In Search of Authenticity: Humanist Weddings in the Polish Context

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Abstract: The post-1989 transformation in Poland entailed not only institutional change, but also an ideational shift. Among other things, this ideational shift gave rise to a growing emphasis on individual autonomy, expressive values, and secularization, which has had an impact on the means of symbolic communication (e.g., rituals) and prepared the ground for the emergence of humanist marriage ceremonies in Poland. The secularization process has gradually undermined the taken-for-granted character of some religious practices, such as rites of passage. Additionally, with the increased focus on authenticity rather than on accuracy in the usage of some pre-stipulated scripts, social actors often tend to replace “ossified” meanings that are communicated through rituals with new meanings, which are perceived as more relevant. This paper sheds light on the issue of authenticity, which is an important category in studies of symbolic, ritual-like actions. Perceptions of authenticity were recurring themes during interviews conducted with couples who decided on a humanist wedding ceremony in Poland. Interviewees often asserted that they rejected the dominant Catholic rite because they perceived it as inauthentic.

Keywords: non-religion; humanism; wedding ceremonies; Poland; Catholicism

1. Introduction

Although the proportion of Polish people who declare themselves to be nonbelievers is low in comparison to other European countries, from 2005 to 2018 the Polish rate doubled from 4% to 8% (Boguszewski 2015; 2018). Despite this increase, social surveys continue to show that Poland is one of the most religious countries in Europe. However, a focus on the details of such surveys suggests that “under the surface of lofty declarations” (Borowik 2017, p. 193) that are associated with an identification with Catholicism, Poles are increasingly more critical of the institutionalized church and its authorities. Sociologists argue that the attachment of Poles to Catholicism is caused by their strong “Polak–Katolik” identification with Catholicism as a cultural religion (Marody and Mandes 2017). This lack of identification with other cultural and religious norms entails a deficit in the ritual alternatives that are available in the Catholic rites of passage. This limitation is an important tool through which the institutional church maintains its power in Poland. Because of this deficit, secularists in Poland have argued that alternative rituals need to be forged in the search for authenticity and to reduce the number of Poles who are Catholic in name only, i.e., “fictional Catholics” (Agnosiewicz 2007).

The paper is based on empirical research carried out on one type of alternative ceremony during the years from 2016 to 2021: the humanist wedding ceremony. During the research, I conceptualized humanist weddings as social performances, using Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of performance (2006) as my main analytical framework. At the heart of this theoretical approach to the study of symbolic, ritual-like actions are such categories as meaning and authenticity (see Alexander 2006).

The overarching aims of the research were to analyze meanings that are present in humanist wedding ceremonies and to shed light on the issue of authenticity. Authenticity was a recurring theme during interviews with Polish couples who decided on a humanist
wedding ceremony. The interviewees often claimed that they rejected the dominant Catholic rite because they perceived it as inauthentic.

In this study, I considered authenticity from two different angles. First, I sought to determine why the couples I interviewed perceived Catholic weddings as “inauthentic” and to ascertain their explanations for the consistent attachment of Poles to Catholic rites of passage (particularly during the process of secularization that is developing in Poland). Second, I aimed to highlight factors that, according to my interviewees, contributed to their perceived authenticity of symbolic actions. In this way, I aimed to shed light on authenticity as a contingent and contextual category and on the relationship of authenticity with religious and non-religious practices.

2. Poland’s Marital Landscape

While Poles increasingly reject the Catholic Church’s continuing interference in politics, religious affiliation and commitment to Catholicism remain high. The vast majority of Poles (91%) declare themselves to be Catholic (Bożewicz 2020), which makes Poland one of the most religiously homogenous countries in Europe, a “bastion of Catholicism” (Pew Research Center 2018). Nevertheless, the numerical strength of Catholicism in Poland may be somewhat deceptive (see Ramet 2017). Even some church representatives notice the fact that, “for a large percentage of the Poles, faith is only a stereotypical mindset, a tradition, an extremely superficial declaration” (Father Mieczysław Nowak, cited in Porter 2001).

Although Polish society has become increasingly secularized, pluralized, and individualized, Poles have remained attached to Catholic rites of passage. The emergence of alternatives to specific religious practices indicates important socio-cultural changes that are emerging in Poland.

Religious weddings in Poland have slowly declined from around 72% of the total number of weddings in 2000 to around 62% in 2017 (Szukalski 2018). This decline has recently accelerated. According to data from Statistics Poland (GUS), a state agency, https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/bdl/start (accessed on 31 March 2022), religious weddings dropped from 61.9% of the total in 2018 to 53% in 2021. Significantly, the vast majority (99%) of participants in religious marriages in 2018 were Catholics (Szukalski 2018).

