

Barbara Mazur  
Politechnika Białostocka

## Religious diversity in the companies of the Podlasie region

*Keywords: religious diversity, small and medium sized enterprises, cultural diversity, organizational behaviors*

### Introduction

The current social and economical trends induce managers and entrepreneurs to regard diversity management as a priority of their agenda. Important social events – accumulative waves of migrations or increasing presence of women in the workplace – and economical trends – firm internationalization, globalization of enterprises and markets – force to face up to the organizational and social problems coming from diversity. In order to manage a multicultural workforce, it is indispensable to implement a new approach of human resource management which integrates and valorizes the diversity of workforce. Thanks to diversity management, each member of organization feels his/herself integrated and valorized and he/she works more efficiently .

However, cultural and religious diversity is not only the case of modern times. It exists also in regions where people representing different ethnic groups or religions have been living together for many centuries. The example of such place is the North-Eastern part of Poland, especially – the region of Podlasie. Geographical and historical conditions have made the Podlaskie Voivodeship a place of coexistence of various nations and cultures. Multinational character provided a background for the creation of distinct systems of values and attitudes, characteristic of representatives of different denominations inhabiting the north-east of Poland.

## 1. Cultural diversity as religious diversity

Culture is a combination of religious, political and esthetical value criteria handed down by historical heritage, which are, at least partly particular to individuals living or having lived in the same social environment [Kankaanranta-Jannari J., 2006, pp. 209–223]. In the light of this definition religious diversity constitutes a substantial part of cultural diversity. Although cultural diversity is commonly interpreted in relation to ethnicity, the term should be understood within a broader context. The subject is important due to the difficulties that it sometimes presents when interpersonal conflict arises as a result of cultural or religious differences.

It is undeniable that religions play a very important role at work because ‘work and religion and their interrelationship are part of the foundations of human society’ [Davie G., 2007]. Research has provided strong evidence of links between religion and various work attitudes and specifically with motivation, job satisfaction, and even organizational commitment. Religions provide adherents with principles by which to live and these principles are also applied within the work setting. Religious faith thus provides people with the means to deal with societal expectations as they face work activities. Furthermore, research provides evidence that people may often turn to God and religion when making difficult work decisions. Most practitioners recognize that it is an imperative to understand the prominent role of religion as it affects business and organizational life [Parboteeah K.P., Cullen J.B., Paik Y., 2009, pp. 51-53]. Therefore if religion is of such importance for homogenous societies and organizations it should be even more meaningful for organizations with religiously heterogeneous work force and with religiously diverse work settings. The reason for this is in multiplications of different value systems which make clear that one particular view is in opposition to one other.

By Trompenaars F. and Woolliams P. [2003, pp.48-50] religion is considered as the second major variable that explains the variance of Individualism score. The first one is nationality, but nationality of the person – as they suggest – cannot explain all the differences. Differences are not surprising with Judaism and Protestantism scoring as a most individualistic and Hinduism and Buddhism the most communitarian. Those cultural dimensions – individualism and collectivism – influence many organizational activities such as reward structure.

## 2. Religious diversity in the Podlasie region

Due to its turbulent history, the Plain of Northern Podlasie remains the most varied region in Poland as far as the ethnic background of the population is

concerned. Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Russians, Gypsies, Tartars, Jews and Germans have been living here for centuries. Nowadays, Belarusians constitute the largest ethnic group. For the most part they are members of Orthodox Church while Poles living here are in major part adherents of Roman Catholic Church.

Differences between Eastern and Western Christianity were broadly discussed in the literature. They can be summarized in the way presented in the table 1.

