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Social distance toward individuals with differing religious attitudes in academic settings: A pilot study among students of social, exact, and natural sciences

Abstract. This article presents the results of a pilot study aimed at assessing the social distance of university students toward individuals who differ from them in their attitudes toward religion. To achieve this goal, a *Social Distance Scale*, an *Assessment of the Importance of Attitudes Toward Religion Scale*, and a sociodemographic questionnaire were used. The results indicate that individuals differing in their attitudes toward religion are met with a high level of acceptance among the surveyed students, particularly those studying social sciences and in more formal and casual situations.

Keywords: social distance, acceptance, religion, students, university.

Social distance is typically regarded as a measure of the closeness we are able to accept with individuals who differ from us in some significant characteristic (Sztop-Rutkowska et al., 2013), or as “a sense of reluctance among members of a given group to accept or approve a certain level of intimacy

in interaction with a member from outside the group” (Williams, 1964, p. 29). As Jorm and Oh (2009, p. 183) note, it is often associated with “a tendency to avoid contact with a specific group of people.” Meanwhile, according to Chlewiński (1980, p. 157), it is rather “a continuum ranging from close, emotionally positive interactions, through indifference, to active antipathy, hostility, and condemnation at the other extreme.”

The social distance an individual has toward a particular social group is largely a social construct and can be linked more to the norms that a given social group considers appropriate in its approach to others than to the individual’s personality traits. However, it is important to note that some of these traits do influence the degree of conformity to these norms (Triandis & Triandis, 1962, pp. 19-20). As Bujnowska and Lasota (2016) point out, the way ‘other’ individuals, those who do not fit the ‘norm’, are perceived is often passed down from generation to generation, with this modeling beginning as early as childhood.

Previous research on social distance has focused on various factors that may contribute to its formation, including skin color (Dampc, 2017; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013; Szejnberg & Jasiński, 2015; Triandis & Triandis, 1960; Triandis et al., 1965), social status/occupation (Szejnberg & Jasiński, 2015; Triandis & Triandis, 1960; Triandis et al., 1965), sexual orientation (Dampc, 2017; Szejnberg & Jasiński, 2015; Zajączkowska, 2018), nationality and ethnic origin (Butrym & Popiela, 2015; CBOS, 2015; Guzy-Steinke, 2020; Korczyński & Stefanek, 2021; Panina, 2004; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013; Szejnberg & Jasiński, 2015; Sztóp-Rutkowska et al., 2013; Triandis & Triandis, 1960; Triandis et al., 1965), disability (Bujnowska & Lasota, 2016; Czyż, 2022; Dampc, 2017; Kanar, 2021; Szejnberg & Jasiński, 2015; Zajączkowska, 2018), mental illness (Corrigan et al., 2001), gender (Dampc, 2017), criminality (being convicted or having served time in prison) (Korwin-Szymanowska, 2019; Szejnberg & Jasiński, 2015), and age (being an older person) (Dampc, 2017; Zajączkowska, 2018). Among these factors, some studies (e.g., Ata et al., 2009; Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1986; CBOS, 2001, 2015, 2021; IPSOS, 2023; Szejnberg & Jasiński, 2015; Triandis & Triandis, 1960, 1963; Triandis et al., 1965) have also focused on attitudes toward religion as a cause of social distance toward certain individuals (i.e., lack of acceptance of those with different religious beliefs/attitudes toward religion).

Religion and its importance for human identity

Religion exists in every culture and society (Pabich, 2020; Adamski, 2011). It is a complex phenomenon intertwined with history and culture, encompassing spiritual, cultural, and social aspects. Eliade (2009, as cited in Krasowska,

2013, p. 12) regards religion as a human phenomenon and treats it as a social, linguistic, and economic occurrence. Erich Fromm stated that “there has never been a culture in the past, and – it seems – there cannot be one in the future, that does not have a religion” (Fromm, 1966, p. 133). The vast diversity of definitions of religion stems from the multitude of philosophical, ideological, and theological perspectives (Kulesz, 2013; Zdybicka, 1988). This diversity arose because different authors “attempted to combine two concerns: depth and breadth in the understanding of religious phenomena while avoiding overly specific definitions or meaningless generalities” (Bronk, 2003, p. 103; Kałuża, 2017). The term “religion” is linked to a particular system of values, models, and norms of behavior that influence and shape a person’s life (Mariański, 2016, p. 3). Today, as Mariański notes, religion is a phenomenon that unites people in the search for meaning, morality, and spirituality, and its definition encompasses both personal and social aspects of human life (Mariański, 1986, 2012, 2016). The word “denomination” is now often used as a synonym for religion. Pawlas emphasizes that today this term functions as “the faith professed by a particular community, regardless of whether it has ever been codified in a single text” (Pawlas, 2019, p. 35). Although the term “denomination” is now treated as a synonym for the word “religion”, it is a subordinate and narrower concept (Pawlas, 2019).

