

# Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia ad Bibliothecarum Scientiam Pertinentia 21 (2023)

ISSN 2081-1861

DOI 10.24917/20811861.21.20

***Olga Białek-Szwed***

Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski

ORCID 0000-0001-5702-4458

***Rafał Jakub Pastwa***

Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski

ORCID 0000-0001-9470-5156

***Aneta Wójciszyn-Wasil***

Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski

ORCID 0000-0003-2848-3051

## Manifestations of *cancel culture* in relation to the Roman Catholic Church in Poland: a case study of selected weekly opinion journals

### Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed an unquestionable change in how the Roman Catholic Church is perceived by Polish society. The functioning of the Church institution under democratic conditions proved to be a serious challenge for religious leaders and hierarchs. It was no longer enough to draw on the past merits and achievements of the Church and its leaders – neither those from the era of the Church's struggle against the communist regime, nor those from the time when the prominent democratic movement "Solidarność" was born. Such monumental figures as Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński or Cardinal Karol Wojtyła – the latter elected Pope in 1978 – are no longer publicly perceived as authorities by contemporary generations of Poles, or this perception is no match to the level of their public recognition at the beginning of the political transformation in Poland. Nowadays, Poland goes through an observable period of "odjaniepawlanie" (dejohnpaulisation) or "dewojtylizacja" (dewojtylisation), fostered by the Church's errors in religious communication, or sexual abuse scandals revealed through digital media, including social media. The contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and of the legacy of John Paul II represent manifestations of *cancel culture* towards powerful social actors. The roots of the *cancel culture* attitudes towards the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and her leaders can be sought, on the one hand, in the changes taking place in society, as well as in the opportunities offered by modern communication tools. On the other hand, they are rooted in the activities of the Church herself, which have contributed to contesting her presence in the public sphere, and resulted in the ousting of

the Church hierarchy and religious leaders form public debate. Among the causes of why the Church's activities are contested, the following need a particular mention: the Church's involvement in current politics, child abuse scandals, a gradual loss of social influence, attempts to maintain a privileged position in society, rise of secular ethics, which sometimes is in an overt opposition to Christian anthropology. The institution of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland has found herself overwhelmed by the complex web of challenges posed by contemporaneity.

## The Problem

The aim of this article is to examine media strategies of contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland in a case study involving three Polish weekly opinion journals: "Polityka," "Newsweek" and "Tygodnik Powszechny."

Based on the intuitions and analyses contained in the works of J. R. Formicola and R. J. Pastwa regarding the cultural boycott and contestation of the Roman Catholic Church, including Poland, it was decided that the phenomenon of cancel culture is consistent with the current state of the debate regarding the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Manifestations of cancel culture towards the church institution and its leaders are visible in the media strategies of Polish weekly opinion magazines.

Three journals from the opinion-forming press segment were selected on the basis of their originality content (the weekly 'Tygodnik Angora', consisting mainly of reprints from other newspapers, was not taken into account) and highest sales, according to data: Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, audit of the Association of Press Distribution Control (Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy). In order to adequately observe the media strategies of contesting the Church, the weeklies 'Sieci' and 'Tygodnik do Rzeczy' were not qualified for the study, as they represent the conservative trend. The sales of the weeklies selected for the analysis in 2020 are presented in the table below:

Title	The sold copies in 2020	Average sales per issue in 2020
Polityka	4 829 916	92883
Newsweek Polska	3 775 034	75501
Tygodnik Powszechny	1 269 488	26448

Source: own compilation based on data Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa 2020.

Over the past several decades, developed societies have witnessed how the role of religion changed in the media-dominated public space. The ecclesiastical institution, her public authorities and experts find it impossible to control the religious content in the media. This also applies to content concerning the Church as an institution and her leaders (Hjarvard, 2008, pp. 9–26; Hepp, & Krotz, 2014, pp. 1–15).

The contemporary widespread contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and a loss of her privileged social position – her decline to the position of a mere religious community-level authority – result from long-term social processes. As reported by research, May 1993 marks the time when Polish society's assessment of the activities of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland reached its