Table 1. **Eastern vs. Western Christianity**

	Differences between Eastern and Western Christianity
<i>Individual v. social aspect of Christianity</i>	Eastern and Western Christianity differ on the definition of the role prescribed to each individual in his contact with God. The East, where <i>sobornost'</i> ( <i>synodality</i> ) is the ultimate resort in matters of doctrine, custom and jurisdiction, views man as part of the community of believers. While it brings out the social aspect of initiation, also present in the Orthodox liturgy, Roman Catholic attitude towards religion is individualistic in relying the authority of the Church on the person of pope. Individualism in Roman Catholic tradition is expressed by priest's use of "I", which is absent in Orthodox tradition. Orthodox doctrine holds that community attracts God's attention better than an individual; thus prayer needs to be expressed collectively, and praising God in singing – in chorus.
<i>Didactics v. mysticism</i>	Long before the schism, the Church in the East was concerned with God's mysteries; Western Church at the same time explored the relationship between God's grace and man's freedom. Rational, social and active attitude on one hand was opposed to contemplative and mystical one on the other hand. It is often mentioned that the West takes on stronger moralistic stance, revealing itself in the importance attributed to the way in which man presents his account to God than the East; the latter being immersed in mystical meditation. The disparity can be observed in liturgy: didactic and catechetical part in Roman Catholic mass is elaborate; mystical aura prevails Orthodox liturgy.

<p><i>Rational v. irrational knowledge</i></p>	<p>In the East the traditional distinction between the rational and the irrational – mystical is expressed in a metaphor of heart and mind. The Eastern conception of faith situates it in the heart and never describes it using the terminology of an intellectual system. Such attitude remains in conflict with Catholic theology which does not discredit the quality of comprehension through reasoning. St. Thomas of Aquin recognizes revelation as the ultimate level of comprehension, but accepts cognitive value of reason as well. Orthodox theologians claim that concepts and notions reveal neither the essence of God, nor can they express the Orthodox faith.</p> <p>On the whole, if liturgical order in the West aims to arouse will and consciousness, to nurture and shape this consciousness on the level of discursive reasoning, Eastern liturgies are driven by a sort of psychophysical activity which pervades subconsciousness and those strata of consciousness that avoid the principles of intellectual speculation.</p>
<p><i>Dichotomy of freedom</i></p>	<p>The perception of only internal, spiritual aspect of freedom is characteristic of Orthodoxy. Free will in the West is considered one of the most significant values, as God's most precious gift. Freedom is our only attribute that is absolute; reason has limitations, will is infinite – that's where we are equal with God. Orthodoxy considers the very inclination to making choices a flaw, a limitation of genuine freedom. Free will is defective and signifies the fall of man, his loss of semblance to God. The ultimate form of freedom is an activity which brings about its own rights and does not yield by making a choice. It is a state of mystical revelation, a direct proximity of good where no alternative choice exists – good is so pervasive that no activity other than good is possible. The will to make choices is the cause of sin – human will selected a path that was not God's choice.</p>

<b>Grace v. merit</b>	Orthodoxy is reproachful of the West, with its interpretation of grace as an external quality which justifies man who is, by his nature, not just, but who can be rewarded with grace. The concept of grace is rejected in the East. Grace does not take on a form of an external excuse, but remains an ontological transformation and divinization of man, and becomes the presence of God. The synergy of God's and human will does not allow for the separation of grace from human freedom. This particular grasp of the notion of grace results from theological disparity: according to the West grace has been created, though not separated from its source – the Holy Trinity; in the East grace is perceived exclusively as uncreated energy.
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Source: Mazur B., *Managing bicultural organizations in Podlasie region*, [in:] „Studia z zarządzania międzykulturowego”, part.II. eds. Ł. Sułkowski, K. Waniek, SWSPiZ, Łódź 2009, pp. 296-300.

It can be predicted that the presented above differences exist and are perceived in the companies operating in the Podlasie region [Mazur B., 2010 p.2-3]. When translated into organizational reality they could mean:

- for Orthodox believers: that group is more important than an individual person, authorities can make decisions concerning individuals without giving a reason standing behind them, rational arguments are not useful for attaining truth which has no logical nature, the only freedom possible for humans is spiritual and any award results from approaching to organizational power or authorities while;
- for Catholics: individual is responsible for his/her life and is independent from other members of the group, active, rational and social attitude is specific, gaining knowledge by learning and appealing to intelligence and logic are distinctive, freedom means the freedom of choice which together with responsibility is the most important value, and any reward is always a natural consequence of desirable behavior [Mazur B., 2010, p.4].

