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ETHICS AND/OR RELIGION AT SCHOOL. CORRELATION OR COMPETITION? ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' OPINIONS

ETYKA I/LUB RELIGIA W SZKOLE. KORELACJA CZY KONKURENCJA? ANALIZA OPINII UCZNIÓW

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera analizę wyników badań empirycznych przeprowadzonych wśród młodzieży w polskich szkołach średnich. Głównym problemem badawczym było uzyskanie odpowiedzi na pytanie o relacje, jakie zachodzą pomiędzy lekcjami religii a lekcjami etyki oraz poznanie opinii uczniów, którzy wybierają jeden z przedmiotów bądź rezygnują z obu. W czasie badań młodzież wyrażała swoje poglądy na temat wyboru między lekcjami religii i etyki, nauczyciele prowadzących zajęcia z tych przedmiotów, a także propozycje tematów, które powinny być

omawiane na lekcjach etyki. Wbrew powszechnym opiniom sugerującym wrogą konkurencję pomiędzy lekcjami religii i etyki badania wykazały, że lekcje etyki mogą być komplementarne dla lekcji religii i nie są dla niej zagrożeniem.

Słowa kluczowe: lekcje religii, lekcje etyki, nauczyciele etyki, zagadnienie etyczne

Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the results of empirical research conducted among students in Polish high schools. The primary research question aimed to obtain answers regarding the justification and conditions of the presence of religious and ethics classes in schools and their mutual relationships. During the research, students expressed their opinions on the choice between religious and ethics classes, the teachers conducting these classes, and proposed topics that should be discussed in ethics classes. Contrary to common opinions suggesting hostile competition between religious and ethics classes, the research showed that ethics classes can be complementary to religious classes and are not a threat to them.

Keywords: religious lessons, ethics lessons, ethics teachers, ethical issue

Introduction¹

In 1990, when religious education was reintroduced to schools, the then-Minister of National Education stated in a directive announcing this decision: "The catechesis of children and youth conveys fundamental ethical and moral values as part of the educational process (...). Opening up to religion and Christian ethical values will significantly enrich the educational process for this generation."² The Polish state, by restoring religious classes in public schools, anticipated that religious education would contribute to the moral and ethical revival of the younger generation. It is evident that religious education, which includes religious upbringing as one of its aims, impacts the integral development of the individual. This form of upbringing constitutes an intentional influence on the pupil, carried out within a specific context, focused on actualizing Christian values to foster positive changes in the individual's personality, including the biological, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual spheres.³

Axiological education, whether in the religious or ethical dimension, should be incorporated into the educational objectives of the school, as it directly influences the integral development of young people. Every developmental process has its own dynamics,

¹ The research was funded by the state budget under the Ministry of Education and Science program "Nauka dla Społeczeństwa" (Science for Society), project number Nds/537097/2022/2022, with a funding amount of 780,538 PLN, and the total project value of 780,538 PLN.

² Minister of National Education, "Instrukcja dotycząca powrotu nauczania religii do szkoły w roku szkolnym 1990/91," in *Aspekty prawne nauczania religii rzymskokatolickiej w polskim systemie oświatowym*, ed. Stanisław Łabendowicz (Radom: Wydawnictwo Ave, 2001), 8–11.

³ Helena Słotwińska, *Wychowanie chrześcijańskie szansą integralnego rozwoju człowieka* (Kraków: Impuls, 2019), 15.

undergoing continuous transformations and changes. This naturally generates the need for ongoing empirical research in a constantly evolving reality. Thus, the primary research problems in this study involve examining youth opinions on which classes they prefer to attend—religious education or ethics. Who should lead ethics classes? What topics should be addressed in ethics? These issues will be presented in the following sections: 1) religious and ethics classes within the school education system, 2) research methodology, 3) choice between religious education and ethics classes, 4) educators for ethics classes, and 5) topics suggested by youth for ethics classes.

1. Religious and Ethics Classes within the School Education System

The preamble to the Act on the Education System of September 7, 1991, later amended on January 21 and February 18, 2000⁴, states that education and upbringing, respecting the Christian value system, adopt universal ethical principles as foundational. Education must be education oriented toward values. Values serve as benchmarks for life choices and aspirations, determining personal development. The adopted value system forms the basis for selecting specific behaviors as well as the purpose and meaning of life⁵. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the call to reintroduce religious education as a school subject in 1990 was met with approval from the majority of Polish society, including parents, children, and youth. The return of religious education to schools was perceived as an act of social justice and as an outcome of Poland's transformative changes, offering an opportunity to overcome the dichotomy in education and to extend religious education to children and youth who, due to objective reasons, had difficulty attending religious classes⁶.

One of the first legal acts regulating current religious and ethics education in Polish schools was the directive issued by the Minister of National Education on April 14, 1992, regarding the conditions and methods of organizing religious education in public schools⁷. This directive, in its first paragraph, designated ethics as an alternative subject to religious education in public schools. According to the directive, "In public primary and secondary

⁴ Act of September 7, 1991, on the Education System, as amended on January 21 and February 18, 2000, consolidated text according to: Journal of Laws No. 67, item 329 and No. 106, item 496 of 1996; No. 28, item 153 and No. 141, item 943 of 1997; No. 117, item 759 and No. 162, item 1126 of 1998; No. 12, item 136 and No. 19, item 239 of 2000.

⁵ Dariusz Sarzała, „Wychowanie do wartości w dobie pluralizmu”, *Wychowawca* 9 (2000): 4–7.

⁶ Jan Szpet, „Szkolna lekcja religii szans w procesie ewangelizacji”, in: *Ewangelizacja a edukacja w trzecim tysiącleciu*, ed. Andrzej Kryski (Czestochowa: Akademia Polonijna, 2002), 165–166.

