THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION IN POLAND:
PAST AND PRESENT

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1. Introduction

An analysis of the development of the science of religion in Poland distinguishes between two different periods in its history. The first covers the years 1873 to 1973, while the second began in 1974 and continues until today. Each of these dates, 1873 (see also Ponistoe–ski, 1979) and 1974, are significant in the history of the development of the discipline.

The year 1873 is recognized as a starting point for the Polish science of religion because of the appearance of two important publications: Adolf Dygasinski (1839-1902) translated into Polish F. Max Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) and the journal *Wedruwiec* [The Wanderer] published Dygasinski's translation of Müller's *The Philosophy of Mythology* in three consecutive issues. Because of these translations, Müller's methodological approach to the study of religion was made available to the academic community. It should be recognized, however, that there had been in Poland, prior to 1873, a broad, if somewhat dispersed, historical and philosophical inquiry into religion. (The significant publications in religion of the period prior to 1873 have been analyzed by P. O. Szole [1971].)

The next essential stage for the study of religion occurred in 1974. Jagiellonian University established the Institute for the Study of Religion. It was the first academic, interdisciplinary, non-confessional institute in the country which focused upon the research and teaching of a variety of religious traditions. In an attempt to understand contemporary religions scientifically, the Institute for the Study of Religion established research programs directed toward empirically analyzing trends in the development of contemporary religiosity. The first teaching program offered at the Institute was a three year doctoral program. Participants in the program were required to have a Masters degree. Their degrees were often achieved in other disciplines such as philosophy, history, or languages. Beginning in the
academic year of 1979/1980 students could register in a full-time five-year Masters program in religion at the Institute. The initiation of a regular Masters program in the science of religion was very important for it meant that the field was officially recognized by the Ministry of Education as a legitimate field of academic inquiry that produced area specialists.

Prior to attending to the details regarding the time periods of 1873 until 1973, and 1974 until the present, we would like to reflect upon several important factors which influenced from the outset the academic study of religion in Poland. Zygmunt Poniatowski (1979) specifies three major influences coming from the socio-political situation of the country that had a special impact on the way studies of religion were carried out (see also Nowaczyk 1988). The first factor was the homogeneous religious culture of the country. For centuries the Roman Catholic Church had enjoyed a position of absolute leadership among various religious denominations in Poland, not only in terms of numbers of believers, but more importantly in terms of its influence in the country. The Church has had a tremendous influence in a number of important spheres of public life, from politics to education and health care. The position of the Church in Poland and its range of influence meant that the Church and its followers believed that the Roman Catholic religion was the most highly developed form of religion. Further, no critical social-scientific analysis of the Roman Catholic church or its adherents was tolerated.

A second factor which has shaped the study of religion in Poland has been the country's political climate. From 1772 to 1918, Poland underwent repartition by three super-powers: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Two of these, Russia and Prussia (respectively dominant Orthodox and Protestant confession), executed their power through a vigorous oppression of every aspect of Polish Roman Catholic identity and independence. For many Poles, Roman Catholicism quickly became the definitive factor which determined real Poles from foreign interlopers, leading to a sense of besetment and polarization. Roman Catholicism then became an agent which represented a "safe symbolic space" (Pruyser 1991) for displaying and sustaining Polish national identity; any criticism directed towards the institution of the Roman Catholic Church became equivalent to an attack on Polish identity. The consequences of this association of social identity with nationalism and religion continued for a significant period of Poland's history. This attitude became even more marked immediately