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# Varieties and transformations in emic interpretations of Catholic rituals in contemporary Podhale: a semiotic perspective on religious change

<https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2023-0147>

Received September 10, 2023; accepted August 5, 2024; published online September 30, 2024

**Abstract:** In this paper, I examine intergenerational differences in emic interpretations of various types of ritual references in the religious culture of the Podhale region (Poland), which is known for its lavish celebrations of Catholic holidays and rites of passage. Drawing on Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual communication, particularly the distinction between self-referential and canonical messages, I analyze Podhale highlanders' attitudes toward the self-referential messages communicated by ritual participants. The analysis of my respondents' narratives revealed that a change in attitude toward ritual messages considering individual social status correlates with a change in the conceptualization of the ritual's reference to its transcendent object. This paper presents this phenomenon through the lens of the basic concepts of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiosis and demonstrates that some changes in the religious culture of Podhale can be interpreted as changes in the dynamics between the components of the sign.



**Keywords:** ritual reference; semiotic ideology; emic interpretations of religious ritual; Podhale

## 1 Introduction

Podhale highlanders constitute the most recognizable ethnographic group in Poland (Małanicz-Przybylska 2014). They are known for their lively folklore, commitment to tradition, and collective Catholic rituals celebrated with great splendor. In light of the contemporary processes of secularization, individualization, and spiritualization of religion, their attachment to public collective rituals seems to be a relic of pre-modern forms of religious life. This issue is raised and reflected not only in

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theoretical studies (from an etic perspective) but also among believers themselves (from an emic perspective), where it often becomes the subject of criticism.

In this paper, based on over three years of field research, I'm taking a close look at the contemporary religious culture of Podhale with a special focus on intergenerational differences in emic interpretations of public ritual and emic axiological assessments of various conceptualizations of ritual references. Reference is understood here as a way in which a particular sign vehicle refers to its object. Following Rappaport (1999), I assume that ritual is a message with a dual direction of reference: as a self-referential message, ritual refers to the condition or social status of its participants, and as a canonical message, it refers to religious myths and doctrinal rules.

Christian intellectual traditions and individual lay believers conceptualize the mechanisms of canonical reference of religious rituals in various ways. In contemporary Podhale, the self-referential dimension of ritual communication is also widely and openly discussed. Both official theological and individual conceptualizations of ritual references are usually parts of wider semiotic ideology – a set of “people’s underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs serve, and what consequences they might produce” (Keane 2018: 65). Semiotic ideology can consist of both conceptualizations resulting from deliberative reflection and pre-reflective interpretive schemes. Keane (2018), who developed the concept, emphasizes its crucial role in religious and ethical disputes over the centuries. Many doctrinal conflicts within various Christian churches stemmed from significant differences in the conceptualizations of the reference of religious artifacts and practices to the sacred. In semiotic studies on religion, some of these doctrinal disputes have already been interpreted as expressions of conflicted semiotic ideologies (see, for example, Keane 2018; Yelle 2013). My research, however, focuses on semiotic ideology in the lived experience of contemporary lay believers who are not religious experts. Although the concept of semiotic ideology is rooted in anthropological research (Keane 2007), this issue has received less academic attention so far. As Parmentier (2016: 16) indicates, analysis of “folk ideas” that constitute various semiotic ideologies is more difficult than analysis of ideas contained in the texts of religious authorities. However, in a similar vein to doctrinal dispute, the accessibility of “folk” semiotic ideologies for analysis arises when conflicting interpretive frameworks collide (Panchenko and Khonineva 2019: 10). During my fieldwork in Podhale, such spaces of contention were notably apparent in intergenerational discussions.

Intergenerational differences in lay conceptualizations of ritual reference can be observed both from a synchronic perspective (as an expression of the internal diversity within a particular religious culture) and a diachronic perspective (as an expression of the transformation of religiosity in a particular community). In this

article, the process of changes in the religiosity of Podhale highlanders is presented in light of the basic concepts of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiosis and anthropological theories that refer to Peirce's ideas, especially Rappaport's theory of ritual communication. Although this study focuses on religious change in a relatively small community, it aims to present a semiotic perspective on religious change in general.

## 2 The religious culture of the Podhale region

Podhale is located in the foothills of the Tatra Mountains in Poland.<sup>1</sup> According to popular opinion and widespread stereotypes, Podhale culture is one of the last examples of “genuinely folk” Polish cultures. Podhale highlanders cherish their artistic and craft traditions. They have, for example, a very lively fashion culture, which I will refer to later in this text: regional Podhale clothes (highlanders refuse to call them costumes) are worn at numerous family and religious festivities by ordinary residents (Trebusia-Staszek 2007).

Due to the harsh mountain climate, Podhale remained one of the poorest regions in Poland for a long time. In the past, the region's economy was based largely on shepherding. Today, although there are still many small family-run farms, Podhale is difficult to situate at one of the poles of the modern-traditional dichotomy. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Podhale has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in Poland, which resulted in significant changes in the region's economy and the local community's rapid enrichment. Now, Podhale is also considered a playground of wild capitalism (Gurgul 2022).

Although Podhale highlanders speak a dialect slightly different from the general Polish language and Podhale is (and historically was) a border region with a culture shaped by various external influences, the highlanders identify themselves as “true Poles” and, as such, see themselves as “true Catholics,” since more than 80 % of Poles declare that they belong to this denomination (Czarnecka 2014).

