# The religiosity of young Poles and the development of the Internet against the background of American experiences

**Abstract:** The article concerns selected problems in the development of the Internet in terms of its impact on the religious attitudes of young Poles. On the base of the research on the use of the Internet and the development of religiosity, their situation is presented in the context of the situation of American teenagers. Americans are one of the largest media markets and have strong and traditional Christian communities. Therefore, certain trends in religious attitudes could have appeared earlier and outlined more strongly there than in other parts of the world. Which of them are reflected in the Polish situation? How is the Internet used by young users in the United States and Poland? Is there anything specific to the Polish situation in shaping religious attitudes via the Internet? The final results of the comparative analysis undertaken are to lead to conclusions showing the characteristics of the Internet that enable it to influence the shaping of the world-view and to forecast directions in which these changes may go. Research on the Internet's influence on religiosity has a short history, but dynamic changes in both religiosity and technology call for the opening of new research spaces.

**Keywords:** changes in religiosity, Internet, youth, Poland

## Introduction

Marshall McLuhan wrote several decades ago about the possibilities of new technologies in the sphere of influencing changes in human life. He believed that they would be more and more a part of ourselves. This "lengthening" of a human being results from "new propositions introduced into our lives through (...) each new technical means" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Continuing

the thought of McLuhan, John Culkin in the 1960s noted that the human first starts to create technology and then technology begins to transform the human. It shapes our understanding of values, the world and humanity. So we are dealing with psychological and social implications of technological development (Culkin, 1967).

The intensity of saturation of the closest human environment with technology is so high that it must affect every aspect of life. Initially, it sparked enthusiasm resulting from the discovery of completely new possibilities for human development of knowledge (Turkle, 1984). With time, the dangers of technological development began to be noticed, not only because of its negative impact on children and adolescents, but also because of its "humanistic expansionism." Neil Postman in the 1980s warned against the difficulties that new technologies can generate. He criticised television, which dominated the electronic media of that time (Postman, 1985, 1992). He did this especially in the context of upbringing and education. He believed that in many ways technology threatened human development, especially that of children and adolescents. It is not only a set of algorithms or procedures, but also shaping qualitatively completely new relations (Postman, 1996). In the place of human emotions, emotions are simulated by appropriate algorithms. Sherry Turkle notes that thanks to the so-called social robotics and affective information science, a completely new class of devices appeared, which were not so much supposed to perform specific tasks for humans, but to accompany them (Turkle, 1995, 2011). The ties that were created, which were often referred to as "para-social" ones, more and more easily win the competition with what has so far been considered the domain of typically human behaviour (today you can miss not only another human being, but also a smartphone or a digital dog-like toy – AIBO). According to David L. Levy, a loving relationship with a robot will become normal, being much more attractive for a person, making their life more colourful and safe. The robot will not betray or break a given word (Levy, 2007). Yet, this trend can also be considered a way to escape from responsibility and moral convenience (Turkle, 2011). There are growing concerns that interactions with devices and software will negatively affect communication with people. This may have a number of consequences related to the development of social competences and the sense of personal dignity (Fukuyama, 2018).

It is not surprising that with such an intense saturation of the human environment with technology, it must have an impact on the religiosity of young people, especially young people for whom new technologies are an

important part of their lives. This is especially true of the internet and social media. The research on their influence on religiosity is in the early stage. An additional difficulty is the dynamics of changes in digital media, which can undergo significant transformations in a short time (enough to mention how quickly Facebook significantly reduced its share in the MySpace market).

Comparative research in pedagogy has undergone methodological crises of various kinds. This often took place because such research dealt with phenomena that stood on the periphery of processes related to education (Bray, Adamson and Mason, 2007; Manzon, 2018). Comparativists focus their attention on different cultures and countries. They see educational research in a broader social context (Milošević and Maksimović, 2020). Education-related phenomena are often closely linked to social change (Goodson and Lindblad, 2011; Kelly, 2016). In this context, comparison becomes an appropriate method of illustrating easily overlooked aspects in home systems. This provides an opportunity to learn from the experiences of others.

The research on the impact of the Internet on young users has long been overshadowed by similar research on television. Since the beginning of the 21st century, and especially after the emergence of social media, research priorities have shifted as the time spent online has started to equal the time spent in front of television screens. The research on the impact of the Internet on young users has been growing. It mainly concerns social life and interpersonal relationships in the broadest sense (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Comstock and Scharrer, 2007; Garr, 2011; Castells, 2012).

