

Why are Polish People afraid of Islam?

Social Effects and Actions to counter
Antimuslim Racism in Poland



Index

Index.....2

Foreword.....3

Sources of ‘Natural Islamophobia’.....7

The Vision of the Muslim Stranger.....9

Sources of Polish Islamophobia.....13

 Literature 13

 Roman Catholicism 16

How to Prevent Islamophobic Sentiments.....23

Literature.....26

Illustrations.....29

Foreword

In 2013, the Council of Muslim Students and Academics (RAMSA) declared July 1st a day against anti-Muslim racism (AMR) to commemorate Marwa El-Sherbini who was murdered in the regional court in Dresden four years prior. The perpetrator was the defendant who had racially insulted Marwa and her child.

It is not only since 2009 that people identified as Muslim have been the target of hostility in Germany. The history of this exclusion is older and not just national. We often tend to understand our society with its in- and exclusions in a strictly national context when in fact the realities of our lives are not independent from other national framings. These different realities of life shape each other, influence each other through shared narratives, through migrational experiences, through demarcation of national identities. A confirmed diagnosis of AMR is not only to understand its national aberrations but also to regard its embeddedness in its international setting. It means to plainly call out racist and culturalist narratives and their transnational effect. It also means to regard the adaptations of widespread stereotypes in their respective national context.

The German, postmigrant society is shaped by migrant experiences, both by socialization abroad as well as a potent marker for differentiation and exclusion. To recognize migrant perspectives on AMR is also a means to recognize migrant autonomy. AMR adapts to the identity narratives of

different communities and is flexible adjusted to the historical, social, and political context. In short, AMR becomes a multi-layered problem.

The structure and objective of the civic education project “Open Mind – (working) Transnationally and Cross-Community against Islamophobia and Muslimophobia” results from the multi-layered nature of AMR and considers minority experiences and foregrounds migrant perspectives. A circumstance that is not given in the German discourse where migrant images and discourses are oftentimes excluded. In a multifaceted approach, “Open Mind” organizes workshops and lectures that deal with the issue and whose results in turn influence the pedagogical methodology as well as reviewing anchored mechanisms with both civil society and governmental actors.

Another fundamental part of anti-racist effort is transnational. It is essential to comprehend the localization of the national representation of AMR in its international context. This includes the exchange with experts from different countries, as well as publications that present the national manifestations. As part of this field of work, a conference entitled “Anti-Muslim Racism in Europe: Social Effects and Actions to counter it” was held in 2022, at which various transnational perspectives were heard. The present publication follows up on the presentation given by Karol Wilczyński regarding the situation in Poland.

In a personal account, he presents a story of encounter and learning with anti-Muslim racism. Wilczyński manages to

contrast his own history with the national discourse on anti-Muslim racism in Polish society and vividly presents the historical approach. The specifically Polish characteristics of AMR flow over to other discriminatory narratives and are romanticized in literature and prose. With historical references to incisive national events, the specifically Polish racist netting serves as argumentative aids to right wing politics.

Karol Wilczyński manages to clearly present the shape and impact of AMR in Poland. Through the personal representation he also offers consolation and practicality through the opportunity to reflect on patterns of racist thought.

It is my hope that this paper is an impulse for intensified international exchange. Not only because there is knowledge to be gained, but because an internationally present racist structure needs an international network to counter it.

With greetings of solidarity

Simon Marwecki,
La Red – Vernetzung und Integration e.V.

Sources of 'Natural Islamophobia'

The first time in my life I met a Muslim was in London in 2007. At the time, I was 17 years old and - as a child raised in a small village near the central Polish city Kielce - the fact that I had never met a Muslim person did not make me an exception among my Polish peers. In December 2019, only 14 % of Poles said they knew a Muslim personally (CBOS 2019: 1) - a slight increase from 12 % in 2015; in 2007, this number was probably even smaller. Upon meeting Sulaiman, I was not shocked, despite him - a middle-aged man with an experience of forced migration from Somalia to the UK - probably being the first Black person I had spoken to in my life. The walls in my mind disappeared very quickly and we found common interests and values. Working together in the warehouse of one of the big supermarkets, we were able to build a good relationship (even though I felt that it was not an equal relationship: Sulaiman became a guardian for me and his stories about the war or romantic relationships were part of our conversations about migrant life in London).

