

## Why Do Polish Catholics Hate the Jews? Making Sense of a Bad Question

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“[Antisemitism] is fundamentally evil and practically dangerous. Evil because it is anti-Christian, unjust, and unmerciful. One may not hate one’s neighbor just because God created him different than me. Such so-called antisemitism, moreover, can be dangerous in practice because no one knows where it might lead, where it will stop, where such unbridled hatred of one part of the population against another will lead, once it has been taken up....May God protect us against antisemitism.”

- Count Stanisław Tarnowski (1893)<sup>1</sup>

“All the materialism, all the blindness and hatred that we see in the short life story of the Savior of the World had accumulated among the Jews gradually, over the course of entire generations. Fathers passed to their children with their blood and with their estates their customs, prejudices, false views and mistaken hopes—and this heritage of poisoned hearts and evil consciences grew ever larger and ever worse. The guilt rose with every generation, so that the whole nation was responsible for deicide—and as a result the whole nation had to bear the punishment for a general sin.”

- Father Zygmunt Pilch (1925)<sup>2</sup>

“It is a fact that the Jews are fighting with the Catholic church, that they are embedded in freethinking, that they constitute the avant-garde of godlessness, the Bolshevik movement, and revolutionary activities. It is a fact that Jewish influence on morality is pernicious, and that their publishing houses spread pornography. It is true that the Jews permit fraud and usury, and that they carry out trade in live merchandise. It is true that in the schools the influence of the Jewish youth on the Catholic youth is, in general, negative from the religious and ethical point of view.”

- Cardinal August Hlond (1936)<sup>3</sup>

“Although the Church is the new People of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the Word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

- *Nostra Aetate* (1965)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanisław Tarnowski, in Władysław Chotkowski, ed. *Księga pamiątkowa wiecu katolickiego w Krakowie odbytego w dniach 4, 5 i 6 lipca 1893 r.* (Kraków: Czas, 1893), 163-164.

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Pilch, *Odrzucenie Mesjasza jako następstwo grzechów narodu żydowskiego. Cykl kazań pasyjnych* (Kielce: Przegląd Homiletycznego, 1925), 44-45.

<sup>3</sup> August Hlond, “O katolickie zasady moralne” (Poznań, February 29, 1936), in Hlond, *Na straży sumienia narodu: wybór pism i przemówień*, edited by A. Słomka (Warsaw: Ad Astra, 1999), 164. “Live merchandise” was a euphemism for prostitution.

“If even one Christian could have helped but did not extend a helping hand to the Jews at the time of danger, or caused his death, we are called upon to beg our Jewish sisters and brothers for forgiveness.”

- The Polish Episcopate (2000)<sup>5</sup>

From time to time, anyone who works in the field of Polish studies is bound to be asked, “why do Polish Catholics hate the Jews so much?” In light of the quotations offered above, how should we respond? As scholars and educators, we will try to restrain ourselves from saying that the question is vacuous, grounded in fallacious assumptions and horrendous overgeneralizations. Instead, we will search for a more tactful response, struggling for an answer that offers some nuance without sounding as if we were denying or downplaying antisemitism. Few issues generate so many emotional arguments as this one, and few have been more thoroughly explored by scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. Sadly, though, both popular debates and academic polemics are typically undermined by a surprising conceptual imprecision and by a failure to specify exactly what is at stake. Perhaps it is quixotic to demand logical rigor when dealing with issues that carry so much psychological baggage, but a little bit of terminological clarity can cut through the polemical thicket that has grown up around what we might call “the Catholic-Jewish Question.”

As the quotations above demonstrate, it is easy to find examples of both antisemitism and anti-antisemitism among Roman Catholics. Not only do we find differences in Catholic rhetoric about the Jews as we move from place to place or across historical periods, but even within the same place and time there is a great deal of diversity. In fact, we can see contradictory attitudes within the writings of single individuals, and sometimes even single texts. Perhaps the most famous example is the infamous 1936 pastoral letter from August Hlond. Immediately after providing a list of all the imagined Jewish vices, the Cardinal continued,

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<sup>4</sup> *Nostra Aetate* (28 October 1965), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) (accessed 22 April 2010).

<sup>5</sup> “List pasterski Episkopatu Polski z okazji 25-lecia ogłoszenia soborowej deklaracji *Nostra Aetate*,” *Znak* 541 (June 2000), <http://www.znak.com.pl/znak/listpast.html> (accessed 22 April 2010).

But let us be fair. Not all Jews are like that. A great many Jews are people of faith, honest, just, merciful, charitable. In a great many Jewish families the sense of family is healthy and edifying. We know people in the Jewish world who are, in an ethical sense, talented, noble, honorable.... One may love one's own nation more, but one may not hate anyone. Not even the Jews.... Within the Jew one must respect and love the person and the neighbor, even if one cannot manage to respect the indescribable tragedy of that nation, which was the guardian of the messianic idea and whose child was the Savior.<sup>6</sup>

Rarely have ellipses been more useful. Ironically, this particular pastoral letter has been cited by both Hlond's defenders and accusers. Those who wish to emphasize Hlond's antisemitism could quote his advice that "in commercial matters it is good to prefer your own ahead of others, avoiding Jewish stores and Jewish booths at the market... One must close oneself off to the harmful moral influences of Jewry, separate from its antichristian culture, and in particular boycott the Jewish press and the corrupting Jewish publishing houses..." If one had a different agenda, one could cite the exact same passage by inverting what was cut and what was preserved: "one may not plunder Jewish shops, destroy their goods, break windows, throw explosives into their houses... it is not permitted to attack the Jews, beat them, wound them, injure them, defame them."<sup>7</sup> Hlond's basic message was that the Jews were dangerous, but they should be treated with Christian love and charity—an argument thoroughly laced with antisemitism, but equally replete with condemnations of violence and warnings about the dangers of hatred. Some might characterize the latter as empty gestures within an otherwise pernicious text, but a broader reading of Hlond's work reveals that he emphatically propagated a message of nonviolence and equanimity in a wide variety of contexts over his entire career. It is far more plausible to speak of cognitive dissonance than hypocrisy.

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<sup>6</sup> Hlond, "O katolickie zasady moralne," 164-165.

<sup>7</sup> Hlond, "O katolickie zasady moralne," 165.

The problem is magnified many times over if we track Catholic writing over time. The passage by Count Tarnowski quoted above was typical of the pronouncements from the Polish Catholic hierarchy in the 1880s and 1890s, which tended to equate antisemitism, not the Jews, with the sins of the modern world. For example, when the first programmatically antisemitic periodical in Poland—a monthly called *Rola* [The Soil]—was launched in early 1883, the Warsaw weekly *Przegląd Katolicki* responded with harsh criticism.