minimum, with the level of public support for the Church at mere 38 per cent. At the same time, negative assessment of the activities of the ecclesiastical institution in Poland reached 54 per cent (CBOS, 1993, p. 7). Already during the *Ad limina* visit of the Polish bishops to the Vatican, criticism of the clergy's involvement in state affairs was overtly voiced by John Paul II himself (Weigel, 2005, p. 666). The Polish Pope was aware of the danger posed by the privileged position of the clergy and the Church since this was the case in Poland's history during the two decades before the outbreak of the Second World War. The leading role of Catholicism in Poland – a country in Central Europe – resulted from the ecclesiastical support for the democratic opposition, which eventually opened a way to the political transformation of 1989, when communism finally collapsed. This influence was evident over the decades that followed, and was particularly obvious during the next waves of political elections. For example, numerous representatives of the Church hierarchy became involved on the side of the presidential candidate Andrzej Duda and the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) camp (Formicola, 2021, p. 11). Attempts to halt the erosion of Catholicism that swept throughout Western Europe took the form of explicit involvement of the clergy and the Church institution in the socio-political stratum. Nonetheless, it is apparent today that these measures failed to stop secularisation processes, typical of developed societies (Formicola, 2021, p. 12). The perception shared among Poles, not only the youngest generations, is that the Roman Catholic Church is over-represented in the public space. This over-representation also applies to religious leaders, including John Paul II. It is becoming increasingly common that the Church becomes a subject of debate in the Polish public space, yet without participation of her leaders or representatives in it. This is due to the contestation of the ecclesiastical institution, mainly as a consequence of the previous 'over-sacralisation' of the public space during the political transformation period, as well as due to the overlap of the ecclesiastical and secular public dimensions, which was inspired by many political leaders (Modrzejewski 2010, pp. 54–55).

These actions are reflected in the reactions of Polish society. In the years 1992–2021, a radical change has become evident in how many Catholics in Poland declare being faithful and participating in religious practices. Changes are particularly noticeable among the youngest Poles. The largest growth vector in non-believers and decline in believers is seen for two age brackets: born between 1980 and 1996, and those born in 1997 and afterwards. This means that Poland as perceived and experienced by the two youngest age groups is in some sense a *non-ecclesiastical* Poland – to say the least. The number of non-believers in the 18–24 age group increased from 6.7 per cent to 28.6 per cent between 1992 and 2021. At the same time, the number of non-practitioners in this age group increased from 7.9 per cent to as much as 36 per cent. According to a research report by the Public Opinion Research Center (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej), the data prove that Poland's youth is undergoing the process "emancipation," caused by the social influences in the family and the immediate environment, including the media environment (CBOS, 2021, p. 10).

The judgement of the Constitutional Tribunal of 22 October 2020 marked a milestone, and became a catalyst for public negative sentiment that erupted on an unprecedented scale in the form of street protests against the ruling party and against the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.

During street protests that scrambled in many large Polish cities and small towns, crowds lambasted politicians of the ruling coalition as well as the institution of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. For the first time in contemporary history, the slogans and the attitudes of the participants unleashed a massive scale of the resentment towards the Church and the attitudes of her leaders. Demands for reducing the influence of the Church on social life spread throughout the public. This is why the public phenomena at hand can appropriately be discussed in terms of manifestations of *cancel culture* in relation to the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Cancel culture is a mediated withdrawal of support and endorsement from public actors, often expressed in the form of contestation, indignation and shaming, in relation to words or actions that are found no longer acceptable especially by hitherto marginalised and excluded social groups and individuals. One form of contestation, and finally of 'nullifying' influential actors, is to oust them of public debate, boycotting events in which they participate, or invalidating their actions as well as their achievements – including past merits and legacy. The invalidation of influencers is a real, poignant and virtually irreversible process caused by the ever-increasing power and social importance of digital media. Many interactions of social media consumers bear the hallmarks of instant judgements on influencers with high media visibility. As Meredith D. Clark notes, the roots for the development of *cancel culture* lie in the patterns of power distribution in society (Clark, 2020, p. 89).

The contestation, and finally cancellation, of influential actors, including institutions, is possible due to spontaneous actions of media users (Velasco, 2020, p. 2). Contesting and cancelling an influential entity is a form of cultural boycott, where an agreement is reached not to enhance the media visibility of the cancelled entity, and to withhold financial or other kind of support for it. Thanks to the power of digital media and visual culture, people who were previously harmed and marginalised by society can have their responsive voice (Nakamura, 2008, p. 204).

Jo Renee Formicola writes about the manifestations of *cancel culture* in relation to Catholicism in different parts of the world. These manifestations include cases of church or Catholic monument desecration, a decline in the number of active parochial schools, with a growing number of people confessing no religion or denomination. According to Formicola, the phenomena at hand develop in a broader context of demographic and cultural changes, including changes in attitudes towards issues such as family planning and abortion. These are also influenced by the lack of response, or insufficiency of response from Catholic circles to manifestations of racism, colonialism, environmental issues or the migration crisis. The sexual abuse cases among the clergy constitute an additional negative factor, as well as the involvement of the Church in current politics. Factors like these further undermine social influences of the Roman Catholic Church (Formicola, 2021, pp. 3–13).

