

# Presuming religious congruence? The nonreligious and Catholicism in Poland

Social Compass

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## Abstract

This article contributes to the understanding of the symbiotic relationship between the nonreligious and the religious in religiously homogeneous cultures. Specifically, it examines the centrality of the religious congruence fallacy in the narratives of nonreligious people. Based on 60 qualitative interviews with Polish nones, I chart the ways in which they make sense of the dominant model of Polish-Catholic religiosity, commonly referred to as the ‘Polak-Katolik’. The findings demonstrate that nonreligious Poles equate Polish Catholicism with hypocrisy, conformity, and an implicit fear of ostracism. In conclusion, I suggest that it is vital that scholars of nonreligion flesh out the complexities of the relationship between the nones and the religiously homogeneous cultures within which they exist.

## Keywords

nonreligion, Polak-Katolik, Poland, religious congruence

## Résumé

Cet article contribue à la compréhension de la relation symbiotique entre le non-religieux et le religieux dans des cultures religieusement homogènes. Plus précisément, il examine la place centrale qu’occupe le faux-semblant de la cohérence religieuse dans les récits des personnes non-religieuses. Sur la base de 60 entretiens qualitatifs avec des non-religieux polonais, je montre comment ils donnent un sens au modèle dominant de la religiosité Polonaise-catholique, communément appelé « Polak-Katolik ». Les résultats

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montrent que les Polonais non-religieux assimilent le catholicisme polonais à l'hypocrisie, au conformisme et à une peur implicite de l'ostracisme. En conclusion, je suggère qu'il est vital que les spécialistes de la non-religion approfondissent les complexités de la relation entre les non-religieux et les cultures religieusement homogènes au sein desquelles ils existent.

### Mots-clés

cohérence religieuse, Non-religion, Polak-Katolik, Pologne

## Introduction

The process of 'becoming religion's other' (Smith and Cragun, 2019: 8) inevitably involves a confrontation with one's religious biography and an ongoing negotiation of relationships with religious people. The nonreligious often forge their personal narratives by drawing on past experiences with religion as part of their identity construction (Fazzino, 2014). For many the exit from religion is not clear-cut as they continue to live in predominantly religious contexts. While this may result in experiences of prejudice and discrimination (Edgell et al., 2006), it may also lead the formerly religious to develop an inside-outsider mentality. This mentality is partly derived from the ongoing interactions with religious people. The inside-outsider status is particularly evident in religiously homogeneous cultures characterised by relatively high levels of religiosity. This article focuses on the case of the nonreligious in Poland to illustrate (1) the interdependence of religion and nonreligion, and (2) the importance of attending to 'religious congruence' in the sociological exploration of this interdependence.<sup>1</sup>

One consequence of being shaped by a religiously homogeneous culture is the Polish nones' apparent concern with what Mark Chaves calls 'religious congruence' (2010). Chaves defines 'religious congruence' as a threefold phenomenon. First, religious ideas are an internally consistent and self-contained system. Second, what religious people do is motivated directly by religious beliefs and values. Third, individuals carry these relatively fixed and readily accessible beliefs and values into a variety of situations. All three dimensions presume logic, order, and consistency of ideas and behaviour. In reality, Chaves posits, religious beliefs and practices are messy and context-dependent (2010: 4). Religious people are not hypocritical when their actions do not correspond with their beliefs. Rather, scholars who study religious people commit the error of the religious congruence fallacy when they impose a non-existent congruence on their research data. As I demonstrate below, the perceptions of Polish Catholics by the nonreligious rest on a similar fallacy.

Based on the findings that follow, I argue that the 'religious congruence fallacy' (Chaves, 2010) forms a vital part of the secular world view among Polish nones. I examine how nonreligious Poles perceive, and effectively denounce, the dominant model of Polish-Catholic religiosity, commonly referred to as the 'Polak-Katolik'. By critiquing the model, the nones forge their vision of 'proper religiosity' as they contrast the theoretical ideal with the reality on the ground. My participants provide an experience-based analysis of their own country with respect to its celebrated status as the bastion of Catholicism. The key questions posed in this article are (1) how do self-proclaimed

cultural deviants read the religious landscape in which they live, and (2) how do they interpret the long-honoured descriptors of Polish Catholicism. I suggest that, by virtue of their status as ‘internal Others’ (Zubrzycki, 2006: 54) in a mono-confessional Catholic country (Borowik et al., 2013), the nonreligious in Poland function as ‘familiar strangers’ *par excellence* and articulate what normally remains unsaid. All deconversion narratives necessarily contain the story of the individual’s religious background which is in turn situated in a particular religious field. It is important to know how nonreligious Poles make sense of their field because these views and interpretations shape their lives as a nonreligious minority. In addition, the study of nonreligious world views can help us better understand both religion and the commonly held assumptions about the congruence between religious identities, beliefs, and behaviour (Chaves, 2010).