### 3. Managing intra-national religious diversity

Management of cultural diversity which embraces religious diversity is an innovative approach to the management of diversities through which it is possible to create an organizational climate of integration, in which people

feel integrated and respected for their uniqueness [Barabino M.C., Jacobs, B., Maggio, M.A, 2001]. An organization's success and competitiveness depend upon its ability to embrace diversity and realize the benefits. Some other authors describe diversity management as an approach to manage every employee according to his/her characteristics and the uniqueness of his/her specific contribution and of his/her background to valorize the organization members, to help them with working together efficiently and to increase their communication and relations [Kandola R., Fullerton J., 1994]. To speak of diversity management means to understand that there are some differences among people and that these differences, if they are managed correctly, are a huge resource for organizations to obtain better outcomes [Kandola R., Fullerton J., 1994].

When organizations actively assess their handling of workplace diversity issues, develop and implement diversity plans, multiple benefits are reported such as: increased adaptability, broader service range or variety of viewpoints. [Cox T.H., Blake B., 1991, pp.45–56]. The sine qua non condition of managing cultural diversity is knowledge concerning employees' religions, the awareness of the differences between them and the formalization in organizational structure.

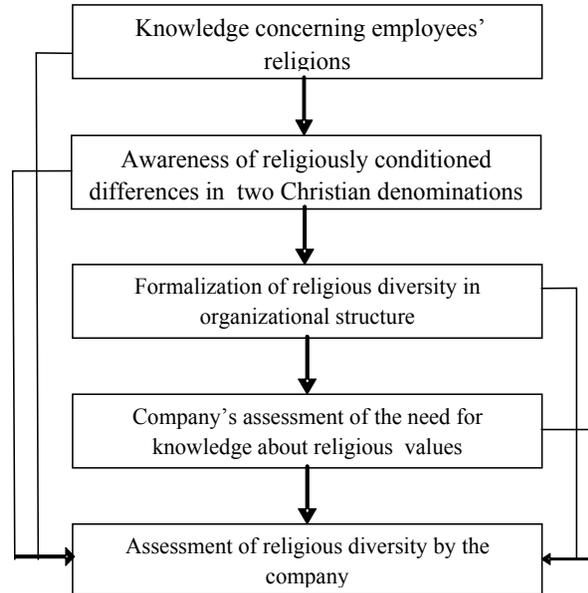
### **Research objective and hypothesis**

The objective of the research was to find out the reception of cultural diversity - perceived as diversity of cultural values specific for two Christian divisions - Catholic and Orthodox. The following hypothesis was proposed:

**The managers of the companies operating in the Podlasie region are aware of cultural diversities of their employees but these are not perceived by them as an important source of competitive advantage.**

### **Methods and research model**

The methods applied in the research were by means of the standardized interviews with the human resources managers or persons responsible for personnel managers in the companies. The surveys were conducted with the use of the research model consisting of five sections presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Model of diversity reception in a company

Source: composed by the author.

The first section of the research model contained questions on whether the organization employs religiously diverse workforce and if it knows the religions of the employees. The second section embraced two questions: whether companies are aware of differences in value preferences of their employees and if they noticed such differences in organizational everyday practice. The third section included questions about a person in the company who could help to reduce real or potential conflicts based on religious diversity. The fourth section contained questions whether managers possess sufficient knowledge about efficient methods of reducing such conflicts and whether it would be useful for all the employees in the company. The fifth section dealt with questions on why, or why not, attention was devoted to diversity, i.e. what kind of advantages and disadvantages for a company result from its cultural diversity.

