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"In France I discovered that being Catholic is a choice": Religious transformations among Polish migrants in Île-de-France

Abstract. Based on five months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Paris and its surrounding areas, this article explores the religious transformations occurring among Polish migrants of the Roman Catholic confession. I argue that while religiosity in Poland is far from static, it undergoes more rapid changes in migrant settings, where individuals are exposed to religiously heterogeneous societies and encounter a diverse range of institutions offering pastoral care for Catholics. Migration often leads people to reflect on and consciously redefine their religiosity, leading some to become less religious, while others experience an impetus for deeper engagement with their faith. This article presents a variety of models of believing and practicing among Poles living in the Île-de-France region and adopts an intersectional approach in order to better understand the factors for religious transformations. While many working-class, particularly male, migrants gravitate towards an ethnic model of religiosity – represented particularly by the Polish Catholic Mission, an organisation serving Poles abroad – working-class women and middle-class migrants of both sexes often adopt a more individualised approach to religion.

Keywords: ethnography, individual religiosity, religious revivals, intersectionality, Polish Catholic Missions.

With over 90 percent of the adult population identifying as Roman Catholic and 70 percent attending Sunday Mass in the 1970s and 1980s, Polish religiosity is often described as defiling both European and global trends. During the late 20th century, while many Western European nations experienced a steady decline in religious adherence, Poland's religious devotion was at its height. A Polish native, Karol Wojtyła, ascended to the papacy as John Paul II, and shortly after, the democratic transformation in Poland shifted the Catholic Church from the state's most powerful opponent to its strategic ally (Borowik, 2002; Kościańska, 2018; Mishtal, 2015). And while religion globally has become less church-oriented and more privatized, individualistic, and eclectic (Luckmann, 2023), many Poles continue to be socialized into a taken-for-granted religiosity that is more focused on practice than belief (Borowik, 2016). The Polish Catholic Missions, scattered across the globe and providing pastoral services to the large Polish diaspora, reinforce the perception of Polish religiosity as church-oriented, ethnic, and, most importantly, monolithic and unchanging (Leszczyńska et al., 2020; Krotofil, 2013). However, this image does not provide a complete perspective.

Indeed, the religious socialization experienced by generations of Poles coming of age in the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century promoted a model of religiosity that prioritized church attendance and religious festivities over a deeper understanding of doctrine or a personal relationship with God. According to Irena Borowik (2016), this emphasis on ritual rather than belief made Polish religiosity particularly susceptible to tacit transformations, some of which mirrored global trends. Many Poles began adopting individualized approaches to Catholic teachings and morality, often blending elements from different faiths. While some gradually became less religious – identifying as Catholic but uncertain about the existence of God – a small minority joined various religious renewal movements, seeking a deeper and more community-oriented form of religiosity.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these transformations and exposed a deep crisis within the Catholic Church in Poland, which struggled to meet the changing expectations of its followers. Poles emerged from the pandemic less religious, especially less inclined to participate in institutionalized forms of worship (CBOS, 2022b, 2022a). The 2020 tightening of abortion laws and the subsequent mass pro-choice protests were significant factors (Kościańska et al., 2021), but the religious transformations during the pandemic also closely mirrored those experienced by migrants. As Sunday masses moved from churches to the internet, religious practice became more optional, allowing some to skip it altogether, and others, who previously attended their local parishes, to choose among different approaches and communities.

According to Joanna Krotofil (2013), migration can serve as a test of the authenticity of one's religious beliefs, as migrants find themselves free from social control and, often for the first time, exposed to religiously diverse societies. While some migrants combat solitude and alienation by frequenting Polish Catholic Mission churches or join local religious communities in hopes of helping their integration into their host society, many others cease practicing altogether, with shifts in religious practice sometimes leading to shifts in belief. Understanding these transformations requires considering the intersecting categories of gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity. In what follows, I analyse the changing religiosity of migrants living in the region of Ile-de-France.

Fieldwork

This article is based on five months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted over 2022 and 2023. During two fieldwork trips to Paris, I carried out 44 semi-structured interviews and participated in masses and public events organised by religious communities and migrant organisations, where I conducted participant observation (Okely, 2013). My understanding of the operations of Polish religious organisations in Paris is also informed by my previous research on transnational motherhood, which I conducted among Polish migrants living in and around the French capital (Kosiorowska, 2022).