To be honest, this was the only relationship I had with a Muslim person that had nothing to do with my work as a community organiser or journalist. Since then, all the people I have met, although they have developed into lasting friendships, have at first been professional acquaintances. This shows and reminds me of how big the separation between Muslims and non-Muslims is in Poland and how difficult it is to create a space for a truly meaningful encounter, apart

from the working environment. I believe that the situation nowadays still looks like this.

I often remember my conversations with Sulaiman and my general idea of him when I was a teenager. A teenager, who was I would call it 'naturally Islamophobic' - which was and is nothing unusual among the younger generation in Poland. Although I was not afraid of Sulaiman himself - I was happy to have him beside me in an environment that I perceived as unfriendly and full of people ready to deceive me, to be honest - I was full of stereotypes and prejudices against People of Colour and Muslims. I remember that one of the most common topics among male migrants from Poland was Polish women dating Pakistani men. Some of them were to be 'punished' for disrespecting their 'race', 'nation' or 'religion' and having their hair forcibly shaved. I have never met such a woman and maybe they were only urban legends, but they worked in my mind, and it was, as I remember, a topic of conversation among people I've met (it is also discussed in academic research, cf. Gawlewicz, A. / Narkowicz, K., 2015). On the other hand, I have never considered my relationship with Sulaiman to be anything out of the ordinary, and as a man I probably would not be 'punished' for a relationship with non-white women either (although being in a same-sex relationship would have been something different).

The Vision of the Muslim Stranger

What has happened to me, this young man, a teenager who was 'naturally afraid of the Other' (the Muslim, etc.), who is now one of the top authors on Islam, a lecturer at the university and one of the activists supporting the Islamic community in Poland? Certainly, this change helped me understand that my fears of Islam were common in Polish culture - that those fears are something people are familiarised with at home, at school and in literature. As a Pole, I learned about Islam, about who the stranger representing this religion is, depending on the national historical context and values presented to me. All of these factors made Islam even more alien to me, because they created fear, distance and many stereotypes (Górak-Sosnowska, K. 2022). Like many other young Poles, I used Islamophobia as a psychological defence mechanism consisting of projection onto 'the Other', who was perceived as the enemy (cf. Buehler, A. 2011).

It seems surprising, however, considering that Poland (along with Lithuania) is one of the two EU countries with the oldest, homogenous Islamic communities. As early as the 14th century, Tatar Muslims began to settle down in the territories under the rule of Polish kings, reaching the number of 100.000 people in the 16th century (Dziekan, M. 2011: 27-28). In the Polish and Lithuanian countryside one can still visit centuries-old mosques. They are remnants of the past, when followers of different sects, religions and faith lived in a non-existent country known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Today, Poland is considered to be a religious and ethnic monolith (which it not necessarily is) and anyone who is not Catholic or Polish is often viewed as a stranger. As a result, we perceive Poland's history and relation with Islamic cultures or states (such as the Ottoman Empire) only in the context of war. It is the effect of decades of educating young Poles about selected events: wars, battles, conflicts. The Treaty of Perpetual Peace, which was respected for decades by Polish and Turkish leaders, is not taught in school. The correspondence between the Polish king Zygmunt Stary and the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph Suleiman the Magnificent as well as his wife Hürrem, who was born Roksolana in the Commonwealth territory, is not talked about. In Polish schools, there is barely any mention of how rich the common traditions, customs, cuisine or clothing are between Poland and Turkey. Little attention is paid to the political and social support given to Polish refugees by the Ottoman rulers in the 19th century or by Iranian and Arab societies during the Second World War. To teach about all that would not fit the black and white narrative about Poland and Islam. It would make the story of Islam in Poland more complex and break the vision of the Muslim stranger.

To complete this picture, it is worth mentioning some figures: Muslims, together with refugees and LGBT+ people, are the most popular targets of hate speech online in Poland (Winiewski et al. 2017: 32, cf. *ibid.*: 44). According to the 2019 Pew Research Centre report, 66 % of Poles have a negative opinion of Muslims in their country, while only 26 % have positive opinion (Górak-Sosnowska 2022: 40). These

sentiments were - and still are - widely used by politicians, right-wing authors and religious leaders.