⁷ Regulation of the Minister of National Education of April 14, 1992, on the conditions and methods of organizing religious education in public schools: Journal of Laws of 1992, No. 36, item 155, as amended.

schools, hereafter referred to as schools, religious and ethics education is organized within the school curriculum for students whose parents (legal guardians) express such a wish; in secondary schools, for students whose parents or the students themselves express such a wish. Upon reaching adulthood, students decide on their participation in religious or ethics education (...) Participation or non-participation in school-based religious or ethics education cannot be grounds for discrimination by anyone in any form.”⁸ In the first sentence of the quoted section concerning the school’s obligations between religious and ethics classes, the conjunction “and” is used. The same conjunction appears in the subsequent sentence discussing student autonomy in deciding on these subjects. However, in the final sentence regarding undesirable phenomena in school—specifically, discrimination as a consequence of participating or not participating in religious or ethics classes—the opposing conjunction “or” appears. This differentiation within a single paragraph results not only in interpretive differences in the regulations but also in serious linguistic and mental implications. A mindset has emerged in society that perceives religious and ethics classes as competing with each other.⁹ “These subjects are viewed in opposition to each other, as though knowledge of a particular religion eliminates the need or opportunity to understand ethical norms, often those of normative ethics associated with a specific concept of humanity and worldview, not necessarily a particular religion. However, let us state clearly that this is precisely how the majority of society, including students and teachers, even ethics teachers, views this pairing.”¹⁰

For some time, discussions in the press and public debates have led to the conclusion that ethics classes should be mandatory. Supporting arguments include the need to provide ethical education to all students, regardless of their worldview. Currently, ethics, alongside religious education, is an optional subject in schools. Attendance in ethics classes is voluntary for children and youth. Some people also mistakenly equate ethics with religion or vice versa. This confusion is especially prevalent in situations where religious education teachers lead ethics classes. In such cases, ethics classes are often improperly evaluated regarding their validity in the school setting. It is argued that religious education teachers find it difficult to

⁸ Regulation of the Minister of National Education of April 14, 1992, Journal of Laws of 1992, No. 36, §1, para. 1.

⁹ Joanna Madali ska-Michalak, Antoni J. Jeowski, Szymon Wiśław, *Etyka w systemie edukacji w Polsce* (Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer, 2017), 32–33.

¹⁰ Madali ska-Michalak, Jeowski, Wiśław, *Etyka w systemie edukacji w Polsce*, 38.

detach from catechetical thinking. However, it is often overlooked that ethics—properly understood—is based on universal values. These values, in turn, align with Christian values¹¹.

In recent years, the number of students attending religious education classes has been decreasing, while participation in ethics classes has not increased, as both subjects remain non-compulsory. Consequently, there is a justified concern that children and young people are deprived of any form of axiological education.

The current legal status of ethics and religious education means that, in practice, students often either choose only one of these subjects or abstain entirely from both. Students are permitted to refrain from selecting either of these subjects, meaning they are not obligated to attend either religious education or ethics classes at all. This approach seems inappropriate, as, given the importance of ethics in nurturing the younger generation, it would be advisable to consider the mandatory inclusion of these classes in the core curricula of primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, allowing students the option to forgo both religious and ethics classes lacks an educational basis¹².

In response, the Ministry of Education and Science planned to implement a policy requiring students to attend either religious education or ethics classes, effective from September 1, 2023. However, despite the Ministry's previous announcements, this has not occurred. The Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Bishops' Conference was also awaiting the introduction of these new regulations and expressed a clear need to support the government initiative for compulsory ethics classes. Value-oriented education is a shared responsibility of the family, the state, and the Church community. This issue is crucial for the effective realization of the school's educational and formative functions. A calm and substantive public debate is necessary, one that would lead to a consensus regarding the vital role of ethics education and the specific formative value it provides.

One reason for the delay or abandonment of mandatory ethics instruction may be the insufficient number of qualified ethics teachers. According to data from the Ministry of Education in 2022, ethics classes were offered in only 2,753 of Poland's 20,738 schools, or 13% of schools. Ethics classes were provided in 2,007 primary schools, 452 general high schools, 173 technical schools, and 121 other secondary institutions. There were 3,884 individual ethics teachers (amounting to 720 full-time equivalents), including 3,117 teachers in primary schools (560 FTEs), 461 in general high schools (102 FTEs), 176 in technical schools (35 FTEs), and 130 in other secondary schools (23 FTEs).

¹¹ Jerzy Kistorz, „Korelacja lekcji religii z etyk – sens czy bezsens?”, *Teologia praktyczna* 19 (2018): 91.

¹² Kistorz, „Korelacja lekcji religii z etyk – sens czy bezsens?”, 94.

2. Methodology of Empirical Research

To address the questions posed above, certain findings from empirical research conducted as part of the project "Religious Education of Polish Youth—Current State, Opportunities, and Challenges," coordinated by the authors of this article, were utilized. As part of this project, quantitative research was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023, involving 1,670 secondary school students (875 females and 785 males) from across Poland. In line with the research design, a minimum of 100 students were surveyed in each of the 16 provinces.

The research was conducted via an in-person survey, facilitated by a specialized company, using a questionnaire developed by theologians, sociologists, educators, and psychologists. The questionnaire comprised 53 questions, including dichotomous questions, single-choice closed questions, multiple-choice closed questions, semi-open questions, scale questions, and open-ended questions. For the section of the questionnaire relevant to this article, primarily single-choice closed questions were used. During the design of the research tool and data collection, it was assumed that all students could participate, including those who were not currently attending religious education classes, though they might have attended in the past.