In this context, the principle of so-called 'benevolent secularism,' is replaced by calls for a radical reduction of the role and influence of the Church in the public sphere (Formicola, 2021, p. 7). The contestation of the Church institution and her leaders leads to their being ousted from public debate, including those concerning the Church and its role in contemporary society. Hence, one of the more frequent manifestations of *cancel culture* is keeping the stakeholders off the debate. This objective is pursued with various media strategies.

The processes of mediatisation in the public and religious sphere, including the mediatisation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland provide the main context for phenomenon of *cancel culture* in the area under analysis. It should be noted that there are intrinsic and extrinsic factors behind the contestation and cancellation of the Church in Poland. The intrinsic ones include the Church's involvement in current politics, sexual abuse cases among some clergy, attempts to maintain a privileged position in society, insufficient competence in the area of religious communication, the banalisation of the faith message and the 'over-sacralisation' of the public sphere. The extrinsic factors include demographic changes, the increasing number of people leaving the Roman Catholic Church or considering leaving, the gradual loss of social influence by the Church, the development of an anti-eschatological culture, the polarisation of society, the confrontational attitude of radical circles, the rise of secular ethics – often opposed to the assumptions of Christian anthropology.

*Cancel culture* is in a constant flux due to the changes taking place in contemporary culture. This raises the question of whether it is possible to pursue social justice in such a way that the past achievements of contested and boycotted actors are not dismantled.

The street protests that erupted after the judgement of the Constitutional Tribunal and the address by the Chairman of the Polish Bishops' Conference on 22 October 2020 were widely commented in the Polish media, including the major opinion journals "Polityka," "Newsweek" and "Tygodnik Powszechny." The reports in these three journals provide adequate material for examining media strategies in the contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. The weekly opinion journals "Polityka" and "Newsweek" are the best-selling titles in Poland, while "Tygodnik Powszechny" is a Catholic socio-cultural magazine that represents a viewpoint on the Church as seen from the Catholic perspective. The time span for the research was twelve months, starting from the outbreak of protests on 22 October 2022. This time span allowed for reliable verification of the research results.

The content analysis method was also used in relation to the three analysed weekly magazines, in a strictly defined time period. Thanks to this method, it was possible to characterise individual texts and compare them with others. An important argument for using content analysis is that it allows for the analysis of photographic material as research material. Which is of great importance in the case of the problem under study.

### Media strategies to contest the Church in Poland

*Media strategies for the contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland: the case of "Newsweek", issues published between 22.10.2020 and 22.11.2021*

The strategy of deprecation of the role of the Roman Catholic Church on the pages of "Newsweek" did not employ the content elimination strategy – where the Church would be ignored as a media topic. Instead, the main argument line focused on undermining the Church's credibility and social position. Without questioning the journalistic duty to pursue the truth, it is possible to see editorial measures taken to reinforce a narrative that contested the institution of the Church. The collected media material exhibits three main strategies for shaping the media message: 1) strong exposition of topics centred around negative events; 2) profiling the interviewees

and the interviews with the aim of generating critical statements about the Church; and 3) the verbal and visual modelling of content that are overt manifestations of *cancel culture*. Within each of these dimensions of media content, specific solutions can be distinguished, extracted from the examples under analysis.

Throughout the period of our study, the image of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution in crisis dominates the main message line in "Newsweek." Above all, pointed out were the political involvement of the Church, sexual abuse cases among the clergy and the lack of transparency or willingness to investigate these cases. Fraud and corruption scandals as well conflicts within the Church were highlighted as well. The negative image of the Church was also achieved by adapting topics that critically portray the Church to a wide variety of sections of the journal, even though they only loosely related to religion. The latter regularly featured in the columns or editorials. Despite their laconic formulation, with their frequency and verbal persuasiveness, they were effective in reinforcing the one-sided argumentation presented by the authors. The problems presented in "Newsweek's" Foreign Section also addressed topics relating to the Roman Catholic Church and her teachings: the legalisation of abortion in Argentina, the legalisation of euthanasia in Spain, corruption in the Vatican, the decreasing numbers of the Catholics in the USA, or the discovery of the children graves in a religious centre in Tuam, Ireland. Such publications built a broad context for the perception of the Catholic Church in Poland as part of a larger institution in a state of crisis, with an insignificant voice in the social debate, a diminishing influence on the decisions and beliefs of citizens, and failing to practice the ideals it promotes.

