



Piotr NOWAK:
*Kształcenie teologiczne w Zjednoczonym
Kościele Ewangelicznym (1948–1988)*
[Theological Education in the United
Evangelical Church (1948–1988)]
Warszawa: Wyższa Szkoła Teologiczno-Społeczna
w Warszawie, 2024

In June 2024, the academic press of the College of Theology and Social Sciences in Warsaw published a monograph by Piotr Nowak entitled *Kształcenie teologiczne w Zjednoczonym Kościele Ewangelicznym (1948–1988)* [Theological Education in the United Evangelical Church (1948–1988)]. It is simultaneously the first volume in the “Studia Pentecostalia” series, which promotes dissertations produced within academic circles affiliated with the said college and with the Christian Academy of Theology in Warsaw.

The Pentecostal movement is currently the most dynamically developing branch of Protestantism worldwide; nevertheless, scholarly literature describing the cultural mosaic and spirituality exhibited across the many Polish communities and churches contained within the Pentecostal movement remains scarce. The 361-page volume in question is the first comprehensive study devoted to the educational institutions functioning within the United Evangelical Church (UEC) in the People’s Republic of Poland. The very choice of research subject attests to the author’s scholarly maturity and sensitivity to the issue: rather than limiting himself to a simple

reconstruction of denominational history, he analyzes it through the prism of the educational system – institutions forming clergy and lay leaders who played a fundamental role in maintaining religious identity under an authoritarian state.

For decades, the institutional dimension of education in evangelical circles remained at the margins of research. The existing literature contains only passing references in the works of Henryk Ryszard Tomaszewski, Jan Mironczuk or Wojciech Trybek, but no monograph had yet been published on the forms of clerical education, the organizational structure of Bible schools, or their role in shaping the community's theological background. Nowak fills this gap by combining the perspectives of a church historian, a researcher of religious education, and an analyst of state–church relations in the communist era. Theological education has always played a fundamental role in all Christian communities. Regardless of confession and of how the clerical office is understood, the preparation of competent leaders and pastors has been – and remains – a priority. Protestantism – and within it, evangelicalism – attaches particular importance to the systematic training of personnel. In this tradition, which emphasizes personal conversion and the authority of the Bible, biblical education is regarded as an indispensable element of healthy church life.

The author undertakes the ambitious task of reconstructing more than forty years of educational activity within a small yet significant evangelical community functioning under a communist regime. He precisely defines the subject and aim of his research, justifying them on solid historical and methodological grounds. Nowak's analysis of the UEC's educational institutions is not merely a description of structures; it is also an attempt to understand the community's adaptive strategies to the political conditions of the socialist state. In this context, despite its theological and denominational diversity, the United Evangelical Church served as a platform for cooperation in religious education. Bible courses, seminars, and other forms of instruction were organized to sustain faith and transmit Christian values in a society subjected to atheization. Although this activity often encountered state-imposed obstacles, it played a crucial role in preserving the religious and cultural identity of evangelical communities in Poland.

The United Evangelical Church, active from 1947 to 1988, functioned as a federation of diverse evangelical environments, including Pentecostals, Baptists, and Evangelical Christians, becoming in the communist era the principal representative of this branch of Protestantism in Poland. Its history largely overlapped with that of the People's Republic: it arose

shortly after the war and ceased operations just before the fall of communism. The communist authorities, suspicious of any independent social initiatives, closely monitored church education, perceiving it as a potential threat to state ideology. Despite the relatively small number of believers – no more than several tens of thousands – a network of educational institutions was established within the UEC, whose very existence faced numerous challenges.

The activity of the United Evangelical Church, including the launch of each course organized by the church, was subject to intense supervision and surveillance by the Office for Religious Affairs and the Security Service. Archival documents preserved in the Central Archives of Modern Records and the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) reveal the meticulousness with which the authorities analyzed curricula, academic staff, and student life. Educational activity played a key role in the preservation and growth of the Polish evangelical movement. Under these demanding circumstances, a generation of church ministers was formed who, after 1989, took leadership in the re-emerging evangelical churches. Reconstructing this fragment of history is not only a contribution to church history but also a testimony to the determination of a religious community which, under a totalitarian regime and despite difficulties, effectively defended its right to educate future leaders and to pass the faith on to the next generation.