Sources of Polish Islamophobia

Literature

First, we will briefly analyse the features of the literature that concern Islam - especially those that are present in Polish schools and influence the educational process. Although Islam is not a prominent theme in Polish literature, there are some notable works that deal with the relationship between Poland and the Islamic world. One example of this is the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, one of the greatest Polish poets of the Romantic period. Mickiewicz wrote a number of poems inspired by contact with the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic tradition (he himself died as a refugee in Istanbul). Students who read Mickiewicz's works do not receive a negative, but an orientalist view of Islam or the Ottoman Empire (Bałczewski, M. 2011). A good example of this is his 'Ballada Alpuhara' - the fourth part of 'Konrad Wallenrod', one of his major works. Similar traits can also be found in the works of another great poet and author of the Romantic period, Juliusz Słowacki - in his 'Ojciec Zadżumionych', for example, he

depicts an Orientalist view of Muslims living in the desert and living like Bedouins¹.

In Polish schools, however, rather negative ideas about 'the East' and Muslims in general are widespread. The best example are the works of Henryk Sienkiewicz or Stefan Żeromski, whose novels are obligatory for every Polish pupil. Sienkiewicz's 'Trilogy' (pl. 'Trylogia') does not deal with Islam or Muslims in general, yet important parts of this work are devoted to the conflict between Poland and the Ottoman Empire or the Tatars. Sienkiewicz mostly portrays the Muslim characters as barbaric and cruel, one of his protagonists turns out to be a traitor. The situation is similar in his work 'In Desert and Wilderness' (pl. 'W pustyni i w puszczy'), which is obligatory for primary school pupils, in which Sienkiewicz repeats the typical Orientalist, Western view of Africa. The Black boy Kali is characterized as a nice, but naive and 'uncivilized' boy. Muslims are portrayed as bloodthirsty and immoral (as well as very sexual). This portrayal has been criticized as perpetuating negative stereotypes about Muslims and contributing to anti-Muslim sentiments (Górska 2013: 208).

Another, later example of Polish literature that is both obligatory and not explicitly Islamophobic is 'Przedwiośnie'

¹ Credits to my student, Beatrycze Piłat, for providing me with this context

(1924) by Stefan Żeromski, one of the most popular Polish novels. In his moving and important novel, he gives a one-sided account of the conflict between Armenians and Azeris ('Tartars') in Baku. He also describes the Turkish intervention, which is one of the stages of the Armenian Genocide. Muslim soldiers are 'murdering women and children in broad daylight and among peaceful observers, bestial executions, abuse of those left behind, with cunningly composed tortures' (cf. Morawiec 2011: 41, translation by KW)². There is no room for any form of coexistence or stories that would at least give a small counterweight to the brutal and bloody history of conflict. The difference between Żeromski's and Sienkiewicz's works, however, is that Muslims are usually not the only perpetrators of violence - there are also extensive accounts of Armenian or Bolshevik violence.

These kinds of images and narratives are well known to Polish students. They are also being reproduced in regions where legends about cruelty of Tatars (i. e. Muslims) invading Europe in the Middle Ages are quite popular - the inhabitants of southern and eastern Poland know stories about the defence of their towns against the 'savage' Tatar invaders, usually thanks to divine intervention, especially of Saint Mary. Of the well-known authors of school literature, only

² I want to thank my student, Bartłomiej Marczyński, for sending me information about Żeromski and „Przedwiośnie”.

Sienkiewicz has so far been criticized for his portrayal of non-Christian characters, including Jews and Muslims. Some scholars have argued that Sienkiewicz's depictions of these characters were influenced by the prevailing prejudices of his time, including anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attitudes' (cf. Górak-Sosnowska 2022, translation by KW).