The majority of respondents identified as formally affiliated with the Catholic Church (73.6%). A substantial percentage of youth did not identify with any religious affiliation (12.8%) or could not clearly answer the question regarding religious affiliation (7.5%). The remaining 6.1% represented other religions and denominations, such as Judaism, Buddhism, or Orthodoxy. Although a total of approximately 80% of surveyed students declared formal affiliation with some denomination, only 46% of them identified as believers (38% as believers; 7.7% as deeply religious). One in five students (21.4%) considered themselves religiously undecided but attached to religious tradition. Additionally, 11.4% of respondents described themselves as religiously indifferent, while 13.3% identified as non-believers. It is noteworthy that 8.2% of respondents found it difficult to clearly define their attitude toward faith. Another significant observation is that among respondents from rural areas, only 9.3% identified as non-believers, while in the largest cities, with populations exceeding 500,000, the percentage of non-believing youth was 28.6%.

The results analyzed in this article do not pertain to objective criteria defining the quality of the entire didactic process but rather present the opinions of young people who were asked to subjectively express their preferences for participation in either religious or ethics classes.

Additionally, students were asked to indicate who they believe should teach ethics, what qualifications this teacher should hold, and what primary topics should be covered in ethics classes. This approach offers a new perspective on both religious and ethics classes by giving voice to the intended audience of these classes. In the summaries presented below, if some students who did not attend religion classes answered the posed question, their responses were recorded on the charts, including the option “not applicable.”

3. Choosing Between Religious Education and Ethics

The provision of ethics classes in public schools in Poland, like religious education, is possible at the request of parents, following the guidelines established in the 1992 regulation issued by the Ministry of National Education, which has been subject to several amendments. The primary motive for introducing this subject in schools was to provide an alternative educational framework for students whose parents did not request that schools support their children’s religious education in line with their beliefs. In this context, responsibility for determining the curriculum falls on the minister in charge of education and upbringing¹³.

Before presenting the empirical findings on school ethics, it is essential first to recall its definition. Ethics, understood as a philosophical discipline, formulates general moral principles and specific norms governing human conduct through inherent human cognitive faculties, particularly reason (intellect). This discipline thus encompasses issues such as the determination of moral duty, the specifics of moral correctness, the origins of moral evil, and the means for overcoming it. Broadly speaking, ethics is defined as the theory of moral duty in human action or as the study and knowledge of morality as a domain of good and evil¹⁴. A more detailed definition of ethics can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Pedagogy of the 21st Century*, where ethics is described as the study of morality, encompassing a set of values, norms, principles, rules, prohibitions, mandates, and cognitive structures guiding contemporary social life and shaping individuals’ attitudes toward themselves, others, their environment, and the Absolute. Ethics examines theoretical issues (axiological and logical) and analyzes various normative systems and propositions. It includes descriptive-explanatory ethics, normative ethics, meta-ethics, and philosophical anthropology. The first of these, also

¹³ Janusz Podzielny, „Szkolne nauczanie etyki i wychowanie”, in: *Wychowanie w szkole: od bezradno ci ku mo liwo ciom*, ed. Radosław Chałupniak, Tomasz Michalewski, Ewa Smak (Opole, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2014), 363.

¹⁴ Tadeusz Lipko, *Zarys etyki ogólnej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2004), 35; Tadeusz Styczeń, Jarosław Marecki, *ABC etyki* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2005), 5.

known as etiological ethics, deals with the history of morality and ethics, the psychology of morality, and the sociology of morality. The second, normative ethics, defines concepts such as moral good and evil, correctness, justice, rights, duties, and obligations of individuals, and aims—where possible—to create comprehensive and coherent normative ethical systems. The choice of ethical system adopted is critical in this respect. Meta-ethics, on the other hand, addresses the logical and methodological issues of normative ethics, while philosophical anthropology explores questions related to the meaning of human life, human purpose, happiness, and contemporary issues that challenge individuals¹⁵.

This understanding of ethics aligns with the new core curriculum for secondary education, signed in February 2018. In this curriculum, ethics as a school subject seeks to honor ethics as a philosophical discipline with a longstanding tradition, rich theoretical foundation, and numerous practical applications¹⁶. It is worth noting that although the ethics curriculum emphasizes its practical nature, it does not neglect its theoretical dimension. The careful integration of these two aspects of ethics education facilitates the development of a fundamental educational skill—thinking—which, according to the general education core curriculum, arises from a continuous interaction between theorizing (general concepts) and specific simulations and actions (particular instances)¹⁷. The proposed goals and content of ethics education thus have a practical and formative nature. Ethical knowledge aims to shape attitudes, enhance the capacity for independent and critical thinking, and foster reflexivity. It is intended to assist students in taking specific positions and acting in accordance with prevailing norms of social life. Ethics, as a school subject, is emphasized as an integrative force within educational processes in schools, encompassing all teaching and upbringing activities conducted within the framework of school subjects¹⁸.

In contemporary times, moral education is particularly essential, with ethics, including that taught in schools, serving as a key vehicle for its delivery. This does not refer to just any ethics, but to a theory of morality rooted in genuine values that serve humanity. Classical ethics fulfills this role well, offering rational foundations to explain the essence of human actions, particularly the reasons why an action may be deemed good or evil. Ethics, especially personalistic ethics, continually emphasizes the superiority of the individual over the state,

¹⁵ Wiesław Szczęsny, „Etyka”, in: *Encyklopedia pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, ed. Tadeusz Pilch (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie, 2003), 1067–1068.

¹⁶ Regulation of the Minister of National Education of January 30, 2018, on the core curriculum for general education in high schools, general secondary schools, technical schools, and second-degree vocational schools: *Journal of Laws of 2018*, item 467.

¹⁷ Regulation of the Minister of National Education of January 30, 2018, *Journal of Laws of 2018*, item 467.

