Are Roadside Crosses in Poland a Religious or Cultural Expression?

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Abstract: The paper contributes to the discourse on roadside memorialisation in the countries of Christian heritage in Europe, Australia, and North America. The aim of the paper is to assess the social perception of the motivation of people constructing roadside crosses at the places of fatal car accidents along public roads in Poland. Is it religious, cultural or both religious and cultural? The uniqueness of this survey lies in its representativeness of the population of one country and the religiosity variable incorporated into a public opinion poll. The study proves that there exists a relationship between one’s declaration of faith and the perception of memorial crosses. Believers more often than atheists opt for both a religious and a cultural meaning of roadside crosses. Atheists and agnostics more often than believers associate roadside crosses only with a cultural meaning—the custom of marking places of death with crosses.

Keywords: memorial crosses; Poland; representative poll; roadside memorials; religiosity; roadside crosses

1. Introduction

Roadside memorialisation of people who died in motor vehicle accidents has become a worldwide phenomenon. Fresh flowers, candles, religious symbols, and photos of the deceased have been placed at the sites of such accidents. This commemoration of road accident fatalities has led to the appearance of numerous academic publications on memorials, which have been referred to in various ways—as roadside death memorials (Reid and Reid 2001), sudden death memorials (Stahl 2013) or, more commonly, roadside memorials (Zimmerman 2010; Hartig and Dunn 1998; Clark and Franzmann 2006; Breen 2006; Petersson 2009; Owen 2011; Tay 2009; Cohen 2012). Crosses placed at the sites of fatal road accidents are part of the memorialisation phenomenon. Everett (2002) and others (Clark and Cheshire 2004; Reid 2013; Welsh 2017) have referred to them as roadside crosses or memorial crosses (Clark and Franzmann 2006; Bednar 2013). Crosses are reported by researchers in many countries of Christian heritage. In this paper, the terms “memorial crosses” and “roadside crosses” are used interchangeably.

This article contributes to the discussion about the contemporary phenomenon of roadside memorialisation. On the one hand, “roadside memorials, wherever they occur, are part of the same international phenomenon” due to the shared experience of grief associated with modern road trauma”; on the other hand, they can differ in detail because they express ethnicity, sub-culture, religious heritage, and individuality (Clark and Cheshire 2004, p. 204). The variety of functions performed by roadside memorials has already been presented in relevant literature. Commemoration and communication seem to be their basic role, as it has been repeatedly stated by many scholars (Reid and Reid 2001; Everett 2002; Clark and Franzmann 2006; Klaassens et al. 2009; Petersson 2009; Nešporová and Stahl 2014). For Santino (2011), apart from commemoration, it is the spontaneous responses to death in public space that represent performativity (a component of addressing a social and political issue). Based on an extensive literature review, Welsh (2017, p. 95) identified the following six key functions of roadside memorials: “to commemorate and honour the...
dead, to provide a place for ‘continuing bonds’ and ongoing communication, to mark the exact location of death, to mark the site as sacred, to act as a warning and safety message, and to enable the grief-stricken family or friends an outlet to do something”.

Despite their commemorative and communicative functions, roadside memorials give rise to debate on the religious meaning of the roadside assemblages containing the image of the cross (e.g., Owen 2011; Nešporová and Stahl 2014; Welsh 2017). Reid (2013, p. 134) concluded that the presence of a cross in a roadside memorial may not necessarily be religious in nature, but “multivocal and can be used to communicate a range of meanings, from the plainly religious to the quasi-secular”. Further discussion on the roadside memorials relationship with religion will be presented in a later section.

The aim of the paper is to assess the social perception of the motivation of people constructing crosses at the sites of road accidents along public roads in Poland. Is it religious, cultural or both religious and cultural? My assumption was that the question above semantically corresponds with the following question: Are roadside crosses an expression of religiosity of the people who put up these crosses, an expression of the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland, or both? The following hypothesis has been put forward: there is a relationship between one’s declaration of faith and the perception of crosses erected at the sites of road accidents. In other words, the aim of this paper is to provide answers to the questions above and to verify the hypothesis.