The circumstances presented above influence the region's religious culture. Here, I draw on the concept introduced to the Polish study of religion by Stefan Czarnowski (1956) to distinguish between official religious systems (such as Roman Catholicism) and the lived experience and practices of particular groups of believers. As one of Czarnowski's commentators writes, “the term ‘religious culture’ includes

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<sup>1</sup> There is no data on how many Podhale highlanders live in Poland. The two districts that they share with two other ethnographic groups and people distancing themselves from any ethnographic identifications are inhabited by 250,000 people.

religion in the sense of denomination as well as individual practices and beliefs” (Baraniecka-Olszewska 2013: 46). In mono-denominational communities, religious culture includes practices that align with the official canon as well as those conflicting with some parts of it. In Podhale, for example, there are many unofficial religious tales and numerous beliefs called *przesądy* (‘superstitions’ – with only weak negative connotations in Podhale, but considered to be a relic of “magical thinking” in some narratives in broader Polish discourse about the region). Furthermore, Catholic rituals in Podhale are practiced in a unique manner, characterized by the regional setting of the ceremony. The religious culture of Podhale is distinguished by a special form of performativity, related to the wider process of festivalization of local heritage. The researchers also point to the vernacularity of religious practices in Podhale (Nowina-Sroczyńska 2014) and the liveliness of customs related to the cultivation of broad kinship ties (Lehr 2014; Pine 1996).

One of the most important features of the religious culture of Podhale is celebrating the collective rituals with great splendor. This type of public celebration stands in stark contrast to contemporary trends in European Christianity, which particularly value the virtues of humility and modesty. It is worth noting that the appreciation of humility and modesty is not limited to the Church’s moral teaching but translates into the conduct of ceremonies, church decoration (O’Connor Perks 2021), and expectations regarding the appearance and behavior of the participants. Podhale highlanders’ attachment to lavish forms of ritual, which provide opportunities for public confirmation of participants’ personal prestige, meets with ambivalent assessments of the highlanders themselves and other Poles. It also makes Podhale a particularly suitable area for research on the self-referential dimension of ritual communication in contemporary lived Catholicism.

### 3 Notes on data collection and research participants

My fieldwork included individual and group anthropological interviews, ethno-linguistic questionnaire interviews, and participant observation in religious ceremonies. I collected data from late 2019 to mid-2023, focusing mainly on three parishes in Podhale. The research may be categorized as an instance of native anthropology (Qamar 2021) since I was raised in Podhale and I identify as a Podhale highlander. An important aspect of my research was the COVID-19 restrictions, particularly those concerning mass gatherings. Although, during the pandemic, participation in public rituals was limited, the very topic of ritual communication gained greater prominence in the narratives of ordinary believers.

The results presented in this paper are based on my fieldwork observations and 44 recorded anthropological interviews focused on public rituals and changes in the religious practices of the respondents and their parish communities. Most of the interviews were conducted during holidays or shortly after rites of passage ceremonies, such as baptisms and funerals. Particularly intriguing material was provided by group interviews with multi-generational families. Such meetings revealed intergenerational differences in the approach to public rituals, as in the turbulent family dialogue, different perspectives were directly confronted and negotiated. The analysis of the collected data led to the segregation of respondents' voices into three generational groups: Children, Parents, and Grandparents.

The term Children encompasses mainly young adults: they are from 14 to 39 years old.<sup>2</sup> Children are the most internally diverse group in terms of their lifestyle, professional experience, and education. This group includes parents and childless individuals, spouses and singles, people with foreign migration experience, and those who have never left Podhale for an extended period. Among Children, there is a small but visible group of people who openly distance themselves from the Catholic Church, even though they still identify as Catholics. Almost none of Children work on the land anymore, even though many grew up on family farms. Highlanders from the Children generation also differ in their approach to Podhale's cultural heritage: some reflexively distance themselves from local traditions, while others affirm them. An indicator of the quality and intensity of Podhale inhabitants' involvement in cultivating local heritage can be their attitude toward regional clothes. In the Children generation, there are those who have worn regional clothes only a few times in their lives and do not plan to wear them again, as well as those who have entire wardrobes filled with regional skirts or shirts. In this generation, the attitude toward regional clothes seems to result from reflective decisions, as their regional identity is often an effect of active choice (Małanicz-Przybylska 2013), as they mostly grew up during a time when the unification of Podhale culture with common Polish culture was intensively progressing (Rak 2015).

Their Parents, aged 40–60, remember the times before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Most of them spent most of their lives in Podhale. Many of them entered adulthood in the 1990s, the period marked by the renaissance of Podhale folklore. Even if they no longer wear regional garb on annual and family holidays, they keep it in their wardrobes and are happy to talk about it. Almost all of them worked on family farms for many years, and many are still part-time farmers. Parents are also a generation for whom national ideas closely align with Catholic values, largely due to

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2 Three minors participated in my research. All of them took part in group interviews in which their parents or grandparents also participated.

the Church's political involvement in efforts to make Poland independent from Soviet influence.

Grandparents are over 60 years old. Most of them experienced post-war hardship. The oldest of them remember the Second World War. All my respondents in this age group had worked in agriculture or sheep herding in the past. They all speak the Podhale dialect – usually with only a few influences from the general Polish language, which can be often heard in conversations with younger respondents. Most of them spent their entire lives in Podhale and only a few have experienced foreign migration. Some of the Grandparents could never afford a complete traditional festive outfit – for them, a complete regional outfit is clear evidence of high status. However, this group also includes respondents who have been active in the regional movement since their youth and were among the first folk-music groups in their parishes.

In the characteristics of the three generations distinguished above, we can observe tendencies well recognized by sociologists. New generations form increasingly internally diverse groups. The differentiation of lifestyles and mobility, associated with the popularization of migration experiences, is growing. All these phenomena lead to the multiplication of communication spaces and wider access for the inhabitants of Podhale to various ideological systems. However, what distinguishes Podhale culture from other European regions is the highlanders' attachment to their place: their own village and parish or the entire region of Podhale. This attachment is revealed not only in art and literature, which contain numerous motifs of domesticating religious figures and events by setting them in Podhale (Brzowska-Krajka 1999), but also in contemporary patterns of migration, which usually include returns to Podhale (Ptak 2019).

## **4 Semiotic triangle and the classification of modes of meaning – the basic concepts of Peirce's theory of semiosis**

Before I present and analyze the data from my field research, I would like to introduce the concepts that I will employ in the further part of the text – the very basic ideas from Peirce's theory of semiosis and Rappaport's theory of ritual communication.