¹⁸ Kosterz, „Korelacja lekcji religii z etyk – sens czy bezsens?”, 93–94.

community, or nature, as well as the necessity to affirm the person for their own sake due to their inherent dignity. A key feature of classical ethics, which can be effectively applied in schools, is its connection with virtue theory. In many areas of life—whether in art, science, or morality—people need to acquire certain skills known as virtues. For example, moral (cardinal) virtues such as prudence, justice, courage, and temperance unquestionably help contemporary individuals recognize and pursue good. These virtues contribute to improved social relations, environmental protection, and an overall moral growth of individuals. The objective here is not blind obedience to legal codes, which one would follow slavishly, but a free choice of good through which a person matures integrally¹⁹.

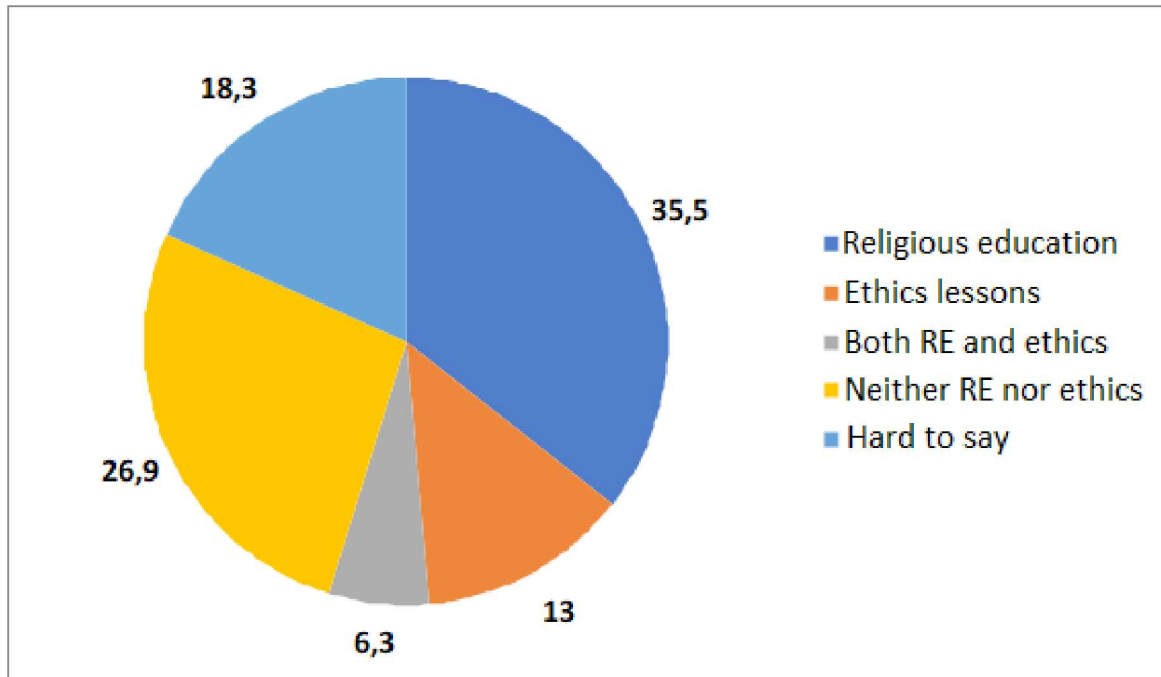
Another issue that indirectly reflects the attitudes of Poles toward religious education in schools is the choice of religion or ethics as a subject for their children. Even in countries where religious education is mandatory, there are options to replace religious education with ethics or even with value studies (covering knowledge about religions, value systems, and selected ethical issues). In some countries, ethics is introduced as either a mandatory or optional subject in place of religious education. Proponents of this solution believe it guarantees the complete worldview neutrality of the school and eliminates potential intolerance toward students who do not attend religion classes. Additionally, there are concerns that religious education in schools may lead to clericalization of the school environment. In Poland, the choice of ethics instead of religious education remains marginal, although there are cases where entire classes opt for ethics over school catechesis. This phenomenon appears to be on the rise, as youth attitudes toward religious and ethics education are diverse.

In school religious education, one of the significant choices students face is whether to attend religion or ethics classes. Many educational institutions currently do not guarantee equal access to both subjects. The largest group of young people (35.5%), if given an unrestrained choice, would opt for religious education, while 13% would choose ethics classes. One in four students (26.9%) would prefer not to attend either religion or ethics classes, while 6.3% would like to participate in both subjects. 18.3% of those surveyed had no opinion on the matter. These findings are illustrated in the following chart.

Chart 1: Hypothetical Choice Between Religion and Ethics Classes (Survey Question 44: "If you had to choose between a religion class and an ethics class, which would you choose?"),