In this study, the question of religion versus culture derives from Eliade’s (1987) sacred/profane dichotomy. I adopted his famous polar understanding of the contrasting spatial and temporal experiences of homo religiosus and modern man, keeping in mind Shiner’s (1972, p. 436) statement that “both extremes represent in most contemporary situations the exception rather than the rule”. In my opinion, the complex phenomenon of roadside crosses deals with a continuum spreading out from using the cross as an intentional act of faith toward a usage without religion-based intent as a cultural or tradition-based marker of death in so-called Christian countries. In other words, some people would consider memorial crosses to be objects associated exclusively with religion/religiosity or secular/everyday experience of death, while others would tend to match them with both spheres (the sacred and the profane). Religion is a part of culture. The question “religious or cultural” may be perceived as falsely binary. What I mean by cultural is secular or profane in Eliade’s (1987) concept of the sacred–profane division. It must be emphasised that the article sums up a three-year-long research project on memorial crosses in Poland. The conclusions concerning the meaning of the roadside cross, based on a survey and presented in this article, will be interpolated with the author’s earlier conclusions, based on surveys (Przybylska 2020), fieldwork and interviews (Przybylska 2015, 2016; Przybylska et al. 2019; Przybylska and Flaga 2019). The project and the article were inspired by the so far unexplored research question concerning the choice of roadside crosses as markers in Poland referred only to a distinctive modern phenomenon of placing crosses at the sites of fatal road accidents. The case of Poland seems interesting because the cross has been deeply rooted in Polish roadscape for centuries.

2. Materials and Methods

Apart from desk research, roadside memorials are examined mainly either through fieldwork or fieldwork supplemented with interviews (Table 1). Nevertheless, there are some studies focused on the perception of people unrelated to the deceased. There are two distinctive themes in the cross-culture literature on public opinion regarding roadside memorials. Some scholars are interested in the drivers’ behaviour and road safety policies (Dickinson and Hoffmann 2010; Hartig and Dunn 1998; Churchill and Tay 2008; Tay 2009; Tay et al. 2011). Others are focused on social and cultural issues identified in the respondents’ answers regarding the perception of roadside memorials (Everett 2002; Przybylska 2015, 2020). This paper contributes to the latter scholarship.
Table 1. Research on roadside memorials by methods.

| Fieldwork and other methods |
|----------------------------|
| **Fieldwork**              |
| (Brien 2014; Byrd 2016; Clark 2008; Clark and Cheshire 2004; Clark and Franzmann 2006; Cohen 2012; Henzel 1991; Kulczyńska and Marciniak 2018; Przybylska 2016; Przybylska et al. 2019; Reid and Reid 2001) |
| **Mass media analysis**    |
| (Owen 2011; Przybylska 2015) |
| (Everett 2000; Graham 2017; Klaassens et al. 2013; Klaassens et al. 2009; Nešporová 2011; Nešporová 2015; Nešporová and Stahl 2014; Przybylska and Flaga 2019; Stahl 2013; Stahl and Jackson 2019; Welsh 2017) |
| **Interviews**             |
| (Everett 2000; Graham 2017; Klaassens et al. 2013; Klaassens et al. 2009; Nešporová 2011; Nešporová 2015; Nešporová and Stahl 2014; Przybylska and Flaga 2019; Stahl 2013; Stahl and Jackson 2019; Welsh 2017) |
| **Mass media analysis and Interviews** |
| (Zimmerman 2010) |
| (Przybylska 2020) |
| **Survey**                 |
| (Przybylska 2020) |
| **Interviews and survey**  |
| (Everett 2002; Hartig and Dunn 1998) |
| **Other methods**          |
| **Mass media analysis**    |
| (Bednar 2013) |
| (Tay et al. 2011) |
| **Experiment**             |
| (Churchill and Tay 2008; Dickinson and Hoffmann 2010) |
| (Tay 2009) |
| **Survey**                 |
| (Breen 2006; Petersson 2009) |
| (Reid 2013) |

To the best of the author’s knowledge, a representative poll on roadside memorialisation has never been conducted. The 10-question survey (see Appendix A) is the first comprehensive effort to measure, at a mass level, the public opinion on roadside memorials in one country. The questionnaire was designed by the author, who used a survey conducted among students (Przybylska 2020), as well as the conclusions from formal and informal consultations. Considering the aim of the work and the standard length of a research paper, only the questions designed to verify the hypothesis proposed in the article will be thoroughly described (half of them). Another paper will be planned for the second half of the questionnaire.

Data collecting was outsourced to one of the leading Polish research companies, carrying out surveys based on nationally representative samples. Prior to the representative survey, a pilot study on 10 people was conducted by the company in July 2018. Next, 1002 adults were surveyed on 8–9 September 2018. The sample was controlled by applying four demographic parameters: gender, age, education, and place of residence, corresponding to the distribution of demographic characteristics in the adult population of Poles (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2018).