Over time, the global perspective in research gave way to a range of specific issues. Issues related to religious life have emerged, particularly regarding the level of practice or acceptance of moral principles based on spiritual messages (Szewczyk, 2008; Ammerman, 2013; Campbell, 2018, Bull, 2018). Nevertheless, Downey's (2014) and McClere's (2017) studies can be considered groundbreaking. They focus exclusively on the impact of the Internet on religiosity by distinguishing an exciting category of people who do not admit to any religion, the so-called nones.

The research on the influence of the Internet on religiosity, which was undertaken quite recently, mainly revealed the weakening of traditional religious attitudes by this network. A lot of space is devoted to the so-called nones, people who do not show any religious affiliation, although they may consider themselves religious. This is spirituality without religiosity (Mercadante, 2014). Allen Downey believes their numbers started to increase with the explosion in the growth of the Internet network. His research shows that

this is not the only factor, but of great importance (2014). Paul McClure has shown that the Internet influences beliefs and patterns, but not religious behaviour. Due to pluralism and multiple world-views, the Internet encourages the construction of different, new, individual world-view concepts and the rejection of truth claims of any religious tradition. The Internet reduces loyalty to a religious institution, but does not have to reduce the level of religious practice. It can, however, open the way to "combined spirituality" (McClure, 2017).

To what extent can new technologies influence changes in religiosity, especially in the young generation? Is it a global or local process? Is the Internet a tool for secularisation? The comparative analysis proposed in this paper concerns two geographically distant countries. Poland is considered a traditionally Catholic country. The religiosity of Poles has been shaped by the history and images of a "Pole the Catholic" or a "Bulwark of Christianity". At the same time, the young generation lives in a global village created by digital media. In many aspects of its life, it resembles more teenagers from Western Europe and the United States than it adheres to the ideals of their parents. The phenomena related to the technological pressure on spirituality in the American market are much more glaring due to its size. It can be assumed that certain processes, if they take place somewhere, will be best visible where the saturation with new technologies is high. At the same time, in the United States, there is a strong segment of Christian Churches with a number of denominations and the mega-church phenomenon being characteristic of this country. Since Polish youth use new technologies in a very similar way as their American peers, perhaps their religious attitudes will undergo similar transformations.

## New trends in religious attitudes of young US residents

A trend which has been clearly dealt with for two decades and which was marked even in the early 1990s is an increase in the number of people without religious affiliation. In the 1970s and 1980s, it remained relatively constant. However, a clear change was noticed in the 1990s (Schwadel, 2010). In the three decades since the beginning of the 1990s, the number of people without religious affiliation has doubled, and according to the PewResearch Centre's forecasts, at the beginning of this decade it is expected to be one in four Americans (PewResearch Centre, 2019). The number of people in early adulthood is rapidly increasing in this group. Among the so-called younger

millennials, the percentage of people who do not admit to any religion is as high as 36%. Young women are slightly outnumbered by men. White residents and university students predominate. Young people whose families have lived in the USA for generations more often deprive themselves of religious affiliation than those who have just arrived or are second-generation US citizens. The lack of religious affiliation does not mean a complete rejection of supernatural reality. Some declare faith in God, heaven and hell or prayer (PewResearch Centre, 2015). The family seems to be primarily responsible for this state of affairs, where the intergenerational transmission of faith has been abandoned. The family ceased to be a religious environment and many families ceased to show any religious preferences.

However, Downey mentions two other reasons for the decline in religious affiliation apart from this apparently obvious cause. Although he believes that the lack of religious education in the family is responsible for 25% of cases of a decline in religious affiliation, an increase in the number of people with higher education is responsible for 5% of cases. On the other hand, 20% of the resignation from religious affiliation was attributed by Downey to the increase in the intensity of the Internet use (Downey, 2014).

When one looks at when the flight of religious Americans towards the nones began, it can be noticed that the beginning of this phenomenon coincided with the availability of websites. Computer interfaces then became more friendly and encouraging to interaction. First, the network began to attract with its possibilities, aesthetics and communicative usefulness. The 1990s was an uncritical approach to the Internet, which was supposed to be a way to build a knowledge society. A similar change, which further strengthened the position of the Internet, took place in 2007 with the first iPhone.

Parents in the 1980s and 1990s often expressed concern that their children were overusing TV. Today, these children have their own children and model their children's screen habits. Technological innovations, symbolised by the first iPhone, have dominated modern tablets and smartphones, making it possible to effectively catch children's attention at the screens (Bull, 2018).