We are unpleasantly disturbed by some of the voices speaking out on the pages of *Rola* against the Jews and declaring a struggle for survival against them. *Rola* is fulfilling its civic duty when it complains about our lack of attention to industry and trade, when it calls for competition in these areas with the Jews, when it criticizes Jewish usury, etc. But it can do all of this without descending from the position of Christian love, without soaking its pen in hatred.... One may, with love, defend against usury and all forms of exploitation, but one may not proclaim a struggle against an entire segment of society, and one may not have hatred against anyone in one's heart .... The German, and the Jew, and every human is a brother to the Pole, if the Pole recognizes God as his Father.<sup>8</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century one can easily find Catholic sermons or devotional books that recapitulate old theological arguments about supersessionism or equally well-established charges of deicide. Such ideas were undeniably anti-Jewish, but there was a meaningful difference between old Judeophobic myths and the politicized, racialized antisemitism that began to take hold in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In any case, in Polish Catholic texts from that era it was unusual to find *any* references to the Jews—they were simply not discussed much in the homiletic literature, the pastoral letters, the devotional texts, or the Catholic press at the time. And insofar as there was a certain degree of Judeophobia, it was balanced by denunciations of political antisemitism, which was

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<sup>8</sup> “Walka o byt,” *Przegląd Katolicki* 7 (3/15 February 1883): 104-105.

perceived as a secular movement with ties to Darwinism and (thus) liberalism and rationalism. Even setting aside these ideological qualms, in places like Galicia, where a conservative public culture remained firmly entrenched, the leading voices of the Catholic Church opposed antisemitism on the grounds that it would spread social unrest and disorder.

The picture in the 1920s and 1930s could not be more different. By then almost no one within the Polish Church would have disagreed with Father Jan Rostworowski's assessment that "to a large degree, the religious and national and economic future of our Fatherland depends on resolving [the Jewish] question."<sup>9</sup> Anyone who reads the Catholic press in Poland from the 1920s and 1930s cannot help but be shocked by the intensity and frequency of the antisemitic diatribes. This was not a tangential issue at the time, but something that the editors of nearly every Catholic periodical considered to be of primary importance. Church-affiliated periodicals like *Przewodnik Katolicki* or *Mały Dziennik* were outspoken purveyors of the most noxious antisemitism. The idea that the Jews were engaged in a plot to destroy Christian civilization was so widely accepted in Catholic circles by the 1930s that it did not even need to be argued—it became one of the self-evident assumptions that constituted "common sense." This message even penetrated children's literature, as exemplified by this verse from a 1924 pedagogical book by Father Józef Janiszewski:

For whenever two get into a fight	Bo gdzie do walki z sobą dwóch leci,
The benefit always goes to a third!	Tam zyski zgarnia zawsze ktoś—trzeci!
These 'third ones' are the Jews with their locks	Tym "trzecim" zaś są pejsaci Żydzi,
Whom all humanity finds repulsive	Którymi ludzkość cała się brzydzi,
And who settled our Poland	A którzy Polskę naszą obsiedli
Like ants, and practically consumed us	Jak mrówki i nas prawie objedli
To the bone, fattening themselves on our labor	Do kości, tuczając się pracą naszą

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<sup>9</sup> Jan Rostworowski, *Najważniejsze postulatory katolickie w dzisiejszej Polsce* (Płock: Diec. Instytutu Akcji Katolickiej w Płocku, 1936), 23.

And like a cancer infecting our land!	I jak rak tocząc krainę naszą!
They are our <i>greatest</i> enemy	Oni są naszym <i>największym</i> wrogiem,
‘The Leeches of Poland,’ a severe misfortune!	“Pijawką Polski”, nieszczęściem srogiem!
For them, like insects living in manure,	Im jak żyjącym w gnoju owadom,
It is best wherever there are many vices	Tam jest najlepiej, gdzie licznym wadom
And people given over to their passions,	I namiętnościom ludzkie oddani,
Who serve them their honor and possessions!	Co cześć i mienie niosą im w dani!
So we will get rid of these parasites	Tych pasożytów więc pozbędziemy
When all of us stand together	Się, kiedy wszyscy już raz staniemy
Under the banner that proclaims	Pod tym sztandarem, na którym świeci:
“Sobriety, unity among the children of Poland,	“Trzeźwość i zgoda wśród Polski dzieci,
Work,” and this slogan: “To Each, His Own!”	Praca” i <i>hasło to</i> : “ <i>Swój do swego!</i> ”
Then soon the Jews will disappear from the Polish lands	Wtedy wnet znikną z kraju polskiego
And all of Poland will come back to life	Żydzi, a Polska odżyje cała
And from then on will have a happy life!	I żywot szczęśny będzie wciąż miała!
For those who poisoned her will no longer be there,	Bo już nie będzie tych, co Ją trują,
<i>And brother will no longer set upon brother!</i>	<i>A braci przeciw braciom swym szczują!</i>
And the “ <i>left</i> ”, which loves the Jews so much,	A z nimi zniknie także “ <i>lewica</i> ”
Will vanish with them.	Która Żydami tak się zachwyca!
Only one “Party” will remain	“Stronnictwa” bowiem trwa nam jednego
The <i>Polish-Catholic</i> Party!	Stronnictwa <i>polsko-katolickiego!</i> <sup>10</sup>

The picture shifts yet again as we move into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, becoming even more complicated. On the one hand, the Polish Church encompassed institutions like Radio Maryja, a broadcast network characterized by hostility towards Jews, gays, liberals, communists, and (for that

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<sup>10</sup> Janiszewski, *Co jest Ojczyzna*, 67. The emphasis is in the original.

matter) just about everyone. Priests like Tadeusz Rydzyk or Henryk Jankowski gained huge followings with their hate-filled conspiracy theories, and they enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) the support of a significant segment of the Episcopate. Rydzyk has written that “in the Gospels the word ‘tolerance’ does not appear,” and he broadcasts this message to about 5.9 million people a week (including 1.4 million who listen to Radio Maryja on a daily basis). His newspaper, *Nasz Dziennik*, has a daily print-run of 250,000.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Polish Catholicism has also generated periodicals like *Tygodnik Powszechny*, which has shown impressive courage by confronting the demons of antisemitism within the Church. In 2010, to commemorate the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the magazine, the editors put out a special edition in which they changed their title to *Żydownik Powszechny*, appropriating with pride the radical right’s inflammatory and derisive name for the paper, and reprinting the seminal texts on Polish-Jewish relations that they had published over the past six decades.<sup>12</sup> Although their audience is far smaller than Father Rydzyk’s, the editors and contributors to *Tygodnik Powszechny* have a disproportionate role in Polish cultural life, and are supported by a few outspoken bishops.