Another reason to ask how the nonreligious relate to the theistic culture of their homeland is that, with the exception of one sociological study of nones as a numerical and cultural minority in Poland (Tyrula, 2014, 2018), no qualitative research on the nonreligious as an umbrella category exists.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand better the Polish religious landscape from the perspective of ‘inside-outsiders’, we must go beyond surveys and opinion polls. The view from the minority sheds light on several aspects relevant to the study of religion and nonreligion in countries characterised by religious homogeneity: cultural religion and its relationship with non-conformists; national identity and religion; and the role of conformity in maintaining cultural myths.

## **Nones and religion**

Over the past two decades, scholars of nonreligion have addressed the relationship between religious and nonreligious people in a number of ways. Two prominent themes in the study of nonreligion from this angle have been prejudice and discrimination against nones (Cragun et al., 2012; Edgell et al., 2006; Gervais, 2013; Hammer et al., 2012; Harper, 2007), and the construction of nones’ autobiographical accounts of deconversion (Fazzino, 2014; Guenther, 2014; Zuckerman, 2015). In both cases, religion constitutes the chief backdrop to the process of crafting secular lives and identities while making sense of the social context in which the process occurs. The religious and the nonreligious exist in ‘symbiotic relationships’ (Marty, 2014: xi) because they need each other to validate their respective stances. Thus religion occupies a significant amount of space in the personal narratives of ‘religious exiters’ (Cragun and Hammer, 2011).

These accounts tend to centre around the shortcomings of the exiter’s religious tradition. By critiquing religion, the nonreligious enact various forms of ‘rejection identity’ (Smith, 2011) in relation to theism. For example, in Zuckerman’s study of people who left religion, interviewees explained their apostasy through their increasing disillusionment with religious beliefs, the loss of faith in God’s intrinsic goodness, or the incompatibility of sexual desire and orientation with their religion’s doctrine (2015). Some were prompted to leave their faith because of what Zuckerman terms ‘the malfeasance of others’ (2015: 90). These individuals rejected religion partly as a result of witnessing hypocrisy, immorality, or malice in the ranks of their community. Similarly, Fazzino’s study of former Evangelical Christians highlights the importance of understanding how the non-religious articulate their opposition to religion and mobilise

it as a resource in life after religion (2014). Fazzino's participants cited the hypocritical behaviour of their fellow Christians as one of the key reasons for leaving the faith (2014: 257). Guenther (2014) shifts the focus from how religious people perceive atheists to concentrate instead on how atheists view religious believers. Her participants saw religious people either as 'innocent victims of predatory religious leaders', or 'narrow-minded, tyrannical, and even evil' (2014: 5). The harshest judgement was reserved for the leaders ('evil'), while the followers were described as 'dupes' (Guenther, 2014: 6). The term 'hypocrisy' appears as a trope in several accounts where atheists criticise religious people for nonreligious behaviour. As Guenther points out, in some atheist narratives, 'hypocrisy contributes to the boundary between atheists and believers and is one important difference between them' (2014: 10).

Another way in which nonreligious people dissociate from religion is through demoralising it so as to moralise their own nonreligious selves (Sumerau and Cragun, 2016). Highlighting the apparent inconsistency in religious people's stated beliefs and actions constituted an important part of such strategies. For example, some of Sumerau and Cragun's interviewees noted the conditional nature of religious people's love for their fellow humans, while others recalled judgmental attitudes and a lack of empathy they encountered in their dealings with religious acquaintances (2016: 400–402).

The examples presented above offer a useful illustration of the religious congruence fallacy and the next section of this article sets the scene for the phenomenon in the Polish context.

## Religion and nonreligion in Poland

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Poland remains the most Catholic country in Europe (Pew Research Center, 2018a). In 2018, 92% of those surveyed declared themselves as believers and 50% claimed to practice regularly (Boguszewski, 2018). Most Polish people, including many nonbelievers, continue to rely on the Catholic Church to administer the key rites of passage, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals (Baniak, 2008; Borowik, 2017). However, Poland's status as the stronghold of Catholicism is increasingly being questioned. In April 2017, the weekly newsmagazine *Polityka* ran a provocatively titled feature 'Is Poland still a Catholic country?' (Radzikowska, 2017). The article suggests that despite the declarations of faith by over 90% of the population, there is little evidence that Polish people are familiar with, or subscribe to, the basic tenets of Catholicism. Between 2005 and 2013, the percentage of practising Catholics decreased from 58 to 50% (Boguszewski, 2015: 3). Moreover, Polish religiosity is becoming more individualised, selective, and subjectivised (Marianski, 2017: 210). Polish people no longer consider weekly church attendance to be obligatory, nor do they think that the key principles of Catholicism need to be accepted in their totality (Boguszewski, 2013). The Church's own estimates indicate a 2 million drop in the numbers of practising Catholics between 2003 and 2015 (ISSK, 2015). In 2018, the percentage of *dominantes* (baptised participants in Sunday mass) was 38.2%, and *communicantes* (those receiving Holy Communion) accounted for 17.3% of all Catholics (ISSK, 2020). The relaxation of attitudes to the sacred is also evident in several survey findings. A 2015 poll found that Poles reported being generally comfortable with

shopping (66%) and working on Sunday (59%). Only 19% would be offended by the consumption of meat on Fridays (Kowalczyk, 2015). Moreover, the nation's views on sexual morality depart from the official teachings of the Church. In 2014, 74% saw sex before marriage as morally acceptable, and an even higher percentage, 77%, approved of contraception (Boguszewski, 2014: 12).