Religion, being a set of beliefs, practices, and moral principles, influences how a person defines themselves, their place in the world, and their relationships with others. It also constitutes one of the determinants in shaping identity, alongside family, social, or national group relationships (Krasowska, 2013, p. 111). Religion can represent an expression of individual searches for the meaning of life, providing answers to existential and spiritual questions. For many people, it is a personal space where they seek answers to questions about human nature, life after death, or God. In this sense, religion becomes a part of an individual’s inner life, independent of external structures and social influences (Mariański, 2012). Beyond the personal dimension, religion also appears as a part of cultural heritage, passed down from generation to generation, which can influence how one perceives themselves in society. Religious beliefs can shape values, moral norms, and life goals. Personal identity becomes closely intertwined with these elements. In a study conducted by IPSOS, 45% of Poles declared that religion is a defining factor of their personality (IPSOS, 2023). Whether religion is actively practiced, rejected, or transformed, its role in shaping an individual’s identity is significant and may change over the course of life (Baniak, 2019). A person’s attitude toward religion impacts their daily choices, interpersonal relationships, and ways of solving problems (Mariański, 1986, 2012, 2016; Szacka, 2003).

Attitude towards religion – The Polish context

In many societies, including Poland, religion is deeply rooted in tradition and culture. Even if a person is not a practicing believer, religious elements can still be present in their daily life, such as in symbols, rituals, or holidays. In such cases, religion may play a more symbolic role in the individual's identity, connected with belonging to a specific social or national group. Another option in the modern world is shaping one's identity through the absence of religiosity. Atheism, agnosticism, or religious skepticism can also be significant components of an individual's identity. Such individuals define themselves not through religious affiliation but through its conscious rejection. This rejection can be as strong an element of identity as active religious participation (Mariański, 1986, 2016, 2021; Szacka, 2003).

In the contemporary context of globalization and the rise of multiculturalism, an individual's religious identity may be influenced by other cultures and religions. In such cases, syncretism may occur, which involves combining different elements from various religious systems, creating a unique, hybrid identity (Mariański, 2016, 2021). The religious landscape of Polish society has been undergoing transformations for several decades, as evidenced by various studies and analyses, both national and international. There has been a noticeable decline in the level of religious faith and practice. From March 1992 to June 2022, the percentage of adults identifying as believers decreased by 10 percentage points (from 94% to 84%), while the percentage of those practicing regularly, at least once a week, dropped by 28 percentage points (from approximately 70% to 42%). Meanwhile, the percentage of non-practicing individuals increased from 9% to 19% (CBOS, 2022, p. 3). Reports from CBOS (2021, 2022a) indicate that the decline in religiosity is most rapid among young people (ages 18–24), residents of large cities, and individuals with higher education. The proportion of people identifying as believers and deeply believing is decreasing, while the percentage of Poles classified as rather or completely non-believing has risen (from 8% in 2019 to 14% currently) (CBOS, 2024).

In 2021, the Central Statistical Office published data from the National Population and Housing Census regarding national and ethnic affiliation, the language used at home, and religious affiliation. Over 38 million people participated in the Census, and nearly 80% of respondents (30,212,506 individuals) answered the question about their religious affiliation. Among these individuals, 2,611,506 people (6.87%) declared no affiliation with any religion. The remaining individuals indicated their affiliation with various Churches/

religions (mainly Catholic Church), as presented in Table 1 (Adamczyk & Mąkosa, 2024, p. 2; GUS 2022).

Table 1. Affiliation of Poles with churches/denominations in 2021

Church/Denomination	Percentage [%]	Population
Catholic Church	71.30	27,121,331
Orthodox Church	0.40	151,648
Jehovah's Witnesses	0.29	108,754
Evangelical Augsburg Church	0.17	65,400
Catholic Church, Byzantine-Ukrainian Rite (Greek Catholic Church)	0.11	33,200
Pentecostal Church	0.08	30,100
Old-Catholic Church	0.03	12,200
Polish Catholic Church	0.02	6,900
Baptist Church	0.01	5,100

Source: Developed based on GUS, 2022.