So what are we to make of all these diverse voices? Some scholars have identified dominant trends, majority viewpoints, or canonical statements from Church leaders, marginalizing (and sometimes failing to even perceive) those who would dissent from such positions. The plentitude of antisemitic Catholics inspired David Kertzer to label the Church “the antechamber to the Holocaust,” and allowed Andrzej Korboński to argue that “one of the most important sources of antisemitism in Poland before WWII could be found in the teachings of the Catholic Church.”<sup>13</sup> These statements are not incorrect *per se*, but they are misleading insofar as they fail to take into account the plurality of voices within the Catholic Church, even during the darkest days of the 1930s. Even worse are those

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<sup>11</sup> Tadeusz Rydzyk, *Tak-tak, nie-nie* (Warsaw: Siostry Loretanek, 2002), 55. For more on Radio Maryja, see “Kościół toruńskokatolicki kontra Kościół rzymskokatolicki.” *Wprost* 1033 (9 September 2002), <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/13911/Rozlam-w-Kosciele/?I=1033> (accessed 22 April 2010); and Tomasz Potkaj and Konrad Piskała, *W imię ojca. Fenomen Tadeusza Rydzyka* (Warsaw: Alex Springer Polska, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> *Żydownik Powszechny* 13 (28 March 2010), [http://tygodnik.onet.pl/15,442,zydownik\\_powszechny\\_132010,temat.html](http://tygodnik.onet.pl/15,442,zydownik_powszechny_132010,temat.html) (accessed 22 April 2010).

<sup>13</sup> David Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican’s Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 264; Andrzej Korboński, “Poland Ten Years After: The Church.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33, 1 (March 2000): 123-146.

like Daniel Goldhagen or Christopher Hitchens who would flatten Catholic history in order to make generic statements about the link between Christianity and antisemitic violence.<sup>14</sup> From the opposite direction, claims that Catholicism allows for *no* antisemitism are equally problematic. Such arguments assert that the Church's true doctrines cannot be reconciled with antisemitism, so antisemites cannot *by definition* be genuine Catholics. In a narrow doctrinal sense it might be true to say that all forms of hatred violate the commandment to "love thy neighbor," and thus cannot be advocated by a genuine Christian, but for the historian it is far too facile to dismiss the overwhelming prominence of antisemitic rhetoric among Catholics in particular times and places.

More serious scholars have resorted to typologies in an attempt to cope with diversity. The historian Krzysztof Lewalski, for example, distinguishes between "anti-Judaic" claims (the theological teachings that distinguish Christianity from Judaism), "anti-Jewish" attitudes (the day-to-day hostilities that came from social and economic conflicts between Jewish and Christian communities) and antisemitism *sensu stricto* (the distinctly modern ideology of racialized hatred).<sup>15</sup> This sort of categorization seems promising, but even if we follow Lewalski's suggestions, we are still left with a great deal of excess—views that won't quite fit within this (or any other) typology. For example, interwar Catholics tended to repudiate ideologies of biological racism, but the passage by Father Zygmunt Pilch cited at the start of this essay illustrates how concepts of "blood" and inheritance penetrated far beyond the confines of scientific, secular antisemites. Even as Catholics continued to condemn racism because of its implicit denial of the power of conversion, and because of its materialist foundation, by the 1930s it was very common to refer to the Jews' "racially congenital despotism" (as a sermon from 1927 by Father Feliks Bodzianowski put it).<sup>16</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002); or even more extreme, Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Krzysztof Lewalski, *Kościół chrześcijański w Królestwie Polskim wobec Żydów w latach 1855-1915* (Wrocław: Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, 2002), 90. For the Vatican's official endorsement of this approach, see Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection On The Shoah*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_16031998\\_shoah\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html) (accessed 22 April 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Feliks Bodzianowski, "Fałszywi prorocy chwili obecnej," *Nowa Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* 33, 14-15 (July - August 1927): 38-40.



grouping Catholic views about the Jews into a few manageable boxes can be heuristically useful, but the exceptions to every possible rule are simply too numerous to ignore.

This is where we typically say “it’s complicated,” and try to leave it at that, but there is in fact a way out of this muddle. The first thing we need to do is to clarify what we mean by the adjective “Catholic.” When historians try to understand how Catholicism has shaped a particular ideology or political movement, what exactly are they studying? Defining Catholicism might seem to be relatively simple, given the highly centralized nature of the Church. At first glance, this would appear to be an institution with clear lines of authority, a well-articulated set of dogmatic claims, and easily specified conditions of membership. It might be difficult to define generic secular ideologies like liberalism or socialism, and it might be tricky to determine exactly who belongs to decentralized religious communities like Judaism or Hinduism, but would not Catholicism be the one great “ism” that *can* be readily delineated? Unfortunately, no: in practice the adjective “Catholic” turns out to be just as indeterminate, vague, and open-ended as any other label of identity, ideology, or faith. Almost any definition will exclude some who use this label for self-identification, or become so broad as to include those whom most Catholics would consider to be outside the flock.

It might seem reasonable to take self-identification as a starting point, and accept that if people say they are Catholic, then they are. Using that measure, there are a staggering 1,100,000,000 Catholics in the world today, making it the largest religious community on earth (with Sunni Muslims following close behind at 1,000,000,000).<sup>17</sup> More to the point for the purposes of this essay, the self-identification standard makes Poland appear almost homogeneous: depending on how one formulates the question, between 90% and 98% of the population will answer “Roman Catholic” when asked about their religion.<sup>18</sup> But such unanimity is always problematic, inevitably concealing and containing heterogeneity. Indeed, when dealing with numbers like these, it becomes hard to consistently link religious affiliation with actual religious practice, let alone religious belief. Four

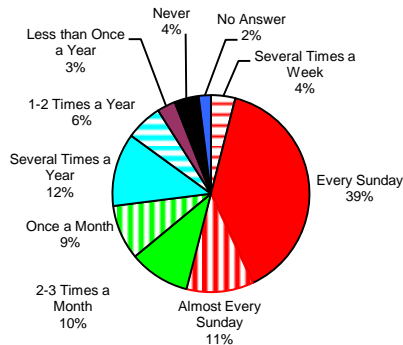
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<sup>17</sup> “Religious Bodies of the World with at Least 1 Million Adherents,” [http://www.adherents.com/adh\\_rb.html](http://www.adherents.com/adh_rb.html) (accessed 22 April 2010).

