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RELIGION ON CATHOLIC INTERNET FORUMS IN POLAND. A MEMORY MEDIATED

Abstract

The following article aims to show that on Catholic Internet forums in Poland, religion—in this case Roman Catholicism—serves as a mediated chain of memory fulfilling two main functions simultaneously: an integrating function and a differentiating function. The analysis will be based on Hervieu-Léger's concept of religion as a chain of memory (2000, 2006) and Davie's modified concept of religion as memory that mutates (2000, 2006). A thread from 2011 on one of the most popular Catholic forums in Poland—*forum.wiara.pl*—will be used as a case study. It will be shown that through voicing various notions of the meaning of religion, faith, the institutional Church, and the connection between science and religion, users both distinguish themselves from and integrate themselves with other users, as well as with their representation of 'average' Catholics in Poland.

Keywords: religion, internet, memory, forums, Catholicism

Sociologists of religion focusing on the influence of digital media on religious practices, beliefs, or institutions, often find classical concepts and theories not only relevant, but also particularly useful in explaining phenomena which take place in the online sphere (see Campbell 2007, 2012; Turner 2007; Lövheim 2004). Researchers connect online and offline religious activities to present a full scope of the changes in the religious landscape. In Poland, however, this topic lacks systematic analysis. Published sociological works include a fragmented quantitative analysis (see PBI/Gemius, in Kloch 2011; CBOS 2014) and a very general overview (Siuda 2010) on the matter.[1] This paper hopes to add to that field of knowledge and, by its use of the concepts of Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Grace Davie, to provide a useful perspective both of the Polish and the global context. The paper will first introduce Hervieu-Léger's concept of religion as a chain of memory, which serves as the basis for creating and maintaining group identity, as well as validating individually-constructed meanings in modern societies (2000: 94). Next, Davie's modified notion of Hervieu-Léger's concept will be discussed. Davie postulates that memory in fact «mutates», but it still serves as a point

of reference—even if individuals find their religious experiences, and practice their religion, outside institutional contexts (2000: 112, see also 2006). Both concepts are helpful in analysing the changes in religious landscapes in contemporary Europe, which are influenced by individualisation, mediatisation, and the shifting of traditional religious authority.

In view of the above, which functions does religion fulfil on Roman Catholic Internet forums in Poland? This article, based on a case study (i.e. one thread from a leading Catholic forum in Poland, *forum.wiara.pl*), aims to answer this question by showing that on Catholic forums in Poland, religion—in this case Roman Catholicism—serves as a mediated form of memory, which fulfils two main functions: integration and differentiation. The former establishes a common basis for communication and facilitates mutual understanding, while the latter helps to differentiate between different groups of users and Catholics on a larger scale. At the same time, what is an integrating factor within the online community may also be a tool of differentiation between forum users and the general Catholic population—and vice versa. This paper hopes to inspire further research on the function of religion as memory and as cultural resource in digital media contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This section discusses two theoretical concepts with the aim of applying them in the study of Roman Catholic forums in Poland. First, the concepts will be analysed separately, and then approached from a shared perspective in the next part of this section. The first concept is Hervieu-Léger's «religion as a chain of memory» (2000). Hervieu-Léger analysed Christianity in contemporary Western societies and came to the conclusion that in modern nations religion does not disappear—as some works on secularisation would suggest—but rather becomes a cultural and symbolic resource; a vehicle for symbolic and metaphorical expression (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 26; 2006: 67). This does not mean, however, that religion becomes but an artefact embodied in a nostalgic Christmas postcard or a cathedral museum. While in many cases it may indeed seem so, religion, through its ties to tradition, also has transformative power. Tradition is a way of expressing collective memory, norms, and meanings, and, as such, it connects the past with the present. The same is true for religion, as «it may function as reawakened or invented memory for actual social groups» (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 92). Collective memory is dynamic as it is constantly re-enacted, re-evaluated, and transformed (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 124; see Hałas 2010). This dynamism is of a normative character as it «involves selective forgetting, sifting and retrospective inventing» and «functions as a regulator of individual memory at any one moment» (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 124). When we acknowledge this aspect of religion, it becomes clear that such a function is fulfilled through asserting one's ties with the past—with previous generations of believers, but also with the history of the Church, great theologians, and their heritage.