I recruited respondents through religious and social events, outside churches, on social media, and using the snowball method, where participants were recommended by others. By extending my research to a diverse range of sites, I was able to assemble a sample of Polish migrants from a wide variety of backgrounds. All of my interlocutors were either born in Poland or spent their early years there before migrating to France as adults. While most of them identify as Catholic, I also spoke with several individuals who were raised Catholic but are uncertain if they still identify as such. My interlocutors included both men and women, from middle- and working-class backgrounds, with varying levels of education. They came from different parts of Poland, including large cities and rural areas, and ranged in age. Their migration to France occurred at different times and for various reasons, with most arriving between 1980 and 2020. Among economic migrants, a significant group was constituted by those coming from the Polish Subcarpathia, a region with a tradition of migration to France since the 1980s. Numerous interlocutors, especially middle-class, were women who moved to France due to marrying French men and people who stayed after having studied at one of the Parisian universities. The exceptional popularity of Paris accounts for the significant

number of people who did not have any specific reasons to migrate other than wanting to live in the mythical city of love and art. My interlocutors differ in their levels of integration into French society and their connections to Polish organisations, and therefore cannot be considered members of a single Polish community in Île-de-France. Instead, I refer to them as Polish migrants or simply Polish people living in the Paris region.

Religion, migration, intersectionality

While considerable attention has been devoted to the religiosity of Polish migrants, studies focusing on the French context are scarce. Those that do exist, with the exception of Janine Ponty's work (2009), which examines the institutional history of the Polish Catholic Mission in France, were written with a pastoral rather than a purely academic purpose. However, data from other Western European countries provides some insight into the broader processes of religious transformation experienced by Polish migrants.

Kerry Gallagher and Marta Trzebiatowska (2017), in their comparative study of Polish migration to the UK and Ireland, conclude that migrants' religiosity can follow several paths. Some may continue practising as they did at home, others gradually distance themselves from the Church, and some „seize the chance to explore Catholicism in a flexible and relatively independent manner" (p. 441). Joanna Krotofil (2013) also notes a small group that discovers religiosity while abroad. Scholars agree that Poles residing in Western Europe tend to practise less; according to Lisak (2016), only 6% of the diaspora in the UK attends church.[1] Their approach to religion tends to be more reflective and individualised (Gallagher & Trzebiatowska, 2017; Koralewska, 2016; Krotofil, 2013; Lisak, 2016). Both decrease in institutionalised religious practice and individualisation of religion are recognised by scholars as trends generally accompanying migration (Massey & Higgins, 2011). However, Catholicism remains an important element of Polish migrants' identity (Krotofil, 2013; Lisak, 2016). While for some, the universal dimension of their faith becomes more significant, the Polish Catholic Missions often foster a discourse that intertwines Polish and Catholic identities (Krotofil, 2013).

[1] Although I am not aware of any statistical data on church attendance among Polish people in France, the data from the United Kingdom may not serve as a reliable indicator due to the differing nature of migration to these two countries. While the UK has long been regarded as an easy destination for short-term stays (Lisak, 2016), migration to France tends to be more challenging on linguistic, cultural, and organisational levels, thus attracting migrants who intend to stay for at least several years.

Intersectional approaches allow to better understand how migrants negotiate their position in host societies. According to Fiałkowska (2019), "religion, intersecting with gender, nation and class […] serves as a resource for self-identification and self-worth." Research on gender, religion and migration shows the influence of migration on gender roles and religiosity of the groups in question (Quero, 2016; Ryan & Vacchelli, 2013). In Polish migrant communities in Western Europe the patterns of masculinity, femininity and motherhood are being reshaped (Leszczyńska et al., 2020; Urbańska, 2015). The works of Fiałkowska (2019) and Leszczyńska et al. (2020) demonstrate that religious transformations in migratory contexts are experienced differently by men and women. Similar to patterns observed in Poland (Borowik, 2016), women in Polish migrant communities are driving forces behind religious individualism and secularisation. Although they perform the majority of organisational and reproductive work within the Polish Catholic Missions, their religiosity is less valued than that of men, and they are more likely to shift to local churches (Leszczyńska et al., 2020; see also Ebaugh & Chafetz, 1999). Meanwhile, men, who often experience a loss of status as a result of migration, tend to develop new, hybrid patterns of religious masculinity. These patterns combine traditionally feminine characteristics, such as emotionality, religiosity, and a sense of community, with traditionally masculine traits like strength and leadership (Leszczyńska et al., 2020).