The survey was carried out in the respondents’ homes by trained interviewers, who read out and noted down the answers to the questions. They used the CAPI technique (Computer Assisted Personal Interview). The interview lasted about 10 min, on average. After the interview on memorial crosses, the respondents were asked other sets of questions, as it was a cyclic quantitative survey, commonly used in Poland. The questionnaire on memorial crosses was designed to be the first one for a respondent. Data interpretation was based on statistical analysis (frequency analysis, Chi-square test).

In earlier studies, researchers did not ask memorial builders or public opinion about their religiosity or religious affiliation. However, they sometimes reported the interviewees’ spontaneous expressions on this topic (Clark and Franzmann 2006; Nešporová and Stahl 2014; Welsh 2017). In contrast to those earlier studies, the current research sought information about Polish respondents’ religiosity. It was assessed through only one question. People chose one of three options which suited them best: I believe in God, I neither believe nor disbelieve in God, I do not believe in God. In the homogenous Polish society, this one question seemed to the author to be a sufficient one. As much as 93.7% of the population belong to the Roman Catholic Church. The leading minority represent the Polish Orthodox Church (1.3%), and other religious denominations put together make up less than 1%
(Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2018). Although slowly declining, religious practices are still vital among Catholics, with about 40% attending Holy Mass and 17% receiving the Holy Communion every Sunday (Sadłoń 2016).

3. Literature Review on the Widespread Use of the Cross in Roadside Memorialisation

The research on the relationship between roadside memorials and religion has, with the notable exception of Cohen’s Thailand study (2012), focused on regions of Christian heritage in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, where the cross is the most distinctive feature of contemporary roadside memorials (Welsh 2017). The share of the crosses (regardless of their size and shape) in roadside memorials varies from 98% in Romania (Nešporová and Stahl 2014), 93% in Australia and New Zealand (Clark and Franzmann 2006), 73% in the US (Dickinson and Hoffmann 2010), 65% in the Czech Republic (Nešporová and Stahl 2014) to about 20% in the Netherlands (Klaassens et al. 2013). Although the cross is frequently included in roadside memorials in many countries, the common use of the cross with a clear Christian religious intent has been reported only in Romania. Roadside memorials in Bucharest “are part of the on-going lived urban Orthodoxy” (Stahl 2013, p. 896).

The low percentage of roadside memorials with crosses in the Netherlands may be explained by the predominance of Protestant faiths, which are generally lacking in religious iconography (Park 1994; Klaassens et al. 2013). However, this reason seems questionable in view of the fact that the United States is predominately Protestant yet includes the cross in a large majority of its roadside memorials. Another possible explanation for the limited number of crosses both in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic may be secularisation (Klaassens et al. 2013; Nešporová and Stahl 2014). Klaassens et al. (2013, p. 11) revealed the following reasons why the bereaved in the Netherlands did not incorporate a cross in their roadside memorials: “for some people the cross was either less personal than another form; believed to be something for older people; thought it was more appropriate at a cemetery; or it was just disliked by the deceased”.

A widespread use of the cross in roadside memorialisation has been observed in western countries, despite evidence of declining church affiliation and regular church attendance. Clark and Franzmann (2006) explained this trend with the term “amorphous spirituality”. It refers to religious activity in the broadest sense, to mark the site of a fatal accident with a cross, rather than being linked to any particular church or religious institution. Judging from the interviews with memorial builders, it was concluded that the transformation of the roadside into one’s own sacred space occurred because memorial makers find authority in their experience of grief, presence, and place, and not devotion to a particular faith. The use of the cross may be an attempt to find culturally appropriate symbols to express both death and the sacred “where there is a paucity of such symbols apart from those offered by institutional religion” (Clark and Franzmann 2006, p. 591). Similarly, the fact that crosses are overwhelmingly employed in the design of memorials in the US and that on the check-list of 12 “reasons for creating a memorial”, the response “an expression of my faith or spirit” ranked well below the mean, led Collins and Rhine (2003, p. 229) to define roadside crosses “as a matter of cultural integration, i.e., a reflex, as opposed to an intentional or specific act of faith, at least in an institutional or denominational sense”. Everett’s (2002) survey in Austin, Texas illustrates this issue, too. Only a small number of high school students’ opinions on roadside crosses cited religious belief in their assessments of the crosses. Some of them said they offer prayer at such sites. Some students stated that roadside crosses signified death, which made them think about the nature of death and their own mortality.