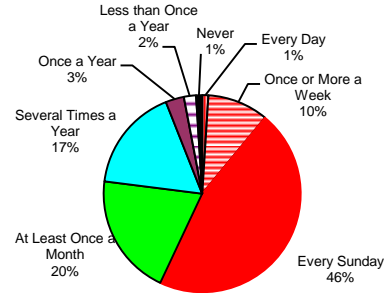
<sup>18</sup> Irena Borowik and Tadeusz Doktor, *Pluralizm religijny i moralny w Polsce: Raport z badań* (Kraków: Nomos, 2001), 23.

major surveys from the late 1990s tried to pin down how often people in Poland went to mass, and though each posed the question differently, the general pattern was clear.<sup>19</sup>

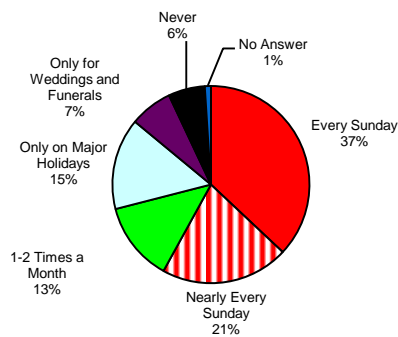
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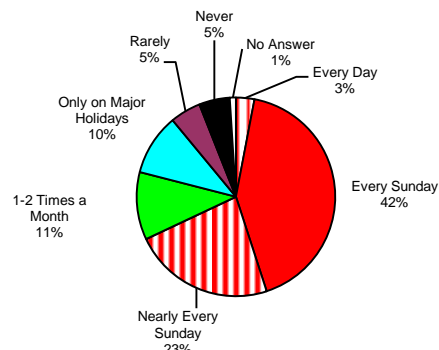
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**Center for the Study of Public Opinion, 1997**



**Father Witold Zdaniewicz, et al., 1998**

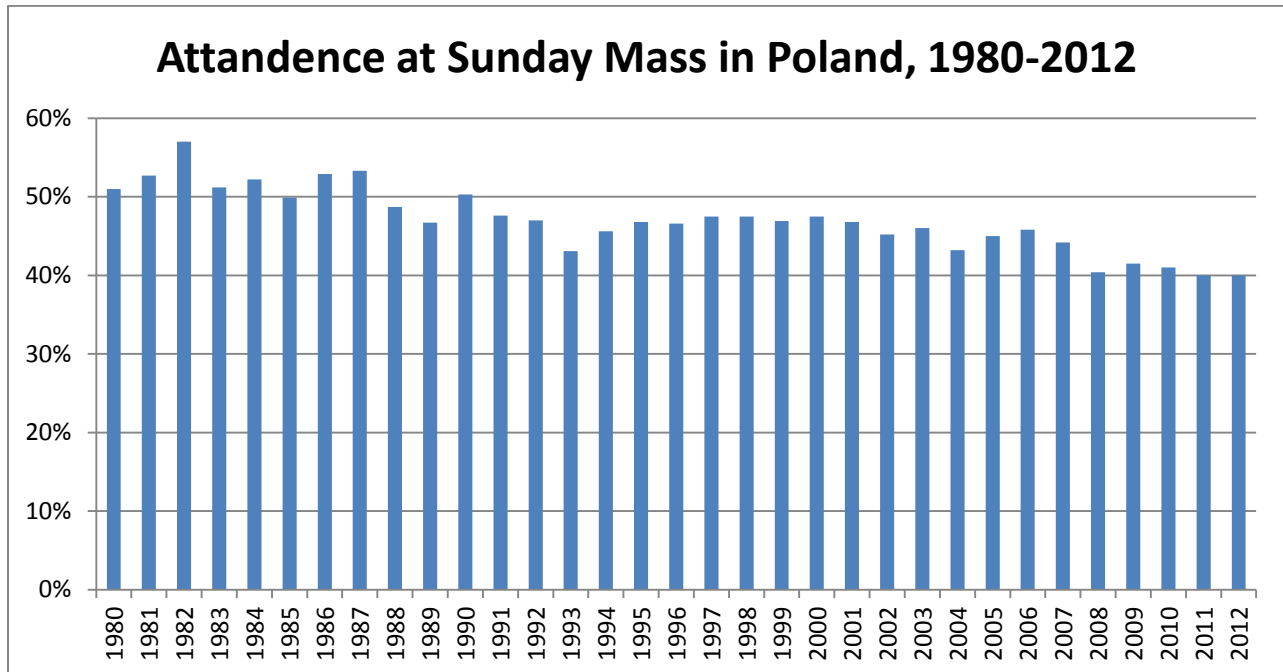


All these figures are all based on self-reporting, and a number of studies have shown that people tend to vastly overstate their level of observance. In Poland, a Church-sponsored study revealed a gap between reported and actual attendance of 10-15%, and a similar project in the US (including both Protestants and Catholics) suggested an even greater disparity.<sup>20</sup> More recent studies that have attempted to compare actual church attendance (by literally counting those who go to mass on a

<sup>19</sup> The ISSR survey is covered in Borowik and Doktor, 135. The remaining studies are cited by Janusz Mariański, „Niedzielne i Wielkanocne praktyki religijne,” in Witold Zdaniewicz, ed., *Religijność Polaków 1991-1998* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 2001), 86-88.

<sup>20</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway and P.L. Marler, “Did You Really Go To Church This Week? Behind the Poll Data,” *The Christian Century* (May 6, 1998): 472-475; Zbigniew Nosowski, „Czy Polska jest (jeszcze) krajem katolickim?” *Więź* 5 (2003).

particular Sunday) with nominal parish membership, and this research shows a striking decline in devotional practice.<sup>21</sup>

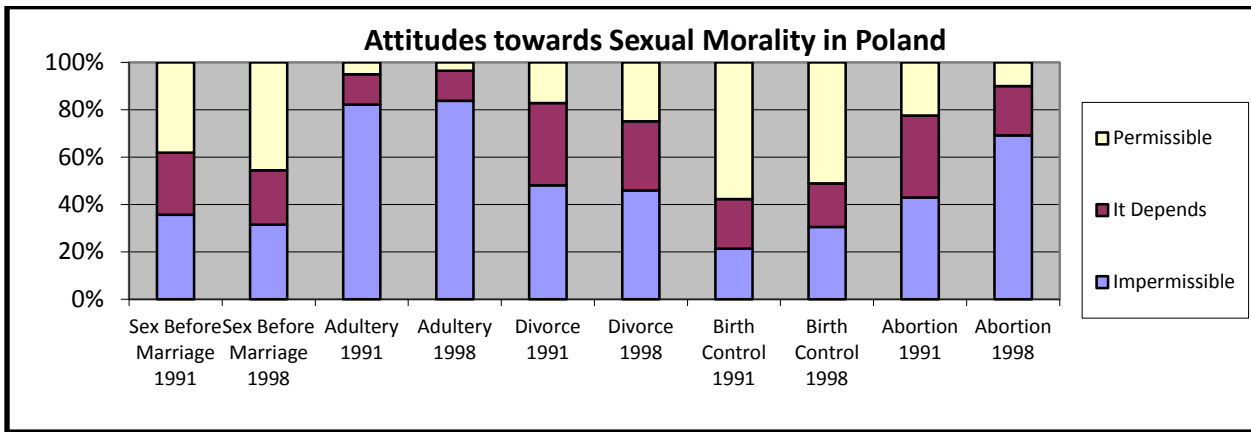


Even the most skeptical observer will have to acknowledge that Poland is a *very* religious place, with one of the highest rates of religious participation in the industrialized world, but the fact remains that in a country where more than 90% of the population claims to be Catholic, *far* fewer actually go to mass with any regularity—and that figure is declining. My point is not to downplay the religiosity of the Poles, but only to make the obvious point that even in Poland, a large number of people are able to claim a Catholic identity without demonstrating much Catholic religious practice.