Interlude I: Working-Class Male Religiosity

Stefan

One Sunday afternoon, I stood in front of the famous "Concorde" Church in the 1st arrondissement of Paris, chatting with a group of middle-aged migrant men. One of them introduced himself as a parish activist responsible for collecting money for a golden crown for the Virgin Mary inside the church. Half an hour later, I learned that my interlocutor was also a lorry driver, but this information was provided to me as if it were an insignificant detail. I understood that one's contribution to the church community was more important for one's identity than one's occupation.

Waldi

Waldi is a working-class man in his forties who serves at Mass in the "Concorde" Church. Although raised Catholic, he considers himself a convert

because, when he lived in the rural area of Poland's Subcarpathia, his faith was "like everyone else's" – he practiced out of habit but never really understood the significance of God's existence. It was in France, due to experiencing the hardships of migration, that Waldi became a true believer.

Ethnic religiosity of the Polish Catholic Mission

Polish Catholic Missions are structures within the Roman Catholic Church that adhere to the Polish Episcopal Conference. This makes them independent of the Church hierarchy in the country in which they operate and limits the degree of influence of local forms of Catholic religiosity. The main function of the missions is to provide church services to Polish migrants. However, not only the Polish Catholic missions offer pastoral care in Polish for Poles living abroad – for example, in Île-de-France, alternatives are proposed by Polish monks and nuns belonging to several different orders, among which the most recognised are the Pallottines, praised for a reflexive style of pastoral care. What distinguishes the Polish Catholic Missions is their cultivation of a pastoral style aimed at maintaining the migrants' ethnic identity and their links with Poland.

According to Joanna Krotofil (2013), the discourse of ethnic religiosity is historically embedded in the functioning of the Missions, which provided a substitute for a homeland for refugees during the difficult periods of Poland's 19th and 20th century history. This is particularly true for France, which is host to the world's oldest Polish Catholic Mission, dating back to the 19th century Great Emigration and cultivating the myth of Paris as a city of Polish national awakening, where prominent figures such as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki or Fryderyk Chopin lived and suffered the loss of their beloved homeland. The experience of receiving substantial numbers of economic migrants, first in the 1920s and 1930s, and later in the post-1989 period, allowed the Polish Catholic Mission parishes in Île-de-France to become adept at connecting the feelings of uprooting and solitude experienced by displaced members of the working classes to the romanticised suffering of national heroes who navigated the same streets decades and centuries before them (Leszczyńska et al., 2013).

The historic Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, usually referred to as the "Concorde Church" (Kościół na Concordzie) due to its proximity to the Place de la Concorde, has been administered by the Polish Catholic Mission since the late 19th century. The church is located a ten-minute walk from the Élysée Palace and is surrounded by luxurious boutiques such as Dior, Burberry, and Chanel. During my first fieldwork in Paris in 2018, I spent a lot of

time in the square in front of the church, chatting with frequent churchgoers and street vendors who offered Polish newspapers and food products that migrants couldn't find in French shops. I conducted interviews in the small Polish restaurant in the crypt of the church, where tea cost a mere 1 euro, and I attended mass for the 100th anniversary of Poland's independence, which was held at the famous Notre-Dame Cathedral. I was in awe of the Mission's ability to make migrants feel at home in the very heart of the extremely gentrified French capital. I met numerous working-class Poles who commuted to the "Concorde Church" from remote suburbs of the city because a sense of belonging to the parish community compensated for the sense of degradation experienced as a result of migration. To them, ethnicity itself may have been a source of discrimination and marginalisation in the host society, but combined with ethnic religiosity it allowed them to feel as the proud successors of the generations of suffering national heroes. The discourse of the Mission draws on the literary tradition of Polish martyrology, which compares the suffering of Poles to the suffering of Jesus, implying that Poland will one day save Europe from its sins (Cervinkova, 2016; Janion, 2007). Therefore, for those who frequented the Mission, being Polish meant being Catholic (Domagała, 2018), and religious belonging, like national identity, was something one was born with and not a matter of choice, regardless of whether one later turned out to be a good Catholic or a bad one. However, as shown by the example of Waldi, religious transformations can also happen within the Polish Catholic Mission.