Piotr Nowak's book constitutes a significant contribution to documenting the history of religious thought in the People's Republic of Poland. The publication portrays resistance as manifested through persistent efforts in education and the formation of future evangelical leaders. Theological training, carried out under constant pressure from the authorities – who could at any moment revoke permission to operate schools – served to lay new foundations for ecclesial structures. Although the authorities were able to hinder graduates from obtaining clerical status or withdraw authorization for the schools themselves, the determination of those who conducted classes – often subjected to repression – ensured the continuity of educational processes, which church leaders regarded as essential for the survival of the Church.

The book's greatest strength is its extensive use of primary sources. The author employs a historical-theological method, combining analysis of archival materials (from the holdings of the Central Archives of Modern Records, through the collections of the Institute of National Remembrance, to church archives and others) with research in printed sources (church

press, internal denominational publications) and interviews with witnesses to the events. Interviews with participants – school directors, professors, and graduates such as Edward Czajko, Mieczysław Kwiecień, and Michał Weremiejewicz – contribute a valuable documentary dimension to the study, lending it an almost ethnographic and humanistic character. Through the voices of these witnesses, institutional history emerges as both vivid and authentic.

Particularly noteworthy is Nowak's examination of dispersed documents preserved, among other places, in the Pentecostal Church Archives (the UEC's successor), the Archives of the College of Theology and Social Sciences in Warsaw, the Theological Seminary in Ustroń, the Christian Bible Institute, and many private archives. Such a broad source base – encompassing official documents, formative texts, and oral testimonies – constitutes an undeniable asset of the work and enables a critical view both of the UEC's activity and of the state's policy toward religious minorities.

The primary objective of the monograph is to reconstruct and thoroughly describe the UEC's educational practices in the context of the state's repressive policy toward religious communities and their attempts at autonomous organization of ecclesial life and schooling. This fits perfectly within both the field of research on the history of Protestant churches in Poland and broader reflection on the role of education in sustaining the identity of ecclesial communities. Combining the methods of classical historiography with elements of theological and pedagogical analysis, the author draws – coherently and thoughtfully – on the interdisciplinary tools of the history of ideas, church history, and the history of education. The narrative is analytical and document-based, yet free of unnecessary hermetic jargon.

Another advantage of Nowak's presentation is his scholarly detachment, avoiding apologetics for any of the ecclesial environments discussed. His language is marked by stylistic culture and care for terminological precision. Although the book rests on abundant source material, it does not feel overloaded with facts. The narrative is clear and rhythmic, and the author successfully combines an academic tone with an accessible presentation of complex theological issues for readers outside the specialist circle. As a result, Nowak's book can be read both as a scholarly study and as a compelling story about the fate of a little-known religious community.

This study addresses a long-standing lacuna in the historiography of Polish Protestantism. Earlier works touched on the topic of education in the UEC only marginally, whereas Nowak presents it comprehensively and critically, showing the origins and development of Bible-school structures

from both intra-church and socio-political perspectives. In his work he not only reconstructs the past but also interprets events connected with the struggle to preserve evangelical identity during a period of ideological repression. Thus the study goes beyond a simple chronicle, becoming a reflection on the continuity and adaptation of religious experience in an unfavourable context.

The structure and composition of the dissertation are logical and transparent. The extensive introduction precisely defines the subject, aim, and methodology, as well as the state of research and the source base; it also aptly identifies the existing research gap and justifies the need to fill it. The author deliberately maintains the classical layout of a historical monograph, which supports clarity of exposition and makes it easier to follow the development of the main research thread. The main part of the work consists of five substantive chapters, supplemented by a conclusion, a list of sources and literature, and a name index.

