has continued to pursue a policy of broad tolerance towards religious minorities (Atlas, 2025).

4. Institutional and Legal Aspects of the Protection of Religious Minorities in Poland

In formal legal terms, the concept of a religious minority in Poland refers to religious groups that differ from the dominant majority in the state (adherents of Catholicism) in terms of religion, traditions or customs. It encompasses any religious community that does not constitute the majority within the country's religious structure and that possesses the right to cultivate its distinct identity (Rynkowski 2019, 461-482).

From the perspective of Polish law, religious minorities are therefore communities united by a common faith that constitute a smaller segment of the population in relation to society as a whole. A defining characteristic of religious minorities is their commitment to preserving their religious distinctiveness and the identity associated with it. Consequently, religious minorities are afforded special legal protection under the Polish legal system (Jabłońska 2024, 95–112).

Significantly, the notion of a religious minority encompasses both communities that have historically been associated with Poland and those that have emerged as a result of migration or the activities of new religious movements (Jarecka-Stępień 2010, 68-82). It should be noted, however, that Polish law draws a clear distinction between national, ethnic and religious minorities. For example, the Karaites, who are traditionally

associated with Karaism – a religion derived from Judaism – are recognised as an ethnic minority. Similarly, the Tatars, a population of Turkic origin that has inhabited the territory of Poland for centuries and whose members are Muslims (adherents of Sunni Islam), are also recognised as an ethnic minority. The Lemkos, in turn, constitute an ethnic minority whose members predominantly belong to either the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church or the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Byzantine Rite (Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) (Act on National 2005).

Crucially, religious minorities in Poland are afforded legal protection and are free to practice their faith. The legal guarantees protecting religious minorities derive not only from constitutional provisions but also, more broadly, from the fundamental legislative act governing religious freedom, namely the Act on Guarantees of Freedom of Conscience and Religion of 1989, as well as from specific acts regulating the relationship between the state and particular churches. The protection of religious rights and freedoms is further strengthened by Poland's status as a democratic state and a party to numerous international treaties and declarations that contain provisions requiring the protection of the rights of religious minorities (Report 2023). These include the *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (commonly known as the *European Convention on Human Rights*, ratified by Poland on 19 January 1993), the *International Covenants on Human Rights* of 1966 (ratified by Poland on 3 March 1977) and the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, adopted by the United Nations on 18 December 1992. Furthermore, freedom of thought, conscience and religion in the Republic of Poland is guaranteed by the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* of 7 December 2000. The implementation of international legal standards concerning religious freedom in Poland is also ensured by the *Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland*, signed on 28 July 1993 and ratified on 25 March 1998 (Potz 2024).

With regard to the relevant constitutional provisions, it should be emphasised that the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 are precise and unequivocally affirm the need to protect religious minorities. This is evidenced most notably by Article 53, which guarantees freedom of conscience and religion to every individual, encompassing the freedom to profess and practise a religion, to maintain places of worship and to provide religious education. As expressly stated in paragraphs 1 and 2: "1. Freedom of conscience and religion shall be ensured to everyone. 2. Freedom of religion shall include the freedom to profess or to accept a religion by personal choice as well as to manifest such religion, either individually or collectively, publicly or privately, by worshipping, praying, participating in ceremonies, performing of rites or

teaching. Freedom of religion shall also include possession of sanctuaries and other places of worship for the satisfaction of the needs of believers as well as the right of individuals, wherever they may be, to benefit from religious services." (The Constitution 1997). The Constitution further provides that the freedom to manifest one's religion may be restricted only where such limitations are necessary for the protection of state security, public order, health, morals or the rights and freedoms of others. Moreover, no person may be compelled either to participate or not to participate in religious practices, nor may any individual be required by public authorities to disclose their philosophy of life, religious beliefs or religious affiliation. In addition, Article 35 provides for the protection of the identity of national and ethnic minorities, including the protection of their religious distinctiveness. It guarantees their freedom to preserve and develop their own language, customs and traditions, as well as to develop their own culture. Furthermore, it recognises their right to establish educational and cultural institutions, as well as institutions designed to protect their religious identity, and to participate in the resolution of matters concerning their cultural identity. Article 25, in turn, guarantees the equal status of churches and requires the impartiality of public authorities in matters of religious, philosophical and ideological convictions, while ensuring the freedom to express such convictions in public life. As emphasised in paragraph 3 of that provision, relations between the Polish state and churches and other religious organisations are to be based on the principle of respect for their autonomy and mutual independence of each in its own sphere, as well as on cooperation for the benefit of the individual and the common good (The Constitution 1997).

