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## **“Male and Female He Created Them” vs. “There is No Male and Female”. Gender Stereotyping in the Junior High School Religion Textbook**

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**Summary.** The Roman Catholic Church in Poland sees gender studies as a threat to its traditional teaching on family and gender roles. This fear reflects both a mis- or non-understanding of the notion as well as an erroneous identification of the so called traditional family with religious doctrine. The chapter endeavors to analyze the textbook that is used to teach religion in Polish junior high schools. In doing so, it attempts to expose the gender stereotypes promulgated by the textbook and to reveal their consequences. First of all, the textbook equates biological sex with gender, assuming the existence of inherent psychological differences between men and women and between social roles assigned to either sex. These differences are presented in a largely stereotypical manner. The likely consequences of this approach include women's economic dependence on men, dangers to women's mental health, and the acceptance of male domination and violence. Yet, it is important to realize that harmful gender stereotypes are not intrinsic to Christianity but, rather, a result of the incorporation of the misogyny of the Old Testament and ancient philosophy.

**Keywords:** education, family, gender, Roman Catholic Church, sex, stereotype, social roles

### **1. Introduction**

Various international resolutions and documents stress the necessity of improving the life conditions of women and girls. It is generally assumed that violence against women and their economic exploitation are culturally determined. That

is why, states belonging to the United Nations are obliged to fight discrimination and harmful gender stereotyping. The most powerful tool to achieve it is to change people's mentality through education. This task is best achieved at a young age, so school curricula and teaching staff should be sensitive to discrimination.

This line of action is best exemplified by the document issued after the International Conference on Population and Development held in 1994 in Cairo: "Schools, the media and other social institutions should seek to eliminate stereotypes in all types of communication and educational materials that reinforce existing inequalities between males and females and undermine girls' self-esteem. [...] School curricula and facilities must also change to reflect a commitment to eliminate all gender bias"<sup>1</sup>.

Most educators also agree that schools, mass media and peer pressure are among the most powerful factors responsible for strengthening gender stereotyping. Thus, providing young people with numerous examples of men and women performing various social roles, raising their awareness towards gender issues and allowing them to develop their identity in accordance to individual characteristics, abilities and skills, instead of following narrowly prescribed social roles is necessary to build a society free of sexism, exploitation, domestic violence and personal misery [Pankowska 2005: 28]<sup>2</sup>.

Poland has made numerous commitments to eliminate gender discrimination and promote wellbeing of both men and women. Nevertheless, reading through the textbooks aimed at providing Polish teenagers with Catholic instruction at junior high schools, one can easily notice that among themes expected in such a curriculum there are also topics strengthening gender stereotypes and oppressive gender roles, which are presented as inherently connected with Christian belief. One could naturally wonder whether there is any place for denominational instruction at publically funded officially secular state schools in the first place. Putting this question aside, it can be asked if presenting scientifically unfounded (not to say discredited) opinions about the human psychology and social roles should be allowed at school under the excuse of religious instruction. Furthermore, even individuals who are in favour of Catholic education can argue that what the textbook presents as part of the doctrine has, in fact, little in common with the spirit of Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> International Conference on Population and Development, [un.org/popin/icpd/conference/offeng/poa.html](http://un.org/popin/icpd/conference/offeng/poa.html) [access: 10.08.2017].

<sup>2</sup> All translations, unless otherwise stated, are by the author of the article.

## 2. Textbook analysis

### 2.1. Biological essentialism

The textbook entitled *Życ w miłości Boga* (trans. Living in the love of God) contains a section devoted to the role of love in human life, mainly the love between married couples and parents and children. Since the users of the book are in their mid-teens, informing them about their developing sexuality and its meaning in their future lives as adult Christians does not seem surprising. Yet, the way it is done raises many more controversies.

The official standpoint presented in the textbook can be seen as a classic example of biological essentialism. First of all, the division into two biological sexes is presented as resulting in two different psychological profiles. Men and women not only have different anatomy but are equipped with unique for their sex set of mental and emotional features. Thus, sex and gender are seen as inherently linked. These psychological profiles are not historically or culturally changeable but are perceived as permanent. They are the result of nature, that is they were consciously and deliberately designed by the Maker.