While the popularity of religious wedding ceremonies is decreasing, a civil ceremony is the only legally binding alternative for couples who do not want to be married by any religious authority. Unlike in countries such as Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and Scotland (Kasselstrand 2018), humanist marriages do not have legal recognition in Poland; therefore, if Polish couples wish to have a legally valid wedding, an additional civil ceremony is required. Civil marriages are usually performed in a registry office. Since 2015, it has been possible to have a civil marriage ceremony outside the registry office. This gives some potential for personalization and individualization, however, not unlimited, as the chosen setting must meet particular requirements. It is expected that the place is safe and appropriate so that it retains the solemn character of a marriage ceremony. If the official considers the place unsuitable, he/she may refuse to perform the wedding. The entire civil ceremony generally lasts around 15 minutes. The oath is formalized and stipulated. After the utterance of the official formula, the young couple can add a few words themselves, but only with prior approval from the official. Given the fact that the latter represents the state, it is expected that these additional words will be respectful and tactful, therefore, the potential for personalization is limited. The abovementioned constraints can, in part, explain the appearance of humanist marriage ceremonies in Poland (for couples’ common motivations to have a humanist wedding ceremony, see Rejowska 2021). As advocates of humanist weddings often argue, even though the civil ceremony is an option for partners who do not want a religious wedding, it is doubtful that couples regard it as a genuine ‘alternative’ that could fill the space of the religious ritual. In line with this narrative, the symbolic poverty and irrelevance of a civil marriage ceremony seems often to ‘force’ non-believers to decide on the religious rite.
Analysis of humanist marriage ceremonies in Poland has also highlighted the aspect of social power, because of the distinct domination of the Catholic Church, especially in the public and symbolic sphere (Tyrała 2009). The propagators of humanist rites perceive them as an alternative, especially for non-believers who, nevertheless, still attend church only for the sake of certain rites of passage. Mariusz Agnosiewicz (2007), former president of the Polish Rationalist Association, under whose initiative humanist rites of passage were introduced in Poland, expressed the hope that this endeavour will reduce the number of ‘fictional Catholics’ in Poland. As he observed, the monopoly which the Catholic Church holds over the ritual sphere suppresses the process of secularization: ‘the dependence of the whole Polish society upon Catholic rites of passage is one of the most crucial barriers to the development of the laic movement’ (Agnosiewicz 2007). This, somewhat, confirms the diagnosis that Poles still have trouble forging identities and symbolic repertoires other than the “Polak–Katolik” ones (see Marody and Mandes 2017). In this sense, Catholic rites of passage have a hegemonic character.

As already mentioned, although civil marriage ceremonies can serve as secular alternatives for non-believers, the propagators of humanist weddings regard their civil counterparts as ‘depersonalized’ (Tyrała 2009; Aston 2019), whereas researchers (see Majdecka 2018) interpret humanist ceremonies as practices and ways of ‘distinction’. Such a critical attitude toward civil ceremonies characterizes not only the Polish context—similar narratives appeared in a study of humanist marriages conducted in Scotland (Kasselstrand 2018). Humanist weddings in Poland are especially popular among the middle class (Majdecka 2018), and ‘distinctiveness’ instead of ‘lavish consumption’ has, in general, become a more important feature of contemporary middle-class weddings. Couples in their early 20s and those belonging to the working class are generally more inclined to have a standard—‘normal’, as they sometimes call it—traditional (which, in the Polish context, usually means Catholic) wedding (Carter and Duncan 2017, p. 5). Another important factor in the increase in the popularity of humanist weddings is the fact that they are embedded in the philosophy of individualism, an ideology that informs the middle class especially (Archer 1988, p. 219). The middle class fulfills it through a greater ‘preference for uniqueness’ and emphasis on ‘self-actualization and personal choice’ (in contrast to the greater emphasis on ‘self-reliance’ or ‘resisting influence’ among the working class) (Bowman et al. 2009, pp. 880, 882).

3. The Need for Authenticity

In (post-)modern societies, the position of the established, bureaucratic religious organizations has been undermined due to certain ideational shifts, such as the shift towards authenticity and the subjective turn (Taylor 1991). Also, some structural changes, such as urbanization, rising social mobility, and ‘the creation of the global middle class’ (Woodhead 2016, pp. 44, 46), have contributed to the weakening authority of institutionalized historic churches.

The ideational shift and turn towards post-materialist values has also meant the replacement of the external authority with authority rooted in the individual (Taylor 1991; Douglas 1996). The ‘subjective turn’ (Taylor 1991, p. 26) was accompanied by a steady spread of ‘the culture of authenticity’. The latter promotes the narrative that each individual has ‘his/her own way of realizing humanity and that it is important to find and live out one’s own [life]’ (Taylor 2007, p. 475). This means living a life in opposition to models that are externally imposed by, for example, religious or political authorities or the community. The ‘subjective turn’ manifests itself also in ‘a revolt against formalism’ (Douglas 1996, p. 1) and a shift toward ‘inner experience’ (Douglas 1996, p. 20). Searching for authenticity, social actors increasingly often reject mechanical ritualism, understood as ‘a concern that efficacious symbols be correctly manipulated and that the right words be pronounced in the right order’ (Douglas 1996, p. 9). Since the Romantic period, an increasing emphasis has been put on the intensity and genuineness of feelings; therefore, the compliance with certain theological formulations, orthodoxy, or stipulated rituals has lost, at least, a part of
its importance (Taylor 2007). It does not mean, however, that social actors reject tradition in its entirety. ‘Regulative traditions’ (Gross 2005) as external constraints, exercising their influence by a threat of exclusion and ostracism, are still present but have less of an impact. However, social actors are still attached to ‘meaning-constitutive traditions’ that work internally by orienting people in a particular way (Gross 2005). In the West, after the Second World War, the narrative of ‘authenticity’ was no longer limited to artists or intellectuals, and, as such, very often simplified ‘expressivism’ became the attitude of society in general (Taylor 2007, pp. 473, 475). Yet it is obvious that in post-communist countries it has been spreading with a time lag.