Mariański states that there has been a decline in religious practices among youth in the last decade (Mariański, 2024, p. 36). The religiosity of individuals aged 18–24, known as Generation Z and Generation Alpha, has undergone particularly intense changes (Drozdowicz, 2022). The religiosity of young generations significantly differs from that of their parents. Over the last ten years, research indicates that the number of believers has decreased from 73% to 53%, while the number of individuals identifying as non-believers has increased significantly, rising from 5% in 2008 to 17% in 2018 (Boguszewski & Bożewicz, 2019). During this timeframe, it is also evident that the percentage of individuals engaged in religious practices rose from 13% to 21%. Interestingly, the percentage of deeply religious individuals remains stable at 8% (Boguszewski & Bożewicz, 2019; CBOS, 2018). In summary, the importance attributed to religious life is significantly lower among young Poles than in the general adult population (Boguszewski & Bożewicz, 2019, p. 37). An analysis of the changes in faith among young people in Poland indicates that it is becoming polarized, evident in the significant increase in the percentage of non-believers alongside a stable number of deeply religious youth (Boguszewski & Bożewicz, 2019, p. 37; CBOS, 2018).

Religious tolerance in Poland is a topic that is gaining significance in the context of contemporary social and cultural challenges. One of the first studies related to social distance towards individuals with different religious affiliations

was conducted by Cholewiński, focusing on social distance towards followers of other religions and nationalities in the locality of Zacisze (Cholewiński, 1980). In 2007, CBOS conducted a study that identified manifestations of social distance among Poles towards other nations and religions (CBOS, 2007). In the study, respondents were asked whether they would agree to their son or daughter marrying someone of a different religion. The results suggest a difference in attitudes towards non-Christian denominations on one hand and Christian denominations other than Catholicism on the other. It was also noted that the attitude towards individuals without religious affiliation is similar to that towards followers of Christian religions. The highest social distance was reported towards representatives of Islam, with approximately 47% of respondents expressing disapproval of their child marrying someone of this faith, which was particularly evident among individuals with lower education levels and older age groups. The referenced report highlighted a correlation indicating that the distance towards Orthodox and Evangelical believers is lower than that towards other religions/denominations (CBOS, 2007). The social distance of Polish emigrants towards followers of other religions was also a subject of research (Bera & Korczyński, 2012; Korczyński, 2014a, 2014b).

Recent studies addressing the topic of tolerance cover a range of issues, including attitudes towards religion, various denominations (CBOS, 2001; Szczęch & Rostek, 2016; Črnič & Zielińska, 2012), and atheism (Tyrła, 2014; Tyrła, 2018; Gervais, 2011). Szczęch and Rostek (2016, p. 178) have noted an increase in tolerance towards people practicing different denominations in Poland. It appears that Poles are characterized more by an honest and objective attitude towards others – those who differ from them in beliefs, behavior, or origin – rather than xenophobic prejudices.

Importantly, age and level of education are factors related to tolerance. The increase in tolerance and acceptance of various social groups also applies to individuals with differing attitudes towards religion. According to the IPSOS Institute (Institut Public de Sondage d'Opinion Secteur) in the report "Global Religion 2023: Religious Beliefs Across the World", the level of tolerance towards other denominations or religions is gradually increasing in Poland (IPSOS, 2023).

Social distance of university students towards individuals with differing attitudes towards religion

The level of young people's engagement in religious practices, as well as their distance from those with different attitudes toward religion, are complex and diverse phenomena. Many factors influence students' religiosity, including

environmental and family factors, education, culture, peer groups, and new technologies. Students' religiosity can take various forms, ranging from strong identification with traditional religions to more individualistic and alternative, syncretic approaches to spirituality (Marianński 2016; Wysocka, 2019). Sociological research indicates that these generations display greater skepticism toward traditional, institutional religion. It has been observed that younger generations are increasingly distancing themselves from regular religious practices, such as attending Mass or participating in sacraments, although some still identify with the Catholic faith (CBOS, 2021).

The issue of social distance toward other religions is particularly significant in the age of globalization (Korczyński & Okrasa, 2015, p. 106). Although studies on the religiosity of Poles have garnered considerable interest (Boguszewski & Bożewicz, 2019; Różański, 2015; Klimski, 2023), there are few studies that address social distance and students' attitudes toward individuals who hold different [from theirs] religious views. This specific area is more often a subset of broader research, for example, on social distance toward various social groups. For instance, Sztejnberg and Jasiński (2015) identified 15 different categories of people (e.g., people from a certain social class, refugees, individuals with disabilities) toward whom social distance might be felt. They then defined several subcategories within each of these groups and determined, based on their results, the level of social distance toward each group among the surveyed Polish physical education university students. Regarding religious groups, they noted the lowest level of social distance toward Catholics ($M = 2.03$ on a 1–7 scale), followed by a gradually increasing distance toward: Protestants ($M = 3.54$), Orthodox Christians ($M = 3.61$), Buddhists ($M = 4.04$), Jews ($M = 4.26$), Jehovah's Witnesses ($M = 4.81$), and Muslims ($M = 5.23$). It is also worth mentioning that Muslims, alongside the Roma, were the social group toward whom students felt the greatest distance (Sztejnberg & Jasiński, 2015). Notably, similar to Polish students, the lowest level of social distance among students from the USA and Canada was also toward Catholics (Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1986).