Men are described as strong, courageous and dynamic, rational and consistent in their actions. They also have more sexual needs and find it difficult to control them. It is said that though an adolescent boy may find the ease with which he reaches sexual arousal problematic, it will be useful later, when he gets married [Szpet, Jackowiak (eds.) 2016: 22]. On the other hand, women are said to be fundamentally different, as they have “different bodies, different minds, and different needs” [Ibidem]. They are sensitive, affectionate and have a great need for privacy. When reaching a decision they rely on intuition and emotions. Women also tend to overwhelm men with their emotional outbursts, constantly looking for love and approval. They are also naïve as they mistake sexual desire for love. Women need someone to protect them giving them a sense of security [Ibidem].

It seems that the authors of the textbook have never met a cowardly and superstitious male and an independent, emotionally reserved and practical woman. Not only is the above description a sweeping generalisation but it can be easily concluded that the features which are typical for men are evaluated much higher. If men are strong, women are weak, if men are brave, women are fearful, if men are rational, women are irrational, if men are independent, women are in need of protection. The dualism here presents male features as superior and more desirable.

Theoretically, men and women are to complement each other and reflect different attributes of God in whose image they were created. Men and women “need each other, as each has – typical for their sex – unique characteristics”

[Ibidem]. One can only wonder how irrationality, lack of bravery and dependence on others are to be found in the allegedly supreme Being. No wonder the most common cultural representations of the deity in the Judeo-Christian tradition reflect only the traditionally masculine characteristics. Most respondents conceptualise the spiritual, asexual Godhead as a male Judge, King, Lord, Father [Renzetti, Curran 2005: 466-467].

The textbook further claims that “being immature as a man or as a woman” (which should probably mean not exhibiting the traditional masculine or feminine characteristics as well as the inability or unwillingness to perform the traditional social roles) is synonymous with “being immature as a person”, which affects one’s relationship with God [Szpet, Jackowiak (eds.) 2016: 22]. Transgression against gender roles is synonymous with sinfulness and psychopathology.

## **2.2. Separate duties and social functions**

The diverse characteristics of men and women predetermine them to perform different social functions. The textbook on pages 36-37 contains a separate set of commandments for ‘responsible’ teenage boys and girls as well as a list of separate duties of mothers and fathers. A model girl believes her virginity is a unique value to be offered only to her husband yet in the case of a boy his sexual purity before marriage is not mentioned. He is to honour in his girlfriend a future mother of his children. He is also responsible for providing financial resources, so that his future wife and children will not lack anything. It is not a duty of a wife to earn a living or support the family. Curiously enough, a girl “loves her parents and will not betray their trust” [Szpet, Jackowiak (eds.) 2016: 37], but a similar task is not expected from a boy. Does that mean it is natural for a daughter to be obedient and nurse her aging parents yet a son can be more independent and career-oriented? A boy “has met many wonderful people in his life and would like to pass onto his children what he received from them” [Ibidem: 28]. Why is a girl unlikely to have met inspirational individuals in her life? Is that joy restricted to men? Since teenage girls are expected to help at home they have less time for activities such as hobbies, sports and socialising [Siemieńska 2014: 2]. They are also subjected to stricter curfew. They are thus less likely to have a wide network of friends and acquaintances.

A similar tendency to keep women within the private sphere and men in the public one can be observed in the list of duties for parents. Some of them are identical for both sexes, such as giving a child Catholic upbringing, praying with the child, attending the mass and preparing the child for the holy sacraments. Yet it is a woman who is described as a “vessel of the Holy Ghost” whose role is

to give birth, feed and nurse the child [Szpet, Jackowiak (eds.) 2016: 37]. Men should “look after the child and its needs” [Ibidem], but these are not specified. Washing, changing the nappies, rocking to sleep, carrying the teething infant through the night appear to be solely female tasks, while men are expected to pay for nappies, bottles and other accessories. Likewise, a father is to act as a role model for the child so the child should look up to its father with respect and admiration, yet it is not stated the role of a mother is worthy of any admiration. Furthermore, comparing pregnancy to being a vessel deprives women of any agency. They are containers for new life, their own lives lose importance.