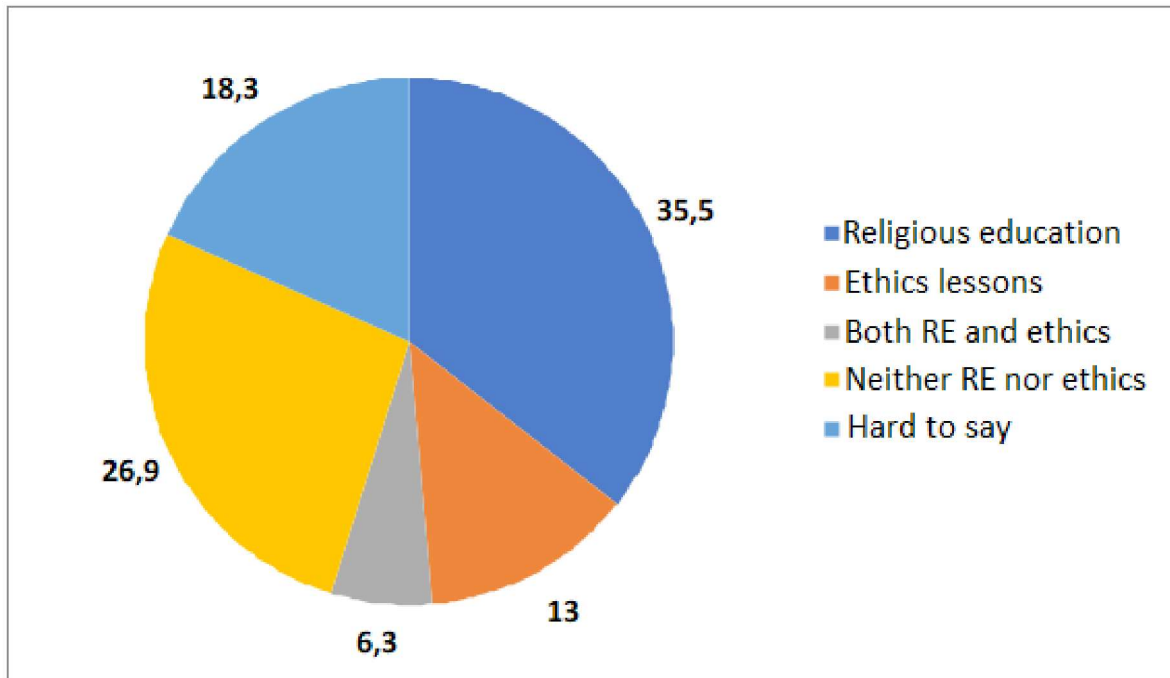
¹⁹ Podzielny, „Szkolne nauczanie etyki i wychowanie”, 366; Piotr Jaroszyński, *Etyka. Dramat życia moralnego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sióstr Loretanek 2002), 9–12.

N=1670 (percentages for all respondents).



It is noteworthy that nearly one-fifth of the youth currently attending religious education would not choose either religion or ethics if given a choice, while an additional tenth of those currently attending religion classes would opt for ethics instead. More than half of the students currently participating in religion classes would still choose religious education, combining two response categories: those who indicated a preference solely for religious education and those who selected both religious education and ethics.

Chart 2: Hypothetical Choice Between Religion and Ethics Classes (Survey Question 44: "If you had to choose between a religion class and an ethics class, which would you choose?"), N=1268 (percentages for students currently attending religion classes).



The likelihood of choosing religious education decreases with higher grade levels and larger town sizes. Over two-fifths of rural youth would select religion class, while less than one-fifth of youth from large cities (populations over 500,000) would do the same. Conversely, interest in ethics classes rises with both grade level and town size. Only one-tenth of rural students would choose ethics, while this number reaches up to one-fifth in cities. The probability of opting out of both subjects also increases with grade level and town size; nearly half of youth from the largest cities prefer this option, compared to just over one-fifth from rural areas. Although these correlations are not strong, they are statistically significant (religion: $\text{Chi}^2 = 48.404$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.171$; ethics: $\text{Chi}^2 = 16.243$; $p = 0.003$; Cramér's $V = 0.099$; neither: $\text{Chi}^2 = 29.474$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.133$).

Religious youth, especially those identifying as Roman Catholic, tend to favor religious classes more than their peers without this affiliation. Nearly half of students identifying as Roman Catholic would choose religion, whereas less than one-tenth of non-Catholic students would. This trend reverses with ethics classes, which are less frequently preferred by Catholic students than by those with other or no religious affiliations. Approximately one-tenth of Catholic students would choose ethics, compared to over one-fifth of students from other religious backgrounds. Likewise, opting out of both subjects is more common among non-Catholic youth; one-fifth of Catholic students would skip both, while almost half of students from other religious backgrounds would do so. These correlations vary in strength but are statistically significant, with moderate associations for choosing religion and opting out, and weaker associations for choosing ethics (religion: Chi^2

= 201.226; $p < 0.001$; $\Phi = 0.350$; ethics: $\text{Chi}^2 = 46.328$; $p < 0.001$; $\Phi = -0.170$; neither: $\text{Chi}^2 = 114.568$; $p < 0.001$; $\Phi = -0.265$).

For youth without religious affiliation, these patterns are reversed. Unaffiliated youth are more likely to choose ethics and less likely to choose religion. Nearly one-fourth of unaffiliated youth would choose ethics, compared to about one-tenth of their religiously affiliated peers. In contrast, a marginal 3% of unaffiliated youth would opt for religious education. Furthermore, around three-fifths of unaffiliated youth would choose neither subject, a significantly stronger relationship (neither: $\text{Chi}^2 = 119.105$; $p < 0.001$; $\Phi = 0.271$; religion: $\text{Chi}^2 = 113.961$; $p < 0.001$; $\Phi = -0.265$; ethics: $\text{Chi}^2 = 24.329$; $p < 0.001$; $\Phi = 0.124$).

Regular attendance in religious classes strongly influences preferences, with students attending religious classes more likely to hypothetically select religion. Half of these students would choose religion, compared to only 5% of those who rarely or never attend. This is a strong correlation ($\text{Chi}^2 = 288.181$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.415$). In contrast, religious class attendees are statistically less likely to choose ethics ($\text{Chi}^2 = 30.663$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.136$). About one-tenth of regular attendees would select both religion and ethics, a significantly higher percentage than the 2% of non-attendees ($\text{Chi}^2 = 17.809$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.103$). Non-attendees are more likely to opt out of both, with nearly three-fifths choosing neither religion nor ethics, compared to just over one-tenth of regular attendees, marking a strong association ($\text{Chi}^2 = 297.354$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.422$).

Ethics classes are also more commonly favored by students identifying with non-Christian religions; one-third of these students would choose ethics, compared to around one-tenth of Christian students, a weak but statistically significant relationship ($\text{Chi}^2 = 13.885$; $p < 0.001$; $\Phi = 0.097$).