For nearly four decades, the *Act of 17 May 1989 on Guarantees of Freedom of Conscience and Religion* has remained a key element of the institutional and legal protections guaranteed to religious minorities in Poland. Within the framework of this legislation, drawing upon the historically established and enduring respect of Poles for other faiths, the continuation of traditions of tolerance and religious freedom, and the cooperation among Poles of different religious and ideological backgrounds that has reaffirmed these values, the Polish legislature guaranteed citizens the right to freely choose their religion, ensured equal treatment of believers and non-believers and introduced the principle of state neutrality in matters of religion and convictions. As stipulated in Article 1 of the Act: "1. The Republic of Poland shall ensure freedom of conscience and religion to every citizen. 2. Freedom of conscience and religion shall include the freedom to choose a religion or beliefs as well as to manifest them individually and collectively, privately and publicly. 3. Citizens who are believers of all denominations, as well as non-believers, shall enjoy equal rights in public, political, economic, social and cultural life." (The Law

1989). The Act unequivocally states that every person in Poland has the right to freely profess a religion, manifest their beliefs and participate in religious rites and practices. Importantly, it emphasises that the Polish state remains neutral with regard to religious and ideological convictions, and that no individual may be compelled either to participate in or to abstain from religious practices. Furthermore, the Act guarantees a broad degree of autonomy and independence to churches and religious associations. In accordance with its provisions, these entities operate independently of the state in their internal affairs and retain the right to conduct educational or charitable activities. The Act also clearly defines all the legal procedures through which religious communities may acquire legal personality and be entered into the official register. In addition, it establishes regulations concerning the property matters of certain churches (The Law 1989).

From an institutional and legal perspective, an equally important role in safeguarding the rights of religious minorities is played by the Commissioner for Human Rights, an institution entrusted with the protection of civil rights and liberties and responsible for counteracting discrimination in its broadest sense, including discrimination on religious grounds. Both individuals and religious communities are entitled to submit complaints to the Ombudsman when their rights or freedoms have been violated (Tarnacka 2018, 58-63).

Furthermore, the protection of freedom of conscience and religion *de lege lata* is set out in the Polish Criminal Code of 1997. Chapter XXIV of the Code, entitled "Offences against Freedom of Conscience and Religion", introduced, in Article 194, the offence of religious discrimination. According to its provisions: "Whoever restricts a person in the exercise of their rights on account of their religious affiliation or lack thereof shall be subject to a fine, a restriction of liberty or imprisonment for up to two years." (Penal Code 1997). Article 195, which concerns the malicious disruption of religious practices, provides that: "Whoever maliciously disturbs the public performance of a religious act of a church or another religious association whose legal status is regulated by law shall be subject to a fine, a restriction of liberty or imprisonment for up to two years." (Penal Code 1997). The legal response to offences against religious feelings is specified in Article 196 of the Criminal Code, which states that: "Whoever offends the religious feelings of other persons by publicly insulting an object of religious worship or a place designated for the public performance of religious rites shall be subject to a fine, a restriction of liberty or imprisonment for up to two years." (Penal Code 1997). Particularly significant is also Article 257, which addresses acts motivated by xenophobia, racism or religious intolerance. Pursuant to this provision: "Whoever publicly insults a group of people or an individual on account of

their national, ethnic, racial or religious affiliation, or on account of their lack of religious affiliation, or for such reasons violates the bodily integrity of another person, shall be liable to imprisonment for up to three years.” (Penal Code 1997).

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that the legal and institutional arrangements adopted in Poland to safeguard the rights and freedoms of religious minorities, counter xenophobia and promote attitudes of religious tolerance are comprehensive, unambiguous and appropriate from both substantive and formal perspectives. These measures provide effective protection for freedom of conscience and religion. It should also be noted that the regulations adopted by the Republic of Poland are fully consistent with both European and global (universal) standards.

5. Poles' Attitudes towards Religious Minorities: The Evolution of Inclusive Religious Tolerance in the Twenty-First Century – The Case of Muslims.

Tolerance (from the Latin *tolerare*, meaning “to endure” or “to bear”) has traditionally been understood as the acceptance of views, customs and beliefs different from one's own, provided that they do not violate human rights. In contemporary times, tolerance refers to the ability to recognise diversity in a world characterised by difference across all spheres of life. Tolerance does not imply the uncritical acceptance of such differences; rather, it involves adopting an attitude of respect towards them while maintaining one's own beliefs and convictions (Engelen and Nys 2008, 44-54).