It seems that women’s role is defined by their procreative tasks while a men’s role is much wider. Men are to be breadwinners, professionally active and ambitious, women are destined to lead domestic lives. It makes them economically dependent upon men’s income.

### **2.3. Examples of role models**

The unit discussing the existence of two biological sexes and their attributes gives two separate role models for girls and boys: Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph, respectively. It is a rather bizarre choice. Mary is presented as a mother of “beautiful love” [Szpet, Jackowiak (eds.) 2016: 23]. According to the doctrine, Mary conceived as a result of the intervention of the Holy Ghost, not as a result of sexual intercourse – such a model is impossible to imitate. She is said to have given birth painlessly, remaining a virgin and was never sexually involved with her husband. “Saint Joseph, a young lad who loved his chosen Woman so much that he refrained from the activity men pursue so much” [Ibidem] is to be an example for boys. The age of Joseph is disputable as the Bible says nothing about it. According to Marina Warner, there was a tradition claiming he was an old man, no longer sexually active, to explain his marital abstinence. A later interpretation explained his celibacy as spiritually motivated [Warner 1983: 23, 77, 189]. The Catholic dogma appears to value physical virginity for its own sake. Why would a married couple refrain from a natural expression of their love through sexual intimacy? Why give the most unusual couple in history as a role model for young people?

### **2.4. Family conflicts**

The textbook authors observe that many families are torn by conflicts caused by excessive materialism or egoism. Though violence is condemned as causing “suffering and pain” [Szpet, Jackowiak (eds.) 2016: 41], its roots and perpetrators

are not discussed. On the opposite, it is vaguely stated that “family members can become enemies: spouses, children, siblings” [Ibidem]. Nevertheless, statistically speaking, siblings or children are seldom the aggressors in the case of domestic violence and the most common perpetrators are men. Yet, the gender aspect of violence is never addressed.

Many scholars assume that the dichotomy of gender stereotypes is directly responsible for sexual and domestic violence. “[M]asculinity stands for physical and moral strength, toughness, adamance and energy in contrast to femininity which is symbolised by sensitivity, warmth, sentimentality and intuition. [...] Little wonder boys brought up within this model reaching maturity despise the ‘weaker’ sex” [Jaspard 2005: 212]. They do not respect women’s views and opinions expecting submission from their female partners. Since they are told they may find it difficult to control their sexual arousal, they blame women for provoking them. Victims of rape are often criticised for inviting the attack with inappropriate clothing, jogging alone in parks, enjoying drinks with strangers, generally for ‘leading men on’. Most researchers agree that men who are violent towards their female partners and other women usually have traditional understanding of gender roles [Pankowska 2005: 120].

The textbook does not point at men as those responsible for abusing their families and does not condemn their violence. Curiously enough, it even states that the break-up of the family is the result of egoism, not a fully justified decision of a battered wife. Obviously, the book does not condone aggressive behaviour; yet, presenting divorce as the greatest evil and not stressing the systematic causes of domestic violence it creates circumstances in which it can be continued. Social ostracism towards divorce decreases the likelihood of a woman’s leaving an abusive partner.

### **3. Sex versus gender in religious education and instruction**

Looking at religious education it is obvious that the notion of gender is entirely absent in it. Biological sex influences behaviour and psychology as well as determines the roles people can perform in family and society.