The group of people looking for spirituality in non-institutional sources is growing. This is called spirituality of seeking. Faith ceases to be inherited, but becomes a personal achievement. It is built on the basis of one's own experiences and is eclectic in nature (Wuthnow, 2003). One can also look for various kinds of substitutes for the traditional faith. Faith in science and technology becomes such an attractive substitute. One can talk about faith here, because scientists only predict certain models or put forward hypotheses,

the confirmation of which is often missing for a very long time. For many, however, this becomes scientific orthodoxy. The Large Hadron Collider (Orr, 2021) becomes the symbol of these "divine" learning opportunities for many people. The crisis of traditional religious narratives also shows that there is no vacuum when it comes to spirituality. Humanity tries to find some fragmentary narration or construct a kind of religious meta-narration. However, the human being lacks philosophical and theological skills. Zygmunt Bauman, even though he considered himself an agnostic, believed that a sense of religious meaning and a reference to transcendence would be extremely refreshing for the present day (Bauman, 2012).

This, however, requires commitment. Religiousness is, after all, practices, organisation and interactions (Beckford, 2006). The Internet allows you to be lazy and justifies it. American parents in the first stage of the intensive development of this network were full of enthusiasm for it, because they did not have to worry about what their children were doing on the street. They stayed at home in front of the computers. Today, in the era of wireless Internet, which is most often used, it is difficult to make an electronic nanny. However, the incentive to reduce social activity and replace it with online activity is even more timely. Spending time online simply gives people more satisfaction than living in the real world. The life of an avatar on the Second Life internet platform, popular at the beginning of the 21st century, was much more attractive and rewarding than living in the real world. In their initial assumptions, social media were supposed to reflect relations that actually exist between people (e.g. between students at Harvard University, where Marc Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, studied). However, they quickly "noticed" completely new possibilities, and instead of reflecting relationships, they began to model them. The testimony of Francis Haugen, a former Facebook employee, submitted to a special committee of the US Congress in the fall of 2021, shed a totally new light on this. What united the representatives of both American parties was the corporation's approach to children. Haugen cited examples of how Facebook knowingly profits from products that harm children. She stated that the catalogue of rules by which social media content is moderated was unclear and changed frequently. Instead of focusing on what users publish on the Internet, one should pay attention to the algorithms that make these and not other entries visible (Levine, 2021).

People who spend a lot of time on the Internet somehow inherit the ways of thinking found in the Internet. The narrative related to traditional religions is definitely not dominant there. Thanks to the appropriate algorithms,

people often obtain negative information or even fake news. In the Internet, one usually receives more information than is needed and one is able to process. This excess does not increase the level of reflective and critical thinking skills. It certainly does not develop what has traditionally been termed "wisdom." This rather pertains to quick and reflex reactions and becomes a communication standard (how quickly you can lead to an outpouring of hatred on a web portal). The Internet can make its users intellectually numb (Garr, 2011). Most users fail to perceive that they are being treated as an object. It is not a relationship-based community whose only reward is the presence that is offered to itself. Users pay for online presence by disclosing their e-mails, contact details, information about shopping or lifestyle (Fitzpatrick, 2010). It is not a good place for a religious community whose members should give each other selfless acceptance. More than ever in the past, young Internet users receive information from various sources. Parents only have relative control over this. The so-called surfing the web means jumping from context to context quickly and can entail misinterpretation.

Intensive use of the Internet leads to the creation of a specific relationship between man and technology. It can replace authorities, including religious ones. Technology intensifies individualism and increases communication distances between people. There is no room for interactions that create a real religious bond and community.

For many US church leaders, however, technology has become an effective tool for building religious organisations rather than communities. First it was the television, today there is the Internet, the more so as it easily attracts young people. Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, American religious communities existed online through e-mail addresses and websites. In the second decade, an intense expansion in social media began. In the few years to 2010, the Facebook presence of Christian congregations reached 41% (Thumma, 2010). Many church leaders are fascinated by the possibilities of new technologies. They also want to use them as an educational tool. The vast majority, however, use the Internet to promote the message and persuade people to convert. However, as research on religiosity, especially among young Americans, shows, such activities on the Internet do not increase religious attitudes. On the contrary, the increase in the time spent on the Internet is accompanied by a decline in the religiosity of young Americans. The extent to which the use of the Internet is responsible for this is not yet fully known. However, the first studies on the subject seem to confirm that the link is obvious. Will the United States soon become a post-Christian

country? One can hear voices of anxiety today. Emeritus Catholic Archbishop of Philadelphia Charles Chaput, a native American from the Potawatomi tribe, writes that a Christian today feels like a stranger in a foreign land in the United States (Chaput, 2017). On the other hand, another American religious leader, Rod Dreher, believes that Christians in the USA should be prepared to survive in small enclaves, because they will find themselves (or already find themselves) in the position of Christians after the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 and during the Migration Period in Europe (Dreher, 2017).