According to the classification proposed by Maria Ossowska and Izydora Dąmbska-Łazari, tolerance may be understood in terms of two distinct categories. The first is passive tolerance (also referred to as negative tolerance), which consists in refraining from interfering with or opposing views, behaviours or characteristics that an individual does not accept. Such an attitude implies indifference or a renunciation of the use of coercion, a non-affirmation of differences and often even an internal sense of discomfort associated with their existence, while nevertheless maintaining a certain distance from them and refraining from any response. Passive religious tolerance may be defined as the acceptance of the functioning of a religious group whose beliefs one does not share, while simultaneously avoiding deeper engagement or interaction with such a group (Łazari-Pawłowska 1984, 105-118).

By contrast, active tolerance (also referred to as positive tolerance) is grounded in understanding, acceptance of diversity and readiness for dialogue. Its essence lies not only in accepting the presence of difference, but

also in valuing diversity, recognising the right of others to exist in their accepted form and publicly expressing respect (Wdowiak 2011, 52-57). Active tolerance is manifested in openness to the arguments of others, willingness to revise one's own beliefs and learning from one another. Active religious tolerance is expressed through visible actions aimed at learning about and understanding the doctrines and values of other faiths, interfaith cooperation in various spheres and the active protection of religious minorities within a given state. The essence of positive (active) religious tolerance is the concept of inclusion, and thus the active integration of religious minorities into socio-political life. The *conditio sine qua non* of inclusive religious tolerance is moving beyond passive tolerance, as well as beyond a mere shift in emphasis from merely permitting the existence of other religions towards the active recognition of their right to difference and identity, and towards cooperation with them as equal members of the society (Adelman, Levi and Verkuyten, Maykel and Yogeewaran, Kumar 2022, 731-750).

When analysing the ongoing changes in Poles' attitudes towards religious minorities, it should be emphasised that a consistent source of information on the religious composition of the Polish population is provided by statistical surveys conducted annually since 1990 by Statistics Poland: "Religious Denominations in Poland" and "Statistics of the Rites of the Catholic Church." Additional sources of knowledge on religious affiliation include the National Population and Housing Censuses (2011; 2021) as well as the multi-dimensional Social Cohesion Survey conducted by GUS in 2015 and 2018 (Statistical Office 2011).

An overview of the most recent results of the above-mentioned statistical studies indicates that Poland is a country in which, alongside the predominant Catholicism, more than 200 other churches and religious associations operate. The main religious minorities (constituting between 1.5% and 3% of the Polish population), whose status is regulated by law, include Orthodox Christians, Greek Catholics, Protestants as well as Muslims and Jews. According to the research findings, 91.4% of the population of the Republic of Poland has a recognised religious status. Census data confirm the statistically dominant position of the Roman Catholic Church. In 2021, the number of its adherents was 27.1 million persons, accounting for 71.3% of the total population and 89.8% of the population with a recognised religious status. The second largest group was the Orthodox Church (151.6 thousand), followed by Jehovah's Witnesses (108.8 thousand). The number of Muslims in Poland was 4.8 thousand persons and the number of adherents of Judaism was approximately 1.4 thousand (Statistical Office 2021).

While religious minorities associated with Christianity in the broad sense do not arouse strong emotions and the level of religious tolerance is