### Sample

32 companies operating in the most religiously diverse part of the Podlaskie voivodeship - comprising five districts: Hajnówka, Bielsk Podlaski, Białystok, Siemiatycze, Sokółka – have been researched. Half of the companies in sample

belongs to the group of the biggest firm in Podlasie Province (the sample was taken from the list of 100 Golden Companies in Podlasie<sup>1</sup>.) and another half represents sector of small and medium size businesses. The selection of the sample was purposeful and it embraces companies representing different branches starting from traditional as mining industry, rails, through communal /municipal enterprises, building companies to modern and high technology such as telecommunication companies.

### **Analysis of the results**

To each stage from the research model there were prescribed specific questions which together with the answers will be presented on the figures. They will be presented in the order of their appearance in the research model.

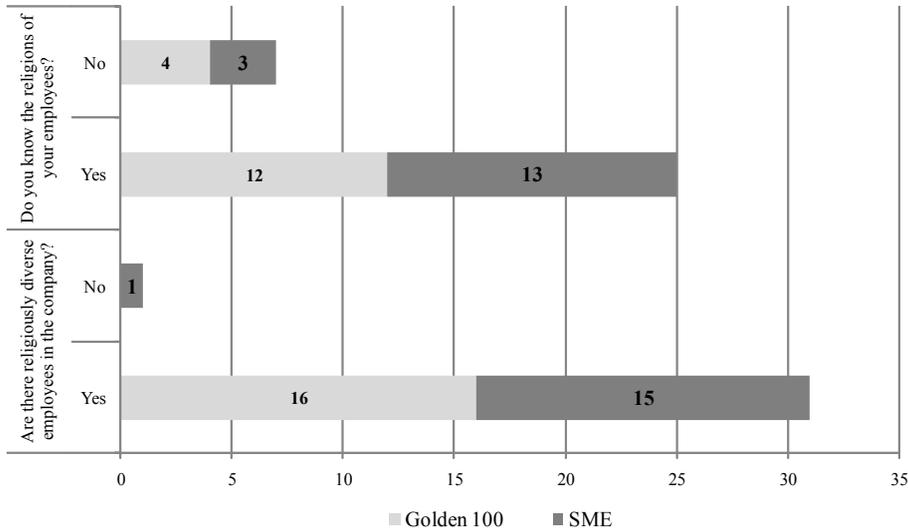
- ***Knowledge concerning employees' religions***

In 31 companies it was proved that workers profess different religions. Some of the statements contained additional information such as: 2/3 of the workforce consists of Catholics, about 1/3 of Orthodox in the total number of 300 employees, “workers are half Catholics and half Orthodox believers”, “in about 60 people half are Catholics and half are Orthodox”, or “over 30% is Orthodox and the rest is Catholic”. In only one company it was declared that all the workers represented the same religion. The information about particular worker's confession was declared in twenty five companies whereas in seven firms the information about confession exclusively of some of the workers was confirmed. Out of those seven companies five belong to the group of big companies and two represent a sector of small and medium size enterprises. The answers for the questions from the first stage of the research model are presented on Figure 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Golden 100 of Podlasie's Companies” is a annual rank of best companies operating in Podlasie region. It was organized by “Kurier Poranny” based on the criteria – relatively highest profit from sale, highest income and the best usage of available resources.

