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Leaving religion as a letting go ritual: exploring the trajectories of meaning making in narratives about apostasy¹

Odchodzenie od religii jako rytuał przejścia:
badanie trajektorii znaczeń w narracjach na temat apostazji

Abstract

The present paper elaborates on the meaning-making processes of leaving the Roman Catholic Church in Poland as indicated in the material coming from interviews and posts published on the Facebook group “Apostazja 2020”. Analysing biographical narratives concerning the experience of apostasy, we are inquiring whether it betrays traces of a rite of passage. Briefly, we present apostasy as social and religious phenomena, but we draw particular attention to the state of Catholic religiosity in Poland. We are seeking an answer to the question whether the act of apostasy is a transformative experience, a liminal moment which affects a person’s sense of identity and opens a new phase in life.

Keywords: apostasy, Catholic Church, discourse, leaving, narratives, religion

Streszczenie

Zaprezentowane rozważania dotyczą procesów tworzenia znaczeń w narracjach na temat apostazji. Materiał badawczy pochodzi z wywiadów przeprowadzonych z członkami i członkiniami fejsbukowej grupy „Apostazja 2020” oraz z wpisów zamieszczonych na tym samym profilu dotyczących doświadczenia apostazji. Analiza biograficznych narracji pozwala przypuszczać, że doświadczenie to nosi znamiona rytuału przejścia. W skrócie, apostazja widziana jest tu jako zjawisko społeczno-religijne, które odzwierciedla procesy sekularyzacyjne w Polsce. W badaniu poszukiwaliśmy odpowiedzi na pytanie czy apostazja może być doświadczeniem przełomowym, takim, które rozpoczyna nowy etap życia.

Słowa kluczowe: apostazja, Kościół katolicki, dyskurs, odchodzenie, narracja, religia

¹ The material presented here comes from author’s monograph from 2023: *Odchodząc od wierzeń. Analiza narracyjna dyskursu o apostazji (Leaving beliefs. Narrative analysis of the discourse about apostasy)*, Toruń 2023.

Introduction

The CBOS report titled “Why are Poles leaving the Church?”² portrays the latest trends in religiosity in Polish society. It transpires that there is a slow decline in the level of religious faith and a faster decline in the level of religious practice. From March 1992 to June 2022, the percentage of people declaring themselves as believers decreased from 94% to 84%, and regular church practices decreased from nearly 70% to almost 43%. At the same time, the percentage of non-practicing individuals increased from 9% to 19%. The study, conducted on a group of 2,235 women and men between November 2021 and January 2022, aged 18 to over 65, revealed that the most common reason for resigning from religious practices is a lack of need, understood as a lack of meaning, interest, or even indifference towards religious life. Other reasons included, among others, criticism of the Church and priests, lack of faith, politics, health, age, lack of time, waste of time, paedophilia scandals, pandemic, hypocrisy, to mention the most popular ones³.

The present study is based on the research findings discussed in the author’s monograph⁴ and focuses on the problem of identity change from religious to secular. To address this issue, face-to-face biographic interviews with 35 apostates were implemented. The interviewees were members of the Facebook group “Apostazja 2020”⁵, aged between 18-50+. The focal aspect of the research was the mechanism of leaving religion and how it is represented in interviews. Analysing identity narration, we have sought answers to the following questions:

- How the individuals cope with the change?
- Whether it is or has been painful for them?
- Whether the act of apostasy serves as evidence of emancipation, detraditionalization, or a reflective perspective on their life and culture?

In the current paper the symbolic dimension of apostasy is highlighted. An artistic representation of this symbolism can be found in the exhibition entitled “*Apostasia: Rituals of Letting Go*”⁶, which was presented in Garage Gallery, in Prague. It features folk and indigenous traditions, beliefs, and crafts. According to the authors of the exhibition, apostasy exemplifies resignation strategy and an exit. It brings liberating results by being an act of resistance against institutional violence.

² M. Grabowska, *Komunikat z badań: Dlaczego Polacy odchodzą z Kościoła?*, CBOS 2022, No 3.

³ Ibidem, p. 3.

⁴ M. Grabowska, *Odchodząc od wierzeń: analiza narracyjna dyskursu o apostazji*, Toruń 2023.

⁵ Currently the group has over 22.000 members.