#### **3.1. Linguistic issues**

The hostility towards gender awareness among many leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland may partly result from linguistic issues. First of all,



Polish language does not differentiate between sex and gender. Both biological and socio-cultural aspects of human identity are rendered as *pleć*. Grammatical gender, *rodzaj* in Polish, is a synonym of the word kind or sort and sounds artificial to refer to cultural aspects of sex (for instance, gender role would be rendered as *rola rodzajowa*, which in literal translation is sort role – an incomprehensible phrase for most people). Thus, Polish scholars either talk about sex as a cultural and social category (which is lengthy) or use the English noun gender. For ordinary people it sounds clumsy, foreign and unnecessary. Some people may even wonder what the whole business of gender is all about as they are unable to differentiate between the socio-cultural and biological consequences and attributes of being a man or a woman. A similar situation applies to adjectives. Although the distinction between adjectives male/female (*męski/żeński*) denoting biological properties exists, it is blurred in the case of masculine/manly or feminine (*męski/kobięcy* or *damski*) which reflect cultural aspects of being a man or a woman. So, though there is an adjective in Polish standing for female (female reproductive organs – *żeńskie narządy płciowe*) and two for feminine (feminine charm – *kobięcy urok*, clothes for women – *odzież damska*), there is only one adjective to refer to men's attributes (male sex hormones, manly behaviour, masculine fragrance would all be translated as *męski* into Polish). According to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language influences human thoughts and perceptions of reality. Since Polish language does not sufficiently differentiate between purely biological and cultural aspects of masculinity and femininity, many Poles may be unable to conceptualise these differences.

### 3.2. Lack of context

The textbook presents features and roles of both sexes as unchangeable. Historical period, social class, ethnicity, not to mention individual characteristics, are irrelevant since men and women have been designed by God in their fixed identities. What is presented as ‘traditional’ family is, in fact, a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of human species – it seems that it is an idealised picture of the nineteenth century upper middle class family life in the Western world that best embodied the divine plan. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English [2005] argue that though the pre-industrial society took the inferior status of women for granted, it simultaneously heavily relied on women's work. The notions of the private versus public world did not exist as most work of both sexes was done at home or close to it and served the immediate needs of the family. It was the industrial revolution and market economy that separated and

polarised the masculine and feminine spheres. White women were scientifically proven to be too vulnerable and delicate to study and earn. They were expected to provide loving and peaceful havens for their working husbands. Obviously, such a lifestyle did not apply to working class women and women from ethnic minorities: factory workers and slaves were seen as strong enough to work side by side with males.

Moreover, the gradual improvement in the standard of living, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made people live much longer. It affected both the understanding of marriage and motherhood. Previously, with many miscarriages, still-born children and high level of infant mortality, the bond between mother and child was less powerful [Badinter 1998]. People could not afford to form powerful attachments and invest emotionally either in spouses or offspring as much as they do now. "If you live in a world where a plague, a war, a murder or just a simple bacterial infection is liable to carry off your inmates at any moment, repeated as an experience over dozens of generations it could act as a disincentive to get too involved. Those who avoided too great attachments would be favoured because they would be less encumbered by repeated mourning" [James 1998: 136]. Thus, the Catholic teaching about the motherly love, value of each embryo's and foetus' right to live and indissolubility of marriage are culturally and historically anchored. Even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century 'till death do us part' seldom meant several decades and in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century between 30 to 50% of people did not survive the age of 15<sup>3</sup>.

Attitude to sexual activity was also seen as different for males and females [Bradley 2008: 147]. Men are presented as easily sexually stimulated and interested in casual sexual encounters without emotional involvement while women are seen as modest and associating sex with love. The religious educators see these attitudes as resulting from different psychology, not cultural constraints. Until relatively recently, unmarried mothers were ostracised or even punished. It is sufficient to mention the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish institution of Magdalene laundries, which were in fact work camps for 'promiscuous' girls. Many women, who entered them as children were never let out and spend their entire lives as slaves. Obviously, the fear of unwanted pregnancy resulting in social exclusion was a powerful deterrent for women to get involved in sexual relationships before marriage. The invention of reliable contraception as well as lessened social control over single women's intimate lives and, in the case of many Western countries, state support of single mothers, has irrevocably changed the way women approach their sexual needs

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<sup>3</sup> Roser M., *Child Mortality*, <https://ourworldindata.org/child-mortality> [access: 20.08.2017].