Social distance toward individuals with different attitudes – toward religion, as well as the importance students place on religion in determining social distance, can depend on various determinants. One of these, as research among students from different countries suggests, may be their nationality/cultural background. For example, it has been shown that for students in Greece, religion is the most important factor shaping the level of social distance, while for students in Germany and Japan, it is occupation (and the associated social status), and for American students, it is skin color/race (Triandis et al., 1965). Other determinants of social distance toward people with different religious

views include factors related to the religious orientation of the evaluating students (their denomination and informal religious activities – relatively high social distance from people of different faiths was noted among those not identifying with any religion, followed by Protestants and Catholics) (Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1986). Furthermore, students' social distance may also depend on certain demographic factors, such as social class (people from higher social classes exhibit less social distance), religion (Jewish individuals tend to show less distance toward others compared to Christians), ethnicity (residents of Southern and Eastern Europe demonstrate less social distance than those from Northern and Western Europe), and gender (though findings in this area do not definitively indicate higher or lower social distance based on gender) (cf. Triandis & Triandis, 1960, 1962; Triandis et al., 1965).

Given the generational changes in attitudes toward religion noted in the literature, as well as the multitude of factors that may influence these attitudes and the need to build a society open to diversity, we consider it important to examine the social distance toward people with differing religious attitudes among students in Poland.

The aim of the study

The subject of this study was the social distance of students of social, natural, and exact sciences from people who differ from them in terms of religion/faith/denomination. Such an analysis can help identify the existence and significance of differences resulting from attitudes toward religion between various formal groups within the academic environment and highlight the need for initiatives aimed at integrating this environment and overcoming barriers to promoting the right to religious diversity.

The aim of the research was to analyze the social distance of students of social, natural, and exact sciences toward individuals representing different attitudes toward religion. This difference could concern both the ideology itself and the strength of identification with this ideology. Aware of individual differences in tolerance for diversity, no precise boundaries of that diversity were defined. Two research questions were formulated: 1) What intergroup differences exist between students of social sciences, and natural and exact sciences regarding social distance toward individuals who differ from the respondents in terms of their attitude toward religion? 2) What intergroup differences exist between students of social sciences, and natural and exact sciences regarding the significance of attitudes toward religion in various interpersonal situations?

Method

We used a diagnostic survey method to conduct the research. Data for the analysis were collected through an online questionnaire, which was presented to students from one of the Polish universities via a Google form (Google, Mountain View, CA, USA) from November 2023 to May 2024. The research tools included a *Social Distance Scale*, an *Assessment of the Importance of Attitudes Toward Religion Scale*, and a sociodemographic questionnaire.

The *Social Distance Scale* was specially developed to determine the declared willingness to accept a person with a different attitude toward religion in various interpersonal situations. In constructing it, the authors applied the idea that measuring social distance typically involves determining “the distance that a person indicates exists between themselves and another person through the approval of certain statements” (Triandis & Triandis, 1962, p. 1). An attempt was made to create a continuum, ranging from situations where relationships are very close (e.g., forming a friendship, sharing the same dorm room) to situations where contacts became less intense and less likely (e.g., studying at the same university). The respondents’ task was to indicate the level of acceptance in seven interpersonal situations using a five-point Likert scale (1 – completely disagree, 2 – somewhat disagree, 3 – hard to say, 4 – somewhat agree, 5 – completely agree). The scale used in the current study, prepared based on the original *Social Distance Scale* by Emory Bogardus (1925; 1928), achieved satisfactory reliability coefficients. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient values for social science students were 0.71, and for natural and exact sciences students – 0.91, indicating the satisfactory internal consistency of the scale.

The assessment of the importance of attitudes toward religion was measured using the same set of seven interpersonal situations as in the social distance assessment. The respondent’s task was to determine the importance of religious attitudes on a five-point Likert scale (1 – completely unimportant, 2 – somewhat unimportant, 3 – hard to say, 4 – somewhat important, 5 – very important). For this scale, Cronbach’s alpha values for social science students were 0.64, and for natural and exact sciences students – 0.86. This scale was less reliable, but values above 0.60 can be considered satisfactory.