Davie adopts Hervieu-Léger's concept of religion as a chain of memory to discuss the place of religion in modern societies and looks at how the concept of religion as

memory has changed. She claims that in most Western societies we can observe a certain mutation of memory into a state of vicarious memory (or vicarious religion), where memory is performed by an active minority (e.g. religious professionals) on behalf of a much larger number of people (Davie 2000: 59, 2006: 24). Individuals increasingly turn to religious institutions on special occasions, which serve as «markers of life-cycle» (Davie 2000: 71), and refrain from practising on a regular basis, as well as distance themselves from institutionalised forms of religion. In effect, many families expect a religious funeral for their deceased, even though neither the former nor the latter have been churchgoers and/or even believers. In other words, religious institutions are seen as repositories of tradition and memory, from which one may take what one currently needs. Church marriages in Poland would be a good example of this phenomenon. Coerced, more or less naggingly, by their families, many future spouses (64% of all marrying couples, GUS 2013: 6) decide to have a Church ceremony even if they do not practice or follow most of the Roman Catholic teachings. But such a decision is not just about the candles and photogenic interiors: by participating in a Church ceremony, even if the religious aspect itself is not especially significant, the newly-weds assert a continuity of tradition, bring their families together, and mark a special moment in their life. How does this result in Davie's notion of memory being mutated? The «tacit acceptance» (Davie 2000: 181) of vicarious memory by the general public is often accompanied by the selective character of religious signs, which lose their ties with specific practices or norms (Davie 2000: 159). Davie discusses a significant shift she calls «from obligation to consumption» in terms of participation: in contemporary times, belonging and believing are matters of private decision and are facilitated by the accessibility of a multitude of religious symbols (Davie 2006: 28). This accessibility is partly secured by mass media and the ever-increasing pluralisation due to migration, mobility, and technological advancement.

Both Hervieu-Léger and Davie attribute many of the changes they analyse to the rise of highly-rational societies and individualism, which often override the need for community. Hervieu-Léger observes that there is a certain tension between individual emotional expression, and its collective assertion necessary to give individual expression meaning (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 94). However, this collective assertion becomes problematic for two reasons: first, rationalisation has resulted in institutionalised religion losing its emotive, expressive power, and becoming a «professionally»-conducted enterprise; and second, individuals often find the sacred and the spiritual outside of religion (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 107–108). The later generations started looking for more personalised, emotional religious expressions. This sentiment often reduces religion to affect and the so-called «minimum creed» (Hervieu-Léger 2006: 64), which can be compared to what Bryan S. Turner has called «low-intensity religion» (Turner 2011: 149). This type of religion calls for minimal commitment, and is in fact a form of service that can be relinquished if unsatisfactory or too demanding (see Davie 2006: 33).

According to both Hervieu-Léger and Davie, the media play a significant role in this change as broadcasters of pluralisation and of oft-conflicting worldviews and values. Individual experience, emotions, and needs—themes which propagate

«expressive individualism» (Taylor 2007: 473, 489)—are omnipresent in modern-day media. Media popularise certain lifestyles that are often quite detached from their religiously-motivated counterparts. As Linderman argues, using the example of Sweden, there is «a growing discrepancy between the patterns of church life on the ground and a more independent, media type of religion» (1993, quoted by Davie 2000: 103). However, portraying media as mere heralds of secularisation would present a one-sided view of their relationship with religion and religious institutions, as the latter use media to proselytise, interact with followers, and attract newcomers.[2] Therefore, there is a lot of truth to Lövheim's (2011: 161) argument that the media and religion should not be seen as opposites, but in fact intersecting domains involving active interpreting actors, cultural and societal contexts, and symbolic exchange. Lövheim's argument is also in tune with more recent developments in research on the influence of digital media on religious communities. Media play a significant role in reshaping traditional forms of togetherness, as well as facilitate the emergence of new communal forms. Current research draws attention to the connections between online and offline communities, presenting them as overlapping or connected rather than autonomous and separate (see Campbell 2012). Discussions concerning the rise of networked religious communities, based on data flow (rather than the flow of persons), storied identities, devolved authority structures, convergent practice, and multisite reality continue, but the focus is on how religious communities reflect changes on the larger scale of the religious landscape as a whole (Campbell 2012: 68, 83–85). In this study, community-building processes are visible as well, especially in relation to shifting authority structures and multisite reality,[3] but it should be added that a multitude of media channels have significant impact on audience fragmentation—also in the context of religious media audiences.

The fragmentation itself does not portend the demise of communities, but rather prefigures their specialisation, which reflects functional differentiation on the societal level (Hjarvard 2011, quoted by Lövheim 2011: 156). Specialisation, as described by Gilles Lipovetsky (1983: 16–17, quoted by Hervieu-Léger 2000: 95–96), is especially visible in the case of support groups forming small, often exclusive communities that «resolv[e] personal problems through shared experience» (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 96). Such groups nurture the need of the collective assertion of one's experience and belonging, while at the same time fostering narcissism as they connect highly similar individuals and aim at solving certain personal problems through finding solutions among others who share them. Participation is also usually a matter of preference and its rules allow fairly easy access and exit (Davie 2006: 33). Hervieu-Léger (2000: 96) adds that even such communities need some form of reference to collective memory and tradition, even if just an imagined one, but she agrees that the fragmentation and specialisation of communities (centred around individuals) bring about the disintegration and fragmentation of collective memory—reflecting a «plurality of specialized circles of memory» (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 127–128).