high, the situation is more complex in the case of followers of other religions, especially Muslims. According to the results of a survey conducted by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) in December 2019, using a scale informally called a thermometer, on which values ranged from -50 to +50 degrees depending on respondents' views, with 0 indicating an ambivalent or unspecified attitude – as many as 45% of respondents expressed a cold attitude towards followers of Islam, while only 17% declared warm feelings. The attitudes of the remaining respondents (38%) could be described as neutral. Importantly, attitudes towards Muslims were considerably cooler than those towards followers of other religions and non-believers. The survey showed that only 14% of respondents (roughly one in seven) reported personally knowing a Muslim. Acquaintance with Muslims was more frequently declared by men than women, respondents under the age of 45 (especially those aged 35–44), residents of large and major cities, the most highly educated individuals, including managers and professionals with higher education, as well as supporters of left-wing political groups. The CBOS report indicated that, compared with the 2015 survey, attitudes towards followers of nearly all religions had become less favourable. However, this change reflected not so much an intensification of negative feelings as a decline in positive feelings and a rise in ambivalent attitudes. Apart from Muslims, negative feelings among Polish society also prevailed towards Jehovah's Witnesses, while Catholics were viewed most positively, followed by adherents of other Christian denominations, namely Orthodox Christians and Protestants. Interestingly, positive feelings outweighed negative ones towards Buddhists and also towards Jews, who were regarded indifferently by many respondents. When asked about relations between Islamic culture and Western culture, respondents were divided almost equally between those who considered a violent conflict inevitable (38%) and those who believed that common ground for agreement could be found (37%). According to 41% of respondents, the conflict between Islam and the West stemmed from religious and cultural differences. As many as 66% of respondents believed that Muslims living in Western European countries have difficulty assimilating and do not adopt the customs and values characteristic of the majority of inhabitants of those countries. Only 10% held the opposite view. Particularly noteworthy is that 63% of respondents agreed with the statement that most Muslims are intolerant of customs and values other than their own. Only 12% disagreed. Furthermore, 50% of respondents shared the view that Muslims generally accept the use of violence against followers of other religions, whereas 22% disagreed. Equally interesting is that 43% of respondents agreed with the statement that most Muslims condemn terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic fundamentalists. However, as many as 25% believed the opposite (CBOS 2019).

The 2019 CBOS survey is particularly important and representative because it captures Polish attitudes towards followers of Islam within the context of specific political developments, including the migration and refugee crisis in Europe, as well as challenges associated with the crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border (Balicki 2021, 117–140). The latter involved attempts by Muslims from various Middle Eastern and Asian countries to cross the border illegally, becoming instruments in the hybrid war conducted against Poland by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko (Górska and Górak 2024, 45–65).

In this context, it is also important to consider the findings of studies conducted by the Centre for Research on Prejudice, which has systematically monitored anti-Muslim attitudes in Poland. Data collected between 2014 and 2021 documented key changes in Poles' attitudes towards Islam and its followers. Survey results indicate that secular criticism of Islam consistently remained a more widely accepted type of attitude, although changes in its prevalence were less pronounced than those observed in the case of Islamophobia. The latter increased substantially following the European migration crisis and a series of lone-wolf terrorist attacks that occurred across Western Europe in 2015–2016 (Stojkow 2018, 185–196). Attitudes towards Muslims became politicised only in 2016. At that point, significant differences began to emerge among respondents declaring left-wing, centrist and right-wing political views, and these differences remained evident also in the subsequent surveys conducted in 2017 and 2021. Left-wing circles in Poland traditionally displayed considerably higher levels of tolerance and were more critical of Islamophobic attitudes. Despite the growing polarisation surrounding Islamophobia, its level in 2021 was substantially lower than in the previous survey and most closely resembled the results recorded prior to the pivotal events of 2015. This trend may be interpreted as a positive indicator of Polish attitudes towards the Muslim religious minority (Lisiecki, 2024).

Interestingly, the findings of the study “Religious Denominations in Poland 2022–2024”, conducted in 2025 by Statistics Poland (GUS), include the issue of discrimination on the grounds of religion. This aspect was first examined in 2014. At that time, all churches and religious associations included in the study (with the exception of the rites of the Catholic Church, which maintains its own statistics and was not included) were asked the following question as part of a statistical survey of religious denominations: *Were any cases of discrimination (unequal treatment) of members of the community due to their professed faith or religious affiliation reported to the church/religious association in 2013 (e.g. insulting comments, assaults, acts of violence, vandalism)?* Importantly, this issue was continued in subsequent surveys in the following years. According to comparative results from the 2013–2024 period, covering

between 68 and 96 churches and religious associations, the vast majority of them (over 70%) reported that no cases of discrimination against community members on the grounds of religious belief or affiliation were recorded in a given year. In 2024, this proportion was relatively low at 79%. The share of churches or religious associations reporting cases of discrimination ranged between 9% and 20% over the analysed period. The lowest value was recorded in 2015 (9%), while the highest was observed in 2020 (20%). In 2024, this figure stood at 14%, meaning that 13 churches or religious associations reported such an incident or incidents. The non-response rate for this question remained at a low level, ranging between 3% and 10%. The highest level of lack of data (16%) was recorded in 2017. Over the analysed period, no major differences were observed in responses; neither a significant increase nor a decrease was identified in the proportion of churches or religious associations reporting cases of unequal treatment on the grounds of religion (Statistical 2025).