Interlude II: Working-class female religiosity

Danuta

Danuta is in her mid-40s and comes from a rural area in Poland's Subcarpathia. She lives in Île-de-France with her husband, also from Subcarpathia, and their four children. For most of her professional life Danuta worked as a housekeeper. Like Waldi, she was raised Catholic, but religion wasn't very important to her before migrating. In France, she started experiencing miracles. On one occasion, she smelled the scent of roses emanating from a figure of the Holy Mary. On another, she had excruciating tooth pain while she was pregnant, and she was afraid she wouldn't be able to communicate with the dentist in French. But as she prayed, the pain went away, and she was able to find the right words and receive suitable treatment. These experiences led her to organise her life around religious practice and follow religious rules to the letter. Initially, Danuta practiced at "Concorde", but later she and her

husband joined a pastoral group led by Polish nuns associated with the Polish Catholic Mission. She appreciates the sisters because they understand that men often lack the patience to worship Jesus for two hours like women can, so they assign them other tasks, such as lighting a barbecue.

Teresa

Teresa is a woman in her 60s from rural Subcarpathia. She works as a care worker for elderly people. In the 1990s, after she and her husband lost their jobs, she was forced to leave her family behind and migrate. Her husband started a new family and divorced Teresa, but she continued to financially support her in-laws and chose to remain single, which is her definition of living a good Christian life. Through her work, Teresa became well acquainted with French upper-middle-class culture and considers French people to be better Catholics than Poles because they don't practice out of obligation. She described Polish religiosity as follows:

> Everybody who comes here from Poland to work goes to the Polish [Catholic Mission] Church. And in everyday life, most of them lead a double life, they have female friends, they make scams at the construction sites… but they all call themselves Catholics.

Contestations of ethnic religiosity

Migration affects men and women differently – while men often experience a loss of status, women may encounter new opportunities which lead them to renegotiating their position. Although communities gathered around the Polish Catholic Mission depend on the work of women and attribute to them the responsibility for cultural reproduction, women tend to be the first to question moral authorities (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 1999; Leszczyńska et al., 2020). For example, when I returned to Paris in 2023, I found the canteen in the crypt closed, and I was told by some of the parishioners that this was because the women running it had refused to continue working without pay for the benefit of the church, as they felt their work was not appreciated by the clergy. Conflicts around women's status in the Polish Catholic Mission are among the factors which lead to women's religiosity being more reflexive and subject to change than that of men. While married working-class Polish couples often attend the Polish Catholic Mission churches together, women whose marital situations are viewed as less normative – among them single

and divorced women, those who left their husbands behind in Poland, and those who found non-Polish partners in France – tend to be the first to search for pastoral care elsewhere.

A particular case involves working-class women who migrate alone and become live-in domestic help for French families.[2] As Catholics, they are often selected by religious employers. The nature of their work helps them quickly acquire proficiency in French and gain a thorough understanding of French culture. These interlocutors, for whom their religious affiliation proved to be an asset in negotiating their position in the host society, tended to appreciate the universal rather than ethnic vision of Catholicism.

Interviews with middle-class migrants showed that there is a fundamental disagreement concerning the position of the famous church. While to some, the historic building placed in the care of the migrant community represented and legitimised Polish people's embeddedness in the French capital, many interlocutors associated the "Concorde" community with non-normative behaviours, such as excessive alcohol consumption and involving in fights outside of the church. Middle class interlocutors scolded the "typical Poles from Concorde" for their poor French language skills of and failing to integrate into the French society. In doing so, they reproduced the discourse of Poland's democratic transformation, when those unable to adjust to the new capitalist culture were deemed undeserving of capitalist success (Buchowski, 2006; Fiałkowska, 2019; Kosiorowska, 2022). In the context of religious transformations among Polish migrants, institutional, ethnic, working-class, especially male religiosity is constructed as non-normative, lacking reflexivity and flexibility, and diverging from values understood as universal.