The aforementioned processes and phenomena are reflected in online religious activity. The next section of this paper will introduce the forum, render visible a few

methodological strategies, and present an analysis of the two main functions of religion as memory in the mediatised context: integration and differentiation.

Forum.wiara.pl   an «Open» Forum

The portal *Wiara.pl* [faith.pl] ranked as the second most popular religious website in Poland in 2011, with over 287 000 real users per month (PBI/Gemius 2011, quoted by Kloch 2011: 262). *Wiara.pl* is also mentioned on two official (institutional) Catholic websites: *ekai.pl* [Catholic Information Agency] and *opoka.org* (an organisation founded by the Polish Episcopal Conference). Hence, it can be assumed that its «Catholic» orientation is legitimised by the institutional Church. *Wiara.pl* shares ties with the popular Catholic magazine *Go   Niedzielny* [Sunday Visitor], but the editorial boards of the magazine and the portal are separate. The website is of both informative and interactive character: a visitor can read news from the Church, read the latest papal messages and audiences, find a religious article, as well as read a blog, chat, or take part in a discussion forum. The online forum is a specific channel of communication. In the particular case of *www.forum.wiara.pl*, registration is required for active participation, but reading and browsing forum threads is open to everyone, non-registered readers included. Having registered, users can fill in their profile page (but they can also choose not to) with information such as gender, age, religious affiliation, etc. The forum is structured as follows: there are eleven main sections, including «the Church», «Philosophy», «Miscellaneous», etc., each containing several topics, such as «Culture», «Ecumenism», «the Church in society», and «Truth and Faith», to give a few examples. After clicking on a topic the reader is redirected to a list of threads organised chronologically (i.e. the thread with the most recent contribution will be at the top of the list), regardless of the total number of pages and posts they include. Forum regulations can be found in a separate tab.[4] There are no clear directions as to which thread should include what type of content, such as personal or non-personal, so both very often intertwine and complement each other. What must be made clear is that although the forum is called and considered «Catholic», it is frequented by a large number of declared atheists and agnostics, as well as non-Catholics, who are all invited to join the discussion on any topic of their choice. Since the forum encourages the exchange of thought between different groups, it can be considered «ecumenical» or «open».

In the original research (see Kołodziejska 2014) the time frame of January 2010-March 2013 was used, since this relatively short period was rife with events of utmost importance for the majority of Poles and/or Catholics. Among them were: the Polish Air Force Tupolev Tu-154 crash in April 2010, which resulted in the deaths of the Presidential couple, state officials, and other passengers (96 casualties in total); the Polish presidential elections in June 2010; the June 2010 beatification of rev. Jerzy Popieluszko (the «chaplain of Solidarity», who was assassinated in 1984); the beatification of Pope Saint John Paul II (May 2011); Independence Day Warsaw riots in November 2011 and 2012; the abdication of Pope Benedict XVI (February 2013) and the election of his successor, Pope Francis I (March 2013). These events were widely discussed in

the media, and, as a result of the plane crash, a debate on national identity and patriotic values became an issue of (also political) conflict.[5]

Since this paper presents a segment of a larger research project, it is useful to clarify the methodological approach and the steps of analysis. In order to obtain textual data from the forum, a web-crawler programme was used, which gathered 10 keywords from every thread based on the TF/IDF algorithm (TF: term frequency; IDF: inverse document frequency). As a result, 5338 threads on *forum.wiara.pl* were aggregated. As the next step, the qualitative tool, summative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Rapport 2010), was applied. Keywords related to community (the understandings of community from the Catholic Church Second Vatican Council documents, i.e. family, parish, believers, the Church, nation, Christians, etc.) were taken into account, as well as their antonyms (e.g. believer-atheist), synonyms (e.g. churchgoer-parishioner), and meaningful collocations (e.g. atheist-parishioner-church-faith). After this step, a total of 1827 threads were selected. Two series of systematic sampling (every 5th and every 6th thread) were incorporated, producing about 670 threads for final analysis, followed by a verification of keyword applicability. The next step consisted of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992; Van Dijk 2005; Lövheim 2004). This method focuses on the relations between text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough 1992: 73). Scrutinising the processes of text production, consumption, and interpretation helps unveil the power (authority) structures behind their different modes, knowledge bases, or «resources» (Fairclough 1992: 79–80, 85), and the implicit preconceptions of reality. Moments of crisis in interaction, or «problematisations» within discourse production and consumption (Billig 1988, quoted by Fairclough 1992: 96, 230), were put under scrutiny in this paper, since, in such crises, discursive change is easiest to observe. Moments of crisis in interaction comprised misunderstandings, disagreements, arguments, and conflicts (usually of interpretation and perception). The forum's «crises» help unveil primarily conflicting notions of «Polish», «Catholic», and «believer/non believer», as well as challenge sources of religious authority and power relations among forum contributors (see Kołodziejska 2014).