**Figure 2.** Knowledge concerning employees' religions



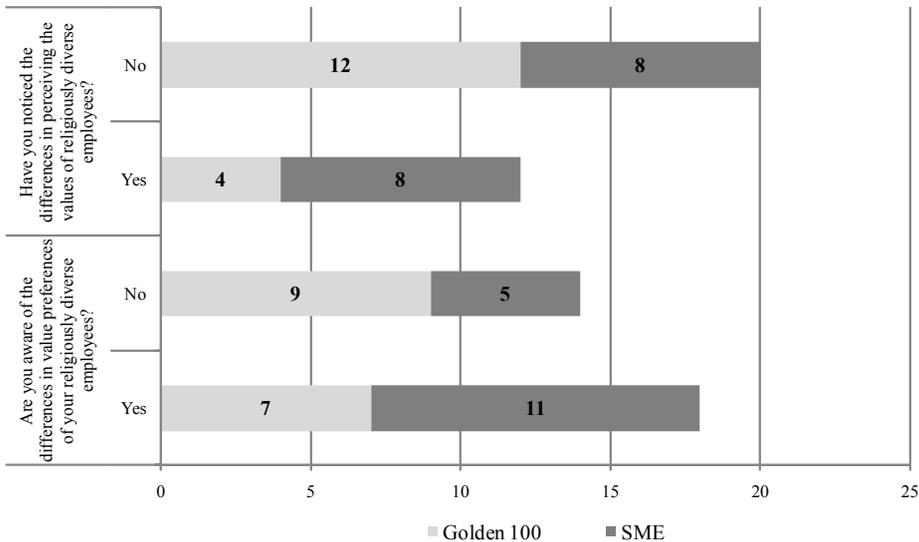
Source: based on the research finding

• **Awareness of religiously conditioned value differences between two Christian denominations**

In the second stage of the research, the knowledge about differences in cultural values of Orthodox and Catholic confessions was diagnosed. The possession of this knowledge was declared in 18 companies while in 14 the answer was negative. Among companies, where managers are aware of the differences, small and medium companies dominated.

It is worth noticing that the number of small and medium size companies which gave an affirmative answer when asked about the differences in perceiving the values by religiously diverse employees were almost twice as big when compared to the big companies. The replies of companies to the questions from this part of the research are shown on Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Knowledge concerning employees' religions and awareness of religiously conditioned value differences in two Christian denominations



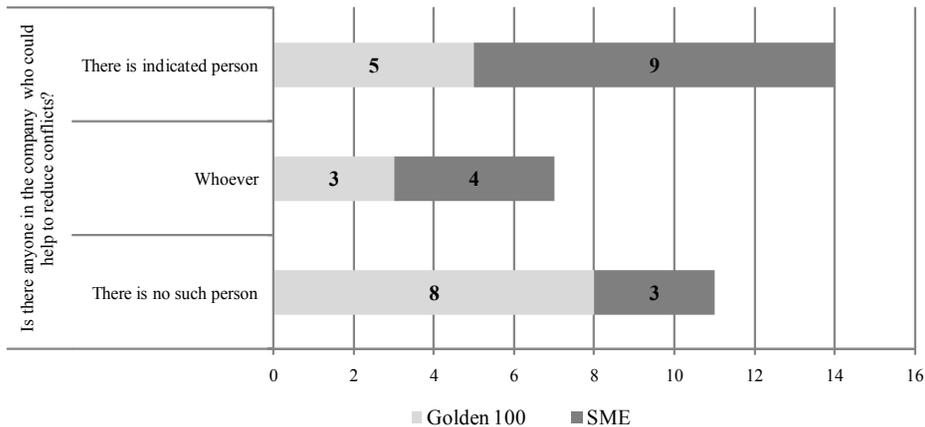
Source: based on the research finding

- **Formalization of religious diversity in organizational structure**

The next step in the research started with asking about potential conflicts in the company arising from diverse cultural values represented by the employees. The conflicts were confirmed by 4 companies (2 from the group of 100 biggest companies in Podlasie and 2 from the sector of small and medium sized companies). Twenty eight companies from the sample did not confirm the occurrence of conflicts resulting from employees' different religious values. Active engagement for the sake of conflict solving was declared by only 1 company, representing the sector of SME, the 3 other companies declared that they were not intervening when based on religiously conditioned values conflict was appearing [Mazur B., 2008, pp. 300-303]. No company affirmed a position in their structure for any person authorized to help in conflict solving when between employees being adherents of various religions or coming out from different religious backgrounds or environments. In such a situation it was investigated who could help in the company or who probably would be helpful in conflict solving or reducing it if it would arise. Afterwards, the respondents were asked to give detailed information about the status of such a person.