Peirce understood semiosis as an action involving the cooperation of three elements: a sign (representamen), its object, and its interpretant (CP 5.484). A representamen is an external form of a sign and vehicle of communication; it is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity"

(CP 2.228). In a language, a representamen can take a graphic or phonic form. In ritual, it could be also gestures, actions, and material objects. An object of a sign can be understood as “all those things that representamen stands for, points to, or refers to” (Buczyńska-Garewicz 1994: 57). It could be some religious idea. An interpretant is a translation of a sign. For the purposes of the considerations presented in this article, I propose to understand it as another sign or set of signs that mediate between representamen and object. As Peirce noted, “anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*” (CP 2.303).

Peirce distinguished various classes and types of sign components and their interrelations. While these classifications are extensively examined in the literature (see, for example, Buczyńska-Garewicz 1994; Sáenz-Ludlow 2007; Short 2007), I cannot delve into all of them within this paper. I would like to briefly recall only the categorization of signs into icons, indices, and symbols as a concept that has particularly inspired the anthropology of religion. According to Peirce, “the division into icons, indices, and symbols depends upon the different possible relations of a sign to its dynamical object”<sup>3</sup> (CP 4.536). I propose to look at this division as a typology of modes of meaning, which include specific ways of referencing between representamen and object. The first is an icon or iconic mode, a mode in which the representamen is perceived as resembling or imitating the object. The next one is an index or indexical mode, a mode in which the representamen is directly (physically or causally) connected to the object. Indices show evidence of what is being represented. The last one is a symbol or symbolic mode: a mode in which the representamen does not resemble the object and has no physical connection with it, but it is fundamentally arbitrary and conventional. Natural human languages are systems of symbols understood in this way.

Here, I will not discuss whether symbols are a distinguishing feature of human communication. Although the idea of convention can be understood in a way that includes arrangements of various relations between “non-human” agents (see, for example, Lewis 1969; Stephens and Heinen 2018), for the purposes of this paper, I adopt a linguistic perspective in which, as Józefaciuk (2008: 44) wrote, “conventional signs are based on a contractual relationship (convention) existing between members of a given social group.” I think that this is also the view that remains close to the emic perspective. An important consequence of such conceptualization of conventionality is the conviction that symbols are negotiable and do not oblige the user of the sign to respect its reference to the objects (unlike icons and indices). What obliges

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3 Peirce distinguishes the immediate object – the object as the sign represents it, from the dynamical [dynamic] object – “really efficient but not immediately present object” (CP 8.343); the object as it really is (Ransdell 1977: 169).

the individual user of the sign to recognize and accept such a reference is the respect for the social contract and, through it, the community itself.

However, I do not completely abandon Peirce's non-anthropocentric perspective on semiosis. In the last part of this paper, I use the sign-centric analysis and present the consequences of the social changes I describe for the semiotic situation and the process of meaning-making.

## 5 Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual communication

In his monumental work, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), Rappaport refers to Peirce's classification of modes of meaning. Although this application of Peirce's basic concepts was not preceded by a thorough study of Peirce's works (Innis 2004), Rappaport succeeded in creating useful analytical tools, which he incorporated into his independently constructed theory of religion.<sup>4</sup>

According to Rappaport, two types of messages are communicated in the ritual: canonical messages and self-referential messages. Canonical messages are relatively invariant messages about the nature of the world that participants take from the liturgy of the rite. They are transmitted by ritual participants but not encoded by them. Canonical messages can be created and transmitted by the liturgical order or myths invoked during the ceremony. Self-referential messages, on the other hand, concern the performers' current physical states or social statuses. They tell the participants of the ritual something about themselves, other participants, and the whole community. This distinction is compatible with Peirce's classification of modes of meaning (however, in his reception, Rappaport [1999: 14] focused on symbols and indices and did not pay much attention to icons). According to Rappaport, canonical messages, which can refer to the content of myths or doctrine, are encoded in symbols. Self-referential messages, which provide information about the group and the individual participants, are encoded in indices. Canonical messages can provide some information on the official perspective of the Catholic Church on the relationship of particular rituals with transcendent reality. For example, the information that the host becomes the "real body of Christ" in the act of transubstantiation is repeated during each Holy Mass. Referring to the canonical dimension of the ritual reference in the following parts of this paper, I will speak mainly about the emic conceptualizations of ritual reference to the transcendent (this reference can be

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I do not refer to Rappaport's comprehensive and complex theory of ritual, deliberately focusing only on the concepts of ritual reference, in which he employs the terms proposed by Peirce.

conceptualized by participants as iconic, indexical, or symbolic; see Wójciak 2022b). However, from the beginning of my research, my main focus was the self-referential dimension of ritual communication.

A classic example of a ritual self-referential message is a long, exhausting dance that proves the performer's good physical condition or expensive and lavish clothes that indicate the material status of the ritual participant. However, according to Rappaport, the most elementary form of ritual self-referential messages is the mere presence of the participants at the ceremony. The very fact of participation in the event is a particularly credible message: since ritual communication is based on indices, it is impossible for participants to lie about what they do in the ritual. For their actions, it is irrelevant whether they dissimulate their real intentions and their efforts have the same performative effects regardless of the sincerity of their motivation (Manzon 2018). For example, by showing up at a funeral, participants pay respect to the deceased, regardless of their personal motivations and intentions. The crowd at the funeral testifies to the high status of the dead or his family, and, also in this context, the intentions of the individual participants seem to be irrelevant.

In indexical modes of creating meaning, gross deception is impossible since representamen here works as proof of the existence of the sign dynamical object. However, this does not mean that people cannot consciously use indices to create index-based messages. As Gilders (2013: 15) noted, Peirce's category of the index includes deliberate human actions that indicate something. In this context, Rappaport writes about *Constructed Indices*: "they are deliberately constructed and employed by humans to indicate whatever they do indicate" (1999: 63). One of the basic types of information that can be encoded in the ritual as a self-referential message is information about individual and group prestige and it can be also deliberately designed by the ritual participants. The expensive outfit of a Sunday mass participant may indicate his high financial status, and the conversations with a priest or local high-status personalities indicate the high position of the person involved in such contacts – these actions can be planned or designed, but they also require some resources and the access to various resources is the actual object of many self-referential messages.