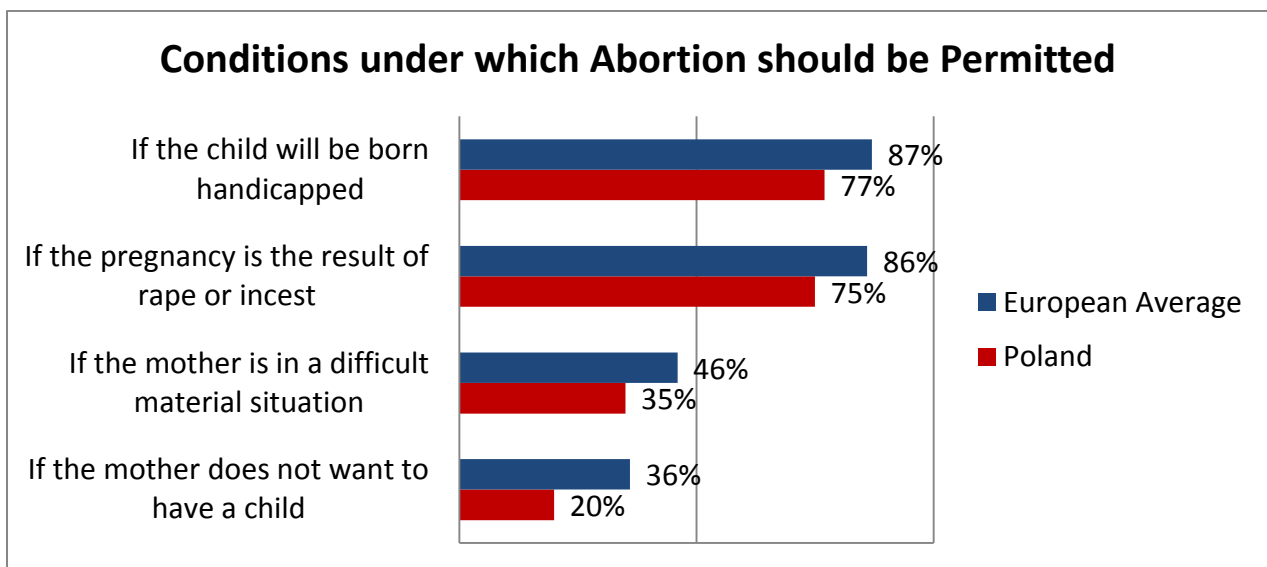
The gap between identity and religiosity is even greater if we look to the realm of personal behavior. Calling oneself a Catholic definitely does not mean that one will necessarily follow the moral teachings mandated by Rome. Even in the 1990s, before the recent decline in religious practice in Poland, two surveys revealed some distinctly heterodox views on matters of sexual morality:<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Witold Zdaniewicz, *Praktyki niedzielne* (Warsaw: Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego, „Kościół w Polsce,” <http://www.iskk.pl/kosciolnaswiecie.html> (accessed January 20, 2014).



The trend in opposition to abortion might give some solace to Church leaders, but in fact that particular figures is undermined by other polling data. A more recent international survey comparing attitudes in 10 European countries suggested that the Poles, while less likely to approve of abortion than their fellow Europeans, are very far from Rome’s insistence on absolute prohibition under all circumstances.<sup>23</sup>



So that leaves us with only one major question of sexual morality—adultery—on which even half of the Poles accept the injunctions of their Church. On matters of theology and dogma, surveys show a similar discrepancy. Significant minorities of practicing Catholics in Poland (and in the United States, for that matter) deny such core Catholic theological claims as transubstantiation or the virgin

<sup>23</sup> Tadeusz Doktor, „Moralne konsekwencje religijności—Polska na tle innych krajów,” in Burowik and Doktor, 317.

birth.<sup>24</sup> When we think about the relationship between religious identity and religious doctrine historically, we encounter even greater difficulties. Pervasive illiteracy, inconsistently educated priests, rural isolation, the enduring strength of pre-Christian folk customs—all this needs to be factored into our picture of Catholicism in each particular historical context. We might be able to say that self-identification as a Catholic increases the likelihood that a person would or will engage in certain ritual practices or believe certain things, but by no means does one follow necessarily from the other.

It is tempting, faced with this dilemma, to avoid speaking about Catholicism as an ascriptive term of theological affiliation, and to shift to microcosmic studies of religiosity in well-defined and narrowly-bounded contexts. Indeed, the move towards microhistory that has so enriched the discipline of history over the past two decades has helped us understand that neither the grand terms of social science (nation, class, race, gender, etc.) nor the sweeping labels of political philosophy (liberalism, socialism, nationalism, fascism, etc.) ever correlate precisely to the lived experiences of concrete individuals. In the field of religious history, the best works of recent years have focused on the quotidian practice of religion or the irresolvable dialogic tensions between spiritual authorities and rank-and-file believers. Reacting against older scholarship that had blithely conflated the claims of the clerical elite with the collective convictions of “the Church,” social historians and anthropologists of the 1980s and 1990s insisted (rightly) that there was no necessary correspondence between priest and parishioner, between the teachings of the official catechism and the actual beliefs of the faithful. What some have called “the new religious history” justly prioritizes the autonomy of the believer and elevates religious practice over abstract statements of faith.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For some examples of survey data regarding doctrinal beliefs, see CARA Catholic Poll, available at <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CCP.html> (accessed 22 April 2010); Irena Borowik, „Religijność—wymiar ideologiczny,” in Irena Borowik and Tadeusz Doktór, *Pluralizm religijny i moralny w Polsce: Raport z badań* (Kraków: Nomos, 2001), 95-124; Thomas Hargrove and Guido H. Stempel, “Many Americans Still Wonder about Nature of Jesus,” <http://www.newspolls.org/articles/19574> (accessed 22 April 2010).