Information about the research sample was collected through a socio-demographic questionnaire.

Statistical analysis

In describing the sample, the chi-square test and Cramér’s V coefficient were used. For the statistical analysis of the results from the *Social Distance Scale*

and the *Assessment of the Importance of Attitudes Toward Religion Scale*, non-parametric tests were employed. To measure differences between independent groups (students of social sciences, and students of natural and exact sciences), the Mann-Whitney U test was applied, and the effect size was determined using Glass's rank-biserial correlation coefficient (r_g). In both cases, due to the non-parametric nature of the tests, the median (Me) and interquartile range (IQR) were used in describing the research results.

In analyzing the distribution of responses to individual questions on the *Social Distance Scale*, a series of pairwise comparisons using the Wilcoxon test proved helpful. Relationships between sociodemographic variables and the results obtained from the *Social Distance Scale* and the *Assessment of the Importance of Attitudes Toward Religion Scale* were determined using Kendall's tau (τ) and the rank-biserial correlation coefficient (r_{pb}).

Respondents

The study included 134 students (71 social sciences students and 63 natural and exact sciences students) studying at one of the larger Polish universities. Detailed data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of the group of surveyed students

Characteristics of the studied group	Social sciences students (n = 71)	Natural and exact sciences students (n = 63)	Overall (N = 134)
Gender:			
female	62(87.32)	43(68.25)	105(78.36)
male	8(11.27)	19(30.16)	27(20.15)
non-binary person	1(1.41)	1(1.59)	2(1.49)
$\chi^2(2, N = 134) = 7.469, p = .024; V_c = 0.24$			
Social status:			
low	1(1.41)	0(0.00)	1(0.75)
average	58(81.69)	49(77.78)	107(79.85)
high	3(4.22)	1(1.59)	4(2.98)
no response	9(12.68)	13(20.63)	22(16.42)
$\chi^2(3, N = 134) = 3.017, p = .389$			
Place of living:			
rural setting	20(28.17)	13(20.64)	33(24.63)
small town (up to 20,000.)	13(18.31)	8(12.70)	21(15.67)

Characteristics of the studied group	Social sciences students (n = 71)	Natural and exact sciences students (n = 63)	Overall (N = 134)
town (20-100,000.)	19(26.76)	14(22.22)	33(24.63)
city (over 100,000)	19(26.76)	28(44.44)	47(35.07)
$\chi^2(3, N = 134) = 4.645, p = .196$			
Marital status:			
single	61(85.92)	52(82.54)	113(84.33)
married	6(8.45)	2(3.17)	8(5.97)
no response	4(5.63)	9(14.29)	13(9.70)
$\chi^2(2, N = 134) = 4.177, p = .124$			
Attitude toward religion:			
believer	40(56.34)	30(47.32)	70(52.24)
non-believer	16(22.53)	23(36.51)	39(29.10)
no response	15(21.13)	10(15.87)	25(18.66)
$\chi^2(2, N = 134) = 3.219, p = .200$			
Contacts with persons representing different denominations			
no	3(4.23)	1(1.59)	4(2.98)
I do not know	18(25.35)	18(28.57)	36(26.87)
yes	50(70.42)	44(69.84)	94(70.15)
$\chi^2(2, N = 134) = .909, p = .635$			

The comparison of the studied groups of students showed a relationship between the field of study (social versus natural and exact sciences) and the number of women and men ($\chi^2 = 7.469$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.024$). In the group of students studying social sciences, there were more women and fewer men than in the group of students studying natural or exact sciences. However, this association was found to be weak ($V_c = 0.24$).

The mean age of the respondents was 21.82 years. The students most frequently declared an average social status (79.85%) and were more likely to live in towns and cities (75.37%) than in rural areas (24.63%). Most were not married (84.33%), identified as religious (52.24%), and had at least occasional contact with individuals of different faiths (70.15%).