In the context of social position signaling in religious ritual, it is valuable to consider also the insights of Stanley Tambiah (1985: 156), who, similarly to Rappaport, connected ritual with Peirce's conceptions, noting that "important parts of a ritual enactment have a symbolic or iconic meaning associated with the cosmological plane of content and at the same time ... those same parts are existentially or indexically related to participants in the ritual, creating, affirming, or legitimating their social positions and powers."

## 6 Involving the emic interpretations of ritual in the analysis

In the following text, I will switch between descriptions from etic and emic perspectives. Thus, for the sake of clarity, I will also sketch the outlines of both perspectives without going into the intricacies of the history of these concepts (for more on this topic, see, for example, Headland 1990). The fact that a term, idea, or view is emic means that it is relevant and recognizable to members of a particular culture (Tyrała 2015). The narrations about the meaning of a ritual and religious changes created by members of Podhale culture are parts of the emic perspective, even if they use terms from specialized language (for example, theological or semiotic ones) and share the perspective with some “outsiders.” The etic perspective is a perspective of theoretical analysis that also includes terms and interpretation frameworks that are inaccessible or unpopular in the emic perspective.

There are several reasons why a closer look at the emic interpretations of ritual is necessary for semiotic-oriented research on contemporary religiosity. First of all, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019: 102) have noted, social research is characterized by the fact that research subjects are also independent agents that can create narrations about their own world. While the reflections of cultural participants are a primary focus in many social sciences, in semiotics and systems theories, they are often treated as materials of marginal importance (see, for example, Bausch 1997 on the Habermas/Luhmann debate). Rappaport’s theory of ritual communication has also been criticized for marginalizing the emic perspective. Robbins (2001) noted that Rappaport treated participants’ narratives, which reveal the psychological complexity of individuals and the diversity of their life experiences, as sources of threats to the social order in the communities he studied. These individual narratives had also significant potential to undermine the coherence of a theory developed at a physical and cultural distance from empirical material. Although Rappaport acknowledged the need to include the religious reflexivity of social actors in his model, he chose to incorporate it without giving voice to the ritual participants or actually studying their perspectives (Rappaport 1980). Rappaport’s approach aligned with the dominant trends in the anthropology of religion at that time, when, as Højbjerg (2002) pointed out, religious reflexivity was a neglected field of study.

In researching contemporary religious cultures, considering participants’ narratives about ritual and analyzing specific semiotic ideologies from the perspective of lived religion is especially important due to the participants’ growing interest in reflecting on the meaning and nature of ritual. According to Tokarska-Bakir (2000: 31), a more epistemological approach to religion distinguishes modern “non-folk-type cultures.” In the following sections of the article, I will discuss my respondents’

axiological assessment of self-referential ritual messages and examine the emic interpretation of the mechanism of canonical reference. To present the different approaches of Podhale highlanders to messages communicated in religious rituals, I will refer to their narratives about various Catholic rituals in which they participate. The case I will particularly focus on is the funeral practice of ordering masses for the soul of the deceased.

## **7 Funeral and practice of ordering a mass for the soul of the deceased as a self-referential message**

One of the most lavish Catholic rituals in Podhale is a funeral, and this was the ritual I had the opportunity to participate in most often during my research.

The death of a community member is an experience around which many religious practices are created, which is a common social phenomenon in the cultures of the world (see, for example, Malinowski 1948). These practices become especially important for individuals who are in mourning and they fulfill several psychological and social functions. As Gibling and Hug (2006) wrote, a funeral “helps set a smaller grieving family into the context of an extended family, church, and community. Survivors do not grieve alone. Funerals confirm and reinforce the reality of death.” Thus, the public character of the funeral has a special function for both groups and individuals.

In Podhale, the period from death to the funeral and the funeral itself is associated with many customs that allow for the confirmation of family ties and neighborly solidarity. For example, if the dead person was a child or an unmarried person, relatives, and neighbors weave a long funeral wreath (Nowina-Sroczyńska 2014). Between the moment of death and the funeral, members of the family and neighbors meet for daily prayer in the house of the deceased and/or in a funeral home. At this time, the family must make several decisions that require proper recognition of family ties and obligations: Who exactly should be informed about the death, and how? Who will carry the coffin? Whose horses will take the body to the cemetery? All these decisions are made during daily prayer meetings.

What is particularly interesting in the context of the problem discussed in this paper is that expressing condolences never gained popularity in Podhale. Support for the deceased's family is shown here by engaging in funeral preparations, appearing at the pre-funeral meetings and funeral, or fulfilling one of the many roles during the funeral procession. These practices (as signs) are based firmly on indices and they are an expression of so-called costly signaling (Sosis 2000). They communicate about

the quality of particular social ties and, in this context, they work as “honest signals” (McAndrew 2019), which means that they are based on biologically costly displays or require behaviors that would be hard to fake.

The circumstances of the pandemic have severely limited the traditional ways of paying respect to the deceased and expressing support for his family. Very often, relatives were not allowed to attend either the funeral or pre-funeral prayers. In such circumstances, specific, previously marginal practices became more important. I will focus on one example: ordering mass for the intention of the dead person. According to this relatively new practice (my respondents dated the appearance of this custom in Podhale at the beginning of the twenty-first century), each person or family who wanted to express respect for the dead ordered a mass for his or her soul and the names of those who ordered the mass are read aloud by the priest at the funeral.