⁶ Garage Gallery, *Apostasia: rituals of letting go* – GarageGallery [online].

Following this inspiration, the question of whether the act of apostasy reveals traces of the rite of passage and how the apostates in question represent the stage of separation, transition, and incorporation of secular identity⁷ in their accounts will be addressed. We will try to evidence the meanings people attribute to the act of apostasy. We will search for symptoms of discourse community formation, i.e., at commonly shared statements and opinions colonised by a specific ideology which can form a template for others to identify. The material we will be looking at includes fragments of interviews with apostates and more recent posts which were published on the Facebook group “Apostazja 2020” following author’s invitation to share views about apostasy as a letting go ritual.

1. Apostasy as a social phenomenon

Apostasy, like a change of religion or conversion, can be considered a significant event that influences a person’s life. Studying this phenomenon allows for a better understanding of the nature of contemporary transformations in the realm of spirituality. Within a pluralistic landscape, a religious actor seeks a solution that best satisfies their spiritual needs⁸.

According to Streib⁹, individuals who leave a religious organization do not always abandon their spiritual life. Some of them change their religious affiliation by joining other mainstream organizations, while others join religious movements with a smaller following. There are also those who engage in independent spiritual quests outside any religious organization.

In the social dimension, apostasy signifies departure from a group and the renunciation of membership, which may have certain consequences. Bromley¹⁰, a researcher of new religious movements, considers apostasy socially and historically significant because regardless of the era, when conflicts between social movements and the rest of society intensify, the inclination towards apostasy grows. Furthermore, like Coser¹¹, Bromley

⁷ Cf. A. Van Gennep, *The rites of passage*, Chicago 1960, p. 1-15.

⁸ D. Hervieu-Leger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement*, Paris 1999; R. Wuthnow, *America and challenges of religious diversity*, NY 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400837243>; R. Barro, J. Hwang, and R. McCleary, *Religious conversion in 40 countries*, „Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2010, 49 (1), p. 15-36.

⁹ H. Streib, *Deconversion*, [in:] *Oxford handbook of religious conversion*, eds. L. R. Rambo, C. E. Farhadian, Oxford 2014, p. 271-296.

¹⁰ D. Bromley, *Sociological perspectives on apostasy: an overview*, [in:] *The politics of religious apostasy: the role of apostates in the transformation of religious movements (religion in the age of transformation)*, ed. D. Bromley, London 1998, p. 3-16.

¹¹ L. Coser, *The age of the informer*, „Dissent” 1954, 1, p. 249-254.

believes that an apostate is someone who, despite changing their beliefs, continues to fight against and deny them. Such a person believes in persistently challenging their former faith.

Bromley¹² examines the act of leaving an organization as a “contested exit”. For the researcher, apostasy represents a unique case of such departure. He distinguishes three possible types of attitudes. The first attitude is represented by individuals he calls “defectors”, who leave traditional, institutional organizations that enjoy social trust and have autonomy to pursue their goals and mission (allegiant organizations). Such organizations have established ways of coping with member defections. Conflicts are muted to ensure that defections do not impact the organization’s position or reputation. An example of such an organization is the Roman Catholic Church, which holds a strong and unassailable position in Polish society, along with developed methods of mitigating conflict situations.

“Informers” are individuals who decide to depart from organizations whose principles may conflict with the surrounding reality (contestant organizations). Their goal is to pursue their own objectives and intentions, which leads to the emergence of both supporters and opponents in their environment. The last group includes individuals who leave “subversive” organizations that are in significant conflict with society. However, due to this circumstance, these individuals find understanding and support outside the organization (subversive organizations).

Brinkerhoff and Burke¹³ propose a typology in which they distinguish three types of attitudes: “ritualists”, individuals who have lost all or part of their beliefs but continue to identify with the community; “outsiders”, individuals who have not lost their faith but have ceased to identify with the religious group; and “true apostates”, individuals who have lost their religious beliefs and completely distanced themselves from the religious community.

2. Apostasy in the Roman Catholic Church

The Greek word *apostáision* (ἀποστάσιον) translates to “divorcement” or separation in English. It appears in three places in the New Testament, namely in the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Matthew (James Strong - Greek Language Dictionary *biblia-online*). According to Detlaff¹⁴, this word can also be understood as deviation, going back, or distancing oneself. Figuratively, this term can be interpreted as a departure from the proper

¹² D. Bromley, *Sociological perspectives*, op. cit.