Possibly the most significant predictor of future trends is the decrease in religiosity among young people. In 2015, 15% of 18- to 24-year-olds declared non-belief, and 44% attended mass, as opposed to 51% in 2005 (Boguszewski, 2015: 8). Similarly, the Pew Research Center's report from 2018 showed that the gap in religiosity between the young and the elderly in Poland was one of the two largest in the world, with only 16% of under 40s claiming religion was very important, as opposed to 40% of the older cohort (Pew Research Center, 2018b: 2).

Despite the shifts, the number of nones – Poles who do not identify with any religion – remains relatively low: between 3 and 8% (Boguszewski, 2013: 3; 2018: 1). In keeping with trends identified in other populations, the biggest growth in nones has occurred among the 18–24 age cohort, urban dwellers, those with higher education, and those whose economic status is higher than that of their religious and very religious counterparts. 63% of Polish nones are men, and 37% are women. Of all the nonreligious only 36% categorically deny the existence of God, 24% believe in a higher power of some kind, and 6% say they mostly believe in God (Boguszewski, 2013: 18). Only 25% of all nones could be described as atheists, if by atheists we mean those who categorically deny the existence of God and possibility of an afterlife. Nones' values resemble those of most Poles. Family and health were the most important aspects of life for the majority of those surveyed (73 and 64%, respectively). Despite having a lot in common with their Catholic counterparts, nones in Poland inevitably function as a numerical and cultural minority. Their cultural minority status is rooted in the fact that their world view, and resulting life choices and behaviour, tend to be at odds with the Catholic mainstream (Tyralla, 2018). Consequently, the Polish nones might engage in impression management to avoid stigmatisation and ostracism. While the minority status is not the central focus in this article, it is evident to different degrees in the data presented below.

### **The Polak-Katolik<sup>3</sup>**

The now axiomatic nexus between religion and national identity in Poland began to take form only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Piwowarski, 1982; Porter-Szucs, 2011: 8; Zubrzycki, 2006: 219). Until the second half of the nineteenth century, Poland had been characterised by religious and cultural pluralism. It took until the inter-war period (1918–1939), when Poland became independent, for the fusion between Roman Catholicism and Polishness to be fully articulated by nationalist ideologues. The model of 'Polak-Katolik' was at the heart of the process of 'the nationalisation of ethnic Poles' whereby Catholicism was explicitly tied to national identity in the political and the religious spheres of life (Zubrzycki, 2006: 55). It is then that the phrase entered public discourse as if to reflect the eternal truth about Poland. However, the myth is based on a tautology: 'a Pole must be a Catholic because without Catholicism a person can no longer be a Pole' (Porter-Szucs, 2011: 7). The equation of national identity with

Catholicism had consequences for identifying the enemy within, as well as without, Poland. In the inter-war period, Jews were labelled as the cultural 'other' in relation to the rightful owners of the state: Polish Catholics.

The narrative of the Polak-Katolik did not go unchallenged by secular fractions and there was no agreed upon definition of the model in the twentieth century. The consequences of promoting the ideal extended beyond mere symbolism. After WWII Poland became almost fully ethnically homogeneous, and the politics of polonisation impacted on the status of the existing minorities (Mironowicz, 2000) which inevitably occupied the lower rungs of the ladder of 'hierarchical pluralism' (Pasięka, 2015: 35). The ethno-religious narrative of Catholic Poland was no longer contested (Porter-Szucs, 2011; Zubrzycki, 2006: 62). The image of the Polish Catholic was further strengthened during the years of Communism (1945–1989). Poland was subsumed under an ostensibly atheist Soviet regime which promoted scientific atheism complete with rituals and ceremonies. Catholicism was continuously mobilised to oppose the atheist Soviet state and the Catholic Church became an autonomous guarantor of Polish identity confronting an alien power. As the only source of national identity, religion was further welded to Polishness. Post-1989 transformation saw religious values brought to the forefront in discussions over the shape of the public sphere, and the equation of Pole and Catholic was part of this process (Borowik, 2017: 316). At the same time, othering discourses have functioned to draw a clear line between 'us' and 'them' (Porter-Szucs, 2011: 34).

The historical complexity and relative youthfulness of the stereotype of Polak-Katolik continue to shape the prevailing discourses of 'real Polishness' in the twenty-first century. In 2016, 64% of Poles claimed being Catholic is important to being truly Polish (Pew Research Center, 2017). Making sense of the model through the eyes of those who do not fit it provides a key to the understanding of the place the nonreligious occupy in their homeland. The Polak-Katolik's historical function has been to draw a symbolic line between the right and the wrong ways of being Polish; yet a careful analysis of the origins of the stereotype reveals its relative fragility as the supposed primordial essence of Polishness. As Porter-Szucs puts it, 'the equation of Pole with Catholic [ . . . ] is supported by a *deeply ingrained but highly selective telling of national history*' (2011: 3).