Roman Catholicism

Despite the vivid memory of Polish refugees in history and the still strong emigration trend from Poland to Western countries since 2015, the attitude of Poles towards migrants and refugees has changed. In just five months of 2015, more than 11 million Poles changed their mind about accepting refugees (cf. Wilczyński et al. 2020). In May, a poll conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre CBOS (2015a: 2) proved the openness of the majority of the Polish people towards international migration and the presence of foreigners in the country. While at that time, the percentage of those opposed to accepting refugees in Poland was 21 %, in September 2015 this percentage suddenly reached 40 %. In December, the number of those against accepting refugees exceeded the number of those willing to provide shelter for refugees (53 % against accepting refugees and 42 % in favour (CBOS 2015b: 2)). Catholics, who make up 86 % of the population in Polish society, were largely responsible for this change of heart. How did it come about?

During the election campaign, the Catholic Church stood hand in hand with the politicians of the Law and Justice party, which took power in parliament thanks to fuelling anti-

immigrant sentiments and a very successful social fear campaign (this process was analysed by me in Wilczyński et al 2020; part of the text below is an excerpt from this article). Some of the leading members of the Polish episcopate are to be discussed here. Abbot Marek Jędraszewski, vice-president of the Commission of the Polish Episcopacy (the number two among Polish church leaders) expressed his stance on refugees by stating that ‘the media report that many refugees openly claim that they want to establish the caliphate in Europe. We cannot ignore this and say that there is no problem’ (Jędraszewski, Łoziński 2015, translation by KW). In a sermon during a religious celebration of the Day of Atonement in Gietrzwałd in July 2018, Bishop Józef Zawitkowski was recorded saying: “There will be no German spit in our face, now we ourselves spit on ourselves. There will be no refugee in my house because I swore that: Every threshold will be our stronghold, let us help God! So, I will not change my oaths. And if someone in my house tries to take down the cross and germanise our children, he is not from my country. Let him return to his homeland.” (PCh24 2018, translation by KW). The sermon was published in Catholic media and was described as ‘important’ in PCh24.pl and ‘beautiful’ in the Catholic media outlet Fronda.pl (Fron-da 2018). The celebration was also broadcast by the church media on Radio Maryja and TV Trwam.

It is also worth noting how this narrative links the threat of refugees to the threat of the invasion of Poland by German soldiers in 1939. This can be illustrated by comparing a cover-photo of right-wing mainstream weeklies with one of the most popular photos in school textbooks and public spaces:



Figure 1: wSieci cover Sep 2015

September 2015: They are coming! Germans are forcing suicidal plan - Tusk and Kopacz give in

Other public figures representing Catholic media and identifying with right-wing Catholicism have commented on Pope Francis' pro-refugee stance, calling his speeches destructive to the institution of the Church and Polish national identity. The most controversial was the sermon of the famous Catholic professor and priest Father Edward Staniek, who

prayed for a quick death of the Pope if he does not change his policy of openness towards Muslims (PCh24 2018a).

Another example is Father Dariusz Oko, a professor at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków, one of the most important Catholic universities in the region. He was one of the most active Catholic priests in the field of migration and Islam and professed to be an expert in those fields. He was often invited by conservative and right-wing media outlets to speak on lectures titled, for instance, 'Islam as a threat to the EU and the world' and reported on his alleged experiences in meetings with Muslims. He hypothesized that 'Islam has always been forced on people with tremendous force, which can still be very inspiring for followers of this religion' (Radio Maryja 2017, translation by KW). Father Oko used his authority as a professor to spread the narrative of Prophet Muhammad as a violent person, a rapist and a 'creator of a little Holocaust' (TVP Info 2017). Father Oko spoke these kinds of words not only in mainstream media, but also at meetings in churches or even in sermons during the liturgy:

The Qur'an itself is aggressive in its message, commanding the physical annihilation of the 'infidels', while the relationship between a woman and a man is based on the woman's absolute subordination, treated as an inferior creature in every realm. Such a message contained in the Qur'an sheds light on the life of Muhammad as described in Sira. He [i.e. the Prophet - KW] was a ruthless, cruel and unbridled man. The Qur'an is the anti-gospel (...). Such ideals, instilled in the followers of Islam from childhood and

contrary to the principles of Christianity, are the basis of Islamic terrorism. (JanChrzciel.pl 2017, translation by KW)

According to Father Oko, professor at the Pontifical University, this poses a threat to the EU and Poland:

In many cities (in France, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, etc.) there are Muslim ghettos where sharia law [sic! - KW] applies, where not even the police can get in. These areas are exempt from the legal order in force in the given country and entering these areas is extremely dangerous, especially for European women. Therefore, our country [i.e. Poland - KW] appears as a bulwark against Islamisation, which is the reason for merciless attacks on Poland by various countries and organisations. (..) I hope that with God's help and the protection of Our Lady we will persevere. (JanChrzciel.pl 2017, translation by KW)

Father Oko managed to gain popularity and attention very successfully in 2017 and 2018 - his lectures and conference series on the topic of 'Islam as a threat' attracted hundreds of listeners and participants. It is important to note that he was not the only Catholic clergyman to spread such a message³.

³ Thanks to Alicja Figarska, my student, who helped me finding quotes by Fr. Dariusz Oko.

Does this explain the correlation between the religious practice of Polish Catholics and their attitude towards refugees? Of the Poles who attended church sermons several times a week in 2016, 81 % were against refugees. In addition, 75 % of Catholics who attended religious events in church once a month said that they were against accepting refugees, and 69 % of those who attended church once a year were against welcoming refugees in Poland, a difference of up to 12 % when comparing regular believers of Catholicism to less religious people (cf. CBOS 2016).

I believe that the spread of anti-Islamic sentiments, a well-known and centuries-old habit among the Polish clergy, is one of the reasons why Islamophobia is a widespread attitude in Polish society. This does not mean that all Catholics are against Islam or are afraid of Muslims - one of the greatest authorities for Poles, Pope John Paul II, was a great advocate of building bridges between Christians and Muslims. There are also initiatives such as the 'Day of Islam in the Catholic Church', which is briefly described in the last section of this paper.

How to Prevent Islamophobic Sentiments

Fast forward, 12 years later, when I - a local activist and a journalist - received a call from my friend, who told me that she was afraid to visit the Islamic Cultural Center of Kraków after the tragic attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. I was shocked and wanted to do something, especially after I heard that she was 'imagining dead bodies of her Muslim sisters and brothers in Kraków'. That same day, together with a group of people from the local Catholic community, we printed several hundred invitations for a 'Solidarity Evening with the Islamic Community of Kraków', went to the Islamic Center to distribute them and planned this event in cooperation with city officials. More than 100 people came to the event to listen to the accounts of Kraków Muslims and just be together. The aim of the event was to do something together, to prevent the feeling of fear, to create the sense of community, and to build real relationships.

Fear arises because of natural instincts that lead people to see 'the Other' in a certain way: black and white, tending to have either very negative or very positive views (cf. Romantic Orientalism). When we see someone as 'the Other', we are most likely to act according to well-described mechanisms: Ingroup Preference and Outgroup Bias (cf. Everett et al 2015). It is therefore a natural, evolutionary mechanism that has helped us to survive in the past. That is why I consider Polish Islamophobia as something 'natural' - when I was 'fed' Polish literature, history classes or religion as a child, it was not easy to open and change this mindset. What

happened then? I met Sulaiman. I read many books and became fascinated by Islamic philosophy and poetry. I fell in love with travelling to Arab countries. I made many lifelong friendships. I began to see how Muslims are discriminated against in Poland and Europe. I understood that the fight against prejudice against other groups, which is deeply rooted in emotion and not in rational arguments, cannot be fought with arguments. It can only be overcome through a series of experiences that are, on the one hand, non-confrontational and, on the other hand, not based on oriental fascination, repeating 'positive' stereotypes.

Therefore, I believe that all events, stories on the Internet, in the media or in educational institutions should aim to create the most natural environment for encounters. Cooking workshops, stories and events where refugees or Muslims have their say, diversity trainings or solidarity meetings - these are all basic ways to prevent Islamophobia, but only if real relationships are created and there is the possibility to really listen to each other.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: wSieci cover Sep 2015.....18

Imprint

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Author: Karol Wilczyński

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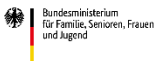
Alt-Reinickendorf 25
10555 Berlin
Tel.: +49 30 – 45 79 89 550
E-Mail: la-red@la-red.eu

www.la-red.eu

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