¹³ M. Brinkerhoff, K. Burke, *Some notes on “falling from the faith”*, „Sociological Analysis” 1980, 41 (1), p. 41-54.

¹⁴ R. Detlaff, *Apostazja a formalny akt wystąpienia z Kościoła katolickiego w kanonicznym prawie karnym*, Poznań–Gdańsk–Warszawa 2016, p. 22.

situation. In Latin, the equivalent of the word “apostasy” is *defectio*, a term that denotes defection, separation, as well as *desertio*, which means abandonment or forsaking.

In the Old Testament, the concept of “apostasy” is used in a political and religious sense. It signifies the departure from Yahweh, rebellion against Him, departure from the Covenant and the Jewish religion, abandonment of the true and only God. In the New Testament, apostasy is understood as a departure from faith and abandonment of the Church¹⁵.

From 1983 to 2009, faithful individuals who wanted to officially leave the Church would submit a so-called “Formal Act of Defection from the Catholic Church” (*Actus formalis defectionis ab Ecclesia Catholica*). As a result, their personal data would be removed from parish registers, and they would be officially considered excluded from the community of believers. However, on October 26, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI modified the Code of Canon Law, rendering this act and its associated procedure no longer valid¹⁶. Currently, in Poland, the General Decree of the Polish Episcopal Conference is in force. It contains guidelines regarding the procedure for carrying out the so-called apostasy.

A person who is leaving the community of believers should submit a statement of intent to leave the Church at their local parish. The statement should include personal information of the apostate, the date and parish of baptism (if the baptism took place in a different parish, a copy of the baptismal certificate should be attached), as well as the reasons for breaking the communion with the Church. The statement should also include information about the voluntary nature of this act and awareness of the consequences it entails. On the part of the parish priest, to whom the person submits the statement of intent, there lies the verification of personal data and conducting a caring conversation to understand the reasons for departure and try towards persuading the person to reconsider their decision to leave the Church. Subsequently, the parish priest is obliged to send a copy of the statement of intent and a copy of the baptismal certificate to the curia of their diocese. After verifying the documentation, the ordinary recommends to the parish priest of the baptismal parish to make the appropriate entry in the baptismal register¹⁷.

3. Rite of passage

A question which arises is whether the experience of apostasy reveals traces of a ritual and, what is more, whether it can be thought of in terms of a rite of passage.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Omnium in Mentem of the supreme pontiff Benedit XVI on several amendments to the code of Canon Law*, 2009, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20091026_codex-iuris-canonici.html.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

Arnold van Gennep¹⁸, the populariser of the concept, distinguished three major stages in a rite of passage. The first involves separation from the previous world, a metaphorical death, the next is a transition (liminality), a moment of realisation that major life events transform the mode of being, and the last one is incorporation, a step into the new world¹⁹. Van Gennep²⁰ made a point that in specific instances some stages are considered more important, thus more elaborated than others.

The focal point of the rite of passage is the transition stage during which social hierarchies may be reversed or dissolved and traditions called into question. The moment of liminality may undermine future outcomes thus creating fluid situations which enable new institutions or customs to arise²¹.

Szokolczai²² argues that we can look at any experience of change through the lenses of a rite of passage and impose a structure drawn from the evidence of culture studies attributed to van Gennep and Turner. The experience of change is organised as a sequence where there is obligatory separation, leaving behind previous routines, practices, or forms of behaviour, followed by the moment of initiation, where the future is uncertain and anything can happen, completed with transition or incorporation of the new mode of existence by way of imitation. A successful passage leads to a change of identity from the old one to the new one. It thus requires an order, because it must guarantee completion, so that it can be followed by imitation.

The change of identity seen as a rite of passage is a transformative event in life because it questions and cancels previously taken for granted beliefs and certainties. It forces people to reflect on their past experiences and life.

The experience of liminality thus transforms the mode of being. By placing an individual in between or at the threshold, we let new phenomena to emerge.

Grimes²³, on the other hand, offers a more nuanced perspective on the experience of change claiming that not every passage in life is a rite. "We undergo passages, but we enact rites". Rites need specific time and place.

¹⁸ A. Van Gennep, *The rites of passage*, op. cit.