Roadside memorials have become a part of informal religion (Clark and Franzmann 2006; Cohen 2012) linked with death and mourning traditions. The modern practice of roadside crosses sprang due to the fact that the cross is often found in cemeteries, either as a marker in its own right or carved into the grave marker (Dickinson and Hoffmann 2010). The symbol of the cross, which used to be reserved for the place of burial, may be taken by
the memorial builders “from this branch of cross symbolism—death, not religion” (Clark and Cheshire 2004). Furthermore, the roadside becomes space where we can observe a transfer of grave traditions and incorporation of new ones (Owen 2011). The exploration of death, grief and religion themes led Zimmerman (2010, p. 115) to conclude that, for his interviewees, roadside memorials are not physical testaments of “God having worked His will” but rather “physical testaments of a very hard-to-accept and understand death”. This is why memorial crosses are called secular commemorations to life lost (Hartig and Dunn 1998) or general markers of death rather than purely Christian symbols (Clark and Franzmann 2006). What is more, Collins and Rhine (2003) report that the site of death may be more important for people who erect roadside memorials than the memorial itself. Thus, the purpose of any memorial, including the cross, is to mark the place of fatality. Roadside crosses also generate controversy. Unattended private crosses that are allowed to remain in public space are perceived by some as a manifestation of government’s endorsement of the religious message (Reid 2013). For instance, in 2005, a group advocating the separation of church and state (American Atheists, Inc, Cranford, USA), sued the state of Utah in federal Court for allowing memorial crosses on public land (Dickinson and Hoffmann 2010). Nevertheless, there are legally approved, small, white crosses in some parts of the United States, which are a part of the Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) programme, commemorating only victims of impaired driving (Everett 2000, 2002; Bednar 2013). By contrast, the general public in Ireland tends to disapprove of roadside memorials within Catholic communities they are inappropriate ways of commemorating the dead, as they disrupt societal norms of imagined equal status in death (Graham 2017).

**Crosses in Polish Roadscape**

In Poland, there are two kinds of crosses in the roadscape: up to 3–4 m tall crucifixes, popular in Poland since the Counter-Reformation in the 17th century, which were erected for various reasons (e.g., to fulfil vows, mark the place of unexpected tragic death or demarcate symbolic borders of a village), as well as small plain crosses or crucifixes, usually well under 1 m tall, constructed on a mass scale for about three decades for only one reason: to commemorate fatal road accidents (Figure 1). The former (called “krzyże przydrożne”—wayside crosses), well documented by folklorists and other scholars (Janicka-Krzywda 1999; Adamowski and Wójcicka 2011), are perceived as part of an old Polish folk tradition, and the latter (called “krzyže powypadkowe”—post-accident crosses or “krzyże pamięci”—memorial crosses) have been reported only recently: briefly mentioned (e.g., Klima 2011; Rogowski 2012), described in one city (Kulczyńska and Marciniak 2018) and comprehensively studied only by the author of the paper (e.g., Przybylska 2015, 2016). They both are either wooden, stone or metal crosses, sometimes accompanied with votive candles and flowers.

I have argued elsewhere that memorial crosses in Poland “seem to be a form of a wider process of the sacralisation of public spaces, which resulted from Poland’s unique history and the role of religion” (Przybylska 2016). The cross has been incorporated into the Polish landscape throughout the ages. It has been interpreted both as the expression of a historically rooted attachment to the Roman Catholic Church and religiosity itself (Casanova 1994; Herbert 2001; Gajewska and Pawliszak 2012). In contrast to western countries, where memorial crosses started to appear in contexts where there was no previous tradition of roadside memorials, Poland follows traditionally Catholic and Orthodox countries with already established praxis of building wayside crosses and shrines.

The data collected along over 2600 km of national roads resulted in the conclusion that the uniqueness of the Polish roadside landscape lies in the number of crosses (memorial crosses statistically observed every 6 km) and that their high incidence in roadside memorials (over 90%) corresponds to the high membership rate in the Roman Catholic Church (Przybylska 2016). Recent studies have confirmed the widespread use of the cross in roadside memorialisation (Przybylska and Flaga 2019).
It appears that public opinion does not associate a memorial cross with an exclusively religious meaning. In 2011, a questionnaire entitled “Should memorial crosses be removed from the right-of-way?” was published on the local website to collect residents’ opinions on crosses put up at road accident sites, as the City Hall in Gdansk was deliberating what action to undertake. Nearly four thousand people took part in a survey and over 600 left longer and shorter spontaneous answers. The analysis of responses provided by Internet users online led to the conclusion that memorial crosses are an element of a deathscape and everyday life space, which occasionally take on religious functions and meanings (Przybylska 2015). Roadside crosses are seen either as traditional components of the public roadside, or religious objects, or cross-cultural markers of death and grief. What is more, people who declared that they were against memorial crosses found them to be “a manifestation of inefficiency on the part of authorities in managing public space and a symbolic lack of compliance with the law separating the State from the Church” (Przybylska 2015, p. 522).