Humanist rites grow out of the processes of modernization and differentiation, which have had an impact on the forms of symbolic communication (Alexander 2006, p. 46). ‘The logic of design’ (Handelman 1998) has changed, and, nowadays, actors can more freely pick elements they want to include. The authorities that were previously the sources of norms, are now increasingly being contested in the name of individual freedom and independence. Also, due to the process of institutional and cultural differentiation, participation in rituals has become optional and more contingent (so that dominant rituals can be more easily rejected). Rising diversity has meant that people to a lesser extent share ‘a few, historic, “charged” symbols that have about the same wealth of meaning for everybody’ (Langer 1951, p. 234). In modern ritual-like actions, among others in humanist rites of passage, the choice of particular cultural texts has become less arbitrary and, therefore, more often contested or put in doubt, while in more classic rituals, actors used to present ‘eternal’ myths, deeply embedded in collective memory and culture (Alexander 2006, p. 70). This is why actors nowadays are more focused on ‘the challenge of reception’ and the authenticity of their actions, not on the exact repetition of the right order of ritual, because the ‘proper’ order has been relativized. Importantly, the emphasis put on proper ‘manipulation of words’ is especially strong in Christian rituals (Tomlinson and Engelke 2006, p. 6), which are still the main reference point for humanist rites. Humanist weddings are fueled by the process of secularization, and they stem from the rising need for authenticity and, paradoxically, to some extent they are anti-ritualistic in their character as they reject the idea that there is some proper order of words and symbolic actions that needs to be obeyed to make the performative act successful.

4. Research Methodology

The article is based on research conducted since 2016. The analyzed data comes mainly from narrative interviews (16) with the main actors in marriage ceremonies, the couples. All my interviewees had had a humanist marriage ceremony held in Poland and were selected by snowball sampling. At each wedding, at least one of the spouses was a Pole. Among the other nationalities were American, Australian, British, and Moldovan. One couple was homosexual. I have also drawn from data gathered during semi-structured interviews with humanist celebrants (12). Additionally, I conducted qualitative content analysis of scripts from humanist ceremonies (46) and observations of humanist marriage ceremonies (8). However, in this paper I mainly refer to the data gathered during interviews.

All my interviewees were members of various sections of the middle class. This social class is more inclined to seek and combine various religious elements, as such a search requires some cultural capital, but also because the need for authenticity that perpetuates such explorations is more likely to appear when other needs are already satisfied. Humanist marriage ceremonies are, thus, a class phenomenon. However, belonging to the middle class is a necessary yet not sufficient factor influencing the decision about whether to have this kind of wedding. Moreover, there is no absolute correspondence between discourses and social class (Ollivier 2008, p. 130) nor between cultural and social stratification (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007, p. 3). Therefore, I make all claims on the socio-cultural background and class of the interviewed couples bearing in mind these limitations. Not all my interviewees were born as members of the middle class, but throughout their lives all of them have achieved such status. They were relatively rich in economic and/or cultural capital. Most
of them lived in cities, either in Poland or abroad: Derby, Krakow, Warsaw, the Silesian Metropolis (Tychy and Zabrze), London, Vienna, and Melbourne.

Many of the interviewed couples had some kind of creative occupation. Among them were ‘cultural producers’: graphic designers, architects, musicians, an illustrator, a sculptor, a dancer, and a journalist. There were also executives and managers, programmers and people working in IT, as well as academics, a wedding coordinator, a coordinator of commercial photographic sessions, and a bio-energotherapist.

Observations made by me and celebrants indicate that the age of ‘humanist couples’ is slightly higher than the average age at marriage in Poland (which in 2016 was 28.6 for men, and 26.6 for women (Szukalski 2017, p. 3)). My research showed that people who decided on a humanist marriage ceremony were mainly 30–45 years old. Belonging to the middle class was also a factor contributing to a higher age at marriage.

There are three main research questions I aim to answer in this paper. The first is: What are the reasons for the renunciation of the dominating Catholic rite, so deeply rooted in the Polish consciousness? Here, I do not focus on the whole variety of motivations (see Rejowska 2021 for further details on motivations), but only on these directly relating to Catholicism as a dominant religion in Poland. Second, I try to shed some light on the couples’ own ‘diagnoses’ of the attachment of Poles to the Catholic rituality, perceived by them as inauthentic and conformist. The third question relates to what research participants considered as ‘authentic’, since the Catholic ritual was perceived by them as ‘inauthentic’.