A successful upholding of this version of national history requires silencing the competing narratives in public discourse. Nonreligion embodies this narrative of Polishness because it does not neatly fit into the ethno-religious model of the Polish Catholic. This is what places the story of nones in the larger context of the country's religious diversity. Non-Catholic religions present in Poland historically are not construed as Polish because 'religious diversity can exist *in* the nation, but it cannot be *of* the nation' (Porter-Szucs, 2011: 4). Simply put, being nonreligious in Poland, just like being a Protestant or a Jew, could be seen by some as tantamount to betraying one's nation.

Moreover, Polish Catholicism is practically synonymous with the national Church. The ruling political party, Law and Justice, emphasises the key role of the Catholic Church in public life and maintains a close relationship with a proportion of the Church hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between politicians and the Church is mutually reinforcing: Catholic values are frequently mobilised to strengthen the political message, and the Church hierarchs endorse the party's moral conservatism. The party's leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, has publicly stressed the Church's in shaping the morality of all Polish

citizens, and explicitly presented the act of defending the Church as one's patriotic duty. In several public speeches he pronounced that 'there is no Poland without the Church. [ . . . ] A hand raised against the Church is a hand raised against Poland' (Kondzinska, 2019; Wilgocki, 2015). This bond between religion and the nation inevitably frames the interactions between the nonreligious and religious Poles.

## The study

This article is based on data from in-depth interviews (N = 60) with self-identified nones in Poland. The study was concerned with lived nonreligion in an ostensibly religious cultural context. Research was carried out over 12 months (January–December) in 2018 in the four largest cities in northern, central, and southern Poland.<sup>5</sup> The project was advertised through both formal and informal networks. First, the existing contacts in the four cities placed adverts on social media and on bulletin boards in local cafes, pubs, and university buildings. Second, snowball sampling with multiple starting points was employed to minimise the problem of homophily (Patton, 1990). The sole criterion for inclusion in the sample was that potential participants identified as 'nonreligious'.

As I was chiefly interested in ordinary 'everyday' nonreligion, political activists and public figures were excluded from the sample. None of my participants in the final sample considered themselves activists, which makes them an example of a 'concealed population' (Morgan, 2008) due to their relative lack of engagement in political movements related to nonreligion. Setting the limits of the concept is a frequent challenge for those researching nonreligion; defining the nones is riddled with complications (Lee, 2015; Smith and Cragun, 2019). The fuzziness of the term was reflected in the characteristics of the sample. All of the participants in this study unreservedly subscribed to the general label 'nonreligious' but their interpretations of the term varied greatly. Of the 60, 53 had been raised 'traditionally Catholic', and 7 claimed their family households were nonreligious despite all the members having been baptised and some having completed the key rites of passage (First Communion, confirmation, and church weddings). Thus, all the interviewees possessed an ethno-Catholic habitus which shaped their interpretation of nonreligion. This implicit knowledge produces a unique understanding of the conceptual boundaries of nonreligion.

While for some participants nonreligion meant clear-cut atheism (defined as a lack of belief in the existence of any deities), for others it included 'passive Catholicism' which they also deemed typical of a large percentage of the Polish population. They defined 'passive Catholics' as those raised in Catholic families who continue to participate in Christmas and Easter, but who do not believe in God.<sup>6</sup> Overall, of the 60, 10 identified as atheists (5 of those considered themselves 'militant'), 13 as 'spiritual but not religious', and the remainder used a variety of terms such as 'nonreligious', 'nonbeliever', 'humanist', and 'passive Catholic' interchangeably throughout the interview. Those 37 participants struggled to find one label to describe their position vis-à-vis religion.

The youngest interviewee was 24 and the oldest 75. The sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender with 28 female and 32 male participants. However, it was strongly biased in favour of the highly educated: 58 out of 60 participants had a university degree, some had several, and 5 held doctorates in medicine, law, psychology, history,

and linguistics, respectively. They worked in a wide array of professions, including musicians, surgeons, massage therapists, counsellors, private business owners, translators, journalists, firefighters, shop assistants, and event organisers. Of the 60 interviewees, only 3 had carried out the act of formal defection from the Catholic Church, while 15 were considering commencing the process at the time of the research.

Interviews took place in a variety of locations ranging from the participants' homes, through workplaces, to public spaces. Fifty were digitally recorded. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average. They were conducted in Polish, transcribed, and translated into English prior to analysis. The interview schedule comprised three broad themes: everyday interactions in public and private spaces; the relationship between national identity and religious affiliation; and moral values. This article draws on one of the key findings identified during the discussion of both everyday interactions, and religion and national identity. The theme could be loosely classed as the nones' reflections on the concept of the Polak-Katolik. Crucially, the vast majority raised the topic spontaneously as we discussed religion in Poland.