Recent studies, based on fieldwork and interviews with memorial builders, have tried to explain certain Christian features of roadside memorials in the Polish roadscape (Przybylska and Flaga 2019; Przybylska et al. 2019). Religious messages, identified in almost 40% of the inscriptions, indicated their authors’ and/or the deceased’s relationship with Catholicism (Przybylska et al. 2019). The fact that the message and the style of inscriptions put into roadside memorials suggest that they are treated like inscriptions on gravestones at the cemetery verifies Clark and Cheshire’s assumption (2004) that roadside memorialisation is a manifestation of a broader culture. Inscriptions on the memorials erected along Polish roads “constitute a reproduction of communication offered by the rich culture of both—roadside shrines and cemeteries, well maintained and often visited in Poland” (Przybylska et al. 2019, p. 9). The phenomenon of interpenetrating roadside and cemetery forms of commemoration in Poland is confirmed in the comments made by some interviewees, who—unprovoked and spontaneously—compared the practice of visiting the roadside memorial to visiting the cemetery, where there are graves of their family or friends who died in accidents (Przybylska and Flaga 2019). As the cross itself was important for memorial builders and they considered themselves to be believers, it was assumed (Przybylska and Flaga 2019) that the cross had been chosen to mark the site of the accident for religious reasons, even though the interviewees indicated both—religious and cultural motivation. It was considered a natural reaction of a Christian, a part of the Polish,
The perception of memorial crosses was also estimated among 88 MA students at Gdańsk University, Poland (Przybylska 2020). Young people were generally familiar with the phenomenon of memorial crosses. In response to the first question of the questionnaire: Have you heard of crosses standing at accident sites by the road?, all respondents but one answered affirmatively. Nearly half of the students spontaneously (it was an open question) quoted only religious arguments, one-third only cultural ones, and 12 people both, when answering the question of why Poles put up memorial crosses at road accident sites, and not something else, such as a boulder or just flowers. It was concluded that there is only “a slight advantage of the religious argumentation over the cultural one when it comes to explaining the choice of the cross instead of other objects to mark accident sites in Poland” (Przybylska 2020, p. 217).

Summing up, researchers are trying to solve the following paradox: on the one hand, we observe the proliferation of crosses employed in the design of roadside memorials, and on the other—the symbol of the cross is not always used for purely religious reasons. It seems that incorporating the cross—an object rooted in Christian heritage—into an informal commemoration practice, balancing between religious and spiritual meanings, originates from religious as well as culture-rooted needs for and ways of commemorating death. While in Romania, with its “on-going lived urban Orthodoxy” (Stahl 2013, p. 896) motivations to erect memorial crosses are placed at the top of the religious—non-religious scale, the works from Australia, the USA, Western Europe and the Czech Republic (Hartig and Dunn 1998; Everett 2002; Collins and Rhine 2003; Klaassens et al. 2013; Nešporová and Stahl 2014) lead to a conclusion that the purely religious reasons are considerably weaker than other, non-religious or quasi-religious motivations, called amorphous spirituality (Clark and Franzmann 2006). The evaluation of religious motivation of roadside memorialisation in Poland attempted so far place this country approximately in the middle of the scale of religious to non-religious motivations. Social media analysis (Przybylska 2015), interviews with memorial builders (Przybylska and Flaga 2019) and non-random survey (Przybylska 2020) point to the presence of the religious as well as cultural element in the meaning of roadside crosses. The next section will present the first attempt to define the religious meaning of memorial crosses based on quantitative measures.

4. Results

The sample population in the representative poll on roadside memorials consisted of 580 women and 422 men. The majority of respondents lived in towns and cities (61%) and others in rural areas (39%). In Poland, we have been able to observe a population aging process going on for several decades (Cicharska 2019). Hence, the youngest respondents (aged 18–24) constituted 12%, while 30% of the sample population were 25–39 years of age. The 40–59 age cohort comprised 35% of the sample, and people over the age of 60 were represented by 23% of the surveyed population. The education structure of the sample reflected the national profile, with 14% of respondents representing primary and junior secondary school and 31% the basic vocational level of education. Almost two out of five respondents (37%) had completed secondary and post-secondary education, while 17% of the sample were people with university education.