### 3.3. Gender conditioning

The authors of the textbook are either unaware (or unwilling to accept) that conditioning is a powerful tool in developing and strengthening the desired gender behaviour. For instance, Unit 7 which deals with the alleged psychological differences between the sexes, is decorated with two illustrations of preschool children. A long-haired girl, dressed in a floral dress, is clutching a doll while a boy with spiky hair, in a checked shirt, is playing with building blocks. Naturally, the girl is instructed she will be a mother one day and needs to practice looking after a baby while a boy practices his physical confidence and special awareness. His clothes, dark and comfortable, encourage him to explore the world while hers restrict her movements. Climbing trees, jumping, running or even biking in a dress and tights is not only difficult but involves a risk of tearing the delicate fabric. Dorota Pankowska [2005: 44] analyses how upbringing, even at the earliest stage of development, fosters gender expectations. Care givers address children of both sexes differently, give them different toys and play with them in a different manner. Behaviours that do not meet the strict gender criteria are immediately modified or punished, especially when small boys exhibit feminine traits, such as softness, shyness, fearfulness [Bradley 2008: 41]. Boys are reminded that ‘men do not cry’ while girls are called tomboys if they express interest in contact sports, which results in being shunned. A brain develops in reaction to the stimuli it receives throughout life. Apparently, brain scans of London taxi drivers exhibited unusually large hippocampus, which was attributed to the specific job requirements [Burns 2013: 6]. If men and women, since infancy, are exposed to different toys, tasks, verbal reactions, expectations and conditions, little wonder they may exhibit different adult behaviours [James 1998: 368]. Yet, whether it is due to nature or nurture cannot be determined. Thus, the cult text of the followers of biological determinism, Anne Moir’s and David Jessel’s *Brain Sex. The Real Difference Between Men and Women* [1992] appears to be misguided in its conclusions. If driving a taxi irrevocably changes one’s brain anatomy, being forged to fit into a gender role might as well do the same.

## 4. Consequences

What are the consequences of teaching teenagers that biological sex determines social roles and individual character and presenting such an instruction as religious truth? The fact that attending these classes is officially not obligatory does not automatically imply scientifically incorrect and psychologically harmful

stereotypes are to be instilled in children as indisputable and integral elements of Christianity, if parents of these children happen to Catholics. Public schools ought to ensure their environment is free of sexism and allows each child to function free of discrimination. Sexism damages mental health, increases economic inequality between men and women and contributes to potential violence. Furthermore, despite the official doctrine, it is not a necessary element of faith. These arguments will be expanded below.

#### **4.1. Mental wellbeing**

Seeing various features of character as either masculine or feminine is dangerous not only because it falsifies the complexities of individual character although it is a very serious accusation. The much more serious danger lies in implicit evaluation of those features. Those seen as masculine are simultaneously superior and desirable while the feminine ones are inferior and unwanted in an adult. Inge Broverman [Broverman et al. 1970], an American psychologist of Austrian origin, conducted a famous experiment in which three groups of people were asked to list properties associated with a mature, psychologically healthy male, female, and an adult of an unspecified sex. Though her subjects were mental health professionals, their values corresponded more to social expectations than objective norms of wellbeing. Not surprisingly, the profile of a healthy male corresponded closely to that of an adult while women were described differently. According to people taking part in the experiment, a psychologically healthy adult female could be submissive, a little irrational and prone to open display of emotions. She was expected to be dependent upon others for support and guidance. Broverman proved that women were trapped within their gender role since both complying with it and breaking away from it they would be seen as deviant. They would either come across as immature, unable to cope with professional duties in the public sphere or unfeminine and 'unnatural'. Although her research was conducted several decades ago, such stereotypes are far from waning. For instance, much of criticism directed at Hilary Clinton mainly focused on her being too ambitious, too confident, too rational while the same attributes would be assets in a male. Competence and professional detachment are still seen as masculine features.

Telling teenage girls, who are at a very vulnerable stage of their emotional development, that being rational, self-confident and economically independent is not what God intends for them may well alienate them from developing their intellectual potential. Psychologists notice that young girls who never exhibited any behavioural problems cease to be well adjusted at

adolescence. They lose their interest in academic achievements and confidence in their abilities, becoming withdrawn and depressed [Pipher 1995]. Childhood allows girls a much wider range of activities which become severely restricted by their mid-teens. They find the narrow sex roles oppressive and realise culture does not reward independent, ambitious, resilient women. If they want to be liked and attract boys they have to chisel their personalities accordingly [Pankowska 2005: 26].

