

# **Becoming a ‘real’ Catholic: Polish migrants and lived religiosity in the UK and Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

The effect of migration on religiosity is a well-documented theme in the sociology of religion. Despite the rapid growth in the number of Polish Catholics in the UK and Ireland, little has been written on the spiritual and religious aspects of their journeys. This paper is based on the authors’ ethnographic fieldwork with Polish migrants in the UK and Ireland. Drawing on qualitative interviews and participant observation with Polish migrants of various ages and class backgrounds, we identify three possible outcomes for individuals of Catholic faith being transplanted to a secular context: first, Catholic Poles continue to practice in the same way as they did in their home country; second, they begin to question their faith and leave the church altogether; and third, they take the opportunity to explore their faith in a flexible and relatively independent manner. We argue that the final possibility leads to the privatisation and intellectualisation of their Catholicism. Thus, the experience of migration gives some Polish Catholics the freedom and courage to question their beliefs but it does not necessarily make them irreligious. In their own words, they ‘believe in the way they have always wanted to but did not dare’. In conclusion, this article highlights the secondary benefits of migration for the personal experience of religious faith.

**Keywords:** Polish migrants, Catholicism, lived religiosity, privatisation of faith, Britain, Ireland

## **Introduction**

Polish migration to Britain in any significant numbers dates back to the Second World War. Largely as a result of the Yalta Conference in 1945, the Poles who had come to Britain in 1940 had little choice but to remain (Stachura) and a considerable community of Polish émigrés was established. Another defining moment in the history of Polish emigration to Britain came in the aftermath of the 2004 enlargement of the European Union. Over a decade later, the Polish population is estimated at almost 600,000, Polish has become the second most commonly spoken

language in the UK (Census), and many Poles have decided to call Britain home (Sherwood). A similar story unfolded in Ireland, albeit within a much shorter period of time. As Ireland was one of only three existing EU members to allow new EU citizens full access to the labour market (Barrett and Duffy), the immigration flow peaked between 2004 and 2007. Poles constituted a significant proportion of that flow and it is estimated that over 200,000 Polish nationals now reside in Ireland (Census).

The presence of Polish migrants has transformed Catholic parishes around the UK. A lot of the attention focused on the high levels of religiosity among the Polish population and the media cast Polish Catholics as unexpected saviours of faith. Newspaper headlines such as ‘Devout Poles Show Britain How to Keep the Faith’ (Bates) and ‘New Wave of Poles Bolsters “Catholic Britain”’ (Brown) appeared frequently and they seemed to confirm the hopes of Poland’s ‘great apostolic assignment’ in Europe (Casanova, 68). Similarly, in Ireland Polish Catholics were promptly acknowledged by the national press with articles titled ‘Polish priests fill gap in vocations’ (Kelleher) and ‘Saints, Scholars and Polish Priests’ (Holmquist). Unsurprisingly, the consequences of these mass arrivals in the UK and Ireland have also been regularly examined in scholarly publications (e.g. Burrell; Kropiwiec and King-O’Riain). However, despite the inextricable historical and cultural link between Polish national identity and Catholicism, few publications engage specifically with the subject of religion. This is puzzling if we consider the centrality of Catholicism to Polish identity. To date very few publications have addressed the connection between Eastern European migrants and Catholicism in the UK (Davis et al.; Trzebiatowska; Dunlop and Ward). The little research that exists focuses on the institutional aspect of Catholic faith of migrants in England and Scotland. A report commissioned by the Dioceses of Brentwood, Southwark and Westminster concluded that the Catholic Church assists migrants in practical matters, such as finding a job, accommodation, legal advice, English courses, while simultaneously functioning as “a harbour of hope and worship” for the economically vulnerable individuals (Davis et al. 32). The report hints at misunderstandings between the host clergy and the ethnic chaplains and their congregations, such as the landlord-tenant relationship between the locals and the newcomers, and insufficient appreciation of the work performed by ethnic clergy (Davis et al. 34). This theme is echoed in a study of Polish Catholics’ relationship with churches in Scotland (Trzebiatowska) which underscores the conflicting agendas of Polish and Scottish lay Catholics and clergy and suggests that due to the strong ethnic element to Polish Catholicism, it does not

travel easily across borders. Another recent study of Polish priests in Ireland further demonstrates this complexity by investigating the negotiation between their objective status as mobile religious professionals and their subjective migrant identities (Piekosz). Whilst lay Polish migrants also created “parallel congregations” (Ebaugh and Chafetz) within the structures of the Irish Catholic Church, it seems that, unlike in the UK (Wynn-Jones and Miller), they were never expected to blend in immediately with the already established Catholic congregations. Polish masses are delivered in the majority of parishes and Polish priests and faithful have become a standard feature of many Catholic churches throughout Ireland (Gallagher). But even though the structural framework for Polish migrants is available, it is unclear how the experience of migration affects their personal religiosity.