5. Against Hypocrisy and Conformism

The majority of interviewees had previously identified as Catholic, were brought up in ‘the Catholic way’, and had a ‘Catholic background’. This group underwent certain Catholic rites of passage in childhood; therefore, a Catholic wedding would have been a ‘natural’ continuation. For many of the interviewed couples, departure from the religious rite partially signified the abandonment of their Catholic backgrounds and an attempt at being consistent with their current beliefs and values. Significantly, my interviewees seldom criticized religion per se. However, they did criticize people, especially non-believers, who still chose the Catholic rite as a form of celebration and of marking a transition in order to please their religious families’ expectations, even though they themselves did not agree with the assumptions behind those ceremonies. As some of my interviewees argued, by doing so these people supported the institutional hegemony of the Catholic Church in Poland. They called such an attitude ‘a lack of authenticity’, ‘hypocrisy’, and ‘conformism’. As Olaf, one interviewee, summarized it: ‘a church wedding, for non-believers it involves a lot of lying, ( . . . ), for non-believers, it’s basically the first lie’. Izabela made a similar comparison, claiming such a marriage was ‘based on a lie from the first day’.

Research participants considered rites of passage to be one of the ‘tools’ the Catholic Church uses to maintain its influence. Some of them realized that creating secular rituality is a way of inducing some shifts in Polish society and forging new identities. They were aware of their own roles as the ‘early acceptors and adopters’ (van de Kaa 1997) of that change. Performative actions, such as rituals, can therefore maintain, but also challenge, the status quo:

We were quite aware of the impact that it could have on people and how just kind of, I was thinking how powerful it was as well. You know, the people could see this, and maybe on some level they would think: “Oh, yeah, it is possible to get married without going to a church”. (Harry)

Interviewed couples often expressed respect for traditions and religious beliefs, but when it came to institutionalized religion, and especially to the institution of the Catholic Church in Poland, they were critical. For many, the Catholic Church was just a ‘dead’ institution with mechanical rituals and ‘inauthentic’ followers who do not know much about the ideational part of their religion and do not live their lives in line with its main assumptions. Perhaps the most expressive manifestation of such an attitude was the following:
For me the Church is a total nightmare... I practically can't stand anything in the church; to be honest, I'm not able to enter a church. And it's not that somehow they harmed me there, just everything that I hear, that is always said there, is just so non-humanistic to me. I couldn't care less about that kind of thinking, it doesn't interest me at all... It's simply dead for me. The Church is dead for me, completely, in the sense that it holds nothing. These people don't even know what they believe in, they don't understand these words very much. (Mikołaj)

The non-religious in Poland often perceive the model of Polish-Catholic religiosity as hypocritical and conformist (see Trzebiatowska 2021). For them, the Catholic rite is inauthentic because it does not reflect the 'real world' from outside the ceremony:

When I'm in church at a wedding, the priest starts teaching, you know, he talks about some things, and I always think to myself, “Man... what do you know about this?”... But every time that I'm in church, I suddenly remember all the paedophilia scandals... Just when I go for some wedding or something, for some christening. I just think, you know, I feel so abstract. This is hypocrisy for me. (Daniel)

However, not all participants claimed that having a Catholic wedding as a non-believer is a sign of hypocrisy. Bernard declared that he understood such decisions stem from “pragmatism”. However, his partner, Barbara, disagreed, claiming that this is just hypocrisy. She said that if she had decided on a Catholic rite, she would have “given herself up”, and it would have been in contradiction to her own identity. Therefore, two different logics lie behind their attitudes: the logic of authenticity and the logic of pragmatism. Because the details matter, I quote their discussion at length:

Barbara: If someone really believes, and believes in the existence of God, and agrees with all these dogmas... and so on, then fine. (...) However, if someone does it for a nice atmosphere (...), for me that is hypocrisy. Something I hate.

Bernard: But it doesn’t have to be hypocrisy. It’s pragmatism.

Barbara: Pragmatism?... Why? So that your parents won’t moan, (...) so that grandma won’t cry?

Bernard: A lot of people have a church wedding because of their family. And they say that normally it would not be... they would have an ordinary civil [ceremony], but the family want it, [so they decide:] “Well OK, let’s have a church [wedding], it’s nothing big for us, I don’t mind”. For me it is a bit of pragmatism. Because why should you fight a losing battle [In Polish: kopać się z koniem]. And say that, “No, we won’t because we don’t want to” (...). And then listen [to the grumbling]... So hypocrisy, not hypocrisy. There are people like me who can go back and forth. Some people just go for what is convenient for them, and others are in a situation where they have to fight a losing battle.

Barbara: Yes, I understand. But? I simply want to be faithful to my principles. I can’t imagine that I could give myself up.

Bernard twice uses the expression ‘kopać się z koniem’ (literally: to kick with a horse), which is analogous to the English saying, ‘fighting a losing battle’. The idiom means that someone takes the fight to a much stronger opponent, therefore, it is doomed to fail. In this sense, Catholic culture is so deeply rooted in the Polish landscape that challenging it is pointless.

During my research I noticed a certain gender difference. Women more often and more strongly than men emphasized that they were non-believers, and that religious marriage was out of the question. Men instead often adapted to the decisions made by their spouses. The opposite situation, in which a woman adapts to her non-believing male partner, did not occur. In contrast to Barbara, for Bernard the type of ceremony was not an issue: ‘I didn’t really care. I just adapted. If Barbara had wanted a church wedding, it would have
been a church wedding. If she had wanted a civil one, it would have been civil.’ Similarly, Norbert adapted to Natalia. As she said:

We knew from the start that we would not have a church wedding; it is not in line with my beliefs and was simply not an option, at least speaking for myself; my husband was always closer to church issues . . . Generally, in my husband’s family I’m seen as a person who led him astray (laughs).