Frequency of religious participation (e.g., church attendance) similarly affects preferences. The more frequent the attendance, the higher the likelihood of choosing religion classes ($\text{Chi}^2 = 209.420$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.382$). Conversely, lower attendance increases the likelihood of selecting ethics or neither subject (ethics: $\text{Chi}^2 = 63.367$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.210$; neither: $\text{Chi}^2 = 178.227$; $p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.535$).

Given that Polish regulations allow students to attend both religion and ethics classes, these subjects are not strictly competing but may instead be seen as complementary. However, the slightly higher status of religious education influences parental and student attitudes, as well as ethics' placement in school schedules. Many parents, guided by personal values, hope to convey these values to their children through school education. Polish schools provide

favorable conditions for parental choice regarding their children's participation in religion and/or ethics classes²⁰.

4. Teachers Conducting Ethics Classes

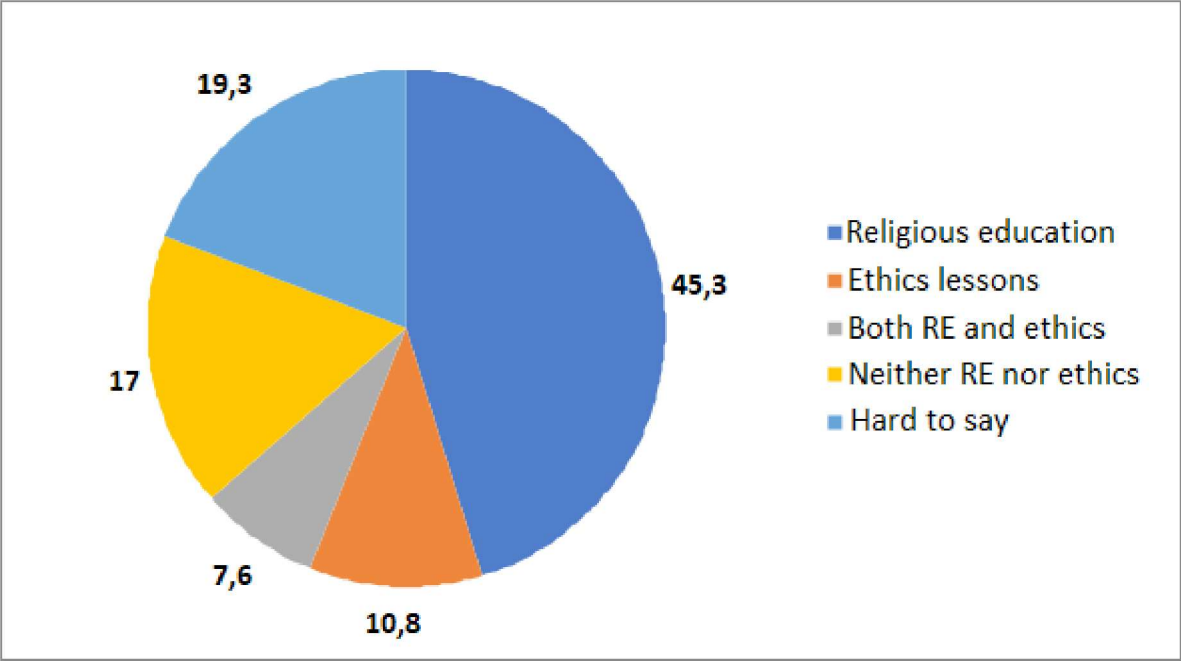
The training of ethics teachers is a subject of ongoing debate, shaped by the unique nature of the subject and the public trust placed in the teaching profession. Ethics educators are expected not only to convey theoretical knowledge but to embrace what is often described as "practical philosophy" in their teaching, as ethical judgments are rooted in practical application. The moral character of an ethics teacher is continuously assessed by students, who may compare it against the principles discussed during lessons²¹.

A survey asked respondents who they believe should lead ethics classes. The largest group, over one-fourth of the youth, indicated that ethics classes should be taught by teachers who have completed specialized studies in ethics. Around one-tenth of respondents supported clergy or catechists for the role, provided they have appropriate training, such as a degree or postgraduate studies in ethics. Fewer than one-tenth of respondents suggested teachers with postgraduate studies in ethics specifically. Additionally, over one-tenth of the youth would accept both groups—teachers as well as trained clergy or catechists—as suitable instructors. Slightly less than one-fifth of respondents expressed that ethics classes are unnecessary, while over one-fourth were undecided on this issue.

²⁰ Madalska-Michalak, Jeowski, Wiśław, *Etyka w systemie edukacji w Polsce*, 348–349.

²¹ Madalska-Michalak, Jeowski, Wiśław, *Etyka w systemie edukacji w Polsce*, 111–112.

Chart 3. Preferred Personnel for Teaching Ethics (Survey Question 45: In your opinion, who should conduct ethics classes?), N=1670 (percentage)



Teachers for Ethics Classes

The survey data reveal a significant relationship between students’ religious affiliations and preferences for clergy or catechists as ethics teachers. Students identifying as Roman Catholic are more likely to favor clergy or catechists (over 1/10) compared to those without religious affiliation (1/20). Similarly, students who regularly attend religious instruction classes show a higher preference for clergy and catechists (over 1/10) than those who do not attend these classes (1/20). Among students participating in catechism within a religious community, nearly 1/5 support clergy as ethics instructors, compared to fewer than 1/10 among students not engaged in such activities. Furthermore, the likelihood of students selecting clergy and catechists as ethics instructors increases with more frequent attendance at Mass. Approximately 1/5 of students attending Mass multiple times a week support this option, while this is favored by less than 1/10 of students who do not attend Mass at all. All of these correlations are statistically significant, though weak (Roman Catholic affiliation: $\chi^2 = 25.994$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.128$; regularity of religious instruction attendance: $\chi^2 = 24.715$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer’s V = 0.122; participation in catechism: $\chi^2 = 24.138$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.123$; Mass attendance frequency: $\chi^2 = 18.527$, $p = 0.005$, Cramer’s V = 0.114).