### **The Mythical Uniqueness of Polish Catholicism**

The taken-for-granted link between Polish national and religious identities can be largely attributed to the mythology surrounding Poland’s history and the belief in the country’s special mission in the world. As Zubrzycki helpfully points out, Polish identity rests on ‘two different but reinforcing myths: that of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity and of its messianic martyrdom’ (Zubrzycki, 26). Historians, such as Brian Porter-Szucs, have rightly described the link between Polish national identity and Catholicism as a ‘tenuous’ and ‘ideologically loaded conceptual framework that gives specific meaning to the past and helps determine what is remembered and what is forgotten’ (291). But while this notion of Polishness is indeed a careful ideological construct, the largely unquestioned essence of the myth continues to inform the nation’s understandings of its place in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Two underlying components comprise Polish religiosity: the historical plight of Poland (particularly between 1775-1989); and the enduring folk nature of Polish Catholicism whereby the ‘rituals of the Church have punctuated the calendar of the Polish peasantry for centuries’ (Porter, 290). The two are mutually reinforcing. As a state Poland was erased ‘from the European map for more than a century and could thus never be “taken for granted” (Zubrzycki, 24). The two components manifest themselves most clearly through continuing fondness for rituals which mark the most important moments in the calendar year. Numerous days are celebrated as both religious *and* national holidays. Polish society continues to be characterized by ‘church-based

religiosity', reproduced by the Catholic Church and the family which remain the key socializing agents (Marianski,100). Levels of religious belief and practice in the twenty-first century Poland remain relatively robust (Marianski) with two thirds of the population attending church every Sunday, and over three quarters considering themselves 'religious' or 'very religious' (Jarmoch, 36).<sup>2</sup> The great majority of Poles still heavily rely on the religious ritual as a meaning-giving activity, officially managed by the Catholic Church (Borowik and Doktor, 129). The institution validates their identity through ritual. Even those with minimal or no involvement in regular religious practices attribute importance to rites of passage such as christening, marriage, or funeral, and they very rarely opt out altogether. Non-conformism entails potential difficulties, such as ostracism and alienation, at school and possibly in later life. According to the Polish sociologist, Janusz Marianski, the truth about Polish religiosity lies somewhere between conformity and genuine faith, as both figure prominently in individuals' motives for practicing religion (70). In what follows, we demonstrate how these faith models operate in the context of migration.

### **Ultra-religious migrants?**

The act of leaving one's country for another in itself could be viewed as a "theologizing experience" (Smith) as migrants fall back on faith and religious communities to assuage the process of transition into the unknown through practical and spiritual means (Herberg). Religious practice and involvement have been shown to act as a "refuge" for new arrivals (Hirschman), and provide a "balm for the immigrant's soul" in terms of emotional well-being and mental health (Connor). But there is another issue at play here. If a migrant religion is considered problematic and a hindrance to integration, as is the case with Islam in Europe, there is an additional incentive to cultivate and protect it from the hostile context. But if it fits in with the host country, as is the case with white Christians of a European descent in the UK and Ireland, it is not perceived as a threat. In the UK and Ireland Polish Catholics now constitute the second most religious migrant group, however they largely avoid stigmatisation on religious grounds. Consequently, they do not need to engage in a strong version of "cultural defence" - reinforcing religious identity and practice as a response to an external threat - as part of their cultural transition to a new country (Bruce). This relatively safe position grants Polish migrants the ability to explore their native faith more freely, or abandon it altogether.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, unlike in the United States where religious

participation may provide an access point to the mainstream (Foner and Alba), in the UK religion can rarely be used to advance one's social standing because it tends to be treated as a private matter and overt displays of religiosity are discouraged. In Ireland, shared Catholic background may be more advantageous, though we found no evidence of this. In other words, religious participation for Polish migrants in the UK and Ireland may bring initial benefits but once the needs are satisfied, it takes a backseat in favour of more pressing demands of everyday life. Therefore migration might be a theologizing experience only temporarily. Indeed, quantitative studies have challenged the theologizing thesis (Connor; Massey and Higgins) by showing a drop in religious participation among immigrants. For example, Massey and Higgins demonstrate that

although people do not change their religious beliefs when they migrate internationally, they do change their religious behaviours. Settling into the country of destination is necessarily a time-consuming process that involves learning a new language, mastering a strange culture and working hard to earn money and get ahead economically, activities that necessarily compete with religious practice for the scarce time at immigrants' disposal (1387).