## **Nones and the Polak-Katolik**

The term 'Polak-Katolik' appeared spontaneously throughout the interviews. My interlocutors focused mostly on questioning the existence of the model, so often cited as the defining feature of Polish society and a shorthand for any discussion of Polishness. Many used the phrase 'some Catholic he is' ('taki tam z niego katolik') when describing their compatriots' approach to religiosity. The phrase sounds particularly dismissive in Polish as it implies that the person is not what they claim to be. Paradoxically, this disdain was not motivated by strong objection to religion per se, but by a profound dislike of hypocrisy and passivity which the nones observed among the general population. Despite being nonreligious themselves, they expected religious integrity from Catholic Poles who claimed the label in surveys, and in everyday conversation. The findings can be divided into three separate but inter-related themes: myth, hypocrisy, and the fear of being different.

### *Myth*

The interviewees described Polak-Katolik as a cultural myth detached from lived reality. The participants' accounts were emotionally charged, as was the vocabulary they used. Jacek (60) dismissed the model as irrelevant to the majority of Poles:

The Polak-Katolik model is absurd. It's a myth which describes maybe 25% of Poles who are hardcore Law and Justice voters. The rest are normal and don't care.

Jacek untethered religiosity from national identity as he interpreted the Polak-Katolik as a symbol of political preference rather than an all-around identity. He demarcated the boundary between the normal and the abnormal, suggesting that explicit identification with the Polak-Katolik was unusual. Andrzej (42) further illustrated the nature of the myth:

In the public sphere, the Polak-Katolik is emphasised and useful for both the Church propaganda and the political propaganda. It's a bit like forcing people into this pre-formed shape. In reality, the Polak-Katolik could describe maybe half the nation who adhere to only some tenets of the faith.

While Andrzej was more generous in his assessment of the percentage and the characteristics of Polish Catholics, he noted the entanglement of the Church and political interests in the promotion and imposition of the model on the nation. Andrzej suggested that even those who fit the model hardly meet the basic criteria because their Catholicism is selective. Pawel's (34) reading differed. He believed that the Polak-Katolik was real because it had 'real consequences'. The model 'used to be a strong core around which to wrap Polishness when there was nothing else. It was useful for the Church but also for the people who wanted to preserve their national identity'. Bartek (29) was more concise yet: '[Polak-Katolik] is useful for people who perceive the nation as a religious thing. The rest of us have to put up with this'. Like Pawel, he appreciated the functionality of the ideal for those with a more religio-national identification but, like Jacek, he distinguished between them and 'the rest' forced to tolerate it. Similarly, Grazyna (57) claimed that the myth of Polak-Katolik had been 'usurped by the Catholic Church and the politicians. It is the dominant narrative of national identity and patriotic discourse in Poland'. Despite her disapproval of conspiracy theories, she thought the incorporation of Catholic symbols into the patriotic narrative was a deliberate strategy by those in power. The myth is invoked whenever something needs to be reaffirmed. Radek (44) echoed Grazyna's view:

Religion is used instrumentally because of this sentimental attitude which prevails in Polish society. 'I am Polish, therefore I am Catholic'. This narrative implies that if you don't believe, you're not a Pole. I realise it's a simplification but it does exist in the public discourse.

Grazyna, Radek, and others spoke at length about Law and Justice voters and the Church's active involvement in politics. Two interviewees gave a more nuanced view of the Polak-Katolik as internally plural and largely rooted in folk beliefs. Kuba (42) objected to the notion of 'a zero-one religious identity'. Rather, 'some people are Catholics but they disagree with the Church's involvement in politics, others support everything the Church says. There are many shades of Catholicism'. According to Szymon (25) 'there's no such thing as monolithic Catholicism in Poland. The most popular type is the cultural, folk version where people think Virgin Mary is part of the Holy Trinity'. It is clear from the extracts above that, regardless of whether the Polak-Katolik accurately reflects the religious lives of Poles, the nones thought the concept served as a vessel for nationalistic propaganda by the government and the Church alike. This theme highlights the symbolic use of the model but how is the symbol enacted in practice by those it encompasses? My interviewees believed the inconsistency between theory and practice was the chief problem with the average Polak-Katolik.

### *Hypocrisy*

Hypocrisy is the act of pretending to be someone one is not. It is common for apostates to charge their former religious communities with hypocrisy – a phenomenon termed

'the classic heretic's excuse' (Meadow and Kahoe, 1984: 350). But it is equally common for the religious to accuse their co-religionists of not being truly religious as a means of elevating their own piety (Moberg, 1987: 4). The Polish nones occupy a space between the heretic and the holier-than-thou: they share features of both but do not belong in either camp. They are not religious themselves, but they object to the hypocrisy of ordinary Polish Catholics. Despite the relative unimportance of Catholicism in their private lives, they comment on the religious integrity of their fellow Poles. For instance, for Karolina (38) the pairing of 'Polak' and 'Katolik' was 'offensive to both the Catholics and the nonreligious in Poland because it's a caricature'. She explained the dissonance between the theoretical model and everyday practices of a typical Polish Catholic as follows:

[The Polak-Katolik] likes Christmas because it's a family tradition, not because it's a church celebration. In small towns the Polak-Katolik goes to church to keep up appearances so the neighbours do not gossip. In big cities, nobody cares.