The first chapter offers a concise account of the history and doctrine of the United Evangelical Church, which is essential for understanding the specificity of education in this community. Among the key aspects to which the author devotes attention is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which had a direct impact on the church's educational philosophy and hermeneutics. Within this theological framework, clerical training was regarded less as the acquisition of qualifications than as a process of spiritual formation. The chapter also includes an overview of the evangelical groups that constituted the UEC. Thus we find descriptions of circles associated with the Pentecostal movement, the Church of Christ, Evangelical Christians, and Free Christians. Also presented are the basic symbols of faith such as the Creed, the approach to the sacraments, and the understanding of the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In the second chapter of his dissertation, Nowak describes the educational traditions of Bible schools in Radość, Gdańsk, and Warsaw, as well as seminaries in Malbork and Lidzbark Warmiński. Later UEC educational initiatives were directly rooted in the pre-war and post-war experiences of Polish evangelicalism, which provides an essential context for understanding the church's post-war activity.

The core of the book is found in the third and fourth chapters. Here the author examines the history of the UEC Bible School – the denomination's most important formative institution, founded in 1948. The school is presented not only as a didactic institution but also as a space for spiritual maturation and mutual inspiration. It operated both as a full-time

and a correspondence programme, which greatly facilitated the preparation of future church ministers; in this way the School exerted a significant influence on the theological consciousness of the entire evangelical church in Poland.

Nowak does not overlook the dramatic events associated with Stalinist repressions and the resumption of teaching after 1968. The story of the School is arranged in accordance with the chronology of successive heads of the institution (Józef Mrózek, Edward Czajko, Mieczysław Kwiecień, Włodzimierz Rudnicki), giving a functional and transparent view that allows the reader to grasp the changing didactic concepts and political conditions in which the institution operated.

The fifth chapter expands the reader's perspective by examining additional forms of training, including Bible-theological courses, programmes for Sunday School teachers, music instruction, and correspondence seminars. These initiatives constituted a response both to the restrictions imposed by the communist authorities and to the geographical dispersion of believers throughout the country.

As a result, theological education became significantly more accessible, enabling participants from various regions of Poland to pursue studies through correspondence. Among these, we should mention the Correspondence Bible Course in Ustroń and the Correspondence Bible Seminary of the Evangelical Christians. Alongside these were shorter courses, trainings, and conferences that helped deepen the competencies of clergy and lay leaders. This extensive educational system – aptly described by the author as a “forge of cadres” – was crucial to the strength and durability of the UEC under unfavourable political conditions. In 1954–1967, due to the absence of the Bible School, such short-term trainings were the only forms of ministerial education in the United Evangelical Church acceptable to the authorities of the People's Republic. It should also be noted that great importance was attached to the education of children in Sunday Schools; for this reason regular courses were organized for catechists, covering not only biblical topics but also pedagogy, methodology, and developmental psychology.

The work closes with a concise Conclusions in which the author formulates the most important findings and points to the continuity of educational traditions within Polish evangelicalism. We should not overlook the rich set of unique archival photographs from private collections that illustrate the activities described, beginning in the early 1970s. The meticulously compiled name index that concludes the publication also deserves recognition.

In summary, while the book provides a detailed analysis of the structures and curricula of the United Evangelical Church, it pays less attention to the dynamics of relations between this institution and other educational entities, both ecclesial and secular – an angle that could shed further light on the socio-political context of its functioning. In addition, the careful analysis of statistics on student and graduate numbers could be complemented by qualitative research into their career paths and social engagement after graduation, which would allow for a fuller assessment of the impact of UEC education on their lives and activities.

Kształcenie teologiczne w Zjednoczonym Kościele Ewangelicznym (1948–1988) represents a work of substantial scholarly and documentary significance. It successfully integrates the characteristics of a source-based monograph with those of a problem-oriented study, exemplifying research conducted with methodological rigour and conscious scholarly reflection. The author not only reconstructs the history of one of the most important institutions of Polish evangelicalism but also interprets it as a microcosm of church–state relations during the communist era. By doing so, Nowak opens new perspectives for the study of religious education and the life of Polish Protestant communities during the 20th century. This work merits the highest scholarly recognition and should, deservedly, secure a lasting place within the canon of studies on the history of evangelical Christianity in Poland.

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