¹⁹ Ibidem; A. Szokolczai, *Liminality and experience structuring transitory situations and transformative events*, [in:] *Breaking boundaries. Varieties of liminality*, eds. A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, H. Wydra, New York, Oxford 2015, p. 11-38.

²⁰ A. Van Gennep, *The rites of passage...*, op. cit.

²¹ A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, H. Wydra, *Introduction: liminality and cultures of change*, „International Political Anthropology” 2009, 2 (1), p. 3-4; A. Szokolczai, *Liminality and experience: structuring transitory situations and transformative events*, „International Political Anthropology” 2009, 2 (1), p. 141-172.

²² A. Szokolczai, *Liminality and experience...*, op. cit.

²³ R. Grimes, *Deeply into the bone. Re-inventing rites of passages*, Barkley, Los Angeles, London 2000, p. 5.

Often they can be named: puja (Hindu worship), bas mitzvah (the Jewish puberty rite for girls), kalacakra (a Tibetan rite of empowerment). The term rite, then, refers to a set of actions intentionally practiced and widely recognized by members of a group. Rites are differentiated, even segregated, from ordinary behavior. Often they are classified as “other” than ordinary experience and assigned a place apart from such activities²⁴.

So, a rite of passage corresponds to a set of symbol-laden actions which lead one safely and memorably through a dangerous zone. In life we go through various passages. Some of them, such as birth, coming of age, marriage or death are anticipated and uniform but require a rite to successfully complete them. However, there are other passages such as the start of school, abortion, illness, divorce, or job loss which are less regularly managed as a ritual. Such events, when they happen unexpectedly, are undergone without the benefit of a ritual. Noteworthy, rites belong to the oldest forms of human activity and their primary function was to unify and integrate. They also provided matrix for other cultural activities such as art, medicine, or education. Undoubtedly, every major step in human life, whether traditional, collective, or recently invented and personal, is overlaid by a template, a form of ritual which we as humans want to fit in.

4. Religious identity

A successful rite of passage leads to a change of identity²⁵. As Joseph²⁶ indicates in his book, religious and ethnic identities endow human life with a fundamental meaning. They inform about our origin but also about the direction we take in life. Acting as individuals but also as members of groups we identify with names which provide us with stories we can adhere to and follow. Religion and ethnicity feed the human mind and imagination with the deepest beliefs about life, universe, and everything else. In many cultures they are bound with reproduction because they determine who can marry whom or whether endogamy or exogamy is an acceptable norm. In Europe starting from the fourth century on, for over 1000 years Christian religion was the sole provider of the sense of identity. Interestingly, in medieval Europe religion functioned as a linguistically unifying but also a divisive force because it bound Christianity with the Latin language, the Islamic world with Arabic, and Jews with Hebrew²⁷. “Identifying

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 28.

²⁵ A. Szalkolczai, *Liminality and experience...*, op. cit.

²⁶ J. E. Joseph, *Language and identity. National, Ethnic, Religious*, New York 2004.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 173

where strangers where from, based on the sort of Latin they spoke (or did not speak), was a matter of life and death”²⁸.

Surprisingly or not the last 40 years in Western Europe has been marked by a substantial decline of Christian identities, which contrasts with the strengthening of religious identities taking place in other parts of the world. Christian worship at some point gained in Eastern Europe and in parts of Asia, countries where it had been suppressed under the communist regime. It has also become popular in parts of Africa or South-East Asia, where Islam or Buddhism had been the dominant religions²⁹.

In turn, research in religious identity in American society brings to light a perspective in which religious identity is not a stable, ascriptive phenomenon. It is often reported that people switch religious traditions leaving behind what they were raised in³⁰. What is more, the switch which mostly interests scholars is the movement towards a category of religious “none.” Interestingly, since 1990 a growing number of Americans have chosen “no religion” in national surveys since 1990 (i.e., “nones”) (General Social Survey). Despite this, the size of the increase is still unclear and requires more thorough research³¹. It remains unclear who religious “nones” are with respect to religiosity and why they claim no religious preference. Originally the switch was observed in mainline Protestantism³². According to the authors of the research, the shift towards rejection of religious identity is a matter of short-term instability of religious preferences and the so-called religious “nones” are in fact “liminars” standing between the religious and the secular³³. Another possible interpretation is that this group of people have decided to remain in a liminal

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 176.