<sup>25</sup> This has become a very rich field of study, and it is difficult to single out just a few exemplary texts. Among the most influential have been David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth-Century German Village* (New York: Random House, 1995); William A. Christian, Jr., *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*, new revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca: Cornell University

Nonetheless, dogmatic claims remain relevant, even if they are not definitive. No matter how sensitive we are to complexity and diversity, we are left with the fact that people do speak about Catholicism *as if* it were a single, coherent belief system, *as if* claiming a Catholic identity implied the acceptance of a set of Catholic teachings. People all over the world act as if there were a bounded phenomenon called “Catholicism” with identifiable beliefs and practices, so we scholars are obliged to consider the possibility that on some level there is. Many Catholics take debates over what it means to be a Catholic very seriously, so we have to give some attention to whatever it is they are debating about. For all the richness of microhistorical studies of religious practice, *something* continues to exist on the macrocosmic scale, and we need to figure out how to talk about it.

So what theological beliefs, moral precepts, and religious practices can be attributed to Catholicism in a general sense, and how might all this relate to antisemitism? How can we bridge the gap between the evident heterogeneity of the Catholic community and the widespread sense that there nonetheless exists a coherent entity called Catholicism? In practice, scholars have dodged this problem by implicitly (and less often explicitly) defining Catholicism differently for different sorts of research projects. Sometimes the term “Catholic” refers to the institutions of the Church and the official hierarchy, as when we speak about the Catholic response to the Holocaust when we are really discussing the actions and attitudes of Pope Pius XII. At other times “Catholic” refers to a cultural community with only notional ties to religion *per se*, as when we refer to the struggles between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. A useful term here might be “ethno-Catholics”: those for whom religion is a Durkheimian means of solidifying community and subjective belonging. Finally, we have *Catholicism*: the theological doctrines and the social, moral, and political teachings articulated

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Press, 1990); Robert Greene and Valerie Kivelson, eds., *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice Under the Tsars* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Dagmar Herzog, *Intimacy and Exclusion: Religious Politics in Pre-Revolutionary Baden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); , Daryl Hart and Harry S. Stout, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Thomas Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Nineteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Thomas Kselman, ed., *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Mary Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Peter van der Veer, *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Philip R. VanderMeer and Robert P. Swierenga, eds., *Belief and Behavior: Essays in the New Religious History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

by the clergy, sustained and defended by the institutions of the Church, discussed in Catholic press, taught to the faithful through devotional texts and catechism classes, and preached in sermons. So we are really dealing with three concepts: the Catholic Church, ethno-Catholicism, and the Catholic faith (in other words, the institution, the faithful, and the belief system).<sup>26</sup>

Not every ethno-Catholic knows or even cares what Catholicism teaches. For some (perhaps most), the theological and ideological teachings of the Church are distant memories from childhood catechism classes, and the sermons at mass are things to be endured or ignored. For such Catholics, their religion is a locus of community, a source of identity, and maybe a forum for rites of passage at birth, maturation, marriage, and death.<sup>27</sup> These are the people who can, without any sense of self-contradiction, use birth control, deny papal infallibility, even question the existence of God without weakening their identity as Catholics. A recurrent theme in Catholic homiletic writing over the past century has been the concern that too many of the supposed faithful are ethno-Catholics in this sense. As Archbishop Józef Bilczewski put it in a pastoral letter from 1901, “We must not simply call ourselves Catholics, but be Catholics.... We must be Catholics at home and outside of home, every day and every hour, with (so to speak) every inch of our being.”<sup>28</sup> Almost a century later, Father Mieczysław Nowak would complain that “for a large percentage of the Poles, faith is only a stereotypical mindset, a tradition, an extremely superficial declaration.”<sup>29</sup> Between these two citations are hundreds—indeed, thousands—of sermons echoing the same concern. For those who claim to truly care about Catholicism, the ethno-Catholics in their parishes have been an ongoing source of displeasure. Nonetheless, the very existence of this frustration points us to the ongoing project to enforce Catholicism on the community of ethno-Catholics, a project that is of fundamental importance even when it fails to produce unanimity.

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<sup>26</sup> For a similar three-pronged approach to the study of religion, see Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization,” *The American Historical Review* 108, 4 (October 2003): 1061-1080.

<sup>27</sup> For all the inconsistencies in Poland surrounding religious participation and adherence to Church teachings, 99% of all children are baptized and 93% of all marriages are consecrated with a church wedding. See Borowik and Doktor, 23, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Józef Bilczewski, “List pasterski do wiernych archidiecezyji w dniu konsekracji i intronizacji—20 stycznia, w dniu N. Imienia Jezus 1901,” *Listy pasterskie i mowy okolicznościowe* (Mikołów-Warszawa: Nakładem Księgarni Karola Miarki, 1908), 30.

<sup>29</sup> As cited by M. Ł. “Pytania o wiarę,” *Rzeczpospolita* (January 17, 1998), [http://www.rzeczpospolita.pl/Pl-iso/dodatki/plus\\_minus\\_980117/plus\\_minus\\_a\\_2.html](http://www.rzeczpospolita.pl/Pl-iso/dodatki/plus_minus_980117/plus_minus_a_2.html) (Accessed 22 April 2010).

St. Thomas Aquinas articulated what has become a classical precept of Christianity: “The worship of God has two parts: the first—external bodily worship—is at the service of the second—an interior worship uniting our minds and hearts to God.”<sup>30</sup> The interiority of which Aquinas spoke is beyond the grasp of historians—depending on one’s point of view, it belongs either in the realm of the psychologist or that of the theologian. That said, what we might call the collective interiority of the Catholic Church—the dogmas, doctrines, ideologies, and worldviews that constitute Catholicism—*can* be described and studied. It is possible to sketch a picture of Catholicism even as we recognize that Catholics are an irreducibly diverse group encompassing everything from learned theologians to casual ethno-Catholics. To use a slogan that was once very popular in Catholic writing, there are moments when the Church feels compelled to proclaim “*non possumus*,” to stand before some ideas and say “no further.” Beyond the small handful of such lines, however, there are many fluid and contested positions that can change from time to time and place to place, yet stay within the broader framework of Catholicism. The scholar’s task is to locate the lines that define this framework, and explore how some ideas can circulate with them, while others get pushed outside.

If Catholicism is narrower and more specific than the multitude of beliefs articulated over time and space by millions of ethno-Catholics, it is nonetheless broader than the corpus of pronouncements by those with official positions in the hierarchy of the institutional Church. Any approach that separates the producers of doctrine from those who receive (or resist) such teachings—that posits the clergy and the laity as entirely distinct—fails to acknowledge the extent to which Catholic thought is generated at multiple sites. I am proposing that we bring doctrine back into our discussion of Catholic history, but not by merely shifting attention from popular rites and rituals to pastoral letters and theological tracts. Instead, I propose to simultaneously recognize and problematize normative claims about Catholicism: to focus on the attempt to draw boundaries around what it means to be Catholic, while at the same time highlighting the fact that such attempts are always contested, and never fully successful. In other words, I suggest that we approach Catholicism

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<sup>30</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, edited by Timothy McDermott (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1989), 300.



neither as a stable doctrinal whole, nor as an irreducible cluster of distinct faith communities; rather, we should look at Catholicism as a bounded site of contested meaning, finite but malleable, heterogeneous but not infinitely so.