This "alienating hypothesis" paints an alternative view of migrant religious practices. Social constraint, be it in their home country in the form of societal pressure, or in the host country in the form of prejudice, is necessary for the preservation of collective religiosity. For Polish Catholics in the UK and Ireland this constraint weakens and individual agency becomes crucial in the absence of a homogenous religious *and* national culture. The strength of a migrant's belief emerges as an important factor affecting their religious participation in the host country (Massey and Higgins 1372). Polish Catholics with a deeply embedded belief and practice system are predisposed to cultivate their faith regardless of their surroundings, while the passive, nominal ones lack this internalised mechanism, which makes their faith vulnerable in a pluralistic and secular destination.

As increasing numbers of Polish migrants decide to take up permanent residency in the UK and Ireland, it is important to find out more about the fate of their "cultural religion" (Demerath) in a markedly different setting. What remains unexplored in scholarly and media accounts is the "religious agency" (Leming) of Polish migrants. How do they practice Catholicism in the UK and Ireland (if at all), and how do they make sense of their ethnic religion once the social pressure to practice is largely absent? In order to fill this gap, we compare and contrast the experiences of

lived religion of Polish migrants in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Despite the historical and cultural differences between the three contexts, there appear to be three avenues of religious agency for Polish Catholics: continuing to practice in the same way as they did in their home country; questioning their faith and eventually leaving the church altogether; and taking the opportunity to explore their Catholicism in a flexible and relatively independent manner. The final possibility potentially leads to the privatisation and intellectualisation of faith. All three options require different degrees of individual agency: ceasing religious involvement and becoming a 'nominal' Catholic migrant puts hardly any burden on the individual, while exploring one's faith in a new country without a ready-made cultural framework demands the most virtuosity and effort. As a result of the latter, cultural religion becomes less significant than personal faith.

### **A note on the theoretical framework**

This article is broadly framed in the structure-agency debate within sociology. The key question revolves around the extent to which religious individuals are free to act otherwise (Giddens) and if so, what they do with that newly found capability for agency after their move to the UK and Ireland. The persistent issue in the discussion of how humans operate in the larger social order that is largely independent of them has been the imbalance in privileging norms and rules as independent determinants of individual behaviour on the one hand, and over-emphasising the power of individual agency on the other. This trend is evident in the works of all the much revered contemporary philosophers and social theorists of the past fifty years, such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, or Roy Bhaskar. Instead of relying on the dualism that pitches social structure against a lone individual, we prioritise the notion of 'the restless cascade of social relations' (King, 18) as a lens through which to comprehend our research participants' migrant Catholic trajectories. The argument we make in the following sections of this article is that the original constraints faced by Polish Catholic migrants fade away as they ease into the new context, only to be replaced by a new set of social relations which enable them to exercise religious or/and secular agency. To put it simply, we examine the relative durability of religious dispositions in light of the shift from a Catholic monopoly to a pluralistic and relatively secular country of destination. Polish migrants come to operate in an environment where their Catholicism becomes elective and requires them to take individual responsibility for beliefs and practices. Moving to the UK and Ireland acts as a litmus test for the stereotype of 'devout Poles'. The remainder of this

article demonstrates the varying impact of the migration experience on our participants' religious lives.

## **Methods**

The data in this article come from two separate qualitative research projects conducted between the years 2008-2013. The interview material from England and Scotland is drawn from a larger study of Polish priests and parishioners in Great Britain, carried out simultaneously in London, Nottingham, and Aberdeen. The Irish portion of the data comes from a project based in County Dublin. Both comprised interviews with Polish migrants, as well as participant observation at masses, social and cultural events. The projects were advertised at Polish masses by the parish priests and the researchers. Subsequently, the researchers approached potential volunteers after masses, at social gatherings, and in the Saturday Polish school run by clergy and staffed by lay women. Thus, the volunteers for the study came from several different sources, though all in some way connected to the Polish Catholic communities. Existing participants provided contact details for their acquaintances, which lead us to a snowball sample. While our sample is not representative, we have confidence in the data because a) starting the snowball in several different settings made the sample less homogenous, b) we reached data saturation across different sites, and c) the patterns that emerge from that data chime with the extant theories on migrant religiosity in the context of pluralism and choice.