The following positions were indicated: chief-executives, direct superiors, the owners, manager assistant, trade unions representatives, directors of particular departments, human resource managers or circumstantial persons. The replies of the companies in this part of the research are shown on Figure 4.

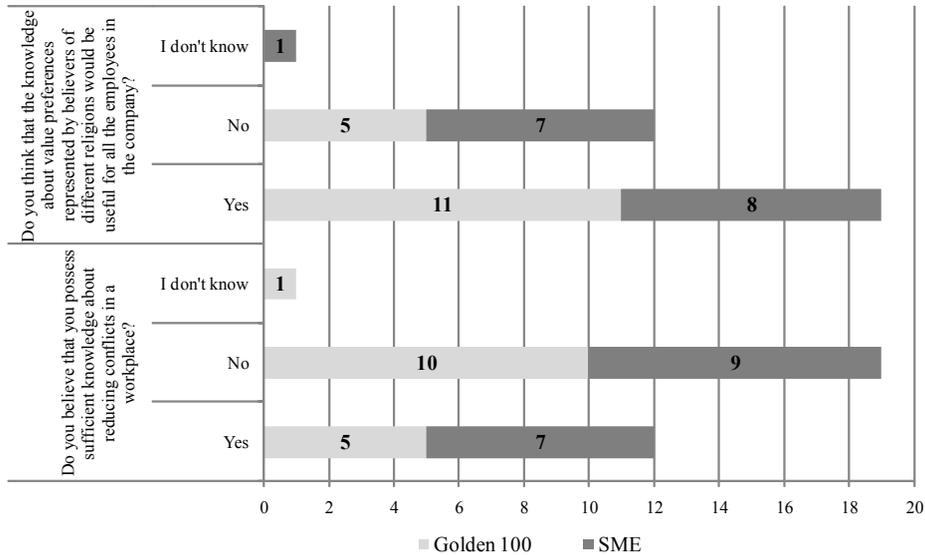
**Figure 4.** Formalization of religious diversity in organizational structure



Source: based on the research finding

- **Company’s assessment of the need for knowledge about cultural values**

The objective of this section was to diagnose the need of information about diversity of cultural values presented by the employees of different religions. It was stated by 12 companies that managers have sufficient knowledge on solving conflicts arising from religious values and by 17 companies this knowledge was assessed as insufficient. The same number of companies assessed this knowledge as indispensable for all of the employees while 14 companies did not affirm such necessity. 19 companies, which is over a half of the research sample, acknowledged that all employees should be aware of the differences in values. This group was dominated by big companies. There was no company where there would be a position for a person responsible for solving this kind of conflicts. The replies to the questions of this stage of the research are presented in the graph 5.

**Figure 5.** Company's assessment of the need for knowledge about religious values

Source: based on the research finding

- **Assessment of religious diversity by the company**

The purpose of the fifth stage of the research consisting of 4 questions was to discover whether companies perceive the differences between the workers representing Catholic and Orthodox cultures as a liability or an asset. Questions were aimed to gain information about the results of the differences to the functioning of the company: the scale of the results consists of affective, cognitive, symbolic and communication effects [Milliken F. J., Martins L. L., 1996, pp. 402—433].

Answering the question whether companies notice employees engage less while working with people whose religion varies – all the companies gave negative answers. That means that none of the analyzed companies confirmed negative influence on the engagement of the employees doing tasks in religiously mixed groups.