It can therefore be seen that the contestation of the Catholic Church in "Newsweek" was neither limited to a single genre, nor to a specific thematic section of the magazine. The accumulation of content relating to ecclesiastical issues and its extrapolation onto various journalistic forms inspired an attitude of criticism of the Catholic Church among Polish readers, thus sanctioning the audience's belief in the universality, rationality and validity of the editorial perspective.

Another media strategy to undermine the position of the Catholic Church was the profiling of interviewees and defining the extent to which they were allowed to present their own opinions. The Catholics whose statements were published in "Newsweek" represented a critical attitude towards the Church and communicated overtly a need for fundamental shift. A large part of that group were the clergymen who distanced themselves from the Church authorities in their media statements. Their authority position granted strength and credibility to the arguments. In the long term, media ostracism leads to the cancellation of persons and views deemed unworthy of readers' attention.

At the same time, a lot of press space was dedicated to authors who were considered authorities and who enjoyed huge media recognition. They became experts on the subject, even though their engagement in the life of the Church was at best indirect. This strategy was executed through specific journalistic instruments that opened up opportunities for expressing one's views directly. It was most evident in the interviews with renowned representatives of various areas of public life, such as actors, directors, writers, scientists or politicians.

Another editorial procedure that could often be found at work in "Newsweek" was to graphically highlight selected portions of the text. The content and

the contextualisation of the photographs published in the issues under analysis was a manifestation of a visual contesting narrative. The suggestive power of imagery, convergent with the content of the article, activated the reader's imagination and provoked them to form their own, albeit clearly instructed, conclusions.

*Media strategies of the contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland in "Polityka" weekly between 22.10.2020 and 22.11.2021*

When the Constitutional Tribunal outlawed abortion in cases of embryo or fetal pathology, and when the verdict met with an enthusiastic response from Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, as well as many other hierarchs, "Polityka" published articles which criticised the course of action taken by the Roman Catholic Church, most often for its involvement in politics, legislation and the functioning of the state. Since the outbreak of the protests, "Polityka" had closely observed and reported on what often were extreme reactions of particular Church figures to the events.

Pursuing the trend to settle the accounts with the institution of the Catholic Church in Poland, in the period under analysis "Polityka" began to publish intervention articles to analyse the lack of financial transparency and the poor compliance with health and safety regulations in parishes, absolutism in community management, problems of lay employees in Church agencies, i.e. financial exploitation and even mobbing.

In some publications in the period in question, the journalists undertook a semantic and lexical analysis of the "new language of protest," – as expressed by one of the columnists. The articles analysed single lexemes as well as complex sentences expressing emotions, contesting the actions of the Polish government and the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Attention should also be drawn here to the lexically and semantically intriguing column titles. Many of them referred to the then current socio-political situation, reflecting the mood of the content and the attitude of the authors towards the topics under discussion. The lexical stock of some publications included colloquialisms, brutalisms and even vulgarisms; others highlighted irony, parody or grotesque. Apart from the titles related to the protests following the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, equally important at the time were those attacking the Catholic Church and its mode of functioning.

*Media strategies of contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland: the case of "Tygodnik Powszechny" published between 22.10.2020 to 22.11.2021*

The contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland on the pages of "Tygodnik Powszechny" is characterised by a critical reflection on her current image and credibility. Consequently, the editors call into question her role as a privileged institution, claiming the right to impose her opinions on Polish pluralistic and modern society.

The analysis carried out in this study enabled pinpointing the main procedures undertaken by the journalists and the editorial board of "Tygodnik Powszechny" that strengthened the Church contestation narrative in the period under analysis. The collected media material exhibits three main strategies for shaping the media message in this respect: 1) highlighting topics centred around negative events; 2) screening interviews and interview topics to generate a critical stance on the Church and her leaders; and 3) the lexical and visual modelling of content that constituted manifestations of cancel culture and took the form of the contestation

of the current social and public functioning of the Roman Catholic Church. Within each of these dimensions, specific solutions can be identified, extracted from the investigated examples.

In the period under analysis “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” was dominated by the image of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution in crisis. At the forefront were texts pointing to the close relationship between the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and the ruling coalition, above all PiS (Law and Justice). Another prevalent theme was sexual abuse scandals and misconduct by some clergy, as well as the flaws in how the Church handled these cases. Finally, the third group of topics most frequently appearing in the weekly’s columns over the period under study concerned a critique of paternalism and the traditionalist style of teaching of the Church in Poland. The first and the third group of texts were specifically related to the Constitutional Tribunal’s judgement of October 2020, and to the statement made by the Chairman of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, as well as to the triumphalism of the medially recognised religious leaders in Poland.