³⁰ D. E. Sherkat, *Leaving the faith: testing theories of religious switching using survival models*, „Social Science Research” 1991, 20 (2), pp. 171-187; D. E. Sherkat, J. Wilson, *Preferences, constraints, and choices in religious markets: an examination of religious switching and apostasy*, „Social Forces” 1995, 73(3), pp. 993-1026; C. Smith, D. Sikkink, *Social predictors of retention in and switching from the religious faith of family of origin: another look using religious tradition self-identification*, „Review of Religious Research” 2003, 45(2), p. 188-206.

³¹ K. D. Dougherty, R. B. R. Johnson, Edward C. Polson, *Recovering the lost: remeasuring U.S. religious affiliation*, „Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2007, 46, p. 483-499; T. Smith, K. Seokho, *The vanishing protestant majority*, „Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2005, 44, p. 211-223.

³² D. R. Hoge, B. Johnson, D. A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The religion of mainline protestant baby boomers*, Louisville, Ky 1994; W. C. Roof, *Spiritual marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*, Princeton, N. J 1999.

³³ Ch. Lim, R. D. Putnam, C. A. MacGregor, *Secular and liminal: discovering heterogeneity among religious nones*, „Journal for the scientific study of religion” 2010, 49 (4), p. 596-618.

status throughout their lives. Labels such as “the spiritual but not religious,” “believing without belonging,” “religious seekers,” “unchurched believers,” “tinkerers,” “fuzzy fidelity,” and “religious privatists” suggest that religious identities cannot be reduced to sets of religious categories that are often used in survey research on religion³⁴.

5. Leaving religion as a letting go experience in narratives about apostasy. Research-based findings

The conducted study was meant to uncover the perspectives and viewpoints held by the individuals who decided to formally leave the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. The material discussed hereafter is based on biographical interviews with apostates³⁵ supplemented with more recent posts published on “Apostazja 2020” Facebook group following the question whether the experience of apostasy can be considered a form of rite of passage. The participants willingly shared their stories related to this experience, discussing the process of apostasy and its impact on their lives.

In the present discussion we focus on the template symptoms of apostasy experience, i.e., what meanings people attach to it and why others are eager to follow it. We try to determine whether this experience has a symbolic dimension, whether the procedure of apostasy with its stages lies anywhere near liminality, experience which brings transformative results.

Furthermore, the collected material allows for the examination of resources present during the specific interview and the biographical information disclosed by the interviewee³⁶. Narrative analysis focuses on exploring the meaning constructions conveyed by the participants during the construction of their stories, in this case, their

³⁴ R. N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*, Berkeley 1985; G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging*, Oxford, Cambridge, Mass 1994; R. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not religious: understanding unchurched America*, Oxford New York 2001; B. Greer, W. C. Roof, *Desperately seeking Sheila: locating religious privatism in American society*, „Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 1992, 31, p. 346-352; W. C. Roof, *A generation of seekers: the spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation*, San Francisco 1993; I. Storm, *Halfway to heaven: four types of fuzzy fidelity in Europe*, „Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2009, 48(4), p. 702-18; D. Voas, *The rise and fall of fuzzy fidelity in Europe*, „Eur Sociol Rev” 2009, 25, p. 155-16; R. Wuthnow, *After the baby boomers: how twenty- and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion*, Princeton 2007.

³⁵ Collected in 2021 and for the purpose of the current paper translated into English.

³⁶ S. Taylor, K. Littleton, *Biografie w rozmowie. Narracyjno-dyskursywne podejście badawcze*, „Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej” 2010, vol. VI, no 2, p. 103-121.

experiences of apostasy. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, emphasizes the way conversations are constructed and the social consequences that different discursive presentations of social situations bring about³⁷. Biography is understood here as a construction that the narrator creates for the purpose of conversation, using previously presented versions and interpretations from the broader discursive environment³⁸.

We believe that by applying narrative-discursive analysis, it is possible to explore the commonalities in the biographical accounts of the participants, such as commonly accepted interpretations and life trajectories that are perceived as typical. Additionally, this approach allows us to examine the work of identity through which these available interpretations are accepted, rejected, and (re-)negotiated, becoming resources for the construction of personal identity that accommodates specific biographical events and life situations of the speaker. This approach thus offers the opportunity to study the social nature of biographical discourse³⁹.