Orders for mass intentions are gathered by the immediate family of the deceased. The transfer of money for the mass serves as an opportunity for a brief encounter with the deceased’s family or a phone conversation in cases where in-person meetings are not feasible. In a culture where offering condolences is not a common practice, such a practical reason for interaction holds particular significance. Agnieszka, a 50-years-old woman who was under quarantine during her mother’s death and funeral, shared her experience of collecting donations for masses: “I took phone calls, took notes, and some neighbors left their money in front of the house. My sister collected money from people who visited the funeral home and gave me their names. I was responsible for the list [of ordered masses].” For Agnieszka, it was almost the only way to place her experience of mourning in a broader social context.

Ordering a mass is also an index-based message. The practice involves not only verbal expression but also a monetary offering, which the family presents to the priest (typically 50 or 100 zlotys per mass). The intentions are usually read aloud at the end of the funeral mass before the coffin is lowered into the grave. Some participants count the mass intentions: the greater their number, the more honorable the funeral; the more masses for the deceased, the more respect he enjoyed during his lifetime. The participants also note who ordered the mass and who did not. Sometimes it becomes the subject of discussion and gossip.

Ordering the masses is indisputably a form of communication. Most funeral participants are aware that they are involved in this particular communication situation as senders and recipients and have some reflections on what and how is being communicated. Agnieszka, quoted earlier, recalls that the first “mass intention” that she remembers as being read aloud at the funeral was an intention for her brother’s soul. The mass was ordered by his boss in the early 2000s. Helena (51) and Stanisław (52) remember that they first encountered this practice at the funeral of

Helena's father (also in the early 2000s). Two masses were then ordered by the deceased's goddaughter – a woman living in Zakopane (the main tourist town of Podhale) who "achieved success in business." The first intentions read at the funeral were directly related to the prestige of both the person ordering the mass and the deceased and his family. Today, the prestige is testified by a great number of mass intentions at the funeral. Talking about the funeral she recently attended, Helena said admiringly: "There weren't many people at the funeral, but 150 masses were ordered! I thought they wouldn't finish reading the list of names!" During my fieldwork, I have heard many similar comments from people coming back from funerals.

The practice of ordering the mass for the soul of the deceased has also a religious/canonical dimension. Katarzyna, the 41-year-old woman, draws attention to it: "I never buy flowers or bouquets. I always order mass. The flowers will wither, and the mass will do some good." However, Podhale inhabitants regarded this custom not only with approval. Kinga (45), for example, said: "They are already exaggerating with these masses! In the past, only the immediate family ordered them. And now! There are even 300 masses sometimes! Young people rebel: they order the masses, but anonymously."<sup>5</sup>

At the last funeral I attended (in the first half of 2023), several intentions appeared without the full name of the person who ordered them. For instance, phrases like "from friends" or "from friend Ola" were heard. Such vague formulations left most ritual participants unaware of the specific individual behind the intention (Ola is a common abbreviation for one of the most popular Polish names). The fact that the deceased was a 24-year-old man implies that the intentions labeled "from friends" were probably organized by individuals of a similar young age. From the beginning of my fieldwork, Children were much more critical of the practice of reading names during the funeral, which seems to be an expression of a wider rift between the generations. Although many young people I interviewed had experience with ordering masses for deceased neighbors, friends, or relatives, they often spoke of the social pressures associated with it. They viewed it as more honorable to arrange a mass without publicizing it within the local community or informing the family of the deceased. Marta (27), for example, said: "Well, you can order this mass somewhere else, in another parish, but here, in the village, people will talk about you." My respondents were aware that not having their names read aloud at a relative's funeral would likely be viewed critically by other community members.

The example of ordering masses described above serves as an illustration of a broader phenomenon: people of different ages differ in their assessment of image-creating practices in the religious space. Respondents from the Children generation

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5 They don't want the priest to read their names at the funeral.

were also much more critical about placing the founder's name on the chapel and any attempts to mark their material status in the religious space. Sometimes, however, their declarations did not correspond with their practices. They took care of the outfit in which they showed up in church and spent a lot of money on it. Many of them also organized grand celebrations for their loved ones on the occasion of weddings, funerals, or baptisms.

In the case of mass ordering, Children often pointed out that holy masses may be ordered *with dishonest or bad intentions*. In this case, care for one's image or fear of social ostracism was considered the *worse* one. What is interesting, the older respondents, especially Grandparents, also noticed that some ritual practices serve to build a personal image, but they did not consider caring about their image in a religious context unambiguously immoral. Parents and Grandparents also have much more acceptance of social ostracism, which some of them explicitly recognize as a social mechanism beneficial to individuals and the community. This generational shift is a clear example of the process of devaluing certain collective values and favoring individualistic ones (Jacyno 2007).

At the beginning of my research, those intergenerational differences were more visible than in the last months of my fieldwork. Two years after the first interviews some respondents from the Parents generation used the same arguments that I have heard earlier from Children. That indicates the diachronic character of the process which can be observed as the intergenerational differentiation in the synchronic perspective. However, the observed change is not quite linear and clear. In addition to the growing criticism of reading aloud the list of names at a funeral, there also appeared a new form of stronger signaling of status and attachment to the deceased and his family: ordering two or three masses by one person and, in this way, distinguishing donator from the others (the numbers of ordered masses is also read aloud by the priests).

## 8 Doubting in the *show* – a closer look at intergenerational differences

### 8.1 Dichotomies used to value ritual behavior and ritual self-referential messages

Trying to answer the question of what values my respondents refer to when they are making axiological assessments of the self-referential dimension of ritual communication, I noticed that their narratives (and dialogues in the group meetings and interviews) are organized by several dichotomies: 1) authenticity versus pretense; 2)

felicitous versus infelicitous performances; 3) individual intentions and motivations versus actions and effects of those actions.

In the statements of Children, the clear dichotomy between truth and authenticity, on the one hand, and falsehood, pretense, and show, on the other, was most often heard. By Children, almost all activities undertaken in the religious space in order to improve someone's own image were critically assessed and often regarded as inauthentic.<sup>6</sup> They most often emphasized that certain behaviors of the ritual participants are undertaken only *to show off* or *for show*. I use the word *show* here because it is a category of special importance in the emic perspective. In the Podhale dialect phrase *na pokoz* ('for show') is very popular. It can mean that something is done for the purpose of presenting yourself to the world and gaining social recognition but it can also mean, especially for older respondents, that something is done in order to simply show it to others. In the statements of younger respondents, the term 'for show' acquires strongly negative connotations: something that is done 'for show' cannot be authentic.