The first two questions severed as an introduction to the more detailed questions on memorial crosses. They were focused on the presence of the cross in the respondent’s everyday life. Almost three-quarters of the respondents declared that they had some form of a cross in their homes, while almost one-quarter did not have a cross anywhere (Figure 2). Every sixth respondent claimed that they kept a cross in the car or carried one around the neck. People who declared having their crosses in any other place, usually talked about the cemetery. If there had been a “ready to tick” option referring to the cemetery, maybe people would have chosen it more often. The popularity of the symbol of the cross in the respondents’ living environment corresponds to the declared significance of the cross in
their lives. The majority (68%) declared that the symbol of the cross was important to them and only 13% stated it was irrelevant. To the remaining respondents (19%), the symbol of the cross was neither important nor unimportant.

![Figure 2. Do you own any kind of a cross, meaning an object in the shape of a cross, no matter what size? (mark all that apply). Source: Results based on a survey (CAPI) carried out on a nationwide sample of N = 1002 Poles aged 18+.](image)

Question number 3, Have you ever seen a roadside cross standing at the place of a fatal accident on a road? revealed that most respondents were familiar with memorial crosses. A total of 958 people (95%) answered “yes” and only 5% (44 people) replied “no”. From this point, the questionnaire was continued only with the respondents who declared they had seen such a cross before.

They were asked to choose one out of three sentences they thought best expressed their opinion regarding roadside crosses. The “Roadside crosses are an expression of the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses” option was chosen by 20% of respondents. “Roadside crosses are an expression of the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland” was chosen by 33%, and half (47%) of the respondents selected “Roadside crosses are an expression of both the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses and the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland”.

The last question of the questionnaire referred to the participants’ self-declaration of faith. It was considered a variable which explained the diversity of responses to the previous question. Three-quarters of the respondents (74%) believed in God, 18% replied that they “neither believe nor disbelieve in God”, and 8% said they did not believe in God. These three groups of respondents can be categorised as “believers”, “agnostics”, or “atheists”, respectively. The levels of declaration of faith are consistent with the answers to the question about the importance of the symbol of the cross in the respondents’ lives (Table 2).

| In your life, the symbol of the cross is . . . | I believe in God % | I neither believe nor disbelieve in God % | I do not believe in God % |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| important                                   | 87                | 24                                     | 15                       |
| neither important nor                       | 10                | 53                                     | 20                       |
| unimportant                                 | 2                 | 24                                     | 66                       |

Source: Results based on a survey (CAPI) carried out on a nationwide sample of N = 1002 Poles aged 18+. Here: respondents who have ever seen a roadside cross at the place of a fatal accident, N = 958. Note: Percentage total may not equal 100 due to rounding effect.
Believers significantly more often than atheists think that roadside crosses are an expression of both, the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses and the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland (50% compared to 31%), $\chi^2 (4, N = 958) = 25.55, p = 0.05$ (Table 3). Atheists and agnostics, significantly more often than believers, associate roadside crosses with the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland. Similarly, respondents for whom the symbol of the cross is unimportant, significantly more often than people for whom the cross is important, said that roadside crosses are an expression of the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland (50% compared to 29%), $\chi^2 (4, N = 958) = 17.28, p = 0.02$.

Table 3. Declaration of faith and the opinions on roadside memorials.

| Roadside crosses are an expression of . . . | I believe in God % | I neither believe nor disbelieve in God % | I do not believe in God % |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses | 21                | 16                                       | 13                       |
| the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland | 29                | 40                                       | 55                       |
| both the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses and the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland | 50                | 44                                       | 31                       |

Source: Results based on a survey (CAPI) carried out on a nationwide sample of N = 1002 Poles aged 18+. Here: respondents who have ever seen a roadside cross at the place of a fatal accident, N = 958. Note: Percentage total may not equal 100 due to rounding effect. Significance level for Chi-square test $p < 0.05$, df = 4.

5. Discussion

It was observed that, by using different research methods of exploring roadside memorialisation, one can obtain different results. In the case of Poland, it turned out that one indicator recorded during fieldwork—the high percentage of crosses in roadside memorialisation (about 90%)—is not sufficient to define the meaning of erecting them: is it religious, cultural, or both? As a result of later research by means of interviews, inscription analysis, surveys, and social media analysis, this first clear-cut interpretation of the religious meaning of roadside memorials in Poland should be considered to be true only in one dimension. Certainly, these crosses can be regarded as visual sacralisation of public space, assuming that the cross is a symbol deriving from religion, thus, wherever it stands, it creates a religious landscape (in the sense of location of structures formally considered sacred).