More specifically, I believe that we can best study Catholicism by looking at two intertwined sites: 1) the normative center of Catholicism—the beliefs and practices preached by the hierarchical authorities of the Church and the canonical texts of the faith; 2) the acts of controversy or (in extreme cases) heresy, when people do or say things that challenge the aforementioned boundaries. Whether a person merely generates debate or is formally excommunicated, such envelope-pushing brings into relief that which is at the very edge of the thing called “Catholicism.” Those unfamiliar with the Catholic tradition are often surprised by the amount of diversity that is possible within the Church. The principle of papal infallibility would seem to suggest that the Pope’s particular interpretation of any given issue should be irrefutable, and that a plurality of opinions on any matter would be hard to sustain. However, the doctrine of infallibility only applies to very specific sorts of statements made under special circumstances. In fact, it has only been formally invoked once: in 1950 when Pius XII proclaimed the doctrine of the assumption of Mary. Just because an official position on nearly every question exists does not mean that dissent is impermissible. Not every “ought” is a “must,” and not every “must” implies the same degree of obligation. Catholicism is best thought of as a shifting but always delineated discursive space, within which a finite but nonetheless significant variety of positions coexist.

As scholars we can learn a lot by focusing on the limits of this diversity, the edges of that discursive space, the contested territories that segregate the Catholic from the nonbeliever. By giving significant attention to debates and dissention, I suggest that we can describe Catholicism without turning it into an abstraction or an ideal type. Catholicism is not a doctrinal constant that exists above and beyond the Catholics who live within it, nor is it a theological mish-mash of the ideas articulated by millions of ethno-Catholics. Rather, it is a discursive field that is constantly being created, sustained, and re-created by those who participate in it. Even though Catholicism is not coterminous

with the population of people who call themselves Catholics, it is nonetheless a conceptual vocabulary that exists only insofar as it is spoken, a mental framework that is defined by those who think within it. Studying the boundaries of this “ism” will not generate a one-sentence definition, and the resulting picture will mutate over time, but it will allow us to make claims about Catholicism.

This approach allows us to speak more precisely and meaningfully about the relationship between Catholicism and antisemitism. To say “Catholics hated Jews in the 1930s” would be an absurd overgeneralization, but it would be equally nonsensical to say “Catholics did *not* hate Jews in the 1930s.” In these usages, the noun “Catholic” would refer to a locus of identity rather than a set of teachings, and as such it would encompass people with a wide range of views. Studying the “ethno-Catholics” referred to above might (at best) allow us to identify some tendencies, but when examining an era before reliable survey data was available, we would have to proceed with great caution. We might be able to get more specific if we focus on the Catholic Church as an institution, insofar as its hierarchical nature minimizes dissent to a certain degree. But here, too, we face significant limitations. The Vatican prior to *Nostra Aetate* spoke with different (sometimes contradicting) voices when it came to the “Jewish Question.” Racialized, biological antisemitism was supposed to be anathema, but one can find such views even in the highest reaches of the Papal administration.<sup>31</sup> After the Second Vatican Council the situation would seem clearer, but in fact Church authorities have been very reluctant to crack down on manifestations of antisemitism within the Church. The continued strength of Radio Maryja in Poland is ample evidence of this. One can explain Rome’s passivity in these matters (the fear of a schism is probably the main reason Father Rydzyk has never been openly denounced), but the fact remains that the institutional stance allows for some ambiguity.

This last example brings us to what we *can* say about Catholicism and antisemitism. By focusing on discursive boundaries as outlined above, we can identify the ideas that lie near the core of Catholicism, those that cross a line into controversy, and those that moved clearly into the realm

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<sup>31</sup> See Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*.

of heresy. A certain polemic with Judaism is probably near that core, but there is a difference between a polemic and a prejudice. The doctrine of supersessionism, although challenged by many theologians since the Second Vatican Council, was long a source of theological dispute between Christians and Jews. Father Adam Kopyciński summarized this teaching succinctly in a sermon from 1905, describing the history of salvation in terms of a theatrical drama: “In the first act the Jewish nation appears; in the second Jesus Christ, and in the third the Catholic Church. . . . The Jewish nation is the preface to Christianity.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the covenant between God and the Jews was “superseded” by the salvific coming of Jesus, and the Church now embodies the ongoing divine revelation. Supersessionism is not only an assertion that Christianity is true and Judaism false, but that the former realizes and thus replaces the latter. Christianity denies the validity of the Gods and holy books of most other religions, but appropriates the Jewish God and the Jewish Bible as its own.

In addition to the theological disputes surrounding supersessionism, there are many passages in the New Testament that criticize the Jews, most famously in the scenes surrounding the arrest and execution of Jesus. Particularly troubling is Matthew 27:25, in which a mob of Jews shouts, “Let His blood be on us and on our children!” Although that sentence is omitted in the other canonical versions of this story (Luke 23, Mark 15, and John 19), all four Gospels depict a Jewish crowd calling for execution. Most mainstream Christians today would contextualize these passages against the backdrop of the bitter theological feuds of the era in which they were written, but regardless, those wishing to criticize the Jews in general could find ample biblical support. For example, an anonymous author in the popular Catholic magazine *Posiew* in 1933 drew upon biblical references to argue that the Jews of Jesus’ time “distorted the Law of Moses,” leading ultimately to a religion that was “a dead teaching, and often outright immoral.” In a telling parallel to the teaching that the partitions had been a divine punishment for Poland’s transgressions, this author recounted a very old myth that blamed the Jewish expulsion from Israel on the failure to recognize that the Messiah had arrived. And just as 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholics often preached that Poland would remain stateless until

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<sup>32</sup> Kopyciński, 159.

the nation completed its penance, so did this writer believe that the Jews “persist and are among us as a sign of the punishment by God for their rejection of the Savior two thousand years ago.”<sup>33</sup>

Rosemary Ruether has labeled supersessionism one of the “roots of antisemitism,” and the potential of the Passion story to generate ill will seems obvious.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, that potential has not always been realized, undermining any “slippery slope” argumentation. After all, it is one thing to say that certain people are doctrinally mistaken or even damned, and quite another to persecute or hate them. The one can lead to the other, but the connection is contingent rather than logically or theologically inevitable. In fact, throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the homiletic literature generally used biblical references to the ancient Jews in order to construct moral lessons for the Christian laity, and not as a foundation for stirring up hatred towards contemporary Jews. Even when priests did evoke the worst elements of the alleged Jewish role in the Passion narrative, the result was usually a paradoxical message that combined negative imagery with an injunction to rise above animosity and love one’s enemies. As one model sermon put it,

The Jews cried out, “crucify him!” And the Lord Jesus prayed, “forgive them.” Their evil was great, yet Jesus’ mercy was greater. And for whom did he pray? Certainly not for those servants of Satan who led him to the cross? Certainly not for those beasts who tore him apart on the cross? O yes, precisely for them did he pray—for them did he beg for grace and forgiveness. They blasphemed, and he blessed; they murdered, and he prayed for them.... Those words are thus words of prayer for grace and forgiveness, but they are also an example, a lesson for us about how to behave towards those who persecute us. Revenge is a diabolic thing, but to suffer persecution patiently is a Christian thing.... This is a lesson for us, so that we will not repay evil with evil.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “Sprawa żydowska,” *Posiew* 27, 32 (6 August 1933): 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ruether; see also Isaac.