Norbert said that he could have had a wedding in church even though he is a non-believer. He also added that he could baptize his child simply because in Poland this is a kind of ‘habitual behaviour’ following birth. Yet he knew that Natalia would be against it:

Norbert: But my wife is like: “We don’t believe so why should we baptise?”

Natalia: Yes, I’m consistent with my convictions and I don’t like duplicity and hypocrisy, that we don’t go to church every Sunday, but the child should be baptized because “that’s how it’s done”. So, I said that, on the subject of the wedding, I don’t want to make any compromises here, either.

Women more often put emphasis on the (widely understood) humanist character of the ceremony. Oliwia explained that during their ceremony ‘We appealed to rationalism: we believe in science, we believe in our senses, we want to get to know the world, discover it scientifically’. By contrast, her partner, Olaf, trying to refer to the ideational dimension of their ceremony, just said: ‘He [the celebrant] was saying . . . what was he saying? The word affirmation remained in my memory’. Also, spouses explained to their friends what humanist weddings were about in different ways. Barbara said that when people asked, she replied that the humanist marriage ceremony was ‘made by people and for people’, whereas Bernard would respond that it was ‘a half-American marriage ceremony’. Similarly, Daniel also described to his colleagues from work that the humanist marriage ceremony was ‘like in the American movies’, so he put emphasis on the visual, aesthetic aspects rather than ideological issues.

One can explain this gender imbalance by the fact that the women were stronger, and even militant, in their statements because Catholicism as a gender-traditional religion essentializes differences between men and women and promotes submission of the latter (Trzebiatowska 2019). Also, the presented results confirm what social surveys show: young women in Poland are generally more progressive than young men (see Pacewicz 2019). They create a ‘mental cohort’ that generates a change (van de Kaa 1997, p. 11). It is also possible that, because women in Poland are generally more religious than men (Mandes 2021), those who decided on a humanist ceremony may also be more expressive in their statements to differentiate themselves from such an image of womanhood.

Yet another possible explanation is the fact that working out the details of a wedding is typically a feminine activity (Sniezek 2005). This refers to the traditional division of the woman as homemaker and the man as breadwinner. Indeed, there was some evidence of this imbalance between women and men and the amount of time they invested in the planning of the studied marriage ceremonies.

Summing this up, ritualized Catholicism, which plays the role of cultural religion in Poland, represents a ‘deep background’ (Alexander 2006) for humanist marriage ceremonies: they function in relation to this creed, and it is often a reference point for them. Sociologists (Marody and Mandes 2017) observe that Poles struggle to see any alternative to the “Polak–Katolik” identity. Despite increasing criticism towards the institutional Catholic Church, when it comes to change-marking events, the Catholic symbolic repertoire seems to be the only one conceivable. In this sense, Catholic rituals stand guard for the social order, freezing the religious landscape in Poland. Additionally, Catholicism, as a ritualized religion, more focused on ‘external actions’ than on ‘internal motivations’ (Douglas 1996), makes it easier for social actors to accept or even ignore the inconsistencies of their own steps. Moreover, in some social milieus, Catholicism is not merely a meaning-constitutive tradition, but it preserves its regulative character—departure from it entails social ostracism and pressure. In this sense, humanist rites of passage challenge the status quo, and consti-
stitute an attempt to forge new rituality, and, therefore, to forge an alternative to the identity of the “Polak–Katolik”.

6. To Avoid Grandma’s Wrath

During the interviews, research participants not only explained why they had not decided on the Catholic rite; they also created their own interpretations of the lasting popularity of Catholic weddings.

According to my interviewees, a large number of Catholic weddings in Poland are not the result of belief. The Catholic rite is, therefore, taken for granted and culturally accepted, and is an ‘expected’ form of celebration:

Barbara: From what I noticed, and [it] seems to me to be true, and when I speak with people this has been confirmed, church weddings at the moment do not result from human faith in 90% [of cases], I think.

A: So, what do they result from?

Barbara: Because it’s nice, because there are flowers.

Bernard: [Because] that’s the right thing to do.

Barbara: And it is solemn . . . [because] that is how it should be. Because mum will be offended, because grandma will be angry, because “Why [don’t you want to do this]? What will people say?” Because I have a white dress and, and, and everything is . . .

Bernard: This is probably the most common. “Because that is how it should be.” Or “That is the tradition.”

These findings confirm the thesis about the attachment of Poles to Catholic rituals that results from the fact that this denomination is a cultural religion (Demerath 2000) in Poland, as well as that Poles are still trying to forge identities other than the “Polak–Katolik” one. In the words of one interviewee, Maja, Catholicism in Poland is the ‘default religion’. In this sense, humanist weddings may have a subversive character. The more popular they become, the less obvious and automatic are other types of marriage ceremonies.

Many research participants claimed that the attachment of Poles to religious (Catholic) rites is an effect of some structural limitations, such as the lack of a real, legally accepted counterpart (as humanist marriage ceremonies in Poland are not legally recognized). People are not aware that there are options other than the Catholic and civil marriage ceremony. They also know that civil ceremonies are not so aesthetically pleasing, therefore, eventually they decide on a ceremony in a church:

Daniel: It is, unfortunately, like that here [in Poland], that it has to be the Catholic Church, because what else? If not the church, then . . . in a [registry] office. That’s it. And then the discussion is over. Because they don’t want a civil [ceremony], because they think that a church [one] will look nicer.