5.1 Meanings and interpretations of apostasy experience

Participants attributed various meanings to apostasy. However, for the majority, it was a **formality** since they had not been participating in the Catholic rituals for a long time. To illustrate, let us quote selected utterances:

“I don’t feel anything special about it, I mean, it’s just a typical administrative formality to take care of.”

Another equally important meaning associated with the act of apostasy was a manifestation of the disapproval of the institutional Church.

“...it didn’t really change anything, so I just manifested that I disagree with something.”

“I’m saying all this in the context of opposing the dominant position of an institution over which there is no control, and also opposing the blatant violation of law and constitution.”

There were also voices expressing the need for life organization.

“I’m also at a stage where I’m organizing many things in my life, changed jobs, getting a divorce, returning from emigration, a lot of changes... My father passed away. I have this need to organize my life, it was important for me not to be a part of this institution.”

³⁷ S. Kvale, *Prowadzenie wywiadów*, transl. A. Dziuban, Warszawa 2012, p. 182-184.

³⁸ S. Taylor, K. Littleton, *Biografie w rozmowie...*, op. cit.

³⁹ Ibidem.

Many people signalled that they didn't want to be part of the statistics or counted among the group of believing Catholics, indicating a strong need for formal disconnection from the Church and a desire to communicate this to the world.

"...no more contributing to those statistics, so someone could say that 99% of Poles are Catholics."

"...I don't want to be stuck in those structures and be a part of statistics."

"Such a feeling, that it left a trace. I hadn't been involved in church life before and I felt the need to communicate that I don't agree with what's happening, and the act of apostasy gave me a very good opportunity to express this lack of acceptance loudly."

In several interviews and Facebook posts we can find more emotional opinions about the experience of apostasy. It is demonstrated when participants highlight the feelings of freedom, lightness, joy, peace, satisfaction, and pride. The sense of liberation exemplifies the metaphor of captivity suggested by Bromley (1998). One person said that after disconnecting from the Church, they moved to the bright side of power. Individuals also indicated that they have been living in harmony with themselves since then. Some signalled the relief which accompanied the moment of apostasy and the realisation that the institution they had been brought up in took their personal freedom away.

"Right after the act of apostasy, I felt a great relief, in the sense that from today onwards I live in greater harmony with myself, I'm more genuine in what I do."

"A sense of relief, well, I know, joy, let's just say I felt like I won the lottery, that kind of freedom. "

"I feel free! And peaceful, fulfilled!"

"When submitting my statement, I had problems, it ended with me slamming the door and complaining to the diocese. That slam (by the way, not entirely intentional - emotions got the better of me a bit) was the moment when I realized that something had let go inside me, and that ingrained attitude of subservience, instilled in me since childhood by everyone around, disappeared."

"For me, it was a liberating act of breaking away from an institution that I perceive as criminal, anti-human, and harmful to the state. I didn't undergo any spiritual transformation because I never allowed myself to be drawn into the toxic fumes of religion".

"...in all of this, I finally found myself, I found peace".

"I'm definitely proud that I made this decision".

"Honestly, for me [...] it was maybe a bit of satisfaction".

“I will have some momentary satisfaction that it’s finally done”.

“...I thought that when I sort of moved to the bright side of power, and maybe I’ll make them realize, that they’ll start thinking too”.

“At that time, I felt very good. As if I had just closed something important”.

“»I used to work in a shelter. Parents would come there for the holidays, take their children home. And after the holidays, they would bring them back. Those children had hope, and then tears in their eyes because their mother had left them at the shelter again... And it’s the same with Jesus when you only go to church on holidays«. **(a story told by a priest during Church service)**. That’s when I realized about this big dark cloud that was inside me. Years of guilt, shame. Years of manipulation... Terrible. That’s when the thought came to me that it’s over. Between me and the Catholic Church - it’s a closed chapter. I read how to unregister from this temple of decay. And destroying human, often child, psychology”.

5.2 Discourse community

The experience of apostasy unites people of the same ideological stance but also leads to the emergence of discourse. We can thus stipulate that apostates form so-called “discourse communities”, which, in Bakhtin’s⁴⁰ words, make up the society in which we live. “Discourse can colonize the members of discourse communities, taking over domains of thought by means of ideology”⁴¹.