Results

Descriptive statistics regarding the level of social distance toward individuals with different attitudes toward religion among the students are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

Questions about acceptance in various interpersonal situations	N	M	SD	Me	Min.	Max.	Q1	Q3
Higher level of social distance								
1. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a roommate in the dormitory room where you live?	134	4.23	0.99	5.00	1.00	5.00	4.00	5.00
2. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as someone who would be your friend, with whom you would happily spend your free time?	134	4.16	1.14	5.00	1.00	5.00	3.00	5.00
Lower level of social distance								
3. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student who will work with you on a joint project?	134	4.68	0.77	5.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
4. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student in the same class as you?	134	4.74	0.69	5.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
5. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a resident of the same dormitory as you?	134	4.74	0.75	5.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
6. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student of your faculty?	134	4.81	0.59	5.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
7. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student of your university?	134	4.84	0.58	5.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00

Overall, a high level of acceptance was achieved regarding individuals who differ from the respondents in their attitude toward religion ($M > 4.00$). It was also observed that the level of social distance toward these individuals increases in situations describing close relationships and decreases when they become more formal and accidental. The analysis of the distribution of responses to individual questions (a series of pairwise comparisons using the Wilcoxon test) allowed for the categorization of the situations described in the questionnaire into two groups. The first category (higher level of distance) includes situations related to cohabiting in the same room in a student dormitory ($M = 4.23$) and making friends to a person with a different attitude toward religion ($M = 4.16$), with the latter representing the highest level of distance in the context of the entire study. The second category (lower level of social distance) related to all other interpersonal situations included in the study. It is worth emphasizing that the very ability to distinguish these two categories of situations related to studying indicates that attitude toward religion is an important characteristic for the surveyed students regarding the individuals with whom they establish close relationships. This particularly applies to situations involving close physical contact (cohabiting in the same room in a student dormitory) or emotional connection (friendship).

Taking into account the field of study of the respondents allowed for the identification of several statistically significant differences between the groups delineated in this way. The analysis included students studying social sciences and students studying disciplines classified under exact and natural sciences.

Table 4. Social distance toward individuals with different attitudes toward religion among social sciences students and exact or natural sciences students

Questions about acceptance in various interpersonal situations	Social sciences students (n = 71) (1)		Natural and exact sciences students (n = 63) (2)		<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r_g</i>
	Me	IQR	Me	IQR			
1. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a roommate in the dormitory room where you live?	5.00	1.00	4.00	2.00	2.450	0.014	0.22
2. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as someone who would be your friend, with whom you would happily spend your free time?	5.00	1.00	4.00	2.00	1.397	0.162	0.13

Questions about acceptance in various interpersonal situations	Social sciences students (n = 71) (1)		Natural and exact sciences students (n = 63) (2)		<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r_g</i>
	Me	IQR	Me	IQR			
3. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student who will work with you on a joint project?	5.00	0.00	5.00	1.00	2.642	0.008	0.18
4. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student in the same class as you?	5.00	0.00	5.00	0.00	2.138	0.032	0.14
5. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a resident of the same dormitory as you?	5.00	0.00	5.00	0.00	1.296	0.195	0.08
6. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student of your faculty?	5.00	0.00	5.00	0.00	2.126	0.034	0.12
7. If you had a choice, would you accept a person who differs from you in their attitude toward religion as a student of your university?	5.00	0.00	5.00	0.00	1.929	0.054	0.10

Notations: Me – median, *z* – Mann-Whitney U test value, IQR – interquartile range, *p* – *p-value*, *r_g* – Glass's bi-serial correlation coefficient.

The research revealed a higher level of social distance among students studying exact or natural sciences in four interpersonal situations. The differences between the surveyed groups of students were greater in situations describing more personal and close physical contact (sharing a room in a student dormitory – *p* = 0.014 and working on a joint project – *p* = 0.008) than in situations allowing for greater freedom in deciding on interpersonal distance (attending group classes – *p* = 0.032 and studying in the same faculty – *p* = 0.034). Unfortunately, since the effect size was found to be low in all analyzed situations (*r_g* – below 0.3), the observed differences in social distance toward individuals with different attitudes toward religion among students studying social sciences and those studying exact or natural sciences cannot be considered highly probable in other similar studies.

Furthermore, the previously identified categories of interpersonal situations with higher and lower levels of social distance are more closely related to the responses given by students studying exact or natural sciences ($Me = 4.00$) than to those studying social sciences ($Me = 5.00$). The variation in responses among students studying exact or natural sciences was greater and was associated with a lower level of acceptance (understood as a higher level of distance) regarding individuals differing in their attitudes toward religion.

The respondents perceived the significance of similarity in terms of religious attitudes as an important characteristic in shaping their interpersonal relationships in different ways. For social sciences students, it held less importance than for natural or exact sciences students (as evidenced by the negative values of the Mann-Whitney U test). Of note, significant differences in this regard mainly pertained to the evaluation of the importance of similarity in religious attitudes in interpersonal situations classified in this study as having “lower social distance.” Thus, recognizing similarity in terms of religious attitudes as an important characteristic of a person can serve, in certain interpersonal situations, as a basis for the emergence of intergroup differences. At the same time, it should be noted that the effect size was low (r_g – below 0.3) in all analyzed situations, which means that religious attitudes as a characteristic differentiating social distance among students studying social sciences and students studying natural or exact sciences cannot be regarded as a variable that guarantees the occurrence of significant intergroup differences in such analyses (see Table 5).