Karolina identified several elements which add up to a fuller understanding of the dynamic between Polishness and Catholicism. Polish Catholics engage in rituals for social, not religious, reasons but the key driver is group pressure and the risk of ostracism. This risk is virtually non-existent in large urban centres where anonymity renders the pressure largely irrelevant. The Polak-Katolik fades away with the lessening of social monitoring. However, there is another way of enacting the myth. The average Polish Catholic is a nominal entity because they neither engage in a 'holy masquerade' (Moberg, 1987) of performing pious religiosity, nor do they oppose it. Dominika (52) described her parents as nominal Polish Catholics who 'will never say they're nonbelievers but they don't go to church, and they don't like how the Church interferes in politics'. Indeed, the Church's political involvement is highly unpopular. In 2015, 84% disapproved of priests telling Catholics who to vote for and 50% felt uneasy about the Church taking a stance on subjects discussed in parliamentary debates (Boguszewski, 2015: 3).

Thus far, two practical definitions of the Polak-Katolik emerge from the interviews: one of Polish people who vote for the right-wing, Church-backed political party and hinge their national identity on Catholicism, and the other one of the average Polish individuals, like Dominika's parents, who could be described as nones, except they would never adopt the label themselves. Agata (30) outlined further complications which others also hinted at: 'the trouble with it is that people do not have good role models'. She associated the demise of 'genuine Catholicism' with the deaths of moral authorities such as Pope John Paul II (1920–2005), and priest and philosopher Jozef Tischner (1931–2000). Similarly, Wojtek (29) emphasised the superficial nature of Polish Catholicism and the selective attitude of Polish people to the practice of their own religion: 'the Polak-Katolik doesn't really exist. Polish Catholics seem confused. Someone will go to church all the time but also live with a boyfriend without marriage, or eat meat on Fridays'. The inconsistency Wojtek highlighted may be vexing to some, but Polish Catholics rarely question the authenticity of another person's beliefs. The theme of passivity and indifference towards faith recurred throughout the interview material. Aga (42) said,

Polish people don't particularly care if you believe or not. But in my family home we never hoovered on a Sunday, even though my dad is a staunch atheist! Because

'what would the neighbours say'? It's a very Polish trait: keeping up appearances. That's why the Polak-Katolik persists.

Both Aga's and Wojtek's views are consistent with the survey evidence on Polish people's attitudes to the sacred and profane presented earlier on. Evidently, the nones in this study found problematic what the general public claim they do not.

### *Fear of being different*

In religiously homogeneous societies, it is difficult to distinguish between faith and social conformity. This is the case in Poland where Catholicism saturates culture to such an extent that the boundary between the secular and the sacred is blurred. Religion is carried on the wave of conformity and Polish culture is "impregnated" with religion' (Strassberg, 1988: 353). The nones often cited 'the universal fear of being different' (Grzegorz, 47) as the reason for the persistence of the Polak-Katolik. This is where Poland resembles the findings in some US studies where the fear of stigma is a common concern among the nonreligious generally, and atheists in particular (Cragun et al., 2012; Edgell et al., 2006; Gervais, 2013). For nonreligious Poles, the Polak-Katolik is the product of conformity to the cultural, but not necessarily religiously based, norm. Many respondents offered creative metaphors to illustrate the lack of substance in the model. Maja (41) compared the Polak-Katolik to 'a hollow eggshell, you know like the ones you paint at Easter. It looks like an egg but it's not'. She added that this emptiness is reflected in the 'automatic and unreflexive' engagement in religious rituals. Misiak (44) defined the Polak-Katolik as someone 'who does everything religious as a habit. Wedding is automatically in church. A child is born, we have a christening'. Most participants provided a variation on this theme. Przemek (39) explained, 'The Polak-Katolik goes to church because it's how things should be. My atheist friends have been pressured into doing things because what will everyone say if you don't?' In his view, many people conform to avoid unnecessary trouble, even if they identify as atheists. Yet again, the Polak-Katolik model is presented in secular and cultural terms where the *sensu stricto* religious component is irrelevant. When we talked about Polish religiosity, Darek (47) laughed,

What's there to talk about? A high percentage of Polish Catholics are Catholics the way I was a Catholic for 25 years: because it was the done thing, because you wanted to fit in, because everyone expected you to do the religious things. I did it to stop my mother from nagging me.

What the nones understood as hypocrisy could be subsumed under the general umbrella of cultural religion (Demerath, 2000), continuously reinforced by the public presence of Catholicism, but also by the immediate social circles. Such socio-cultural Catholicism means that tradition legitimises beliefs and values, not the Church's teachings per se.