It can therefore be concluded that levels of tolerance in contemporary Poland are influenced by age and level of education, while Poles' attitudes range from acceptance to distance. Younger and better educated Poles, particularly those who identify with the political left, demonstrate significantly higher levels of religious tolerance and are considerably more inclined to express acceptance of other religious denominations.

6. Conclusions

The analysis conducted confirms the hypothesis formulated in the introduction that Poland has successfully combined its historical traditions of openness with an adequate response to emerging trends in the international environment and to the challenges associated with maintaining and strengthening attitudes of inclusive religious tolerance among its population. Instances of passive tolerance, as well as occasional manifestations of hostility, xenophobia and even Islamophobia, remain sporadic in nature and appear as elements of political spectacle aimed at gaining visibility or enhancing socio-political popularity, particularly among far-right politicians and their supporters in the Republic of Poland. This phenomenon is consistent with broader trends observed across the European Union.

It should therefore be noted that Poles' attitudes towards religious minorities are largely positive or neutral, which can be attributed primarily to historical traditions, the democratisation of the state and the cultural homogeneity of Polish society. Public opinion surveys consistently indicate that the majority of Poles express either favourable or indifferent attitudes towards the presence of religious minority groups. These minorities are

widely perceived as an integral component of Poland's socio-cultural landscape. Positive attitudes tend to be especially evident in regions of traditional multicultural character, such as the Podlasie region, characterised by a strong presence of Orthodox Christianity, and Silesia, with its Protestant heritage, where the coexistence of different religious denominations has become deeply ingrained in the functioning of Polish society.

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that, while the Polish state guarantees freedom of religion and a broad scope of religious tolerance (supported by robust formal institutional and legal safeguards), Poles' attitudes are characterised by a high level of openness towards traditional branches of Christianity, alongside a degree of distance towards certain non-Christian religions. Distrust and passive tolerance, stemming primarily from fears of cultural otherness, are evoked by religious groups that are less familiar within Polish history, as well as by those that are widely, and at times stereotypically, portrayed by the right-wing political circles as a threat to Poland's security – most notably adherents of Islam.

Accordingly, the most significant decline in the dominance of inclusive tolerance among Poles occurred in the years 2016–2017 and can be attributed to a growing perception of threats to the security of the Polish state and its citizens. This, in turn, was a consequence of the intensifying wave of jihadist attacks in Western Europe at the time, the expansion of the so-called Islamic State and, above all, processes of uncontrolled migration of Muslim populations from the MENA region to Europe. This situation changed as the aforementioned threats were resolved or mitigated.

It may therefore be argued that Poland and the Polish population remain consistent in their commitment to inclusive religious tolerance. This appears to constitute a sufficient safeguard against the radicalisation of attitudes and the gradual shift from active acceptance towards increasing distance, emerging expressions of non-acceptance or even occasional narratives of hostility directed at non-Christian religious minorities in Poland.

References:

Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on Regional Language of 6 January 2005. Dz.U. 2005 nr 17 poz. 141.
<https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu20050170141>.

Adelman, Levi and Verkuyten, Maykel and Yogeeswaran, Kumar. 2022. "Distinguishing active and passive outgroup tolerance: Understanding its prevalence and the role of moral concern." *Political Psychology*, 43(4): 731–750.

Atlas of Religious or Belief Minority Rights. 2025.

<https://atlasminorityrights.org/countries/Poland.php>

Balicki, Janusz. 2021. "Islamophobia in Poland in the Context of the Migration Crisis in Europe." *Ecumeny and Law* 9(1): 117-140.

Barkey, Karen and Laurence, Jonathan. 2026. *Handbook on Religious Toleration in Comparative Perspective*. Boston: Springer.

CBOS. 2019. *Postawy wobec Muzułmanów. Komunikat z Badań* 148.

Cieszyńska, Beata. 2009. "Between "incidents of intolerance" and "massacre" british interpretations of the Early Modern Polish Religious Persecution." *Revista Lusófona De Ciência Das Religiões – Ano VIII* 15: 269-282.

Curtis, Gleen E. 1994. *Poland a country study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division.

Davies, Norman. 1981. *God's playground: a history of Poland. Vol.1, The origins to 1795*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davies, Norman. 1982. *God's playground: a history of Poland. Vol. 2*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Engelen, Bart and Nys, Thomas. 2008. "Tolerance: A Virtue? Towards a Broad and Descriptive Definition of Tolerance." *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 15(1): 44-54.