For the purposes of this article I have chosen one thread called «I'm looking for answers in the topic of faith—show me the way?», which was created in September 2011 and had 73 posts in total.[6] This thread was chosen because it included both discussions on the meaning of faith (and religion) and a type of «metadiscursive» dispute in which the users actually discussed their participation on the forum, its purpose and functions, as well as addressed the general Catholic population. The combination of various themes in this particular thread was considered to be most relevant to the posed questions, with discursive problematisations centred on questions of religious and communal identity.

The thread was started by an individual who declared that he was agnostic and was looking for answers to questions which were troubling him. He first gave a testimony on how he lost faith in his youth, and then voiced several doubts about the Catholic Church doctrine, the Bible, and the Ten Commandments. He contrasted several biblical statements with their applicability to reality and his own experiences. This started a

discussion involving several long-time and more recent members, believers and atheists.

The Integrating Function of Religion as Memory

When analysing text production, it can be concluded that the chosen thread—as well as other threads on the forum—contained a variety of individually-authored posts that comprised a combination of everyday Polish, Internet slang, and «religious» language (i.e. relating to the matters of faith and religion, or, emulating biblical/theological genres). Everyday Polish is exemplified by an informal, simple writing style, resembling casual conversations and featuring colloquial expressions. Users address each other on a first-name basis, although in Poland it is polite to refer to the interlocutor as «Mrs» or «Mr», unless they are friends or relatives. Internet slang is represented by the use of emoticons (such as « ») and acronyms (e.g. IMO, which stands for «in my opinion»), although it should be noted that *forum.wiara.pl*'s users use them rather sparingly. Several other features of Internet slang, such as «letter alternation» (as in «WeLcOmE»), substituting numbers for letters (e.g. «h4ppy»), or letters for words («r u a Catholic?») appear very rarely. Religious language can be found in quotations from religious sources, such as theological works, the Bible, Vatican documents, prayer books, etc., but it is also often appropriated by users in their testimonies, accounts of conversion, or references to religious experiences. This «online forum discourse» is also a hybrid of direct and indirect discourse representations, with hyperlinks facilitating intertextual references and turning a linear, chronological conversation into a fragmented one. Presuppositions (usually embodied by implicit conclusions and assumptions voiced by forum users), irony, and metadiscourse are also found in the phase of discourse production, which can be seen in examples below.

Having accepted religion as a source of commonly-shared values and a resource of collective identity, the analysis of the thread looks into how that common basis is voiced and interpreted in the phase of text production and consumption—and for what purpose. According to Hervieu-Léger (2000: 94), individually-constructed meaning must be confirmed by others. On the forum itself, this is performed through sharing personal content (including all sorts of religious testimonies, experiences, exchanging advice, support, and prayer intentions), which is also often validated by quoting external sources such as documents, Church laws, tenets, etc. In the thread there were several users who responded to the initial post by giving their own testimonies such as: «God exists and helps me every day and that's the proof He exists», while others provided links to external sources such as images, links to other threads on the forum, or quotations from the Bible. In the threads analysed, people with and without religious (or spiritual) affiliations joined in. There were three statements that were repeated regularly, and can, as such, be considered to exemplify commonly-shared values and collective identity:

1 Religion and rational science are different orders, although they do not necessarily contradict each other: «We won't get an answer about the beginning [of creation] from science. This question has always puzzled people and divided them into believers and non-believers»; «Looking for proofs of God's existence by means of rational methods will get you nowhere, as God isn't rational in the same way he isn't material».

2 Belief or faith are a personal quest and a process: «You need to search for God»; «First of all you have to look for «your own» God, God who will «speak» to you and whom you will accept». Religious experience is also individual and personal: «Everyone has their own God. Or, in other words, everyone has their own vision of God»; «You can only experience God personally. You cannot experience God through religion, the Church, the neighbourhood, Internet friends, or reading, watching films, etc.»; «Faith must be nurtured...We are personally responsible for the quality of our lives».