Furthermore, many of the so-called traditional feminine features (passivity, submissiveness, low self-esteem, helplessness, fearfulness) are dangerously close to symptoms of clinical depression. Simultaneously, having little control over one's life, being financially dependent upon others, leading a monotonous existence filled with household drudgery and putting the needs of others above one's own greatly increase the likelihood of developing a mood disorder. Brant Wenegrat attributed the overrepresentation of women as psychiatric patients to their relative social powerlessness, which he defined as "the ability to provide for one's needs and security and the needs and security of loved ones, to stand up for oneself in conflicts with others, and to make decisions based on one's own desires" [Wenegrat 1995: 1]. Higher exposure to domestic and sexual violence, lack of income or insufficient earnings, being overburden with domestic duties and inability to use reliable methods of contraception are not good foundations for mental wellbeing. "The high rates of depression in women can be seen as an almost inevitable response to living in a culture that deeply fears and devalues the feminine" [Crowley 1993: 183].

Simultaneously, however, the traditional masculine gender role is far from beneficial. Men are forbidden to admit to any weakness and openly express emotions. Many mental health specialists blame male aggression and alcoholism on being trapped within the male gender role. Most research also proves that children whose fathers take an active part in their upbringing and look after their needs in early infancy are better adjusted and emotionally healthier [Pankowska 2005: 138]. Expecting from men, without taking into consideration their individual features and socio-economic environment, that they will be efficient breadwinners able to support a growing family on one income is deeply unrealistic. Men do become unemployed or permanently disabled. The expectation that men should provide financially for their families is also not consistent with recent trends. Polish women tend to be better educated than men (both in terms of secondary and university education), which makes it clear they possess intellectual abilities and formal qualifications to seek professional employment [Fuszara 2005: 686]. Furthermore, many women do successfully combine professional employment with motherhood, not only out of economic necessity, but also out of the need for economic independence, personal fulfilment, and self-esteem.

Generally speaking, children benefit from having happy and fulfilled parents and having both working parents or one stay-at-home parent (mom or dad) does not matter as long as the decision of working or staying at home is consistent with the wishes and needs of the parent, not economic necessity or social pressure [James 1998].

## 4.2. Cultural interpretation of gender character traits

Being submissive, selfless and passive is not socially rewarded as contemporary culture values confidence, assertiveness, dynamism and resilience. Peter Kramer in *Listening to Prozac* argues:

“A certain sort of woman, socially favoured in other eras, does poorly today. Victorian culture valued women who were emotionally sensitive, socially retiring, loyally devoted to one man, languorous and melancholic, fastidious in dress and sensibility, and histrionic in response to perceived neglect. We are less likely to reward such women today, nor are they proud of their traits.

We admire and reward a quite different sort of femininity, which [...] contains attributes traditionally considered masculine: resilience, energy, assertiveness, an enjoyment of give-and-take” [Kramer 1993: 270].

Obviously, it could be argued that Christian upbringing is not to produce assertive and competitive individuals who are to succeed in this world but rather, according to the Sermon on the Mount, meek and gentle ones. Christian virtues are not compatible with norms of the liberal, modern, Western civilisation. Yet, curiously enough, it is only the females who are trained to be submissive, willing to sacrifice their needs and live for the benefit of others – at least in the schoolbook interpretation of Catholicism. Traditional masculine features, such as strength, dynamism and rationality, do not necessarily parallel the beatitudes of Christian ethics. It can be best exemplified in the military ethos and combining patriotism with Catholicism in Polish nationalist discourse. Frequent references to Catholicism by Polish freedom fighters in the past, existence of military chaplains who serve the religious needs of army members do not seem surprising to anyone. Yet, turning the other cheek, resistance to evil without using violence and following the sixth commandment should prevent Christians from joining the army or fighting with the intention to kill. Nevertheless, Catechism and Church history show that both capital punishment and defensive war have been permitted. It seems that authorities of the Church (male ones) used complex arguments to excuse behaviour that was deeply immoral when it seemed rational – like killing an aggressor but equally unwilling to accept similar behaviour when it applied to circumstances of women’s life – such as aborting