Serious intergenerational differences in the assessment of image practices became very visible during the discussion about the founders of chapels in churches in one of the group interviews I conducted. 27-year-old Piotr categorically stated: "They [funders] do it [found the chapel] only to show off!" He and his 34-year-old cousin were very critical of the practice of putting founders' names on chapels and emphasized several times that the noblest act would be to fund the chapel anonymously. The representatives of Parents' and Grandparents' generations had significantly different opinions. Parents emphasized that the founder has the right to be proud of his generosity. They noticed that the founding of the chapel may be the result of many years of hard work of the founder and his efforts deserve social recognition. The only representative of the generation of Grandparents in the discussion reversed this argument. She noted that people could work hard just to be able to afford such a special honor, and there is nothing wrong with that. From the Grandparent's perspective, social recognition was not an extra reward for hard work or a noble attitude but the main goal of various efforts. And the older respondents spoke about it completely directly. This tendency was also revealed in my research on the attitude of Podhale highlanders to various image-related practices (also outside the religious context): older people had a more positive attitude toward practices oriented toward creating a positive image of the individuals in the community (Wójciak 2022a). Importantly, in their narratives 'show' was not contrasted with authenticity.

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6 "The shift towards authenticity and the subjective turn" in the approach of young Poles to rites of passage was observed also by Rejowska (2022).

In the narratives of Grandparents, the dichotomy between a good/successful/felicitous performance and a bad/failed/infelicitous performance was used much more often than the authenticity-pretense dichotomy: if Grandparents criticized any ritual behavior, the critique focused on unsuccessful performances. Performances are usually strongly index-based messages: someone can present themselves as a bad dancer at a wedding or a physically weak man when he does not stand upright during the guard at the Holy Sepulchre. The success or failure of the performance determined the axiological value attributed to the practice by other participants in the ritual. The categories of good and bad performance were also related to the true-false dichotomy. Bad performances were recognized as untrue because they did not indicate the expected object of the sign. Sometimes, they are directly called deceptions or become objects of ridicule. A good example of this approach can be found in one of the contemporary Podhale *godka* ('folk-stories'). Its hero, Jacek, describes a typical performance of a rich American relative during the *cepiec* ('capping ceremony'), which in the past was combined with the public presentation of wedding gifts (usually money): "Such a man is just waving a dollar bill over his head for all to see. And he puts it in his pocket five times before he throws it" (Pitoń 1999). In this passage, Józef Pitoń – the author of this *godka* – makes fun of a performer, revealing the inadequacy of the form of the performance to the gift. This is possible because everything happens here in plain sight. The audience – the other wedding guests – not only can but even ought to comment on what is happening. The discussed dichotomy clearly aligns with John L. Austin's classic concept of felicitous and infelicitous performatives (Austin 1962). However, although Austin's analytical framework treats performatives as alternatives to constatives – statements evaluated for their truth or falsehood, from the emic perspective of older Podhale inhabitants, felicity and truth are seen as closely intertwined concepts. This could be better understood in relation to another important narrative dichotomy, which is a dichotomy between individual intentions and motivations (which seem to be more important categories for young respondents) and actions and effects of those actions in material reality (they seem to be more important for the older – Parents and Grandparents). Usually, for most Grandparents and Parents, what mattered in the end was the effect of the action: if someone gave a generous wedding gift, found a chapel, or ordered the mass for their relative, his behavior was assessed positively, and his intentions receded into the background. Children were significantly more likely to reflect on the intentions of others and base their assessment of a ritual situation on them.

All mentioned dichotomies organize not only relations between different generations in families but also individual, internal reflections of the respondents of all ages. They also involved the notion of *truth*.

## 8.2 Linguistic ideologies and modes of recognizing “the truth” of ritual practice

Declaratively, the truth was a much more important category for Children. Younger respondents even used the word *prawda/prawda* (‘truth’) more frequently. I propose to distinguish two basic modes of recognizing ‘the truth’ of participants’ practices in religious space. The first one is collective, intersubjective recognition, which occurs during public displays in a show. For older respondents, the show is part of the truth according to the principle that we can judge something as real if we see what people actually do. The second mode is individualistic and subjective recognition, where the determinant of truth is the authenticity of personal intentions. In this case, the honesty of intention is crucial, even though access to information on individual intentions is difficult. According to the narratives of younger respondents, the only fully acceptable intention in the religious sphere should be the canonical one: the will to connect with the sacred or reference transcendence.

The group of Children on the one hand and the groups of Parents and Grandparents on the other can be seen as groups of participants that share different linguistic ideologies, which can be treated as a particular type of semiotic ideology. Joel Robbins, referring to Rappaport’s theory of communication, proposed the distinctions between “cultures whose linguistic ideology is characterized by a general skepticism about language” and “cultures in which people trust speech and distrust ritual” (Robbins 2001). This distinction quite well reflects the differences in attitudes of younger and older Podhale highlanders, but it is questionable whether it is a distinction between the two separate “cultures.”

The mere recognition that some sign is *untrue* (for example, because it is only ‘for show’) changes the quality of the communication situation but does not necessarily end the process of semiosis. Suppose a funeral participant discovers that the intention of his uncle, who ordered the mass, was not to worry about the soul of the deceased aunt (the uncle could be an atheist or did not like the aunt at all). In that case, the “person who knows” is still involved in communication, and the semiosis is ongoing. However, at the same time, if the internal intention of the ritual participant becomes the highest determinant of the truth, there appears to be doubt about the indices, which can seriously undermine the particular semiosis process.