The preference for teachers with a degree in ethics is primarily differentiated by school type. Students in general high schools favor this option more than technical school students,

with over 1/4 of high school students and less than 1/5 of technical school students indicating this preference. Though this association is weak, it remains statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 17.266$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.103$).

On the other hand, responses supporting teachers with postgraduate ethics qualifications, as well as those in favor of "any of the three types of instructors," do not vary significantly with respect to any independent variables. The perception that ethics classes are unnecessary, however, does show significant differences. Non-religiously affiliated students express this view more frequently (1/3) compared to religiously affiliated students (less than 1/5), with this difference being statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 33.350$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.144$). Roman Catholic students are less likely to see ethics classes as unnecessary compared to others (over 1/10 vs. over 1/4), as are students who regularly attend religious instruction (over 1/10 vs. nearly 1/3) and those involved in catechism within a community (over 1/10 vs. 1/5). These associations, while statistically significant, remain weak (Roman Catholic identification: $\chi^2 = 39.501$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = -0.156$; regular attendance in religious classes: $\chi^2 = 56.080$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.183$; catechism participation: $\chi^2 = 16.086$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = -0.101$). Furthermore, students with less frequent Mass attendance are more inclined to view ethics classes as unnecessary; nearly 1/3 of students who do not attend Mass believe ethics classes are unneeded, while approximately 1/10 of students attending weekly Mass share this view. This association is statistically significant, though weak ($\chi^2 = 51.185$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.189$).

Over the years, ethics, not without organizational and legal disruptions, has evolved from a subject that could be chosen instead of religion in schools to a more firmly established program, increasingly finding its place in the school timetable. However, its teaching is still entangled in various organizational, social, cultural, ideological, and legal issues. These problems become more pronounced when considering matters such as: a properly constructed curriculum framework, well-prepared teaching programs, textbooks, and educational aids at every stage of education. According to the data from the ministry, few teachers teach ethics as a full-time subject. For most, it is an additional subject alongside another core subject. Research has repeatedly revealed that deficiencies in the teachers' substantive knowledge of ethics do not play as significant a role as the lack of freedom in addressing the subject matter being taught. Furthermore, the teachers themselves, often unjustly, position their subject unfavorably in relation to others, especially religion in schools²².

²² Madali ska-Michalak, Je owski, Wi sław, *Etyka w systemie edukacji w Polsce*, 361.

5. Proposed Ethics Lesson Topics

The content outlined in the current core curriculum for ethics in schools aligns with fundamental issues and values essential to the holistic development of individuals. These lessons are open to students with varying levels of ethics knowledge, while religious classes provide opportunities to deepen and broaden this understanding.

A correlation between ethics and religious classes could enhance discussions on moral norms, principles, and human values in ethics classes. It would also enrich criteria for evaluating human actions by referencing biblical texts, Church teachings, and the lives of saints. This integration is essential to avoid fragmented knowledge, protect against misinformation, and counteract subjectivism, pragmatism, and moral relativism. Through this correlation, students could integrate knowledge gained from religious and other subjects, including ethics. Ethics lessons could support young people in linking human history to our future and in appreciating the legacy of millennia of human existence. The core curriculum topics are often controversial, especially when considering various life philosophies in postmodernity. Key ethical concepts include moral evaluation: good, evil, value, criterion, principle (norm, rule), attitude, virtue, vice, duty, sanction, conscience, model, authority, responsibility, natural law, established law, dignity, human rights, human nature, truth, and happiness²³. When discussed in ethics classes in relation to students' experiences under postmodern cultural influences, supplementing this with Church interpretations in religious lessons is often necessary.

It is important to emphasize the significance of integrating religious teachings with ethics lessons²⁴, especially on topics related to the Fourth, Eighth, and Tenth Commandments, which pertain to relationships with parents and neighbors. The ethics curriculum includes essential topics such as interpersonal relationships, exemplified by respect toward parents, teachers, peers, and others—both adults and children. Other topics include respect and compassion for the elderly, weaker individuals, and those in need; the nature of love and its different forms; the family as a communal good; and actions that contribute to the common good within the family and the classroom. Additionally, the curriculum addresses moral considerations surrounding cheating, and the ethical aspects of violence and cyberbullying, as well as the individual's relationship with God. Each of these topics is equally important in