3 Faith is not the same as religion: «…people generally confuse faith with religion, but they are totally different. They think that if they practice, they automatically «believe» in God…»; «While faith is an end in itself, religion is only a means to an end…»; «…you don't have to be a follower of any particular religion to have faith in God».

These three notions are not subjects of heated dispute in the thread. Rather, it seems that they constitute a basis of agreement between most users, which can be confirmed by the analysis of text consumption phase. The first recurring theme—the relationship between religion and science—signals that, while there may be a disagreement on the role of the two in modern society, and while both may ask similar questions («How did the world begin?»), users seek answers pertaining to different conceptual dimensions. This is on par with functional differentiation, which resulted in the specialisation of religion and science and their separation. It should be mentioned, though, that attempts at creating bridges between the two are being made, for example with NaPro Technology, a religious-based technique for overcoming infertility. The thread also mentioned that the Catholic Church does not neglect science as such and does not oppose scientific theories as fervently as, for example, Protestant fundamentalist groups in the United States. As an example of the Church's tolerance towards science, the case of establishing the age of the Earth was discussed: a religious user said that the Church does not teach that the Earth is 10,000 years old, as another disputant had suggested earlier, implicitly confirming that there is not any impending conflict between religion and scientific claims. Statements two and three, presented above, were neither opposed nor challenged by the great majority of users, which leads to the assumption that they are generally accepted. Even non-believers may agree that faith and religion are not the same, although their evaluation of the two will most likely be negative. Similarly, believers and atheists alike may see faith as a personal journey and something that cannot be enforced, notwithstanding the varying meanings attributed to believing and the role of the Catholic Church.

  Statements two and three evoke several of the claims discussed in the previous section: the separation of institutional and private forms of religion, the focus on mediated

personal experience, and the emphasis on an individual spiritual journey. All of the aforementioned claims are coherent with sociological analyses of the turn towards individualisation and expressivism in modern societies.[7] The difference is, however, that on the forum, descriptions of a personal spiritual journey usually aims at finding its end in some religious affiliation. One post was a good example of this line of thinking: «If you want to be a Catholic, respect that tenet [of Confession] despite your criticism...If you don't want to accept individual confession, there are Christian Churches in which it is not practised in that form». The suggested options—with one exception, quoted above in point three—were in fact limited to atheism or becoming a follower. Nobody suggested adopting patchwork, alternative, or esoteric forms of religiosity, and the «Catholic» character of the forum cannot be considered justification enough. This is an interesting theme since many agreed-upon notions would, in fact, be incoherent with the teachings of the Church, to which religion (as well as faith, morality, and norms) and the institution are inseparable (Can. 1983: 747–749).

What should be mentioned here is that the forum itself is not a source or trigger of religious experience, as defined by Stark and Glock (1974),[8] and the latter is usually found offline. However, religious experience is often recounted and narrated within the threads. Therefore, religious experience undergoes «double mediation»: the first instance of mediation is initiated by the user as he or she writes about their experiences, while the second mediation is performed by the medium itself, which means that everyone can read about the experience online and perhaps ascribe different values to that testimony than what they would have, had they heard the testimony on a first-hand basis. Here, the observations are reflective of the concept developed by Brigit Meyer and Annelies Moors that religion is a set of «practices of mediation» (2006: 7, quoted by Lövheim 2011: 162), which facilitate access to the transcendent and the sacred. Forum members practice separately, and mostly in traditional offline contexts, while later they report and reflect upon their religious experiences, practices, beliefs, and knowledge online; making connections to the transcendent on various levels. This mediation is a form of meaning-making and symbolic communication (Lövheim 2011: 162). The forum environment offers a new space for meaning-making exchanges, which take the form of text-based communication—archived, organised, and accessible without limits.

Since all thread participants are immersed in the medium and communicate on the same level, they share a common understanding of the rules and codes of mediatised communication. Through analysing text production and consumption, I found that users do not openly doubt the honesty and reliability of personal testimonies, and they do not question the hardships of the spiritual journey recounted. Non-personal content, however, is prone to such questioning and even discrediting.

The Differentiating Function of Religion as Memory

While religion as memory can have an integrating function and create an overarching «canopy» (to paraphrase Berger) that facilitates communication in a heterogeneous

community, it can also be a vehicle for the differentiation and fragmentation of groups. All forum users are welcome to share their world-views and opinions without restrictions other than forum regulations and 'netiquette'. Criticisms must also be based on the shared knowledge of religious symbols, texts, and important religious figures (such as popes, theologians, etc.). Discussions between believers and atheists are not focused on finding a compromise, but rather on exhibiting knowledge and assessing the cultural and religious heritage in Poland. In the analysed thread, three notions representing «lines of demarcation» were found:

1 Evaluation of the role of the Catholic Church: «…through its actions, the Church makes me even more certain that it's abusing its power»; «The Church was, in my eyes, a place in which the living God resided in the Sacraments, the Church was my Mother»; «The Church is for the most part made up of frauds who grow fat at the expense of their «followers», why won't God do something about them?»; «The Catholic Church and its version of God. One version among many».