a foetus when pregnancy is a result of rape or incest or using contraception when the birth of another child might ruin the health of the mother and/or prevent her from attending to the needs of other children. Very few Christian denominations, most notably the Quakers and the Amish, have been pacifist and refused to take another's life even in extreme circumstances. Although the Sermon on the Mount or the Commandments are not gendered and should apply to men and women alike, it seems that they can be re-interpreted to suit the circumstances of male lifestyle. Finally, even the traditional feminine features, apparently so cherished by the Catholic world, are, in fact, paid only a lip-service. Looking at the gender-ratio of Catholic saints, one can easily observe the great majority of them are men – before the 20<sup>th</sup> century so was the case with 87 per cent of them [Sheldrake 2012: 40].

### **4.3. Preoccupation with sexual morality**

Finally, the textbook presents married life, which focuses on procreation, as they only option for Catholics who do not choose consecrated life as priests, monks or nuns. The fact that some people may remain single, for a variety of reasons, is not mentioned. Likewise, there are some childless married couples and their relationships are not, by definition, worse or unhappier. People may be infertile or consciously decide they do not want to have offspring for grave reasons – for instance, due to genetically transmitted serious disability or their own poor health. The textbook does not take their situation into consideration although the teenagers using the book may know countless examples of such individuals from their daily lives and, statistically speaking, some of them may lead such a life themselves. Needless to say, the fact that some people are not heterosexual is completely ignored.

Furthermore, the textbook presents typical for many religious denominations obsession with sex life as the area teeming with opportunities for immorality, which is combined with neglect towards other areas of life. It seems that having sex before marriage or using contraception is the worst kind of evil people can do. It is curious, since the Bible discusses other kinds of sin much more frequently: hypocrisy, lack of charity, pride are much more often mentioned. Furthermore, sexual irregularities in the Old Testament are more often presented as crimes against property than cleanliness. Throughout the book teenagers are never told that cheating during exams, dumping garbage in public places, bullying others (especially sexual or ethnic minorities), and abusing animals are morally repulsive yet it would be probably much more appropriate for their age group.



## 5. Formatting

“All the great religions originated in specific cultural contexts”, as Philip Sheldrake [2012: 32] observes. Their imagery and dictates are the product of specific historical, cultural and geographic conditions. For instance, Jewish and Arab people, who lived in desert conditions where health hazards were high, developed a complex system of dietary and hygienic restrictions. Yet, when they attract converts from different regions and spread worldwide, some of these requirements are modified or even abandoned. In a different context they undergo a process of ‘formatting’ to fit the new circumstances [Sheldrake 2012: 32]. In this way, practices, customs and ideas that are not relevant to the principles of faith are rejected.

This is exactly what happened when Christianity was born and its Gentile followers did not regard circumcision or kosher food as the necessary elements of faith. Later, when scientific discoveries undermined the literal interpretation of the Scriptures, most Christians started regarding the Bible as a metaphorical text. The fact that the world was not created in six days and the Earth is not a static centre of the universe does not make them question their religious beliefs.

Looking at the history of Christianity, one can easily observe that there have been many practices that earlier Christians approved of as consistent with their faith that now appear preposterous: public executions, Crusades, slavery, anti-Semitism. The first Christian groups (for instance the Quakers) that preached the equality of the sexes and the abolition of slavery were seen as extreme sects not belonging to the mainstream. Misogyny is so deeply intertwined with the history of Catholicism that relatively few members of the clergy (all male, needless to add) are sensitive to its wrongs. Though the textbook condemns racism and anti-Semitism it does not mention the genocide of witch trials that killed innumerable women in late medieval and early modern Europe. It does not condemn the vicious remarks about women expressed by respected saints and Church fathers.