The interviewees were asked to reflect on the questions of religious identity and everyday activities, migration experience, and relationship with the host culture. An open-ended, in-depth interviewing technique was employed to explore the meaning-making process from a migrant's perspective (Lamont and Swidler). In both projects participant observation provided a space to document migrants' engagement with religion, while semi-structured interviews enabled an open dialogue on their experience of shifting from the context of religious obligation to that of choice. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour on average and all were digitally recorded, transcribed and subsequently translated into English. Pseudonyms were used to ensure privacy. Overall, data from seventy-one interviews inform this article: ten from Scotland, twenty from England, and forty-one from the Republic of Ireland. All participants had been residents in the UK and Ireland for at least a year. 58 out of 71 interviewees were female. This imbalance reflects both the gender difference in religiosity among Polish Catholics (Jarmoch) and the

challenges of recruiting male respondents in both studies.<sup>4</sup>

### **Once a Catholic, always a Catholic**

Travelling faith has always been a significant feature of migration. New migration patterns have emerged in the last two decades (Favell), particularly within Europe as the fluidity of European borders has resulted in ethnic forms of indigenous faiths emerging in many countries (Leonard; Passarelli; Maher). This is evident in Ireland and the UK where Polish Catholicism travels across borders and migration offers Poles the opportunity to re-evaluate their faith. The active and progressive approach adopted by the Polish Catholic Church in facilitating the celebration of Polish Catholicism in different parts of the world has been a corner stone for the survival of migrants' faith, but most importantly provided an indispensable coping tool: "God, faith, it helps you survive" (Luckasz, 27, Ireland). Indeed, it is well documented that many migrants rely on faith and faith-based organisations to find their place in a host society (Levitt; Hirschman). The reception of 'new religions' or ethnic forms of traditional religions has been well documented in the US (Foner and Alba; Alba et al.) with only a small number of studies exploring this aspect in Ireland and the UK (Gray and O'Sullivan Lago; Trzebiatowska). In the latter case, the institutional response to Polish clergy and parishioners has varied between Ireland and the UK. In Ireland this group received a warm welcome so much so that Polish clergy and laity felt their religious, social and cultural needs were met by the host country (Piekosz, Gallagher). In the UK, however, Polish priests faced challenges juggling their culturally specific approach to parish duties with the expectation placed upon them to integrate and encourage almost immediate integration among the wider Polish community (Trzebiatowska). Polish clergy in both settings emphasised the need for migrants to practice Polish Catholic faith, which they saw as distinct from the Irish version, and superior to the variety they encountered in the UK (Gallagher, Piekosz, Grubka and Lisak). Inevitably, and regardless of the pushback from the religious institution in the receiving countries, this attitude has led to the creation of 'parallel congregations' (Numrich; Ebaugh and Chafetz) where migrants can continue to practice their faith in the same way as they did in Poland.

The growth in the number of Polish masses in Irish and UK parishes is a direct response to the needs of Catholic Poles in the host society. Migration did not impede Monika's (31, England) desire to maintain traditional religious practice: "When you move it to the British context, then we still stick to what we learned at home. It's not like my whole worldview changes because I've

come here”. Monika, like many other participants, pointed out that Polish religious services in England offer the advantage of being linguistically and ritually similar to those in Poland, thus enabling migrants to transition seamlessly between the sending and host societies. Olga (33, Scotland) felt that it would be difficult to understand and follow the format of religious services in English; she attended “church to relax and if I have to focus to understand, then it becomes a duty”. Polish migrants would not get the “same experience” (Aga, 33, Ireland), they argued, if they had to integrate into Irish or English Catholic congregations. Polish masses enable them to create a feeling of “home...culture...sentiment – Irish church is not the same” (Albin, 28, Ireland). Nonetheless, a small number of interviewees held radically different views. They explicitly preferred to celebrate mass in English as it allowed them to “re-discover your faith, almost anew” (Anna, 26, Scotland). According to these participants, religious services in English are much more “light-hearted” (Tomek, 52, Ireland) as opposed to “sad hymns and awful sermons [in Polish]. I either want to go to sleep or leave” (Anna, 26, Scotland).