2 The evaluation and meaning of knowledge: «I will always appreciate statements made by rationally-thinking people. And the tortuous speeches given by believers that you can find here have always made me sure God doesn't exist»; «By having a small stock of knowledge you possess little knowledge of your own ignorance»; «I call this the «ignorance of an atheist». Before you leave your religion, you should get to know it inside out»; «Atheism is based solely on the rational mind and rejects other ways of perceiving reality».

3 The social representations of Catholics (on the forum and outside of the forum): «Observing what goes on in the world, how people act, the general hypocrisy and deceit, I can only say: THERE'S NO GOD»; «...those naive [followers] kneel in front of those priests as if they were kneeling before God himself, and willingly give those priests a cash infusion every Sunday», «For some time I've been reading forum [...] topics dealing with advice on faith....Someone writes an imploring post looking for help in finding God. …After two weeks maximum it turns out that they only want to prove to themselves and others that they don't need any advice and have in fact already made up their mind».

Religious affiliation as such does not determine the course of differentiation. More important factors include: the frequency of posting (which requires time and effort, but also allows individuals to prove their knowledge/skills) and users' knowledge/interpretation skills. The latter is also key in resistant readings. Consider the following dialogue, which is a response to the post written by the thread creator:

WU1: From what you're writing it seems you have a problem with the Church as an institution, not with God.
WU2: He has a problem with God. And a larger one than he thinks. [Another user] wrote about this clearly.

Since discussion participants are also readers of posts, they are entitled to voice their opinions and provide alternative interpretations and explanations, as in the quoted dialogue. Such exchanges are in fact the driving force behind forum discussions. Threads where everyone agrees with each other can hardly ever be found, and when they do, they end very quickly. While there is not enough space to discuss this matter in detail here, it should be mentioned that alternative and resistant readings imply an ongoing negotiation of authority on the forums. Since every non-personal statement has to be backed with sources,[9] users are expected to not only know which texts support their own claims, but also to think critically and provide cogent argumentation during disputes. Notwithstanding the presence of clergymen among users, the clergy does not have a different status than other users and is respected on the basis of their knowledge rather than their «professional» affiliation to the Church. In other words, their authority is not assumed, but «earned», as in the case of all other disputants. Knowledge, insightfulness, and a talent to explain must be proven in the course of discussions.

What also often happens is that users of *forum.wiara.pl* distance themselves from other forums (especially *dyskusje.katolik.pl*) by criticising their prejudiced moderation or the general level of discussions. Moreover, forum users often express their distance from «statistical» Catholics in Poland. Social representation is partly created by statistical data,[10] which shows a discrepancy between declared affiliation and attendance at mass,[11] and partly by common stereotypes about «ritualistic» Catholics, whose devotion does not extend beyond weekly mass (see also Garbowski 2014: 221–223).

The above-cited quotes reveal a strong connection between assessing the role of the institutional Church and Catholicism in Poland—which is understandable if we look at the history of post-war state-church relations in Poland—the function of public religion in the Solidarity movement, and the system transformation of 1989. Despite the rise of expressive individualism, the representation of religion remains to a large degree a representation of the institution. Some of the above-cited users mentioned hypocrisy, greed, power abuse, and fraud in their criticisms of the Church, but the defenders did not directly address these charges. Instead, they stressed their personal reasons and individual motivations for being churchgoers, and suggested that others do the same, as opposed to look for imminent flaws. Perhaps, due to the highly personal character of this thread, there were surprisingly few attempts at countering critical arguments with facts, which is the usual practice on the forum.

One user, quoted at the end of point three, criticised the approach observed on the forum, which could be summarised as «asserting oneself by posting biased questions». In the three-year period of analysis there were few metadiscursive threads, i.e. threads that would discuss the purpose of using that particular forum. From this short excerpt we can extract an implicit notion of the above-mentioned specialisation of mediatised communities that connect like-minded individuals looking for solutions to their own problems or reaffirming their own views. Here the user suggests the latter, stressing that it is a common practice, albeit a futile one in terms of discussion.