However, there are two other questions, the answers to which may modify this one-sided interpretation of the meaning of memorial crosses by an “objective researcher” during fieldwork. The first one concerns memorial builders’ motivations to erect roadside crosses, and the other one—the interpretation of these motivations by the public. Is the use of the cross by memorial builders to mark the place of death in a car accident motivated religiously? Is the use of it interpreted by other people as religious? The results of the public opinion poll presented in this article fit into a particular symbiosis of the religious and cultural theme, noticeable in the author’s previous works as well. Next to the religious motivation, memorial builders reported culture based motivation (Przybylska and Flaga 2019) and the inscriptions found at memorial crosses manifested both—Catholicism and a broader culture of cemetery traditions in Poland (Przybylska et al. 2019). Half of the people participating in a representative poll see roadside crosses as an expression of both—the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses and the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland.

Moreover, a conclusion can be drawn that contradicts the conclusions about the predominance of the religious motivation in choosing the cross for a roadside memorial (Przybylska and Flaga 2019) and the perception of roadside crosses as elements displayed for religious reasons (Przybylska 2020). As one-third of Poles treat memorial crosses
exclusively as a custom of marking places of death with crosses, and 20% exclusively as an expression of the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses, it should be agreed that the results of the representative poll indicate a slight advantage of the cultural meaning over the religious one.

It is interesting that the status of declared faith did not diversify the respondents significantly in their answers concerning the religious meaning, contrary to the answers concerning cultural and both religious and cultural meaning. Believers more often than atheists opt for both religious and cultural meanings of roadside crosses. Atheists and agnostics (as well as the respondents for whom the symbol of the cross is unimportant), more often than believers, associate roadside crosses only with the custom of marking places of death. The respondents seem to generalise their own belief system when discussing the motivations of other people erecting roadside crosses. Non-believers have only a cultural perception of roadside crosses because they do not believe in God and this is why they do not interpret memorial crosses as religious artifacts. However, it would be interesting to conduct in-depth interviews with atheists and agnostics and ask them what exactly motivates their point of view. Believers’ dual perception of roadside crosses is intriguing. They do not follow the above-mentioned pattern of generalisation because they do not associate roadside crosses exclusively with one sphere. They are aware of the complexity of roadside memorialisation, spanning out from the sacred to profane. For homo religious, space is heterogeneous, oriented, and meaningful, while for other people, it is homogenous, neutral, and amorphous (Eliade 1987). It seems that respondents who believe in God are more sensitive. Adopting Shiner’s (1972) redefinition of the concept of Eliade’s sacred space and profane space in the light of the human spatiality and lived space analysis, they seem to perceive roadscape as unpolarised human space.

Finally, let us discuss two issues emerging from the answers to the remaining questions in the questionnaire. Firstly, it must be emphasised that the representative poll proves that the roadside crosses phenomenon is commonly known among Poles (95%), though slightly less known than to students participating in the study before (Przybylska 2020). Thus, the Polish case is part of the international phenomenon of roadside memorialisation (Clark and Cheshire 2004) and problematic motoring heritage (Clark 2008). Secondly, the declaration of faith (74% “believers”), the declared presence of the symbol of the cross in everyday life (72% have it at home) and its importance in the respondents’ lives (68%) contradict the statements from Clark and Franzmann (2006), who associate the widespread usage of the cross with an amorphous spirituality, not linked to any specific church or religious cult. The statements derived from the Australia and New Zealand contexts are not supported in the current research as well as in the previous research because religion-oriented perception and usage of the memorial cross along Polish roads has been reported (Przybylska and Flaga 2019; Przybylska 2020). In the case of Poland, this “specific church or religious cult” is Roman Catholic Church, gathering the majority of Polish people (Sadłoń 2016). Despite the fact that respondents were not asked directly about their denomination status, it was not necessary in a homogenous society. The top results regarding the declarations mentioned above, obtained in the representative poll, confirm Poles’ attachment to Christianity. It must be emphasised, however, that the specific laconic style of mass scale survey failed to pick up nuances of trends well recorded elsewhere in literature on contemporary Polish religiosity (Hall 2016; Mazurek 2019).