Dominika: A lot of people also have the assumption of this lovely image on the basis of a beautiful church on the market square in Krakow. ( . . . ). ( . . . ) This natural element of every wedding has arisen, that it will be so beautiful in a church.

As Daniel argued, despite many Poles not being attached to the institutional church or even being critical and aware of its unresolved problems, such as concealed pedophilia within the Catholic Church in Poland, they still prefer to conformistically adjust to the rules of the institution they otherwise criticize.

The ideological layer of ritual is contingent on social power and its economic hierarchies (Alexander 2006, p. 36). Catholic marriage ceremonies are still very popular in Poland because it is the older generation that is generally more attached to the Catholic Church and usually has already accumulated greater financial capital than marrying couples. Because parents often financially support the wedding, they feel privileged to shape it with their
preferences. Couples could reject their parents’ money, withdraw from the white-wedding script, and theoretically organize a more modest ceremony by their own means. However, the white wedding meaning-constitutive tradition is still powerful, also because of the discrete, persuasive efforts of the wedding industry (Ingraham 1999), which tries to secure its own interests by further sustaining the white-wedding tradition. The hegemony of the Catholic Church in Poland, and the wider hegemony of the white-wedding tradition, might therefore support each other and exercise their power ‘by securing the consent of individuals who both constitute and are subject to it, even though they are largely unaware of the process and experience it as common sense’ (Arend 2016, p. 159). Then, social actors do not perceive these scripts as external and coercive, but merely as symbolic means and traditional repertoires of communication (Alexander 2006, p. 56).

According to the research participants, Polish families use two tools to coerce couples to have a Catholic ceremony: money and emotional blackmail. Dominika and Daniel told me about their friend who initially had been shocked and appalled that they were not planning the ceremony in a church. But Dominika’s reasoning convinced him and afterward he himself did not want a religious ceremony either:

**Dominika:** I don’t go [to church], you don’t go either. (. . . ) so why pretend on this day that suddenly we all go? (. . . ) He was so outraged, but (. . . ) after our wedding, when he got engaged to his now current wife, he said that he told his parents that he does not want a church wedding, because he does not go to church, so he shouldn’t have a church wedding. But since they had a slightly different situation and the parents probably paid for it, it . . . it caused a fuss, and they had a church wedding.

**Daniel:** When the parents pay, [and] what is more when there are friends of the parents at the wedding, [they say]: “You have to do this, do that. And you have to have a church wedding, because what will we tell our friends?” They [the bride and groom] tell the parents that there will be no church wedding, and they [the parents] would probably say: “So pay for the wedding yourself”.

Their friend, therefore, had to realize not only that he does not have to perform his wedding within the Catholic tradition, but also that having a Catholic wedding in some cases would be even inappropriate. Yet gaining such consciousness did not eventually lead to withdrawal from the dominant culture. As soon as he got rid of the internalized conviction that the Catholic wedding is the only proper one, he encountered external, regulative pressure on complying with tradition. In this sense, ritual is a tool for exercising social control. Therefore, in contrast to the wedding industry’s frequent assertions that ‘This is your day’, in many cases a wedding is in fact a ‘dream day’ of those who own the financial capital to pay for it. Dominika’s friend could have rejected his parents’ money, offered only if the marriage was performed in a church, and decided on a modest ceremony organized by his own means. Yet then he would encounter another external pressure to have a festive, possibly lavish, wedding celebration. This shows how two apparently separate hegemonic orders (religious and consumerist) are intertwined and support each other to preserve the status quo.

While the connection of white weddings with the hegemonic order of religion was evident for all the research participants, their link with capitalism and consumption was less obvious and more normalized. Daniel and Dominika justified their friend having to decide on a Catholic ceremony by the fact that otherwise his parents would not have financed the wedding. However, none of them noticed that, in fact, a lavish wedding party is not required to have the institutional marriage, and there was a solution for this situation (i.e., a wedding ceremony that they can afford themselves). This option was not taken into account, because wedding consumption is normalized and internalized; it is a necessity, not a possibility (Ingraham 1999), and it adds gravitas and significance to the whole event. Also, investment of money is performative: a more ceremonial form of wedding is an ‘indexical’ indicator of success and wealth (Tambiah 1979, p. 162) but there is also a metaphoric
relation between the investment of money in the ceremony and the anticipated solidity of
the created marriage. Consequently, the alienating power of the industrial and ideological
machinery of wedding production is invisible: the bride and groom do not seem to realise
that they can just withdraw from the conspicuous consumption instead of pretending they
are Catholics just to gain access to their parents’ financial resources and spend them on the
‘one special day’.