Knowledge, the integrating aspect of which was discussed above, can be a differentiating factor when the users assess its meaning and purpose. For some, knowledge is equal to rational thinking, which is dominant in modern societies, while for others it

is a necessary component of religion. Several users stressed that atheists rely solely on science and knowledge, denying the existence of anything else (be it supernatural, transcendent, or spiritual), and thus deprive themselves of a full image of what life is. Others added that knowledge is not everything, nor is it too helpful if one wants to deepen his or her faith. This argument was countered by a few atheists, who pointed out that science means simply looking into causes and effects and connecting them, while religion is not concerned with making those connections.[12] To conclude this section, the greatest dispute centred around the primacy of faith over knowledge or vice versa, but it had a personal dimension and did not undermine the general agreement that religion and science (knowledge) can coexist and sometimes overlap. To some extent, this turn towards personalisation bears traces of Romanticism as it evokes the debate of Romantic thinkers on the role of knowledge, their critique of the «heartless» and rigidly rational Enlightenment science, and their assertion that humanity needs both to progress.

Function Overlap

Both the integrative and the differentiating functions of religion as a chain of memory on the forums were analysed, but just one reference was made to the general Catholic population. However, a closer look at the integrative function leads to the assumption that what connects forum users may at the same time separate them from the social representation of the general population of Catholics they refer to. In fact, the emphasis on a personal spiritual journey, thorough knowledge of one's faith, and making conscious choices go against the image of fossilised institutional practices without a deeper meaning (see Hervieu-Léger above) and create a vivid contrast to the average «lukewarm» Catholic. Atheism and deep faith are opposing dispositions that are much more accepted than indifference, ignorance, or the selective acceptance of the Church's teachings. Since memory links the past with the present, it can be assumed that, even implicitly, contrasting the representation of Catholics with forum users serves as a means of challenging the status quo. Criticisms of the institutional Church span the entire Polish media—including Catholic media—but in the particular case of the online forum, such criticisms are answered with transgressive solutions. Looking for faith in oneself, without necessarily focusing on the Church, does not imply sweeping institutional problems under the carpet, but rather gaining personal independence and wisdom. Despite the advice to join a congregation when reaching spiritual maturity, the focus is on personal development and the accumulation of knowledge.

The differentiating function of religion can also be seen from a different perspective: as a force integrating forum users with certain segments of the population. While the social representation of «average» Catholics can be summarised as «lukewarm», there are several online and offline groups joined by individuals seeking to deepen their faith. These groups take the shape of specialised communities, popular especially in large cities, which include groups for young people, singles, couples struggling with infertility, or families with disabled children. Through regular meetings and prayer,

they satisfy the need of both religious and personal communication. Numerous communities associated with the Neocatechumenate or the Charismatic Renewal movement are also present both online and offline, and their activities comprise both the religious and spiritual, as well as offer a personal, almost therapeutic dimension. Catholics in Poland—as anywhere else—are hardly a homogeneous group, but an aggregate of numerous small communities, often enjoying a high degree of autonomy. Online Catholic forums contribute to creating this multifaceted picture. By connecting individuals from different generations and with different religious dispositions, they have a transformative potential.

Conclusion

Hervieu-Léger's concept of religion as memory and Davie's modified concept of religion as memory that mutates are useful lenses through which to analyse the changing facets of religion and religiosity on Catholic Internet forums. Religion on the forums is mediated, since it is recounted by users via textual communication, but the Internet itself adds another mediating lens: the presence of religion, or, more accurately, religious expression, is perceived differently online than offline. Since the online environment is more democratic, open, and hospitable to individual forms of expression than most traditional Catholic settings (like the parish, for instance), the forum becomes a space for voicing opinions which can be both coherent and contradictory, to varying degrees, to the teachings of the Church. It facilitates personal, individual expressions of faith and belonging, shared within a heterogeneous community of believers and non-believers. The online forum becomes a space of mediation of memory, and it also enables the collective validation of individual beliefs.

The question of the function of religion on the forum, posed in the beginning of this article, was answered in the following way: this mediated form of religion is a resource and a chain of memory, which can both integrate and differentiate forum users, and these two functions are not disjunctive. Several values and notions which constitute collective memory and assert individual opinions include the (partial) separation of the scientific and religious orders, the personal character of religious experience and beliefs, and the difference between faith and religion. Were we to look back at the postwar history of the Catholic Church in Poland, we may see that while these notions seem at present rather uncontroversial, they counter the traditional forms of religion that emphasise strong connections between the institutional Church and religious expression. Furthermore, these notions also go against the representations of «average» Catholics whose faith, knowledge, and devotion do not extend beyond the weekly Sunday mass. Therefore, what integrates online disputants serves as a means of differentiation from what is considered «average». Challenging the status quo, or fossilised ways of thinking and practice, is a way of bringing issues into light and critically engage them through discussions. Conversely, differentiating notions, such as the representation of Catholics and the institutional Church, or the meaning and purpose of knowledge, while causing disagreements between users and dividing them into opposing groups,

they may also integrate users with other online and offline communities with similar outlooks, such as the Neocatechumenate, the Charismatic Renewal, or atheist groups.