## 8.3 Doubt in the show as a feature of communication in modernity

The question is, why do young respondents not believe in the show, and what are the communicative consequences of their doubt? The doubt about the show in the

context of ritual communication is a phenomenon noticed in modern American and European culture (Rothenbuhler 1998), so it is not a distinguishing feature of the Podhale region. On the contrary, it seems that in Podhale, the process of modernizing ritual communication takes place with a delay because the religious culture of the region for a long time was and still is collectivist-oriented, and the inhabitants, due to a specific combination of socio-cultural circumstances, were able to maintain certain pre-modern forms of family and neighborly relations without losing the possibility of getting rich and modernizing (which was not always possible in other rural areas of Poland). Thanks to this, some more universal trends can be observed here *in statu nascendi*: narratives of representatives of distinguished generations form a diachronic story about the changes in the religious culture of Podhale.

To address the question of why the doubt in the show is increasing, I would like to highlight two phenomena. Firstly, in contemporary European cultures, there are more opportunities to manipulate material indices. Consider the example of regional clothes as self-referential messages (as I previously mentioned, traditional clothes are frequently worn during religious rituals in Podhale). In an affluent community, it becomes more challenging to denote individual status through clothing: today, traditional garments can be rented at the rental shop, and many individuals can afford to purchase complete regional outfits. In such circumstances, the value of clothing alone no longer serves as a distinctive marker. Instead, a new indicator of social status emerges, such as the knowledge of whether the attire adheres to canonical patterns often determined by experts and local authorities (Małanicz-Przybylska 2013). This shift exemplifies the transformation of communication based largely on simple indices into communication based increasingly on symbols as conventional signs.

Secondly, doubting the show, and thus doubting the indices, can be a consequence of the multiplication of communication spaces, which is a characteristic phenomenon of modern societies (Korporowicz 2017). Today, individuals function simultaneously in several communication spaces, which not only use different codes but are also differently constructed (such as online and neighborhood communication spaces). This could be understood as the coexistence of different sign systems. Individuals, acting as both senders and receivers of messages across different communication spaces, attain varying degrees of fluency in their respective languages. That is the reason why some indices are no longer decoded by all members of the parish community. Even though indices are always related to contextual information, they still require an interpretant – without it, there is no semiosis and no meaning relation. Looking at this problem from the perspective of social communication, I argue that there are no “unrecognized” indices. Although some practices and features of things can be messages even when the recipients of the signs are not

fully aware of them,<sup>7</sup> there must be some kind of interpretative framework in which a material form can appear as a sign necessarily consisting of three elements. Peirce assumed that the dynamical object could determine the character of the relationship with the representamen (CP 4.536). As Goudge (1965: 53) pointed out, “an index has a direct physical connection with its object ... and the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection except to take note of it.” However, to be able to “take a note of it,” one needs to have access to even a very simple interpretant.

This problem could be illustrated with another example concerning traditional Podhale attire. A large, original coral necklace indicates that the person wearing it is wealthy (such necklaces cannot be rented). However, in contemporary Polish culture, there are many other ways of expressing wealth. People who are completely uninterested in regional clothing may simply not notice the value of the corals. As traditional clothing is some kind of conventional system comprised more of a blend of indices and symbols than pure indices, I propose to focus also on the very fact of participation in ritual. Attending someone’s funeral is, theoretically, a simple indicator of commitment and respect for the deceased. Absence, on the other hand, may be interpreted as an expression of disrespect. This is how indexality could work in a situation in which participants of a particular religious culture operate within one communication space. The modern multiplication of communication spaces, however, creates an important context for each individual communication situation also within one particular space, as it multiplies the alternative interpretative frameworks: the non-appearing of a relative at a funeral can have a whole range of explanations. In such circumstances, the index-based signs (even as primal as presence or absence) begin to lose their meaning.

## 9 Mass for the soul of the deceased as a canonical message

One of the indirect consequences of the doubt in the show is the axiological devaluation of the material dimension of the ritual. As I previously described, for younger people, concern for one’s own image begins to be a socially undesirable practice in the religious space, which is expected to uphold positively esteemed values exclusively. However, the axiological devaluation of index signs (even if they primarily concern only the individual image of the participants) affects not only self-referential messages but also canonical ones. Although in the case of canonical messages in religious rituals, the object of the sign always remains transcendent to some extent, it

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7 It is worth noting that Peirce cautioned against reductionist psychologism.

is also inaccessible outside the sign, and its inaccessibility is radical in this case. The material objects are always somehow accessible outside a particular representamen: to be their own indices, they do not need a very sophisticated convention. Contrary to this, something that is absolutely transcendent cannot function in human communication as its own index (from the “objective” etic perspective); it can only be conceptualized by the believers as an index (from the emic perspective).

I argue that the devaluation of pure indices in ritual communication (originally limited to the non-canonical dimension, which, despite its material and potentially sign-determinative nature, is paradoxically easier to contest as it is not sacralized<sup>8</sup>) is translated into abandoning the conceptualization of canonical reference as indexical reference. Believers use their own conceptualizations of religious canonical reference. They, for example, consider some elements of the ritual as the exact reproduction of some mythical event (iconic-symbolic reference); as symbols that remind them of some religious value (symbolic reference); or they conceptualize them as the *true* parts of the sacred, like the Eucharist as a real part of the body of God (indexical reference). From a semiotic perspective, the disenchantment of the world can be interpreted as the replacement of indices with symbols in the emic interpretations of ritual and other sacred signs’ reference, and as such, it can be understood as a change of semiotic ideology in a particular religious culture.

This process, however, does not seem to begin with the discovery of the non-indexical nature of canonical reference of signs conceptualized as indices so far, but with a serious change in the mediation between “pure” non-sacralized ritual indices and their objects at the level of the interpretant. The new mediation takes a specific form of denying or questioning the indexical nature of the indices, although they still seem to impose themselves on the interpreter. At this point, it is worth referring to the perspective of Yelle (2013: 92), who places the changes in the approach to the reference of the religious sign within the broader context of an increasing skepticism concerning signs and languages, particularly regarding their ability to represent nature.