Some migrants continue to practice their faith while also benefitting from an array of social and spiritual resources that Polish clergy and churches offer to lay people. Indeed, Roman (48, Ireland) explained that these “extras” are an added incentive to ensure migrants “stay connected to the church”. This should not necessarily be seen as cynical, or instrumental on either side. Magda (40, England) witnessed a similar situation in the UK but insisted that if people stay connected to God, irrespective of their motivations for attending church, this can only be a positive thing: “people go to church for different reasons because sometimes they wouldn’t go in Poland but they would start here for social reasons...”. Similarly, Barbara (40, England) believed it necessary to stay close to one’s faith in the new country. Religion helps to negotiate challenging life circumstances and people should “thank God for work, health, and for surviving the separation from their families”. Thus, the existence of Polish masses and the efforts invested in the formation of Polish congregations all perform a vital role in maintaining faith for those committed to institutionalised Catholicism. For others, the host country serves as a catalyst for questioning what has been taken for granted in Poland.

### **Catholics question faith**

There is some evidence that individuals move away from their faith after migrating (Massey; Yang; Tubergen). Migration presents many with new life prospects and opportunities, including

decisions on whether to become members of a faith community. This element of free choice was of particular concern to Polish priests, such as Father Marek (53, Ireland). He believed that migration presents a “serious moral problem” to Polish Catholics as they move away from structured religion and with it from a family tradition, which leads them to “behave differently”. He highlighted the lack of religious attendance, and in particular migrants’ relaxed attitude to confession. Polish Catholics in his parish offered various explanations for such behavior: “so, for example, ok I work very hard, I don’t have my proper house, my proper family, nobody is watching me”. This is problematic, he argued, because they “feel a bit more free” and this freedom eventually leads some to abandoning the church altogether.

This implicit social constraint present in the home country extends beyond strictly religious duties. In Poland the Catholic Church places great emphasis on celebrating faith as a family unit (Sztaba) whereby other family members unwittingly act as a Catholic panopticon to ensure compliance. This is the case so much so that Karol (26, Ireland) recalled feeling like “a black sheep” of his family because of his refusal to attend Sunday mass. In Ireland and the UK, migrants are no longer bound to be religiously active by familial obligation to the same degree. Olga (33, Scotland) explained that in Poland “religiosity is very strong”, and absence from religious services is noted by the community (except for large urban churches which are by nature more anonymous). She illustrated her point with this anecdote:

You have to go. And the brother didn’t go, just like my husband. Sunday morning, everyone is dressed up, waiting for him and he didn’t understand what they wanted from him. They made him go and he was bored. But they told him he had to. Everyone had to. Unless you’re sick. But here [in Scotland] you have no neighbours, nobody will pay any attention to it. Nobody to explain yourself to. Only the priest. The priest knows because he can see if someone isn’t there.

But the priest is powerless without the community’s inconspicuous support which is not automatically granted in the receiving context. The freedom associated with entering a new society provides migrants the opportunity to reconsider their religious practices and personal faith. As a result some turn away from the church. The relationship between many Polish people and Catholicism is deeply embedded in routine, yet in Ireland and the UK migrants have to pause and actively decide on the shape of their religious habitus. As Wojtek (21, Scotland) explained: “in

Poland you don't have to think about religion, you just do it. But here, you have to think because nobody will remind you. Here, you need to develop your own habits".

According to several participants, the "type of migrant" which moved to Ireland and the UK may explain why many abandon the church altogether. Existing studies have demonstrated repeatedly that the majority of Polish arrivals can be characterised as "labour migrants" (Roede; King O' Riain). Finding employment while negotiating a new social terrain may mean little time for religion, of course, but on the other hand, as we have shown above, some Catholics prioritise church attendance over double-time on Sundays. Martin (32, Ireland) explained that there is a generational difference at play: "we're young and we have to work". The pragmatic aspects associated with migration supersede individuals' need to maintain regular religious practice. The ramifications of the 2008 economic crisis in both Ireland and the UK meant that the job market became somewhat precarious, which for some results in sidelining religion.