The aim of the next question, whether companies notice a higher level of creativity and innovativeness of the employees when they work with the religiously different, was to grade the level of creativity and innovativeness. Also in this case the answers were almost homogenously negative - 31 companies

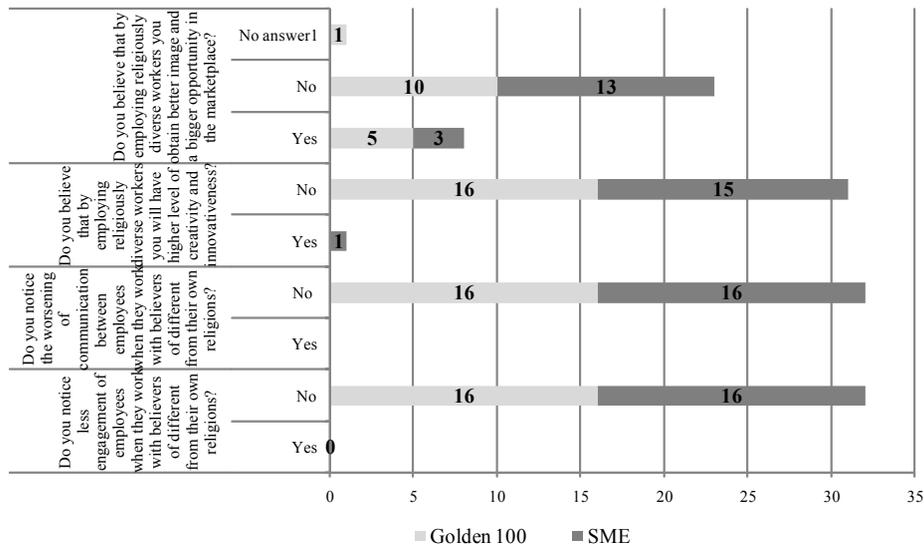
did not confirm the higher level of creativity of employees co-working with people representing a religiously varied environment. So this time also as to the cognitive effect there was no evidence apart from one company that it exists.

The third question whether companies reckon that by employing workers of different religions they will have better image and bigger chances on the work market was aimed to grade the level of the symbolic effect. It was the one to differentiate the inquired mostly. 8 companies agreed to the suggestion that by hiring religiously different workers the companies will create a better image and will have bigger pool of talented people to choose from, while 23 remaining companies did not agree with that suggestion. One company did not give a particular answer to the issue.

Answers given to the question whether companies observe a lower level of communication between workers while they work with people of an other religion, did not confirm the existence of the communication effect. None of the 32 companies did confirm the fact of a worsening level of communication between religiously varied working groups.

The results of the last section of the research model are shown on the graph 6.

**Figure 6.** Assessment of religious diversity by the company



Source: based on the research finding

## Conclusions

Results of the research confirmed the first part of hypothesis which was that the managers of the companies operating in the Podlasie region were aware of the cultural (religious) diversities of their employees. They are conscious of different religions existing in the region and the religions of majority of employees hired by companies are known to managers, especially to those from the SME sector. Moreover, over a half of the researched companies is aware of the differences in cultural values of their workers who represent Orthodox or Catholic confession. Those companies which do not recognize the differences in value preferences belong to the group of big firms rather than to the SME sector. Also, the big companies more frequently lack information about the religions of particular employees. For some of them religion is a part of private life of their employees.

In respect to the second part of the hypothesis which assumes that the cultural diversity is not perceived by managers as an important source of competitive advantage the research findings only partly proved it. A certain part of the companies perceive diversity of employees as a source of its better image in the market. Some of them, especially companies representing the SME sector, consciously employ a certain number of adherents of both religions because of the holidays which for both groups are in different periods of the year.

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### **Abstract**

*Work, religion and their interrelationship are a part of the foundations of human society. The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the religious diversity in big and small and medium sized enterprises operating in the most religiously diverse region in Poland. The main interest was how managers in these companies or their owners cope with diversity challenges in organizations. In order to analyze these aspects a research model has been proposed and used as a basis for the studies conducted in 32 enterprises operating in the Podlasie region.*

*This research is of critical significance because it is initiating the study of cultural diversity conceived as religiously conditioned values which could influence organizational behaviors. It provides an analysis and evaluation of how effectively companies under investigation manage cultural diversity within their workforce. Lessons from the research suggest that an extra effort should be made to help managers and business owners as organizations seek to take competitive advantage from religious diversity of the employees.*