7. Looking for Authenticity: Rejection of Formalism

The couples interviewed do not perceive other types of ceremonies, e.g., Catholic or
civil, as ‘authentic’, because the words used during them, repeated so many times, have
lost their meaning. As Maja said: ‘We don’t want empty cliches, uttering words that mean
nothing.’ In many cases, words spoken in a church are meaningless, according to the
research participants, because they do not entail any real action, or the meaning of the
words does not match the meaning of actions taken. In this sense, humanist marriage
ceremonies have an ‘anti-ritualistic’ character and reject mechanical repetition of forms, a
critique that is not new, and deploy a similar narrative as the Protestant Reformation (see
Douglas 1996). However, it does not mean that advocates of humanist ceremonies reject
ritual in its entirety. Analysis of the narratives of the couples shows that there are some
‘good’, slightly ‘romanticized’ rituals that evolve ‘organically’ from the inside, and ‘bad’,
fake, and mechanical rituals imposed from outside.

As the analysis showed, one of the features of humanist marriage ceremonies is its
‘deformalization’. As Diana, a celebrant, explained, at the beginning of the event he invites
guests to ‘relax’. Many weddings begin with the words of the celebrant, which seek to
express more clearly the specific, intimate, and less ‘official’ character of the ceremony: ‘I
say about it, “please unbutton your jackets, please relax, please let the children go free, so
that they can participate in whatever way they want”’ (Edmund, a celebrant). Rejection of
formalism functions in relation to Catholic ceremonies, which are perceived as rigid and
pre-stipulated. High levels of ritualization suppress the realization of feelings (see Langer
1951; Tambiah 1979) that make the ceremony authentic:

The church weddings that we’ve been at, I had the impression that the wedding
itself is totally detached from the guests. ( . . . ). ( . . . ) There is the priest, the
people around the altar, and the rest of the people repeat, mindlessly repeat,
whatever is needed. (Izabela)

Harry, who was baptized in the Church of England, even though his parents have
never been religious, was shocked by Polish ritualized Catholic religiosity:

I wasn’t born like that, you know? I was born more like a free human. So, when I
see people getting down on their knees, people ringing a bell and getting down
on their knees and stuff like that I’m just like: “Wow, what’s going on here?”

He was surprised that people, who are normally cheerful, when entering the church
seem to become full of sadness. It is because the highly ritualized ceremony expects from
them a suspension of feelings and interactions (Handelman 1998). Catholicism is a ritualist
religion and as regards sin it is ‘more concerned with specific external actions than with
internal motivation’ (Douglas 1996, p. 35). In Poland, this focus on the external form might
have been enhanced even more by the influence of Baroque culture and Sarmatism, which
left a mark on Polish Catholicism (Casanova 1994). As Daniel interpreted it, humanist
wedding ceremonies, contrary to Catholic ones, are less focused on ‘appearances’ and more
on the authenticity of motivations:

And here [at humanist weddings] you’re left in peace; no one is pretending; [at a
Catholic wedding] everyone is pretending that they, you know, believe . . . that
we are playing at a church wedding, we are making vows and something, right?
Sometimes at weddings [there are] 100 people in the church, [and] 10 [of them]
go to communion . . . So 90 per cent do not normally go to church. Every one
In the excerpt above the issue of authenticity returns. Firstly, the main actors of the Catholic rite do not really identify with its ideological assumptions. Secondly, weddings in church are inauthentic, because there is a discord between the perceived moral condition of the church as an institution and values referred to during celebrations. The factor that influences authenticity is, therefore, whether the meaning of the symbolic action is relevant to the current social situation (Goody 1977).

Deformalization is also reflected in the linguistic dimension. The ritual language deploys ‘formalized’ rather than ‘everyday’ speech acts, and, therefore, language is more abstract and less intelligible. Speech forms are deeply embedded in social structure and fixed hierarchies (Douglas 1996, p. 28). Catholic rituals, in relation to which humanist ceremonies function in Poland, in particular are concerned by proper ‘manipulation of words’ (Tomlinson and Engelke 2006). By contrast, celebrants at humanist ceremonies try to use ‘everyday language’ (Dawid, a celebrant) and speak ‘more freely and less formally’ (Diana, a celebrant). Two interviewed couples confessed that they had asked a celebrant to avoid such expressions as ‘bride’ and ‘groom’. As Karolina explained: ‘I didn’t want anyone saying that I was the bride, and he was the groom, I wanted to treat it a little differently. (. . . ). I instead wanted him to say something like “lovers”’. Significantly, during her interview Gaja spontaneously used the traditional term ‘wedding couple’ (in Polish: para młoda, meaning literally ‘young couple’) and she started to laugh: ‘So like the wedding couple [para młoda]—it’s a strange term—the couple in love, the two people wanting [to get married]’. Couples are aware of some arbitrariness of words, which is also a departure from magical thinking, in cases where words have some inherent meanings and magical power is ‘an inherent property of certain words’ (Malinowski 1922, p. 427). For instance, Maja said that for her the concept of marriage was ‘empty’: we fill it with content. As if it were not filled with content by itself. It is we who decided what to pour in there.’ This is a kind of non-magical, non-essentialist, and anti-ritualistic approach that rejects the belief that symbols are infused with some inalienable, immutable meanings (Douglas 1996). As Gustaw, a celebrant, said: ‘The most beautiful thing about symbols is that they don’t have any meaning until we give them that meaning.’