Although generally not the case in Ireland, in the UK migrants felt the impact of secular values on their religious identities. Anna (26, Scotland) explained:

I was shocked when I discovered that my university friends thought religion was silly. Because in Poland you either believe or you don't but someone's religiosity is generally accepted. Here, religion seems to be one big idiocy. A group of people my age would see religion as absurd.

Upon arrival in the UK Polish migrants enter a relatively secular and multi-cultural landscape, while in Ireland they share the official religion of the population. This may go some way to explain why such overtly secularist attitudes of the host society were not a notable factor in the Irish case study. Although participants acknowledged variations in attitudes towards religion between themselves and the UK natives, the discrepancy was not explicitly mentioned as a factor deterring them from participating. The more significant element was the Polish clergy's attitude which caused some migrants to distance themselves from the church. Church in Poland is seen as hierarchical and separate from the laity – "every 'proboszcz' [trans.parish priest] would be the same. Talking about money and politics. This is not what I need here" (Irena, 31, England). Thus, it appears that some Polish priests continue this pattern in the host society: they privilege power struggles over nurturing people's religiosity. When asked about their perception of Polish clergy

and the work they do, Karol (26, Ireland) quickly retorted:

They have too much control. They tell people, order people, even in politics. I don't go to church to hear that. They say religion, follow God, have you seen a Polish church? Full of rich...Even here, it's the same, the same attitude, the same way, it's all about control, helping people: no.

Karol's observation points to the similarities between the church in Poland, and the sister churches in Ireland and the UK. For those like him, although not many in this sample, the hierarchical nature of the church and the divide between the clergy and the community are alienating. The economic exigencies of being a labour migrant coupled with basic struggles to adapt in the new society, and the absence of family network all add up. Without interpersonal incentives, yet under immediate economic pressure, some Poles drift away from religion as their mass attendance becomes less frequent.

### **Exploring Catholicism outside the institution**

And yet, contrary to the above-described scenario, there are certain Polish individuals who deliberately use their time in Ireland and the UK to explore Catholic faith in nuanced ways. Migration offers them the unusual opportunity to rediscover their Catholicism in a flexible and relatively independent manner. In some cases, the relationship between Polish clergy and migrants also takes on a new dimension in the host society. According to our participants, in Poland the hierarchical nature of the church and the role adopted by many of the clergy eradicated any meaningful connection between priests and laity. In the new religious and social landscape many interviewees spoke of fostering relationships with Polish clergy. Migrant priests became more accessible. As Zuzanna (55, England) said:

One Polish priest here was very clever and he came to visit. I could talk to him about some problems I had with my faith. In Poland I couldn't open up like that. Over there, everything just blends into the crowd. It's not this Polish, backward Catholicism, because once you get to know a priest, you can tell him a bit more, have the courage to discuss faith with him. In Poland you have this model of a priest, then a big big gap, and then the crowd.

Nothing in between. And here my faith is much more authentic because it's matured. You have to mature in your faith and here I have the opportunity to do it.

This open approach adopted by the clergy encourages migrants to engage with their faith and develop new and 'authentic' ways of believing and practicing. During our fieldwork, trust emerged as the key aspect of these newly formed relationships. Migrants were more comfortable to build personal relationships with priests in the new setting where rules of engagement are not pre-determined by tradition. Like many others, Olga (33, Scotland) felt that "trust...is the most important thing". She went on to explain: "he [the priest] knows all my problems and he's my role model". Olga's account provides an insight into the dramatic change in clergy-parishioner relationships in the context of migration. The clergy establish strong links with the congregation, which was vital for Zofia (27, Ireland) who appreciated their efforts: "The priests sees this is the kind of role that is needed in this community and they do it". According to our interviewees, even the knowledge that such pastoral support exist can be comforting.

The new cultural context creates conducive objective conditions for migrants to adopt a dynamic and proactive approach to religion. Irena (31, England) discovered the need to embrace multiculturalism and use Christianity, rather than Catholicism, as an umbrella term for personal faith:

Has my faith changed here? I think so. In Poland I was less open. Here, religion is also about the community, the multicultural community. I think it's more original here. It's more open and everyone is part of the group, no matter what they look like or come from. We have so many people here who come to this church but they are not necessarily Catholic – they identify as Christian and it's such an eye-opener for me.