Table 5. The significance of attitudes toward religion as a characteristic in differentiating social distance among social sciences students and exact or natural sciences students

Questions about the significance of attitudes toward religion as a characteristic in various interpersonal situations	Social sciences students (n = 71) (1)		Natural and exact sciences students (n = 63) (2)		<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r_g</i>
	Me	IQR	Me	IQR			
a. If you had a choice of who would be your roommate in the dormitory, would it be important to you that the person shares a similar attitude toward religion as you do?	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	-0,631	0,528	0.14
b. When choosing a friend to spend time with, would it be important to you that the person shares a similar attitude toward religion as you do?	1.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	-0,774	0,439	0.11

Questions about the significance of attitudes toward religion as a characteristic in various interpersonal situations	Social sciences students (n = 71) (1)		Natural and exact sciences students (n = 63) (2)		<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r_g</i>
	Me	IQR	Me	IQR			
c. If you had the choice of who you would work on a joint project with, would it be important to you that the person shares a similar attitude toward religion as you do?	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	-2,278	0,023	0.05
d. If you had the choice of who you would be in a class with, would it be important to you that the person shares a similar attitude toward religion as you do?	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	-2,398	0,016	0.10
e. If you had the choice of who you would live with in the same dorm, would it be important to you that the person shares a similar attitude toward religion as you do?	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	-0,808	0,419	0.16
f. If you had the choice of who you would study with in the same faculty, would it be important to you that the person shares a similar attitude toward religion as you do?	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	-2,329	0,020	0.14
g. If you had the choice of who you would study with in the same university, would it be important to you that the person shares a similar attitude toward religion as you do?	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	-3,254	0,001	0.11

Notations: Me – median, *z* – Mann-Whitney U test value, IQR – interquartile range, *p* – *p-value*, *r_g* – Glass's bi-serial correlation coefficient.

The study also attempted to determine the correlation between the acceptance of individuals with differing religious attitudes and sociodemographic variables in the two groups of students (Table 6).

The analysis of the relationship between sociodemographic variables and acceptance of individuals with differing attitudes toward religion revealed only two significant correlations. Both pertained to social science students and indicated that place of living and contact with individuals of different faiths could be potential sources of variation in the measured level of acceptance. Table 2 showed no significant relationship between the field of study and contact with individuals of different faiths; however, when we relate the presence of such contacts to the level of measured acceptance, it turns out that among social science students, we can expect a significant but weak (albeit positive)

relationship between their occurrence and a higher level of acceptance. Similar observations can be made regarding place of living, where only among social science students, a weak, negative correlation between place of living and the level of acceptance of individuals with differing attitudes toward religion was recorded. This relationship favors students living in smaller administrative areas as representing a higher level of acceptance toward individuals with a different attitude toward religion.

Additionally, an analysis of the correlation coefficients between the significance attributed to the attitude toward religion and sociodemographic variables in the studied student groups was conducted (Table 7).

Table 6. Correlation between the acceptance of individuals with differing religious attitudes and sociodemographic variables in the groups of surveyed students

Sociodemographic variables	Field of study	Correlation coefficient's value ¹	<i>p</i>
Place of living	social sciences	-0.176	0.030
	exact and natural sciences	0.093	0.279
Contacts with persons practicing different denominations	social sciences	0.216	0.008
	exact and natural sciences	0.049	0.572

¹ – Kendall's tau for the variables: social status, place of living, marital status, attitude toward religion, and contact with individuals of a different faith; point-biserial correlation coefficient (r_{pb}) for the variable gender.

Table 7. Correlation between the significance attributed to the attitude toward religion and sociodemographic variables in the groups of surveyed students

Sociodemographic variables	Field of study	Correlation coefficient's value ¹	<i>p</i>
Social status	social sciences	-0.193	0.017
	exact and natural sciences	-0.154	0.074
Place of living	social sciences	0.255	0.002
	exact and natural sciences	0.074	0.388

¹ – Kendall's tau for the variables: social status, place of living, marital status, attitude toward religion, and contact with individuals of a different faith; point-biserial correlation coefficient (r_{pb}) for the variable gender.