While the significance of family pressure featured strongly in all the interviews, Magda (53) provided a particularly vivid example. Her friend, a GP in a small town, baptised her baby: ‘only because granny insisted. Granny insisted because she worried about what people would say. She never goes to church but it’s a small community, so people would be asking questions’. Another interviewee, Paulina (35), neatly captured the normative essence of Polak-Katolik thus: ‘it’s a deeply rooted obsession with being like everyone else, not deviating from the norm. It’s conformism, it’s just convenient’. The pressure to participate in rituals emerges as the primary building block of the Polak-Katolik but the participation is mostly passive and unreflexive. Paradoxically, as Radek (48) put it, ‘the Polak-Katolik finds it easier to participate than to reflect. As a nation, we are fake Catholics’. This ‘fake’ Catholicism manifests itself most vividly when participation in the key rites of passage comes under public scrutiny. Martyna’s (30) husband’s family were vociferous critics of the Church who never attended mass or prayed but:

When we did not baptise the baby, they gave me a sermon about the importance of Catholic baptism! Suddenly they had a problem: ‘what if something happens to the baby?’ I guess they meant death. Baptism is like insurance for them. It’s keeping up appearances.

When Dagmara (34) talked about her understanding of Polak-Katolik, she offered a story which she introduced as ‘a meme version of Polak-Katolik which sums up Polish religiosity’. Shortly after she had had a baby, a taxi driver asked her about baptism. Dagmara truthfully replied that she did not plan on baptising her baby. To her surprise, the taxi driver praised her for not ‘wasting money on a party for other people’ but he also issued a warning: ‘these days those priests are so malicious and greedy that if you don’t baptise the baby, they won’t let her have her First Communion’! The anecdote paints a picture of the Polish Catholic other interviewees alluded to: someone suspicious of the Church and its representatives, yet also mindful of the social forces larger than one’s personal convictions. It also illustrates the fragility of the symbiotic relationship between the ‘nones’ and the cultural Catholicism. As Pasięka demonstrates in her study of minorities in rural Poland, non-Catholic minorities are accepted as long as their existence ‘does not infringe on the idea of the Polish – Catholic bond as natural and special’ (2015: 58). The example above fleshes out the paradoxes of the model of Polak-Katolik, and the delicate balancing act performed by the nonreligious in daily interactions.

The Catholic ritual, with its norms and customs structuring both the life stages and the calendar year, has become so firmly inculcated into everyday life that it is practically impossible to separate the sacred from the secular in the Polish context. The leitmotif of unreflexive and passive participation in tradition frequently recurred in the interviews. Anna (39) felt that ‘a lot of Polish people more or less participate in the Catholic circus because they don’t want to be talked about as different’. This habitual religiosity comfortably coexists with anti-clericalism. Stefan (29) revealed: ‘I know anti-clerical people who go to church every Sunday. I don’t understand it’. In his view, Polish Catholics are ‘seasonal conformists’ who perform religiosity for social reasons (Laniel, 2016: 376). The normative power of the Polak-Katolik is most evident when the model becomes mobilised when the status quo is threatened by difference. One such instance is

a departure from tradition, such as church weddings and baptism described above. Another is difference understood more generally. As Krystyna (28) explained,

Catholics in Poland are fine until someone is different, and then it starts. You know, the hatred and bile. So, whoever is different is the enemy: a homosexual, a Jew, and a non-Catholic.

Krystyna collapsed several characteristics into what could also be understood as the Other.<sup>7</sup> Catholicism is not the defining normative ingredient here but it is tied up with ethnicity and sexuality. The ideal Polak-Katolik is a conforming heterosexual Christian. Karol (52) summed up the sentiment well: 'Polish people do not like eccentricity. They don't trust those who step outside the norm'. And yet the norm seems capacious and accommodates a range of behaviours.

## Discussion and conclusion

Nonreligious people in this study based their critique of Polish Catholics on 'the Catholic puzzle' (Bane, 2005) – the perceived discrepancy between the teachings of the Catholic church and the practices of Catholics. They repeatedly returned to the term 'hypocrisy' to indicate the inconsistency between professed religiosity and its actual expressions in day-to-day life. Their evaluation of the Polak-Katolik focused on the shortcomings of the putatively religious Poles. The participants expressed disappointment in the failure of Polish Catholicism to exercise the truly Christian mission in society. Their accounts of the typical Polak-Katolik were infused with frustration at the disjuncture between their compatriots' beliefs and behaviour. The detailed interpretations go some way towards deconstructing the multi-dimensional nature of religiosity in Poland, but they also highlight the complexity of the ethno-religious myth. The nones emphasised what historians of Poland have repeatedly noted: that the myth of Polak-Katolik is propped up by revisionist constructions of the past (Demerath, 2000: 138; Porter-Szucs, 2011; Zubrzycki, 2006). The nonreligious stressed the fragility and unattainability of the ideal of the Polish Catholic. This does not mean that Catholicism in Poland is meaningless or false. Rather, Polish Catholicism is 'not as strong as its supporters think, nor is it as weak as its critics describe' (Marianski, 2017: 228). Perhaps it is this ambiguity which my respondents identified and disapproved of.

Most importantly, the findings in this study testify to the ubiquity of the expectation of religious congruence. The Polish nones presented the inconsistencies between religious declarations and the practical enactment of these declarations as problematic at best and hypocritical and deceitful at worst. In this sense, their narratives exemplify the tendency whereby the general public, and the critics of religion specifically, hold erroneous assumptions about 'the drive for congruence as the defining feature of religion' (Chaves, 2010: 9). The connection between religiosity and 'what looks like logically related outcomes' (Chaves, 2010: 5) is a fallacy because in reality religious congruence is rare. What the participants read as hypocrisy might be more accurately described as an instance of 'religious incongruence' (Chaves, 2010: 3).