Several interviewees chose to approach their faith in multiple ways. No longer confined to obligatory participation, migrants "opt in or out" (Gosia, 27, Ireland) of the church. The independence central to this process is in stark contrast to the way they had experienced religion prior to migration. Faced with the reality where neither belief nor belonging is mandatory, they explore "what sort of Catholic to be" (Justyn, 26, Ireland). As a result many migrants develop an 'à la carte' approach to Catholicism. For them the practical meaning of religion has changed dramatically since leaving Poland; it is now "not about being in church every week, getting my

hour ticked off and that's that" (Monika, 31, England), but rather it is "more important to act like a good Catholic, to set a good example for my kids, not to sit in church all the time and pray every day, and then do bad things...you have to be flexible, that's what I learned here" (Hannah, 39, England). In line with this deed-based approach to religiosity, moral behaviour outside of the church is seen by some as an acceptable substitute for attending religious services. Others place greater importance on private daily prayer, following the Commandments and leading a decent life. This is how Gosia (27, Ireland) understood her religiosity:

You get baptised and that, you know, but more regular sacraments I don't think so. But...I have my own beliefs and way of doing things. Does it make me less Catholic not getting the Eucharist or the sacrament of forgiveness? I don't think so.

This interview extract clearly demonstrates the fragmentation of the traditional definition of 'Polak Katolik'. The deeply personal nature of Gosia's faith may well make it invisible to others but no less valid in her eyes. Overall, while the goal of some Polish clergy in Ireland and the UK is to preserve Polish Catholicism, their target audience is far from homogenous in their spiritual needs. Migration acts as a catalyst for multiple expressions of Catholic faith, some of which separate from the institutional and national model.

## **Discussion**

Sociologists of religion have gone some way to address the complex ways in which migration impacts on faith (e.g. Ebaugh and Chafetz; Levitt; Warner). Migratory experience can have a theologising or an alienating effect on individuals' faith in certain host societies, and we argue that the religious behaviour of Polish Catholics in the UK and Ireland takes several different forms between these two ends of the spectrum. Polish Catholicism appears to have travelled with ease in the sense that the overall decline of church attendance in these countries created useful physical and spiritual spaces for migrants to inhabit. At the same time, once the element of immediate social constraint (Ellison and Sherkat) is removed, the individual is responsible for cultivating their own religiosity. This constitutes a challenging task for the majority as the Catholic Church in Poland is strictly hierarchical and religious faith of the laity is at best syncretic and at worst passive and confused (CBOS). The normative patterns and expectations become less relevant as the migrants' habitus begins to alter due to the new context and this shift frees up space for agency in the shaping

of their religious experiences. The extent to which this opportunity is taken up depends very much on the migrants' attitudes and predispositions formed over time in their home country.

Several configurations of relations between migrants and religion emerge from the data: some continue to practice in the same way as they did prior to migration; others begin to question their faith and eventually leave the church altogether; and others still seize the chance to explore Catholicism in a flexible and relatively independent manner. A handful of individuals embark on a creative spiritual journey through engaging in religious 'virtuosity' (Bourdieu) to varying degrees. It would appear that this process implies a weakening, or complete severing of the link between Polishness and Catholicism. The two remain central to migrants' identity but they are experienced and expressed separately.<sup>5</sup> The freedom of choice in this regard liberates nominal Polish Catholics in different ways, depending on the personal and often semi-conscious value they place on religion in their everyday lives. These pathways are to some degree determined by the elements Polish Catholics deem central to their religious identity. Language is a key issue in most migratory experience (Lippi-Green) and thus inevitably affects the level of Polish migrants' participation in Catholic churches in the host country. The presence of Polish clergy in Ireland and the UK facilitates the celebration of Catholicism in the migrants' native language. However, based on our data, it appears that this aspect is less important for Catholics in the UK than in Ireland. Poles in Ireland pointed to the importance of understanding the religious service as opposed to simply being present at the mass. Possibly, part of the reason for this difference is that Polish people felt more entitled to religious provisions in their native language in a country which resembles Poland more in terms of its Catholic history and identity, and the commonality may make natives more sympathetic towards migrants' needs to practice in their own language.