## Religious attitudes of Polish youth and the use of the Internet at the beginning of the 21st century

The religiosity of Poles is often regarded as proverbial. However, what was characteristic and often incomprehensible for researchers from the West was that it concerned all social groups, including teenagers. In 1988, over 70% of young people participated in Sunday services (Mariański, 2019). The situation began to change after the fall of communism in 1989. The processes of secularisation and individualisation began to have an increasing impact on religious attitudes. Although it was not a sudden process, its direction was clearly marked and the speed of change was increasing. Religiousness was privatised and faith in the sphere of dogmatics and moral science was experienced selectively. Secularisation particularly affected institutional relations and this trend has never been reversed (Marody and Mandes, 2007). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the process has significantly accelerated. There were moments of spiritual awakening at that time, such as after the death of John Paul II in 2005. In 2013, only 14% of young people accepted fully Catholic sexual ethics (Mariański, 2015). There was also a drop of several dozen percent in the religious practices of young people compared to the 1990s. A significant collapse occurred in the second decade of the 21st century after various scandals in the Catholic Church. In a study conducted in 2021, nearly 60% of adolescents said that their faith had weakened significantly in the last two years. However, almost the same number of people considered themselves believers. 73% of young Poles expressed distrust towards Catholic hierarchs, but almost the same number trusted Pope Francis (Zawadka, 2021).

There have also been significant changes in the religious affiliation of young Poles. The number of declared members of the Catholic Church has decreased since the fall of communism by almost 11% in 2017. They did not

join other religious denominations, but there was a group of young people who did not admit to any religion (8.7%). The changes intensified after 2005. It is very likely that they will continue. In the group of young people formally identified as Catholics, many describe themselves as indecisive, indifferent or even non-believers (Mariański, 2019).

To what extent did the development of the Internet contribute to these changes in the religious attitudes of Polish youth? The official beginning of the Internet operation in Poland is considered to be August 1991. Then a researcher at the University of Warsaw was to send an e-mail to his colleague from the University of Copenhagen. However, it was not until December this year that the Americans removed all restrictions resulting from the Cold War sanctions. The digital curtain was lifted almost two and a half years after the fall of communism in Poland. Initially, the network was of interest mainly to research centres. However, it quite quickly adopted the same direction and dynamics of development as in other parts of the world.

The rise of social media and mobile Internet significantly increased the level of involvement of Polish teenagers in the network. Since 2014, the Scientific and Academic Computer Network – National Research Institute (NASK) has been conducting regular research on the way the young use the Internet. According to a 2020 study, 92% of Polish teenagers use the web via smartphones. The amount of time spent on the Internet is also increasing. The same research shows an average of 4 hours and 50 minutes a day. Yet, 11.5% of teenagers spend 8 hours or more there. The average age of digital initiation is 6 years and 8 months. Usually, the amount of time spent online is much higher than parents believe (NASK, 2020). The recruitment-affiliative nature of participation in the network prevails. On the one hand, Polish teenagers look for entertainment on the Internet (e.g. movies or games), and on the other, they treat the web as a tool of belonging to a group (NASK, 2019).

Can the Internet have an impact on the religious life of Polish teenagers? The teenagers themselves confirm that it has. Every fifth respondent in the NASK study answers that it is a positive effect. Still, almost the same percentage say the opposite. The largest group (55%) has no opinion (NASK, 2019). The Internet is treated as a source of religious knowledge. This is what every third Polish teenager declares. On the other hand, the specificity of the network makes the acquired knowledge relative. Everyone decides about their direction of research. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about systematic knowledge in the academic sense (Górny, 2007). Despite this, every fourth teenager declares that thanks to the Internet they have enriched their religious

knowledge (NASK, 2019). The Internet is also becoming a place of religious persecution. This has affected 4–6% of teenagers in the last few years. The research from 2020 revealed such cases in relation to 4.3% of young Internet users (NASK, 2021).

Undoubtedly, the Internet can influence the religiosity of young Poles. This seems to be one of the many factors that are decisively and systematically changing religious attitudes today. As noted by the well-known researcher of the religiosity of Polish youth, Janusz Mariański, "in the conditions of the intensifying processes of deinstitutionalisation and individualisation in society, there is a spontaneous, bottom-up pressure exerted on the Church to leave to individuals the decision to define the meaning of religiosity in life and the ways of experiencing it" (Mariański, 2011, p. 74).