Couples also doubted that an official or a priest, as the representatives of the bureaucratic structures, have the power to create a marriage. This indicates the changing locus of authority as an effect of the ‘subjective turn of modern culture’ (Taylor 1991, p. 26)—external authority is increasingly being replaced with authority rooted in the individual. For instance, Gabriel argued that he ‘had neither the need nor the desire to allow any institution, either official or ecclesiastical–religious, into it. (. . . ) I wanted to do it in a way that would be authentic for us, and not somehow imposed externally.’ What is authentic is, therefore, not mediated by any institution governed by rationalized and bureaucratic rules. It unfolds ‘organically’ from within the individual. In the celebrants’ interpretation, the rejection of institutions, including religious ones, results from the fact that people nowadays increasingly rarely identify with what Taylor (2007, p. 484) calls ‘big-scale collective agencies’. They are ‘tired’ with institutionalized, historical religions and the various religious divisions imposed by them, and, therefore, increasingly often they become indifferent to religion. As Gustaw, a celebrant, explained: ‘So it is boredom with religions in general also at the global level.’ This is a ‘crisis of religious authority’ (Woodhead 2016, p. 42). Yet, it does not mean that those people do not search for their own individualized spiritual and religious, or spiritual but non-religious, worldviews: ‘People run away from it [institutional religion], they look for different paths that do not exclude their own spirituality’ (Gustaw, a celebrant). Therefore, the presence of humanist marriage ceremonies in Poland might be a sign of a turn toward post-materialist values: people nowadays (in post-industrial societies) are inclined to reject traditional religious orientations, yet, at the same time, they try to fill their life with meaning and purpose, but without referring to the traditional and institutionalized religious framework (Inglehart and Appel 1989, p. 48).
8. Conclusions

The interviewed couples no longer identified with the Catholic Church, and, therefore, perceived the idea of a Catholic marriage ceremony as hypocritical and inauthentic. However, the fact that they were non-religious does not simply mean that they were atheists and that they filled their ceremony with explicit atheistic elements (see Rejowska 2021). Being non-religious can mean a whole spectrum of attitudes, from atheism and humanism to religious indifference, but it can also embrace some magical, spiritual, or superstitious beliefs (see Herbert and Bullock 2020). Importantly, what was common for all my research participants was the rejection of bureaucratic forms and institutions (not only religious but also civil).

One might interpret humanist rites as a part of ‘a revolt against formalism ( . . . ) and ritualism’ (Douglas 1996, p. 1). In this sense they can be inscribed in ‘the long history of ( . . . ) revivalism’ (Douglas 1996, p. 2) that used to have a mainly religious character but might be non-religious, too. They partly stem from the critique of rituals as mechanical and non-reflexive. Such critical views, according to Mary Douglas (1996), have ‘shades of Luther’ and ‘shades of the Reformation’. During my research I often noticed some narrative similarities; however, it would be difficult to claim any direct influence of Reformation ideas.

The analyzed weddings are anti-ritualistic in the sense that they reject rituals as automatic, pre-stipulated, artificial symbolic actions that deploy ossified, worn-out meanings detached from their original source. My interviewees often expressed the view that participants in Catholic rites (considered as ceremonial and elaborate in form) did so only because of a coercive tradition, performing some external gestures and uttering some formulas but not identifying with the meanings conveyed through them or even not understanding them. They suggested that there is no authentic link between the values declared in the rite and the values cultivated in life outside the ritual. In this sense, the research participants were anti-ritualists as they rejected ‘empty symbols of conformity’ (Douglas 1996, p. 3).

As my research showed, the most important factor influencing whether an action is perceived as authentic or not is a ‘choice’ —a ‘cultural hallmark of modernity’ (Illouz 2012, p. 19). As long as religious behavior was a matter of reflexive choice and not coercion, the interviewed couples did not criticize it. Moreover, sometimes they themselves in their ceremonies referred to some religious or spiritual worldviews. Therefore, while couples rejected the influence of regulative tradition, they still wanted to anchor their ceremonies in relation to meaning-constitutive traditions (Gross 2005). The rise in popularity of humanist rites of passage is clearly the effect of secularization, understood as a decline in the social significance of religion, ‘gradual disaffiliation and growing indifference’ (Bruce 2018, p. 114). But equally important is a decline in the authority of institutions in general: a result of the subjective turn (Taylor 1991), as well as rejection of formalism and ritualism. These attitudes are primarily popular among the middle class, which is also the most frequent clientele for humanist wedding ceremonies.

To sum up, couples who decided on a humanist wedding ceremony do not criticize religion per se, but rather religious bureaucratic institutions and religious conformism. They do not reject tradition in its entirety. Couples simply refuse to accept social control exercised through regulative traditions and the institutions that govern them; yet they still have some fondness for old, traditional elements, or simply need them for more pragmatic reasons. This is because of the still vivid structuring power of the meaning-constitutive traditions. In the same way, while the interviewed couples in some sense represent an anti-ritualist approach, as they perceived pre-stipulated rituals as fake, mechanical, non-reflexive, and emotionless, at the same time their decision to have a humanist wedding grows out of a yearning for symbolic action that would be authentic.

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Note
1 Involving possibly lavish consumption and having celebratory form as well as fairy-tale character (Arend 2016, p. 145; see Ingraham 1999, p. 3).

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