Members of apostasy groups thus subscribe in whole or part to the statements which are part of the discourse. Hence, in the narratives we can trace commonalities or recurring themes such as an extremely negative opinion about the Catholic Church as an institution and a force which leaves an indelible mark on society. The Church was also widely criticised for influencing politics, specifically in the realm of morality. The decision to make abortion law in Poland stricter or the discrimination of LGBT+ community were the last straw. Other commonly criticized themes were, among others, privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church officials, catechism classes in public schools or a very close alliance between the Church and the state in Poland.

“And I don’t hide that we got to 2020, where things went a bit too far. And I think it was the last straw, what happened in the fall, when the Tribunal ruled, ruled on the abortion ban in Poland. Add to that all the priests’ statements, earlier the Sekielski brothers’ movies. All of that started to build up”.

⁴⁰ M. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the novel*, [in:] *The Dialogic imagination*, ed. M. Holquist, transl. M. Holquist, C. Emerson, Austin 1981, p. 259-422.

⁴¹ Little, Jordens, Sayers, *Discourse communities...*, op. cit., p. 61.

“The turning point is somewhere the crackdown on LGBT”.

“The final chord was the church wedding. And that tipped the scale”.

“I hope this will be a political statement, as I said, and somewhere, when I talked to someone, that this is also the only thing I can do to express the political situation in the country”.

“To do this civil disobedience, simply”.

The Church’s actions were described as “forcing themselves into people’s lives,” “brainwashing”, “manipulation”, “persecution”, and one person mentioned “arrogance, bullying, and rudeness”. The Church was referred to as a criminal organization, a political party, and something that merges with power.

“...while that, in fact, a political-financial institution, like the Catholic Church, that actually forces itself into every aspect of every person’s life in this country”.

“It’s a good introduction to brainwashing, from childhood. I’m thinking that a child has a more malleable psyche and can be more easily manipulated this way. It’s an easier object of manipulation, and at this point, you tell the child that if they’re naughty, they’ll go to hell, yes. This is what repels me in religion, not just Catholic, but mainly, that it’s all about manipulating guilt and scaring with punishments”.

“As a child, I experimented and searched for that divine element within myself. I was expelled from religious classes several times for inappropriate questions, and that was my first discouragement from the Catholic Church. I didn’t find a need for Yahweh or any other god within me. What the church and the politicians did with this faith cries out to Mother Earth. Arrogance, greed, and an absolute lack of respect for all development, human rights, science-phobia, and numerous other phobias of this institution are terrifying”.

“...the Church has a huge influence on sexuality and manipulates people’s sexuality because it’s a part that gives them power over the faithful”.

“Right now, the Church is just a regular political party”.

“...that I can’t belong to an organization that, for me, is a criminal organization”.

“Meanwhile, of course, the recent political events, the marriage of the throne and the altar, all that’s happening, covering up paedophilia, that arrogance, bullying”.

Not only was the Catholic church, its impact on society and its close alliance with the state the object of criticism. The research also demonstrated a tendency towards secularization and a strong criticism of religion as such. Among the interviewees it was quite common to refer to Karl Marx’s metaphor that religion is the opium of the people. Other voices were also negative in tone.

“On the other hand, I believe that religion is somewhat like opium for the people. Through religion, there are so many conflicts and various catastrophes, problems”.

“However, I believe that religion is a bit like opium for the people. And I think that religion causes a lot of devastation”.

“...there’s so much destruction, so many negative aspects of religiosity, that I don’t think the consolation that religion provides, especially because it’s completely illusory”.

“From my point of view, religion is illogical. There’s no basis for it to exist”.

“For many years, I’ve had the opinion that religion was invented a long time ago to control people”.

“...I consider every religion bad”.

“...religion relieves one from the duty of thinking”.

“Religion suppresses learning”.

“Furthermore, everything is dictated by this, because I have the impression that the rulers are guided by what the clergy says, and this religion is everywhere in great abundance”.

“...for many people, this religion can be necessary because it provides them with peace, gives them values to learn”.

“Addictions turn to religion, and that’s their way. They hold onto it as if it were an anchor”.

However, there were few voices saying that religion can help people in difficult circumstances.

“I think it’s something very human. Personally, I don’t feel the need to identify with any religion. However, I know that it’s human and probably somewhat necessary, especially for some”.