In Polish society, there is a process of transition from moral absolutism towards relativism and selective morality, the first inspiration of which does not have to be religious. For many, it becomes obvious that moral systems can also be created and justified beyond Catholicism. Religious premises have not disappeared, but are no longer the sole material that builds up the system of ethics. This is largely the result of the fall of authority and reluctance to accept their arguments (Mariański, 2015). The past thirty years have shown that the process of secularisation is progressing, although not as fast as in other countries of Western Europe and North America. The religious practice of young people, especially religious instruction at school, is becoming a less mass phenomenon. The phenomenon of distrust towards the church hierarchy does not have to continue, but it will largely depend on the actions of the Church. On the other hand, a certain type of religiosity, which has been dominant so far, may be marginalised. If there is a far-reaching individualisation of religious choices, the Internet will probably become a leading force here, even pushing aside the intergenerational message. Despite these negative tendencies, in the August 2021 survey, 87.4% of Poles declared themselves to be religious and deeply religious. Even among the youngest surveyed group (18–24 years old), this percentage was 71%. However, when it comes to fulfilling religious practices, a very significant decrease is already dealt with (from 69% in 1992 to 23% in 2021). There is therefore a significant discrepancy between declarations and practice (CBOS, 2021).

The process of secularisation of the young generation is therefore more about turning away from the institution of the Church and not about an immediate break with transcendence. A significant amount of time spent by young Poles on using the Internet may have a significant impact on world-

view changes – not only as regards departing from faith, but also as regards the changes in living and articulating it. The Internet today puts a young person in the situation in which St. Paul was on the Greek Areopagus (Acts 17, pp. 16–35) – only with the difference that the Apostle brought his offer there, while the modern young generation often treats this situation as a kind of "spiritual supermarket" where you can find something that you currently want.

## Conclusion

The young generation is undoubtedly under pressure from digital tools. They represent for them both a technological and a worldview attraction. The American experience shows how this process is intensifying. Young Polish Internet users are also a growing and more active group. Although many religious communities try to make their presence felt online, this fades in comparison to other offers. It seems vital to understand how the Internet can influence the departure of young people from the Church and the growth of a group of people who do not identify with any religion. Although there is a lot of information and detailed reports on the Internet use by the young, this kind of research is still lacking in Poland. The Internet undoubtedly has a number of features that make it an effective tool for influencing the worldview, especially of young people who have little life experience. The most important are the following:
  – stimulation of individualism;
  – promotion of uncomplicated ideological solutions, devoid of deeper justifications and contexts;
  – algorithms (especially in social media) stimulating interactions;
  – relative independence from parents and guardians;
  – mobility (network interactions take teenagers longer than any other activity).
   In confrontation with traditional religious communities, the Internet has a power that no medium in the history of human development has had before. The persuasive nature of Internet messages supported by tools attractive to young users must also bring results in the area of their religiosity. What is taking place with the religious attitudes of young Poles in many respects reflects the situation in the United States. First of all, there are more and more people who reject any religious affiliation. The percentage of young people engaging in religious practices is falling. These changes, however, take

place much slowlier and it is possible to periodically slow the trend significantly or even to reverse it.

Polish and American youth at the same time entered the period of intensive use of new technologies. In the USA, it was simply related to its development, in Poland, with the fall of communism and the fall of the Iron Curtain, also in the digital sphere. The aforementioned features of the Internet can lead to the following trends in religious attitudes among young people:

– change of traditional religious attitudes (e.g. in the sphere of rites and customs related to church holidays);
– decreased loyalty to the religious community;
– promotion of combined spirituality;
– building a syncretic religious world-view;
– diversionary religious knowledge;
– development of non-religious sources of truth.

The Internet puts pressure on young people not only in the sphere of religiosity. This also applies to moral, political and economic issues. The sphere of religiosity, however, is so intimate that so far it has not been imagined that it can be influenced in the same way as by views on politics or economics. However, digital tools are so attractive to young users that they become the easiest way to change religious attitudes. It seems that traditional Polish religiosity still has extra-network "reserves" of tools for the intergenerational transfer of religious attitudes. However, they are under increasing pressure from technology. For many young people, the Church seems distant and the smartphone is always at hand.

There may be practical reasons for this. It is essential to prepare a reasonable offer for people who neither identify with the Church nor are particularly hostile towards it. These Polish "nones" will be a group which is likely to grow shortly, and the Internet may become (and probably already is) the leading cause of this phenomenon.

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