When the nones stressed the passive religiosity of the Polak-Katolik, they demonstrated another important point made by Chaves, which is that religious rituals often 'disguise

rather than reflect everyday realities' (2010: 4). Attending church and participating in rituals help to maintain appearances on the interpersonal level. This is also how the social order is reproduced. But the religious agency the nones expected to see in the truly religious Polish Catholics seems largely absent, except when triggered by specific scenarios. The nones' diagnosis of the Polak-Katolik is sociologically accurate in that they correctly identify the common occurrence of religious incongruence. To develop this point further, we only need to examine the behaviour of young Polish people. While the young Catholics understand their faith less well, attend church and pray less frequently, they still see the Catholic Church as the main point of reference. To the nonreligious, this might look like religious incongruence, but 'the religiosity of young Poles is full of paradoxes' (Mandes and Rogaczewska, 2013: 268). Religious congruence is a rare occurrence, but the *assumption* of religious congruence is widespread, as evidenced by the model of the Polak-Katolik.

This study also sheds light on the persistence of the 'cultural power' of Catholicism in Poland (Demerath, 2000) and the commonalities between the religious and the nonreligious. The Polak-Katolik is not simply 'religiously connected without being religiously active' (Demerath, 2000: 136). Rather they are more engaged and committed to the religion because of the power of social norms which are in turn enforced by the immediate social group and the larger symbolic framework. Religious symbols and rituals remain on standby 'and may still be called upon to mobilize the faithful and the "faithless" alike'" (Demerath, 2000: 137). The cultural power of the Polak-Katolik is exercised over all Poles. Even though the nonreligious notice and resist it explicitly, they have a lot in common with the average Polish Catholic. Both groups are tepid about Catholicism in the sense that they conform to the socially orchestrated demands of the faith without investing much of themselves in these displays of religiosity. Both are also critical of the Church.

This shared attitude might be symptomatic of the ongoing transformations of Polish Catholicism. As some scholars have argued, its strictly religious functions have now been overshadowed by 'the social functions of faith (i.e. the potential for socializing processes contained in (. . .) rituals and beliefs)' (Marody and Mandes, 2017: 250).

The findings in this study echo the existing research on the nones' critique of religion which include the themes of hypocrisy and conformity (see, for example, Fazzino, 2014; Guenther, 2014; Sumerau and Cragun, 2016). In the same vein as the participants in Sumerau and Cragun's (2016) study on nonreligious moral identities, Polish nones cited conformity as the defining feature of religion in their own cultural context. They were not indifferent towards Catholicism; to the contrary, they criticised Catholic Poles for their superficial adherence to faith. However, unlike Sumerau and Cragun's participants, Polish nones did not depreciate religion generally, or Catholicism specifically. Rather, they saw the model of the Polak-Katolik as disingenuous and inconsistent, which in their eyes made it inferior to both other religious identities and nonreligious stances. In doing so, they implicitly distinguished between 'proper' and 'fake' Catholicism in terms of both morality and rituals.

Previous research has addressed the perceptions of the nonreligious by the religious (Cragun et al., 2012; Edgell et al., 2006; Gervais, 2013; Hammer et al., 2012; Harper, 2007) but we need to find out more about the other side of the story. In order to do so, it

is necessary to go beyond the basic ‘heretic’s excuse’ and flesh out the complexities of the relationship between the nones and the religiously homogeneous cultures within which they exist.

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## Notes

1. In this article, I use the term ‘nones’ and the ‘nonreligious’ interchangeably to capture the broad and relational category of ‘religion’s other’ (Smith and Cragun, 2019) which in this study includes self-identified non-practising nonbelievers, atheists, ‘passive Catholics’, humanists, and the ‘spiritual but not religious’.
2. Of note here is Janusz Mucha’s seminal article (1989) on the status of nonbelievers in Poland. While not an empirical study, Mucha’s work usefully outlines the key features of unbelievers as a group, many of which remain relevant over 30 years on. The issues of visibility, social control, city-countryside divide, parenting dilemmas, and rites of passage continue to pose difficulty for nones.
3. The discussion of the ‘Polak-Katolik’ here is by no means exhaustive. For rich and nuanced explorations of the model’s history, see Łuczewski (2012) and Nowicka (1991).
4. Law and Justice (PiS) is a right-wing populist political party which has been in power since 2015. Catholicism and the Catholic Church occupy a central place in the party’s view of Polish society. Catholic teachings, patriotism, and tradition are considered the core ingredients in the creation of the political identity of the nation (PiS, 2014).
5. No cities from Eastern Poland were included in the sample because the calls for participants in that region rendered very few initial responses which eventually turned out to be dead ends.
6. This theme is addressed in more detail in Trzebiatowska (Forthcoming).
7. For a detailed exploration of constructing enemies against the backdrop of the Polak-Katolik, see Krzeminski (2017) and Zielinska (2018).

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