I was not surprised to discover that the church community was in conflict with its wealthy neighbours. In 2018 one of the street vendors told me that she had failed at her attempts to legalise her activity and that she frequently experienced police violence and racism. When I returned to Paris in 2022, the trade had already been regulated: the only stands which remained were new, wooden and decorated with patterns inspired by Polish regional folklore, and according to a parish gossip the change was influenced by one of the luxurious boutiques, concerned about the community's impact on the prestige of the neighbourhood.

Interlocutors whose social positioning – composed of class, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and occupation – facilitated better integration with French society and the adoption of a worldview combining universal Christian and

[2] The situation of interlocutors from this group resembled that of the women studied by Sylwia Urbańska (2015). Urbańska's research provides a broader perspective for my observation, highlighting the potential for social change associated with working-class women's migration.

cosmopolitan values tended to attribute a sense of embarrassment to the ethnic style of religiosity. Marek Pawlak, in his analysis of the emotions accompanying identity processes in the context of Polish migration (2018), showed that the association of Polish ethnic identity with economic migration and a lack of integration, viewed as non-normative in contemporary Western politics, makes Polish people feel embarrassed about possibly being perceived as members of that category due to their origin.

Interlude III: Middle-class religiosity

Szymon

Szymon is a 28-year-old PhD student. He has been living in Paris for several years with his wife. In the following, he explains how his attitude towards Catholicism has changed over time:

> Around high school or at the beginning of university, I started becoming interested in religion. It stopped being a childhood habit and became an important subject […]. I was drawn towards Protestantism, but my stay in Paris made me abandon any interest in the Protestant desire for an individual, private religion and oriented me towards a collective, ritualised religiosity, which helps to persevere and removes questions and doubts. Because doubts are one thing, and regular practice is another. And perhaps this religiosity, this Catholicism, became so important to me because of my stay in France. It was here in France that I felt I was Polish, and only in France did I feel that I was Catholic. In France, I discovered that being Catholic is a choice. In the sense that being Catholic is not something obvious, like in Poland.

Like many other migrants from diverse backgrounds, Szymon discovered that religion is both a choice and a distinctive element of his identity, closely tied to his ethnicity. Associating privatised religiosity with Protestantism and westernisation led him to embrace the collective and universal dimension of his Catholic faith. He did this by joining a French parish and participating in a pastoral care group for young married couples. At the same time, in the French church, he felt distinctly Polish – he often felt the urge to express his identity by pronouncing Latin phrases as they are pronounced by speakers of Slavic languages or by kneeling at points in the Mass when one would kneel in the Polish church, even though it is not customary in France.

Kasia

Kasia is a 42-year-old woman from a medium-sized city in Silesia, in southern Poland. Despite being a healthcare professional, she was unable to afford living on her own in Poland, so she emigrated to Paris 14 years ago. She did not feel compelled to return to Poland because, as a single woman who was childless by choice, she believed her situation would not have been accepted there. When asked, she declared that she was Catholic, but her description of her faith more closely resembled some form of pantheistic spirituality than Christian doctrine – she preferred speaking of timeless energy rather than God. Although she occasionally prayed in church, she only did so for her relatives who had remained in Poland, "because they believe in it."

When I asked her how it was possible for her to continue to say she was Catholic, even though she did not share any of the Catholic beliefs, she responded: "Because I have papers for it." For Kasia, religious denomination, much like nationality, was difficult to change – she could say that she was French, a world citizen, or an Earthian, but people would have thought she was crazy. Although she continued to maintain links to the Catholic church, occasionally practising and viewing Catholicism as a somewhat uncomfortable but inescapable element of her identity, beneath all this, she had created her own individual vision of the world from elements completely unrelated to Catholic doctrine.