Contesting the Church in Poland for its close links with the main ruling party was a reaction to the widespread street protests that erupted on 22 October 2020, which also attracted outraged Catholics. The Church was criticised for accepting solutions suggesting the criminalisation of abortion on eugenic grounds instead of a stronger focus on the formation of the faithful, supporting political solutions against public opinion, where the Church and the state claimed the right to decide the fate of women. Criticism of this kind was directed at the bishops, who live in luxury and security, and who wield vast influence over the ruling politicians. The Church that is involved in lawmaking and politics is doomed to collapse.

The contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland in relation to sexual abuse scandals and the flaws in the Church’s handling of these cases, including cover-ups, constituted the second group of topics discussed in “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” in the period under study. The disclosure of the new cases of sexual abuses coincided with street protests following the Constitutional Tribunal’s judgement, further deepening the crisis of the Church institution in the public eye. The issue of covering up abuse resonated strongly in the context of doubts about the attitude of Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, John Paul II’s former personal secretary.

The third group of topics that fuelled the contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland pointed to the paternalism of religious leaders and hierarchs. Another media strategy aimed at contesting the Roman Catholic Church was the screening of authors and interviewees, including the extent to which they could present their own opinion on matters at hand. The Catholics whose statements were published in “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” represented a critical attitude towards the Church and enunciated a need for fundamental shifts. It is noteworthy that the voice of the bishops concerning the issues for which they are criticised was ignored.

## Conclusions

On the basis of the media material analysed above, three main strategies of contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Polish opinion-forming press were identified: 1) exposing negative aspects of the subject matter under analysis; 2) profiling interviewees and interviews; and 3) lexical and visual content modelling techniques.



The manifestations of each of these strategies were confirmed in each of the three weekly journals examined. "Newsweek" unveiled a lack of symmetry in the opinions and backgrounds presented. The way interviews were conducted by using direct and personal questions to elicit the critical views from the interviewees evoked an unambiguously negative image of the Catholic Church. Further reinforcing the message designed in this way was the accumulation of pejorative lexis and the layout of graphic material. Exploiting the above strategies built a media contestation narrative that effectively depreciated the voice of the Roman Catholic Church in Polish public discourse. "Polityka" maximised publications showing the clergy's excessive involvement in social issues, including interference in women's rights, matters of the state, issues relating to the Church's funding and her attitude towards lay employees, sex scandals, the relationship of some of the clergy with representatives of the ruling party and the demise of the authority of John Paul II. The material analysed in the Catholic weekly "Tygodnik Powszechny" points to three main reasons for the contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland: 1) involvement of the Church institution in current politics; 2) sex abuse scandals; 3) paternalism. The voice of the bishops was excluded from the media debate on the crisis of the Church and the weaknesses of the Polish Church hierarchy. This can be explained by distrust of the journalists towards the institutional Church's ineffectiveness, which exacerbates the ecclesiastical crisis. Manifestations of cancel culture in the form of contestation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland were characterised by 'non-debate' with representatives of the Polish Bishops' Conference, denying them a voice in matters concerning the main areas of the crisis. This fact confirms the peculiarity of Polish Catholicism, which is largely detached from the ecclesiastical institution.

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### Abstract

The aim of the article is to examine the media strategies of contesting the Roman Catholic Church in Poland on the example of three Polish opinion weeklies: "Polityka", "Newsweek" and "Tygodnik Powszechny". The period of our search was set at twelve months, starting from the outbreak of protests on October 22, 2020. On the basis of the media material analyzed above, three main strategies of contesting the Roman Catholic Church in the Polish opinion-forming press were identified: 1) exposing the negative aspects of the analyzed issues; 2) profiling of interlocutors and interviews; and 3) lexical and visual content modeling techniques.

Keywords: mediatization of religion, cancel culture, Roman Catholic Church, media

### Przejawy kultury unieważniania w stosunku do Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce. Studium przypadku wybranych tygodników opinii

#### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie medialnych strategii kontestacji Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce na przykładzie trzech polskich tygodników opinii: „Polityki”, „Newsweeka” i „Tygodnika Powszechnego”. Okres naszych poszukiwań ustalono na dwanaście miesięcy, poczynawszy od wybuchu protestów 22 października 2020 roku. Na podstawie analizowanego powyżej materiału medialnego zidentyfikowano trzy główne strategie kontestacji (cancelingu) Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w polskiej prasie opiniotwórczej: 1) eksponowanie negatywnych aspektów analizowanej problematyki; 2) profilowanie rozmówców i wywiadów; oraz 3) leksykalne i wizualne techniki modelowania treści.

Słowa kluczowe: mediatyzacja religii, cancel culture, Kościół rzymskokatolicki w Polsce, media