The collected material provides access to shared criticisms, which can be considered as templates or models that one can adopt. Among the commonalities, there are critical opinions about the Roman Catholic Church that are widely accepted within the discourse community. These opinions include:

- a strong and inviolable position in society,
- an alliance of religion and politics,
- the imposition of morality on people,
- the limitation of people’s personal freedom and rights,
- the suppression of learning,
- covering instances of pedophilia,
- brainwashing and manipulation.

Furthermore, we have identified several collective experiences and feelings associated with the Church that many can relate to, including:

- suppressed freedom of thought and expression,
- abused trust in the institution,
- fear of Church authorities,
- anger at the injustices of the Church,
- contestation of the entrenched structures and teachings of the Church.

5.3. Apostasy as a letting-go ritual

The experience of apostasy bears traces of a rite of passage, thanks to the existence of a discourse community that safely guides a person through a challenging transition to a new mode of existence.

Testimonies of apostates reveal that the apostasy experience is neither uniform nor straightforward. However, it can be stipulated that apostasy has been transformative for those involved, even if some considered it merely a formality. Many of them had been away from the Church and religion for a long time, so apostasy helped them symbolically seal their past and attain a sense of personal integrity. Additionally, for many, apostasy represented a new beginning in life, viewed through emotional lenses. Presenting the act to the priest in the local parish required strength and courage as it challenged social hierarchies and traditions. Therefore, the perceptions that people felt relief, joy, and freedom after apostasy seem justified.

The experience of transitioning from a religious to a secular identity involves three stages:

- separation from the past, marked by apostates providing lengthy, critically evaluated descriptions of memories connected with the Church,
- initiation, which involves taking steps toward a new mode of existence, such as visiting the local parish and conversing with the priest,
- incorporation, signifying the acceptance of a new way of life through imitation, as interviewees and respondents admitted to changes in their lives since apostasy.

The visit to the local parish and the meeting with the priest represent a liminal moment, a threshold that empowers individuals to embrace a secular lifestyle. This is evident in the posts apostates share on the Facebook group, featuring stamped apostasy acts immediately after their visit to the local parish. These initiatives signify personal victory and a fresh start in life.

Notably, the findings and the surge of interest in apostasy in Poland appear to contradict the preliminary research conclusions of Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam⁴² on the rejection of religious identity and the category of religious “nones” in American society. The authors of the research suggest that the shift towards rejecting religious identity should be seen as temporary instability among those who are in transition between two identities. What we have observed is a steadfast shift towards a secular identity, with a complete rejection of religiosity. Most research participants and respondents to my Facebook post reject both the Roman Catholic Church and the beliefs it represents.

Conclusions

The apostasy experiences discussed in the collected material align closely with the symbolism of the exhibition “*Apostasia: rituals of letting go.*” They exemplify a strategy of resignation and departure, representing an act of resistance against institutional violence. One coping mechanism is to reject the institution outright and sever all ties with it. Apostates we contacted emphasized the importance of meticulously managing the process of leaving the Church, ensuring that the change in their membership status is officially noted in the parish register.

The portrayed exit is definitive and resolute, indicating that those involved navigate the transition from a religious to a secular identity without hesitation. They display confidence in their decision. While for many, apostasy is primarily a formality, for others, it signifies a breakthrough and a new beginning in life.

What stands out is a well-thought-out process of leaving not just the Church as an institution but also the associated beliefs. For the majority, apostasy involves a departure from everything associated with Church membership, including rituals and beliefs, as well as the broader religious-influenced culture, values, and attitudes. The contacted apostates strongly criticize the Church’s influence on worldviews.

The research material also exhibits signs of a discourse community, where shared statements and opinions are influenced by a particular ideology that others can identify with. It serves as a template for others to follow.

In conclusion, the apostasy experiences revealed in the biographies under study mirror a prototypical rite of passage, encompassing separation, initiation, and incorporation. The narratives and accounts, for the majority, reflect a transition process.

⁴² *Secular and liminal...*, op. cit.

Even if many considered apostasy a formality, the complexity, depth, and emotional involvement of the narratives prove otherwise. Leaving the religion in which one was raised requires effort and determination. The contacted apostates have admitted that the decision to apostatize was accompanied by thorough analysis and serious consideration, but they made it confidently, knowing that the change of identity from religious to secular should be officially recognized.

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