Religion of choice

The institutional character of Polish religiosity and the prevalent model of socialisation into normative religious practice lead many Polish people, especially those residing in small towns and villages where there is no market of competing religious organisations, to treat religiosity as a given. In Poland, those who are not believers often find it almost impossible to avoid religious practices, especially on occasions such as weddings or funerals, or to resist their children's attendance at theoretically optional religious classes at school (Borowik, 2016; Gallagher & Trzebiatowska, 2017). Experts have long pointed out that this model does not correspond with a changing, democratic society, and it is gradually being replaced by the individualised model of a "religion of choice" (Boguszewski, 2016); this process occurs more rapidly in the context of migration and mobility. Interlocutors in their late 20s to early 40s, who first moved from a small town or village to one of the largest Polish cities to attend university and only later emigrated to France, often stated that moving

to France did not change much for them, because their first encounter with voluntary religious practice occurred while they were still students. However, for many others – those who did not have prior opportunities to experience religion as a choice – coming to France required finding their own model of believing and practising. While some, upon migration, perceive the heterogeneity of beliefs and models of religious practice as a threat, numerous interlocutors, such as Szymon, described discovering that religion is a choice as a positive, empowering experience.

For migrants who are less inclined to an ethnic model of religiosity and who are comfortable with praying in French, the local French parish is often the self-evident choice. Their experiences are influenced by the specific historical context of French Catholicism. Since the French revolution, the Church in France has been framed as the opponent of the state, and while it never ceased to be an important political actor, its influence has been less direct than in Poland. Throughout the 20th century, France participated in the Western European trend of dechristianisation. Many French people not only abandoned Catholicism entirely, but the Church itself transformed to accommodate new, secular sensitivities. This phenomenon is notably exemplified by the sudden decline of confession in the 1960s and the French episcopate's somewhat liberal and reconciliatory response to the promulgation of the encyclical Humanae Vitae in 1968 (Cuchet, 2018). Although French Catholicism actively participates in global conservative movements and anti-gender campaigns, its points of focus differ from those in Poland. It tends to advocate for a particular model of the heterosexual, nuclear family, as exemplified by its strong opposition to same-sex marriage and artificial fertilisation for single women and lesbian couples, and is less interested than the Polish Catholicism in family planning methods and anti-abortion activism (Béraud, 2021).

The majority of respondents overlooked the conservative side of Catholicism in France, and considered it liberal as opposed to church in Poland. The only exception were middle-aged female domestic workers, who tended to have the most thorough understanding of the religious sensitivities of the Parisian middle and upper middle class. However, these respondents also praised French Catholicism for being a religion of choice, meaning that those who voluntarily selected it were more inclined to stay true to it. French parishes were often described as open to newcomers and French priests as more likely to present a positive vision of religiosity rather than speak about sin and punishment.

Whether they select a Polish Catholic Mission church, the Pallottines' church, their local French parish, or they cease practicing entirely, migrants reflect on their religiosity and change in practice is often followed by change

in attitudes to religious institutions and finally transformations of religious beliefs. Searching for their place within the market of religious institutions, migrants reuse elements of various religious discourses and models of practicing, creating new, hybrid, individual approaches to religion.

Conclusions

Polish Catholic migrants arriving in France face a number of choices regarding the continuation of their religious practice. They encounter a religiously diverse society, where practising religion becomes a choice rather than an obligation. Additionally, they find a wide array of organisations offering pastoral care for Roman Catholics, either in Polish or French, and adhering to various models of practice and belief. In this context, migrants, often accustomed to a taken-for-granted religiosity, are compelled to reflect on their faith and reassemble it, drawing from different religious models. They freely combine elements of their religious upbringing at home with ideas from popular culture or New Age movements. Their religiosity often becomes more individualised and reflective, in line with global trends.

People's complex social positions, related to class, gender, marital status, ethnicity, and generation, influence how they navigate this new situation. The ethnic model of religiosity, particularly represented within the Polish Catholic Mission churches, is especially appealing to working-class men, offering them compensation for the loss of status resulting from migration. Meanwhile, women, for whom migration presents new opportunities to renegotiate their status, often take the lead in religious transformations, shifting towards non-traditional, individual, hybrid forms of religiosity.

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