

Universities are becoming more and more complex organizations. They fulfill many functions and must meet the often contradictory expectations of both their own members and institutions from their closer and more distant surroundings. An interesting case of higher education institutions are Catholic universities, which must meet these expectations taking into account their religious specificity. The uniqueness of Catholic universities is related to their organizational identity. They have an ambiguous status: they are not entirely religious, but also not entirely secular. They function on the border of several important institutions: the state, the Church and the market. The aim of the project is to understand the role of religion in the construction of organizational identity on the example of four Catholic universities in Poland: the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw and the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. These four universities are similar in some respects and different in another. The project will answer two main research questions: how Catholic universities in Poland construct their organisational identity in relation to religion and why in this respect differ within and among themselves?

The study will be based on the model of four strategic areas of university activity: teaching, research, external relations, and administration. The analysis will cover both the symbolic and material dimension of the university's identity (documents, media, space, events, symbolism) and the perspective of their members (managers, employees and students). Despite the long existence and a recognisable position on the university map of the country, Catholic universities remain *terra incognita* for social researchers in Poland. This project is expected to contribute to filling this puzzling gap.

Owing to the nature of the research aims, mixed methodology will be used for the planned research. The project will use reactive and active methods, based on both existing and developed materials. The research will be based mainly on the qualitative methodology. The quantitative methodology will be complementary to the qualitative research and will be designed and conducted in a reflective way, concerning how, where, when, and by whom the data will be collected and analysed. Triangulation, thanks to the wide and varied research material provided with the use of several methods and techniques, will saturate the data and enable mutual validation of the formulated conclusions. The following research methods and techniques will be used in the project: desk research (content analysis of internal and external data distributed within the university), ethnographic research (observation during field research), online survey (including university employees and students) and individual in-depth interviews (including middle-level managers). Systematic research will cover the period 2020-2024, but the project will also take into account historical materials relevant to the research context. Qualitative research will be carried out using the MAXQDA software, and quantitative research with the usage of MonkeySurvey software.

So far, no one in Poland has researched Catholic universities using the instruments of social sciences. In turn, research in the world mainly concerns the USA and is a reflection of that specific context. Research in Poland will shed new light on the current knowledge about the identity of Catholic universities, based on a specific case from Europe, in addition to a country with an unprecedented socio-religious situation, with the dominant position of the Roman Catholic Church and still high, although dynamically changing, religiosity of the society. Catholic universities are a kind of laboratory of dynamic tensions between various institutional fields and religion, in which the influence of the social, political and economic context is focused like in a lens. The use of the institutional theories in the research of Catholic universities is a novelty on a global scale. This will affect the development of social sciences (both in terms of content and methodology), it will bring together several disciplines, such as sociology, management studies or the religious and cultural studies, but most of all it will broaden the existing knowledge on the mutual relations between the public sphere, higher education, and religion.