6. Conclusions

The paper contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse on roadside memorialisation. The author hopes to encourage scholars to undertake two activities that will contribute to the development of comparative studies on roadside memorialisation. Firstly, they should conduct representative polls, because few studies focused on public perception and they did not include a wide-ranging, cross-nation sampling procedure. Secondly, they should include general and/or detailed questions about the respondents’ religiosity, faith, or religious denomination into the research on roadside memorials.
The study increases the knowledge about the perception of using the symbol of the cross in the roadscape context. In Poland, half of the population perceive a dualistic motivation in the display of roadside crosses along public roads. Roadside crosses are both a religious and a cultural phenomenon to them. The research hypothesis put forward in the introduction has been positively verified. There exists a relationship between one’s declaration of faith and the perception of memorial crosses. Firstly, believers more often than atheists opt for both, the religious and the cultural meaning of roadside crosses. Secondly, atheists and agnostics more often than believers associate roadside crosses only with the cultural meaning—the custom of marking places of death. In the Polish context of millennium-long Christian traditions, the fact that some identify the cross as the default symbol for marking death suggests that Christianity has become essentialised as everyday ‘culture’.

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**Appendix A. Roadside Crosses Questionnaire**

1. Do you own any kind of a cross, meaning an object in the shape of a cross, no matter the dimension? (mark all that apply)
   1. □ in your home
   2. □ in your car
   3. □ on your (family) property
   4. □ at work or in the place where you study
   5. □ in any other place . . . (please mention)
   6. □ I wear one around my neck
   7. □ I don’t have a cross

2. In your life, the symbol of the cross is ...? (mark only one)
   1. □ important
   2. □ neither important nor unimportant
   3. □ unimportant

3. Have you ever seen a roadside cross standing at the place of a fatal accident on a road? (mark only one)
   1. □ yes
   2. □ no

4. What is your reaction when you notice such a roadside cross? (mark all that apply)
   1. □ I become aware that the road is dangerous in that place
   2. □ I slow down, if driving
   3. □ I wonder how the person(s) died
   4. □ I pray for those who lost their lives
   5. □ I pray for the bereaved who have erected the cross
   6. □ I reflect on the meaning of life and death
   7. □ I avoid looking, I find it unpleasant
   8. □ I avoid looking, it is too emotional for me to look
   9. □ I don’t have any particular reaction, I just continue on my way
5. Why do you think a person would erect a roadside cross? (mark all that apply)
1. □ to warn other drivers about a dangerous stretch of road
2. □ to commemorate people who died in an accident
3. □ to mark the place where a person lost his/her life
4. □ it is a religious practice
5. □ it is the custom
6. □ other . . . . . .

6. Do you believe the practice of erecting a roadside cross at the place of a fatal accident is appropriate? (mark only one)
1. □ Yes
2. □ Rather yes
3. □ Neither yes nor no
4. □ Rather not
5. □ No

Depending on how the respondent answers, she/he will get one of the following questions:
(if 6 = 1 or 6 = 2)

6A1. Why do you believe (rather believe) such crosses are appropriate? (mark all that apply)
1. □ they are a strong warning signal for drivers
2. □ they are part of the Polish landscape
3. □ they do not bother anyone
4. □ they reflect the Christian faith
5. □ removing them would be an unchristian gesture
6. □ they help the people who erected them, in mourning
7. □ other answer ..........

(if 6=4 or 6=5)

6A2. Why don’t you believe (rather don’t believe) such crosses are appropriate? (mark all that apply)
1. □ they distract the drivers
2. □ they disturb the view, they belong in a cemetery
3. □ they are placed there illegally
4. □ they contravene with the secularity of the Polish State
5. □ the cross should be venerated, not placed on the side of the road
6. □ people who erect them only want to draw attention on their tragedy and loss
7. □ other answer . . .

7. Would you say that erecting a roadside cross at the place of a fatal accident characterizes the Poles? (mark only one)
1. □ Yes
2. □ No
3. □ I don’t know

8. Which sentence do you think expresses best your opinion regarding the roadside crosses? (mark only one)
1. □ Roadside crosses are an expression of the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses
2. □ Roadside crosses are an expression of the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland
3. □ Roadside crosses are an expression of both the religiosity of the people displaying these crosses and the custom of marking places of death with crosses in Poland

9. Would you consider erecting a roadside memorial dedicated to a person close to you who died in a road accident? (mark only one)
1. □ Yes, and this roadside memorial would have a cross
2. □ Yes, but this roadside memorial would not have a cross
3. □ No

10. Which term suits you best? (mark only one)
1. □ I believe in God
2. □ I neither believe nor disbelieve in God
3. □ I do not believe in God

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