<sup>35</sup> Stagraczyński, “Ostatnie słowa,” in *Wybór kazań*, 2: 268.

This author's main point was that Christians should turn their attention to heaven, avoid vengeful thoughts, and love their neighbors and enemies. His characterization of the Jews was brutal, but he was equally prone to describe his fellow Poles as miserable creatures whose very reason for living was a mystery understood only by God. In another sermon this same priest explained how the Jews had been "rejected by God" because they "persisted in their stubbornness" and refused to acknowledge the Savior. Then he quickly changed direction, warning his audience that once God's "mercy" shifted from the Jews to the Christians, the latter were obliged to adhere to a much higher moral standard. "The greater the mercy, the greater the punishment for those who sin against that mercy," he preached. Revealingly, the title of that particular sermon was "The Catholic in Hell."<sup>36</sup> These passages were typical: most of the references to Jews in 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish sermons alluded to a mythologized image of the people of ancient Israel rather than to the Ashkenazim down the street, and those biblical Jews were discussed mainly as a way of setting up moral lessons for Christians. The result was hardly sympathetic to the Jews (to say the least), but there was still quite a bit of distance between this religious imagery and the racialized, politicized worldview of the secular antisemites.

As noted earlier, we can make a strong case that by the 1920s antisemitism was quite easy to espouse within a Catholic framework, but there is no indication that supersessionism or the Passion story had much to do with it. Instead, we see a constant tension between popular (and mostly secular) conspiracy theories and doctrinal imperatives that mitigated against them. Cardinal Hlond's infamous pastoral letter was typical: he both affirmed all the imagined pernicious traits of the Jews, but also emphasized that "not all Jews are like that."<sup>37</sup> However we interpret such texts, it is hard to see how they *emanated* from Catholic doctrine or even from older forms of Judeophobia. There are simply too many logical leaps and intervening contingencies to draw a convincing causal story. If we move away from such cause-and-effect narratives, however, and turn to a study of Catholicism's outer boundaries in the specific circumstances of the interwar years, we see that *opposition* to

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<sup>36</sup> Stagraczyński, "Katolik w piekle," in *Wybór kazań*, 1: 77-82.

<sup>37</sup> Hlond, "O katolickie zasady moralne," 164-165.

antisemitism was very hard for Catholics to advocate at the time. Consider, for example, the fate of Father Anthony van Asseldonk's *Amici Israel* organization, founded in 1926 in order to spread a more positive image of the Jews among Catholics. Asseldonk was not a model for 21<sup>st</sup> century multiculturalism—he wanted to be nice to the Jews so as to convert them more effectively—but his rhetoric differed sharply from the antisemitic mainstream of his day. Significantly, the *Amici Israel* were disbanded by the Vatican, which accused the group of “a manner of acting and thinking contrary to the opinion and spirit of the church, to the thinking of the Holy Fathers, and to the very liturgy” and for failing to recognize “the Jewish peril.”<sup>38</sup> We must not conclude from this that every Catholic *had* to be an antisemite—that would involve the sort of category error I've been focusing on in this article, confusing the Catholic community, the Catholic Church, and Catholicism. We can say, however, that Catholicism's discursive boundary was drawn at the time in such a way as to make even biological antisemitism possible, while making anti-antisemitism very difficult. This is very different from overgeneralizations like “Catholicism leads to antisemitism” or “Catholicism caused antisemitism.” Instead, the core-and-periphery approach I am suggesting here retains individual human agency (and thus responsibility), allows us to locate antisemitism firmly within the discourse of Catholicism, but avoids slippery causal oversimplifications.

Moreover, such an approach helps us understand what has happened since *Nostra Aetate*. We cannot (yet?) say that Catholicism *precludes* antisemitism, despite the periodic statements from the Vatican implying that this ought to be the case. One only need walk into a Church-affiliated book shop in Poland to see that antisemitic views can still be articulated within a Catholic framework. But these voices occupy a very different space within Catholicism than they did a half century ago. Instead of sitting near the center of the Catholic world, they exist on the margins, and when they are articulated too loudly they generate controversy and even scandal. Meanwhile, the Polish Church now officially sponsors “Days of Judaism” each year, when parish priests throughout the country are urged to communicate positive messages about “our older brothers in faith” (as John Paul II called

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<sup>38</sup> Ronald Modras, *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism: Poland, 1933-1939* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 271-272.

the Jews).<sup>39</sup> It is certainly not *required* that a good Catholic today be an anti-antisemite, but there is space to advocate such views. Once again, that core of Catholic doctrine does not lead to any necessary conclusions about the Jews, but it does frame the way discussions of the Jews take place within the reconfigured spaces established by *Nostra Aetate*.

So the answer to the straw-man question used in the title of this essay (“Why do Polish Catholics hate the Jews?”) is that many of them do not, if by “Catholic” we mean the community of ethno-Catholics, or the institutions of the Church. If, however, that query is really aimed at finding a relationship between *Catholicism* and antisemitism, then we would have to reframe it: how has Polish Catholicism in some circumstances opened up discursive spaces for the rhetoric of antisemitism, and at other times made those spaces a bit harder to access? What is the relationship between the doctrinal core of the faith and the configuration of its outer boundaries, and how does antisemitism fit within that relationship? This somewhat cumbersome reformulation of the question allows us to explore both how Catholicism has facilitated ideologies of hatred, and how it has framed those ideologies in distinctive ways. Recognizing that both the core of Catholicism and its boundaries are constantly in flux, we can thus move away from simplistic cause-and-effect arguments and towards a more nuanced understanding of how Catholicism both hinders and facilitates particular forms of antisemitism in particular times and places.

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Stanisław Krajewski, “Na Drodze do normalności: Dzień Judaizmu,” [http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/T/TE/dzien\\_judaizmu.html](http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/T/TE/dzien_judaizmu.html) (accessed 22 April 2010).