Figurski, Paweł. 2024. "Medieval Liturgy and the Making of Poland: A Study in Early Medieval Political Identification (c. 960s—c. 1030s)." *Journal of Medieval History* 50(2): 141–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2024.2320277>

Górska, Ewa and Górak-Sosnowska, Katarzyna. 2024. "The Other at the border: 'frontier Orientalism' in politics and law in Poland." *Patterns of Prejudice*, 58(1), 45-65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2024.2373585>

Jabłońska, Paulina. 2024. "Religious freedom in Polish legislation." *Itinerari di Ricerca Storica* 38: 95–112.

Jarecka-Stępień, Katarzyna. 2010. "Muslims in Poland: Tatars, Refugees and Immigrants." *Electronic Journal of Political Science Studies* 1: 68-82.

Lisiecki, Emil. 2024. "Zmiany postaw Polaków wobec muzułmanów i ich związek z poglądami politycznymi na przestrzeni lat 2014 – 2021." Raport Centrum Badań nad Uprzedzeniami.

Lukowski, Jerzy and Zawadzki, Hubert. 2006. *A Concise History of Poland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Łazari-Pawłowska, Izydora. 1984. "Trzy pojęcia tolerancji." *Studia Filozoficzne* 8: 105-118.

O'Brian, Pliny. 2016. *Empires, Crusaders, and invasions through the Middle Ages*. New York: Cavendish Square Publishing.

Penal Code - Act of 6 June 1997. Dz.U. 1997 nr 88 poz. 553, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19970880553>.

Potz, Maciej. 2024. "Religious Freedom In Poland." EUREL. https://www.eurel-info.cnrs.fr/IMG/pdf/pl_religious_freedom_in_poland_alz.pdf

Report on International Religious Freedom: Poland. 2023. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/poland/>

Rynkowski, Michał. 2019. "State and Church in Poland." In *State and Church in the European Union*, edited by Gerhard Robbers, 463-466. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Sarnecki, Witold and Niccolle, David and Embleton, Gerry. 2008. *Medieval Polish Armies 966-1500*. Oxford nad New York: Osprey Pub.

Statistical analyses and report. 2025. *Religious denominations in Poland 2022–2024*. 2025. GUS. Warsaw.

Statistical Office. 2011. *National-ethnic, linguistic and religious structure of the Polish population – National Census*. <https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechnie/nsp-2011/nsp-2011-wyniki/struktura-narodowo-etniczna-jezykowa-i-wyznaniowa-ludnosci-polski-nsp-2011,22,1.html?pdf=1>

Statistical Office. 2021. *The condition and demographic, social and economic structure of the Polish population in the light of the results of the National Census*. <https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechnie/nsp-2021/nsp-2021-wyniki-ostateczne/stan-i-struktura-demograficzno-spoeczna-i-ekonomiczna-ludnosci-polski-w-swietle-wynikow-nsp-2021,6,2.html>

Stojkow, Maria. 2018. *Polish Ummah? The Actions Taken by Muslim Migrants to Set up Their World in Poland*. "Central and Eastern European Migration Review" 7(2): 185-196.

Tarnacka, Agata. 2018. "Ombudsman as a body protecting human rights." *ASEJ Scientific Journal of Bielsko-Biala School Finance and Law* 22(2): 58-63.

Tazbir, Janusz. 1973. *A state without stakes: Polish religious toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. New York: Kościuszko Foundation.

The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997. Dz.U. 1997 nr 78 poz. 483. <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19970780483>.

The Law of May 17, 1989 on Guarantees of Freedom of Conscience and Religion (J.L. of 1989 No. 29, Item 155). <https://czasopisma.inp.pan.pl/index.php/cceel/article/view/1296/1074>

Warمیńska, Katarzyna. 2017. "Polish and Lithuanian Tatars: One history and two stories." *Nurt SVD* 2: 111-122.

Wdowiak, Patrycja. 2011. "O rodzajach tolerancji w filozofii Profesora Iji Lazari-Pawłowskiej." *Etyka* 44: 52-57.

Wyrozumski, Jerzy. 2016. "At the beginning of Polish tolerance." *The Annual of the Scientific Library of the PAAS and the PAS in Cracow* LXI: 9-19. <https://doi.org/10.4467/25440500RBN.16.001.6612>

Zamoyski, Adam. 1988. *The Polish way: a thousand-year history of the Poles and their culture*, New York: F. Watts.

Zamoyski, Adam. 2015. *Poland: a history*. London: William Collins.