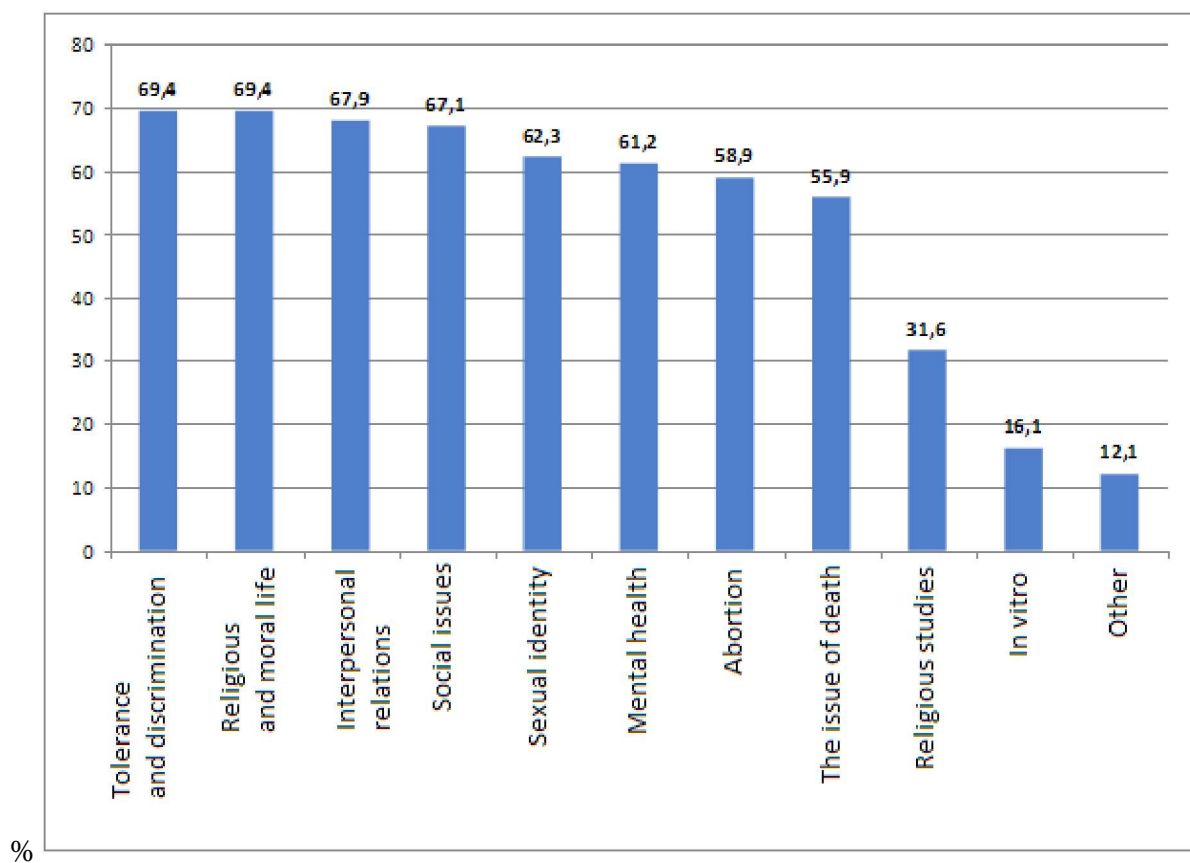
²³ Kostorz, „Korelacja lekcji religii z etyk – sens czy bezsens?“, 97.

²⁴ Kostorz, „Korelacja lekcji religii z etyk – sens czy bezsens?“, 97–98.

religious education. Mandatory ethics classes in schools could enhance and integrate these themes across other subjects, including religious instruction. This integration would provide an opportunity for religious lessons to incorporate the ethical teachings of ethics instructors, creating a unified approach to moral and social education²⁵.

The surveyed students were also asked to suggest the thematic scope they believe should be covered in ethics lessons. Responses reveal ten key areas that students feel are essential for inclusion in ethics education, arranged in a ranked list.

Chart 4: Ethical Issues to Address in Ethics Education (Survey Question 46: "What ethical issues, in your opinion, should be included in school ethics education?"), N = 152*, in



* Students' Responses to Ethics Lesson Topics

Among students who provided specific responses, the most popular topics of interest are tolerance and discrimination, religious-moral life, interpersonal relationships, and social issues. Over two-thirds of students indicated interest in each of these areas. The next tier of interest includes topics such as sexual identity, mental health, abortion, and the concept of death, all selected by more than half of respondents. This suggests a relative lack of interest in

²⁵ Kistorz, „Korelacja lekcji religii z etyk – sens czy bezsens?“, 98.

areas like religious studies and in vitro fertilization, with only about one-third and one-fifth of students, respectively, expressing interest in these topics.

The frequency of preference for the top six thematic areas shows notable gender-based differences in certain cases:

1. Tolerance and Discrimination: Female students are significantly more likely than male students to express interest in this area. Over 80% of female students selected this topic, compared to less than half of male students. This association is statistically significant ($\text{Chi}^2 = 11.639$; $p < 0.001$) and moderately strong ($\text{Phi} = 0.396$).

2. Interpersonal Relationships: Female students also more frequently indicate an interest in interpersonal relationships, with about 80% of females highlighting this area versus just over half of male students. This difference is statistically significant ($\text{Chi}^2 = 6.060$; $p = 0.014$) and moderate in strength ($\text{Phi} = 0.302$).

3. Sexual Identity: Female students again show a stronger preference, with nearly 80% marking this area, compared to just over 40% of male students. This difference is statistically significant ($\text{Chi}^2 = 8.005$; $p = 0.005$) and moderately strong ($\text{Phi} = 0.373$).

The topics suggested by students were extensive but, for sociological clarity, they were generalized and grouped into relevant categories. Responses that did not fit within the ten main themes were classified under "other."

Conclusion

In summing up the choice between religious studies and ethics, it is evident that ethics courses in schools hold significant potential for moral development. An essential purpose of ethics education is fostering moral health in the younger generation, focusing on cultivating sensitivity toward personal and societal good, which human reason can recognize and pursue. However, moral understanding always emerges within the conscience, sometimes presenting complex dilemmas that reason alone cannot resolve, necessitating the complementary perspectives of faith and religious experience²⁶.

The data indicate a clear preference among students, with 35.5% favoring religious studies over ethics, selected by only 13.0%. Ethics is more commonly chosen by females, students from urban areas, those in the first year of study, high school students, and those who do not participate in religious classes or attend church services. Conversely, religious studies

²⁶ Podzielny, „Szkolne nauczanie etyki i wychowanie”, 367.

attract more male students, those from rural areas, students in the fourth year or from technical schools, and individuals who regularly attend both religious classes and church services.

When asked who should teach ethics, nearly a third of students (28%) had no strong opinion. Respondents generally did not object to clergy or catechists leading ethics classes, though they emphasized the importance of instructors being well-prepared and having a university education. As for the content of ethics classes, students most frequently expressed a desire for discussions on current issues, moral values, tolerance, mental health, everyday social problems, personal conduct, interpersonal relationships, and philosophy.

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