With this conclusion in mind, some limitations to Hervieu-Léger's and Davie's theories should be addressed. First of all, since Hervieu-Léger's book is characterised by theoretical engagement, empirical evidence to support or debunk the theory, or to highlight certain aspects thereof, is fragmented, dispersed and unsystematic. Hervieu-Léger's definition of religion as believing based on shared memory and tradition may also be considered too broad and general (see Knoblauch 2001). Similarly, while both Davie and Hervieu-Léger emphasise the role of media as broadcasters of pluralisation in the transformation of the religious landscape, it is unclear from their works if mediatisation is the inherent element of the processes of functional differentiation of societies, or, its prominent effect. In view of the above, more questions should be posed: do Catholic Internet forums have transformative power when it comes to reflecting on the place of religion in modern societies? What types of religious communities are created on those forums and what are they based on? To what extent do they mirror changes in religiosity, especially among youth? While those questions could not be answered in this article, the author hopes to contribute to the field and inspire further research on the topic.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Due to limited space, in-depth analysis of other religious media channels in Poland and their function in the transformations of religion could not be conducted in this paper. Readers interested in this topic should consider consulting the following literature in English: Garbowski 2014; Radkowska-Walkowicz 2012; Bo kowski 2009.

[2] On the tension between secularisation and modernisation theories in relation to mediatisation, see Lövheim 2011.

[3] On this point, see Kołodziejska 2014.

[4] http://forum.wiara.pl/viewtopic.php?t=10498.

[5] The particular timeframe chosen may have influenced the discursive layer of forum communities. However, it was my intention to trace such influential events in the forum's content and form of discussion. In order to avoid overemphasising one period and underemphasising another, I used summative content analysis and systematic sampling (see methodology section, page 5, in this article). In combination with a timeframe comprising several years, these methodological tools allowed me to limit bias in the research process.

6   The original Polish name of the thread is «Szukam odpowiedzi na temat wiary—wska cie mi drog ». All Polish quotes are my own translation. In the larger research project, detailed information was provided to Polish-speaking readers so that they could locate the original fragments. Users' forum nicknames were undisclosed. When necessary (i.e. in quoted dialogues), gender-neutral indications were applied, such as: W U (n), where W stands for «wiara» (name of forum), U is «user», and (n) is the number of the user in the order in which the quotations appear in the dissertation (for example, WU1 = Wiara User One). Though the forum has open access for all readers, this approach is more in accordance with the Association of Internet Researchers' Ethical Guideline (see http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf).

7   As argued by some researchers, there is, presumably, a difference in the advancement of expressive individualism and its reception in Poland and the secularised part of Europe. See Garbowski (2014: 202).

8   Stark and Glock (1974: 126) define religious experience as an «encounter between [the individual] and some supernatural consciousness».

9   This is explicitly stated in forum regulations.

10   Forum users explicitly and implicitly draw an image of who an «average» Catholic is and what the characteristic traits of Catholics are. Therefore, users refer to the «social representations» of both these groups, which are themselves not factual, although sometimes they also refer to statistical data or media sources. On the definition and discussion of the concept of social representations, see Howarth (2002).

11   Declared affiliation estimated at 93% (CBOS 2012: 2) and attendance at mass at 39% (ISKK 2013).

12   As one user humorously put it: «…thinking «let this chop be warm» doesn't have causative power, it is much better to think you should heat it up in the microwave».

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Abstract. The following article aims to show that on Catholic Internet forums in Poland, religion—in this case Roman Catholicism—serves as a mediated chain of memory fulfilling two main functions simultaneously: an integrating function and a differentiating function. The analysis will be based on Hervieu-Léger's concept of religion as a chain of memory (2000, 2006) and Davie's modified concept of religion as memory that mutates (2000, 2006). A thread from 2011 on one of the most popular Catholic forums in Poland—forum.wiara.pl—will be used as a c The two most religious countries, Poland and Lithuania, and the two least religious, the Czech Republic and Estonia, are post-communist states. The trend of religious affiliation was repeated when young people were asked about religious practice. Only in Poland, Portugal and Ireland did more than 10% of young people say they attend services at least once a week. In the Czech Republic, 70% said they never went to church or any other place of worship, and 80% said they never pray. In the UK, France, Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands, between 56% and 60% said they never go to church, and between