Sheldrake [2012: 34] writes that “the followers of tradition may resist change and retreat from the new social or cultural realities. Untimely this will lead to death. Or, a tradition reinvents itself and rediscovers its original flexibility as it seeks to respond to the new challenges”. Unless Catholicism, especially in Poland, undergoes the necessary formatting, it will become a religion deprived of any real spiritual significance, restricted to dumb observance of fossilised rites.



## 6. Role and value of religious instruction

Contemporary culture, with its lookism and oversexualisation is not ‘girl-friendly’, to use a colloquial expression. That is why, some parents and educators may believe fostering religious values may be beneficial for children’s well-being as it should protect them, for instance, from premature sexual experiences, drug and alcohol abuse and other dangers to which teenagers are exposed. Nevertheless, it comes at a price of instilling in children harmful gender prejudice and promoting emotionally unhealthy behaviour.

One could assume religious education should deal with issues connected with explaining the doctrine, history of the Church, principles of faith and Christian behaviour – in short, it should teach how to be a better believer and a better human. Obviously, it should contain elements of Christian ethics and social teaching, relevant to the child. Nevertheless, as Magdalena Środa [2005: 656] observes, “the number of practicing Catholics and the number of lessons of religious instruction (two hours a week for over twelve years) has had no impact on lowering crime levels (which remain high), has not increased the degree of public trust (which remains low) or the level of morality in public life”. It seems that the enforced return to traditional values has not influenced the society at all.

## 7. Conclusions

Many members of the Catholic clergy as well as conservative politicians believe gender studies to be incompatible with Christianity. They equate them with other modern ‘evils’ such as feminism, secularisation and liberalism, ignoring a rather obvious observation that atheists and agnostics (and in all likelihood liberals and feminists) are seldom more immoral and prone to commit serious crimes than believers. In fact, quite the opposite is often true as countries with the highest levels of crime are inhabited by people who identify themselves with one of the majors world religions, Christianity included, while predominantly secular states have relatively low crime levels, high degree of social trust and involvement of citizens in various charities [Blackford, Schüklenk 2014]. Still, even people who value the role of organised religion in their lives and identify themselves with Catholicism, should be able to combine gender awareness and belief in the necessity of fighting gender stereotypes with their beliefs. Christianity was born as an *avant-garde* religion, liberating the previously oppressed groups such as women, slaves or the lower classes. Christ had female followers, friends and

disciples, often valuing them more than his male companions. The first century of Christianity produced female spiritual leaders [Clark, Richardson (eds.) 1977: 6, 33-34]. The misogyny that later appeared within Christianity was the effect of Judaism and prejudices of the pagan antiquity [Warner 1983: 177-178, 186]. It is high time these cultural traces, alien to the spirit of Christ, were noticed and eliminated by the Catholic Church.

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### **„Stworzył mężczyznę i niewiastę” czy „nie ma już mężczyzny ani kobiety”. Stereotypy płci kulturowej w podręczniku do nauczania religii w gimnazjum**

**Streszczenie.** Kościół rzymskokatolicki w Polsce widzi w badaniach nad płcią kulturową zagrożenie dla tradycyjnego nauczania na temat rodziny i ról płciowych. W lęku tym widać brak zrozumienia dla pojęcia gender i błędne utożsamianie tzw. tradycyjnej rodziny z przekonaniami religijnymi. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wyników analizy podręcznika do nauczania religii dla gimnazjum pod kątem zawartych w nim stereotypów płciowych oraz ich konsekwencji. Przede wszystkim podręcznik zrównuje płć biologiczną z kulturową i zakłada istnienie stałych różnic psychologicznym między mężczyznami a kobietami, które determinują ich role społeczne. Różnice te przedstawione są w stereotypowy sposób. Konsekwencją takiego przedstawienia może być brak samodzielności ekonomicznej kobiet, osłabienie ich zdrowia psychicznego i przyzwolenie na męską dominację i przemoc. Warto jednak pamiętać, że te negatywne stereotypy nie są nieodłączną częścią chrześcijaństwa, lecz wynikiem włączenia do niego mizoginii Starego Testamentu i filozofii starożytnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja, gender, Kościół rzymskokatolicki, płć, rola społeczna, rodzina, stereotyp