The analysis of correlation coefficients between sociodemographic variables and the results of the *Assessment of the Importance of Religious Attitudes Scale* confirmed previous findings regarding the place of residence. In the group of social sciences students, there was a weak, positive correlation between this variable and the recognition of religious attitudes as an important characteristic in interpersonal relationships. Students residing in smaller administrative areas attached less importance to information about the religious attitudes of the individuals with whom they establish interpersonal relationships. Conversely, a factor that acted slightly in the opposite direction in this group was social status, as its decline was associated with an expected increase in the importance of religious attitudes as a characteristic influencing interpersonal relationships. In the case of students studying natural and exact sciences, the analyzed correlations with sociodemographic variables were statistically insignificant.

Discussion

The present study showed that individuals with differing attitudes toward religion received a high level of acceptance from the surveyed students ($M > 4.00$). These results are consistent with those obtained in the studies by Szczęch and Rostek (2016) and IPSOS (2023). Declared acceptance decreases in situations describing close relationships and increases when they become more formal and casual. At the same time, among social sciences students, a lower level of social distance was observed compared to the group of natural and exact sciences students, while the significance of religiosity as a characteristic in shaping interpersonal relationships was higher in the group of natural and exact sciences students than in the group of social science students. Thus, it can be concluded that religious tolerance may play a significant role in shaping interpersonal relationships. The indicated difference in students' distance from people who differ from them in terms of religion may result from their lived experiences and worldview. The choice of major among candidates in social sciences, and exact and natural sciences, is associated with their specific interests and personality traits. For instance, a person choosing to study social sciences may display greater curiosity, openness to interpersonal relations, and a corresponding set of personality traits. Maria Libiszowska-Ziółkowska (1991) indicated that among students in the humanities, the percentage of believers was the lowest (68%), followed by the technical group (73%), and the natural science group (82%). Hubert Sommer (1993), who conducted his research among students of mathematics and Polish philology, concluded that in the group of Polish philology students, 16% were indifferent and 6% were

non-believers, while in the group of mathematics students, none declared themselves as indifferent or non-believers (Sommer, 1996). Anna Królikowska (2009), whose study included students from humanities, technical, and medical faculties, found that religious life was very important for medical students (56.6%), slightly less important for technicians (44%), and humanists (44%). Contrary to the generally held stereotype, 'the negative relationship between educational level and religiosity does not function in a mechanical way' (Królikowska, 2009, p. 60). In fact, a relatively low level of distance characterizes both studied groups seems to align with the results of previous studies showing that both natural and exact sciences students, and their peers studying social sciences exhibit a similar level of social skills (Wierzejska, 2016).

The analysis of the relationship between sociodemographic variables and acceptance of individuals presenting differing attitudes toward religion did not reveal many significant patterns. This result seems consistent with earlier research findings, which do not clearly indicate differences in social distance toward various social groups between individuals of different genders or ages (see, e.g., the meta-analysis conducted by Jorm & Oh, 2009), although it can be noted that there are studies (Dampc, 2017) suggesting that among Polish university students, men exhibit less social distance toward individuals of different faiths. In the present study, only among social science students, several weak correlations were recorded between the acceptance of individuals differing in religiosity and place of living (negative correlation: higher acceptance among students living in smaller towns) and contacts with such individuals (positive correlation: higher acceptance among students having contact with individuals with differing attitudes toward religion) as well as between the significance attributed to the attitude toward religion and social status (negative correlation) and place of living (positive correlation). Some of these results are consistent with those previously obtained by other authors. For example, Triandis and Triandis (1960) indicated that individuals with higher social status attribute greater significance to the attitude toward religion (as a factor that may lead to higher social distance when a person has a different attitude toward religion) than those with lower social status. Others, conversely, indicate different dependencies. For example, studies of Polish and Ukrainian students show that students living in larger cities exhibit greater approval of "foreign" individuals than students from rural areas and small towns (Korczyński & Stefanek, 2021).

Implications for practice

The research allows for several implications for academic practice to be formulated. First, considering that the results suggest that students who interact with individuals of different religious attitudes are more open and accepting, it can be inferred that greater exposure to diverse views may foster increased tolerance and mutual understanding. This indicates the need to promote interactions among diverse groups in the academic context. Moreover, the differences between students from various living areas and differing social statuses show that acceptance may be related to the cultural context. This highlights the need for further research on the impact of cultural context on religious tolerance.

Limitations

Although this study allowed for an analysis of the social distance of students from a Polish university toward individuals representing different attitudes toward religion, it should be noted that these results do not warrant the conclusion that similar findings would occur in other study groups or among individuals living in different regions and countries, as social distance is largely a cultural construct (Jorm & Oh, 2009; Triandis & Triandis, 1963).

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