Migrants in both countries placed great emphasis on God but this sentiment could simply be part of passive belonging, or even a substitute for active belonging. Individuals may engage in a process of 'believing without belonging' (Davie) as a convenience, rather than a conscious choice. At the same time, some participants explicitly stated that it is more important to have faith than it is to engage in religious practice. This forms part of the new creative ways in which Polish Catholics can construct their religiosity in the host society. The privatisation of religiosity enables them to actively re-evaluate their faith and the meaning of churchgoing, and as a result migration makes

faith more personalised and individualized. This has both positive and negative consequences. Some argue that such personalisation results in lower numbers forming part of the religious congregation, a disintegration of rituals, and the weakening of inherited identity (Hervieu- Léger), while others point to the higher quality of religion and faith (Warner; Ammerman; Levitt). Polish Catholics need to take responsibility for their own faith and some simply choose not to do so. Almost all interviewees noted the substantial effort required to practice their religiosity in the manner they did in Poland. Context and social sanctions are paramount here as our participants acknowledged that in Ireland and the UK they were no longer situated in a complex network of cultural expectations. The rigid Catholic structure in Poland and the accompanying normative framework for shaping religiosity constricted their agency and the degree to which they could create their own meaning around faith. Therefore, it is possible that ‘true’ Catholics are separated from nominal ones in the process of migration. ‘True’ Catholics continue to believe and belong, even if they opt out of traditional church services. They create nuanced ways of engaging with faith, and religiosity remains an important part of their identity. ‘True’ Catholics take responsibility for their spiritual development as they shift from a context of obligation to that of choice (Davie). In this sense, they become universal Catholics because they separate their faith from nationality to explore the qualities of their religion which transcend cultures and hierarchies. This separation inevitably reshapes their habitus of ‘Polak-Katolik’ as it both creates and reinforces a new type of private and intellectually informed faith, and Polish clergy are central to the process. In Ireland and the UK migrants witness the emergence of a different type of priest who appears more accessible and interested in developing migrants’ religiosity. As migrants themselves, some clergy also reconsider their Catholicism in the new context (see Piekosz) and become transnational and mobile religious professionals. They attract lay Polish people who share a similar mindset, as evidenced above.

Therefore, the move to a field structured by semi-secularisation and/or religious pluralism effectively leads to migrant Catholicism becoming more *conscious* because of a) the ability to choose and b) personal contact with priests. The sum of new and old interpersonal relations impacts on the possibility of agency with regard to lived religion. In our case, it is more helpful to think of structure in terms of the aggregate of expectations, rituals, and lay and religious lifestyle choices, rather than the church, or its representatives as a reified institution floating over Polish migrants and determining their pathways in the new country. This way, we can explain better how a web of

micro-encounters and interdependencies slowly chips away at the Polish Catholic habitus, or remoulds it where the cracks have shown all along. As our findings come from qualitative projects, the claims we make are modest and exploratory in nature. However, our tentative conclusion would be that migration weakens religious commitment for the majority, while strengthening and transforming it for the already predisposed and committed minority. Despite the historical and cultural differences between the UK and Ireland, our data reveal three possible avenues for Polish Catholics: continuing to practice in the same way as they did in their home country; questioning their faith and eventually leaving the church altogether; and taking the opportunity to explore their Catholicism.<sup>6</sup> The final possibility leads to the privatisation and intellectualisation of faith for the minority of Polish migrants.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a nuanced exploration of the historical relationship between Catholicism and national identity in Poland, see Porter-Szucs (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Having said that, regular mass attendance between 1991-2012 decreased by 9.9 per cent (Marianski, 66).

<sup>3</sup> This is not to imply that Polish migrants stop cultivating and preserving their cultural traditions. However, in a democratic country marked by semi-secularity and religious pluralism, religion does not play as big a role as it would if Catholics felt under threat from the state, or other religious groups.

<sup>4</sup> Women are, on average, more likely to volunteer than men (Taniguchi, 2006). We would also hazard a guess that Polish women who agreed to talk to us had been raised in accordance with the ‘tyranny of nice and kind’ (Gilligan, 1982) whereby femininity is equated with selflessness and sacrifice for the sake of others.

<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge that this task of intellectualising faith may have been carried out in Poland prior to migration, and indeed some of our interviewees hinted at previous attempts at private exploration of religious meanings. Nonetheless, the objective conditions in the UK and Ireland, and most importantly aspects such as secularity (or indifference), religious and ethnic diversity, and individualisation, appear to be more conducive to independent spiritual development.

<sup>6</sup> These are simply Weberian ‘ideal types’ and we are convinced that a large-scale longitudinal study of the faith trajectories of Polish migrants would identify multiple mutations of these three pathways.

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