The problem discussed above is well reflected in the changes in the attitude of Podhale highlanders to the funeral custom of ordering masses for the deceased. If most people give up ordering a mass in Podhale, the number of masses at a funeral will no longer indicate the prestige of the dead person or his family. It is worth noting that the motivation for such a step is not to doubt the canonical meaning of the mass but to refuse to let it communicate some kind of self-referential message about the dead person and the individual ordering the masses. Axiological assessments of the self-referential dimension play a crucial role in this case, but the consequences of

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<sup>8</sup> Rappaport conceptualizes sacralization as the process of removing a specific aspect of reality from the scrutiny of verification.

actions taken as a result of such evaluations are not limited to the self-referential dimension of the ritual. They also affect canonical references. According to the official interpretation of the Catholic Church and the popular belief in Podhale, each mass with the intention of the deceased is to bring him closer to the Kingdom of God. That idea is based on the conviction that the intercession of the living believers helps to purify the souls in purgatory (Trojanowski 2021). Especially for the Grandparents' generation, the awareness of securing such intercession seems to be extremely important. Senior women from my home village, including my own grandmother, saved money for the Gregorian Masses – a series of 30 masses for the soul of the deceased – to protect themselves in this regard. Therefore, it can be assumed that masses for the deceased have (at least for some inhabitants of Podhale) also a purely religious, canonical dimension: they are conceptualized as rituals with a direct effect on some sacred reality.

As I mentioned, the attitude of some of my respondents to ordering mass has changed over time. I noticed the first changes in the approach to this topic in my own family, which prompted me to turn to some of the respondents once again. As the number of funerals and ordered masses increased,<sup>9</sup> masses ceased to be held in parish churches. Then, some older respondents began to consider a different form of ordering a mass (for example, ordering a mass on their own via the Internet in another Polish church). Some of my respondents were starting to worry about the canonical message. They wanted to be sure that the holy mass would be celebrated. This kind of reflection was undertaken even by people who had previously spoken very favorably of the custom of ordering masses.

Although the canonical dimension of religious practices was declaratively important for younger respondents, they did not undertake similar reflections in the interviews. In this case, the young people's declarations of attachment to the canonical dimension of ritual and religion did not entail reflection on the formal canonical conditions of completing the ritual. With the exception of three respondents – siblings from an intelligentsia family, above average involved in religious practices (compared to people of the same age from this village), and a local religious expert (a woman leading a pastoral group at the parish) – none in the age group of Children consider the subject of the canonical order of ritual an important problem (in a wide range of topics in the interviews, not only the practice of ordering masses for the deceased). Representatives of the Children generation also much more often considered particular ritual practices as symbols only conventionally related to the transcendent (Wójciak 2022b). As a result, they most often did not

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9 Due to the crisis of the health care system related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of deaths has significantly increased throughout Poland. In 2020, in one of the parishes where I conducted research, the number of deaths doubled compared to 2019.

attach importance to whether the rituals were performed in accordance with the canonically established order. For most of them, as long as the intentions of the ritual participants were noble, the formal course of the ritual was of secondary importance. The devaluation of this particular aspect of the ritual strips it of many essential features: repetitiveness, predictability, and sequentiality. As Tambiah (1985: 133–134) notes, these features characterize rituals more as conventional rather than intentional behavior and allow the ritual participants to distance their emotions and internal intentions from their commitment to public morality. While it is true that rituals facilitate actions that might diverge from individual intentions – encoding simulations of intentions rather than the intentions themselves (Tambiah 1985: 132) – this very discrepancy also opens up space for moral critique. In the discussions I participated in during my fieldwork, the conceptualization of religious signs as icons, indices, or symbols has been the subject of moral judgments. The young respondents accused older participants of “magical thinking” because of their indexical interpretations of rituals. The elders, on the other hand, saw the departure of the young from the rigor of the ritual order as a *crisis of faith*. For example, Marek (25), in one of the group interviews, accused his in-laws of *magical thinking* when they talked about the interference of Catholic saints in their daily lives.

The presented differences between generations can be interpreted as an expression of a particular process stretched over time. At this point, the question arises whether we can assume that there is some kind of transition from pre-modern, magical forms of the ritual characteristic for folk-type culture to post-modern forms in which the importance of physical gestures and signs is diminished, and the importance of the participants’ internal beliefs is emphasized?

This issue should not be approached too simplistically. Reflecting on historical tensions in assessing the relationship between the form of the ritual and the intention of its participants, Buc (2001) notes that it is a naive simplification to believe that in the Middle Ages, believers were unaware of the possibility of participating in rituals with dishonest or cynical intentions. The key differentiating element here seems to be not merely the awareness of the potential for manipulation or false intention but rather the response to this awareness, which boils down to either accepting the rules of communication despite the possibility of “intentional deception” (as Rappaport [1999: 119] notes, it is the acceptance, not the belief of the participants, that is necessary for the performance of the liturgy) or rejecting these rules and distancing oneself from them. Such distance or rejection may involve adding further rules designed to counteract ritual deception, which can be interpreted as an extension of the interpretant, understood as a set of additional signs.

The Polish anthropologist Tokarska-Bakir (2000) points out that moral ambivalence is an integral feature of the folk-type religiosity. In the case discussed in this paper, this moral ambivalence allows the participants of the ritual to tolerate the

dishonest intentions of others. Tokarska-Bakir also notes that modern religion, in contrast to folk-type religiosity, carries the threat of moral *rigor mortis*, and when morality becomes more important in a particular religious culture, the meaning of the rite is weakened, as intolerance to moral ambivalence in a religious ritual does not allow ritual participants to affirm indistinguishability.<sup>10</sup> According to a Polish anthropologist (Tokarska-Bakir 2000: 34), it is an important aspect of the process of disenchantment of the world, which she associates with the Reformation and Protestantization.

## 10 The process of changes in religiosity in light of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiosis

The authorities of the Catholic Church also seem to have slowly departed from the so-called folk-type perspective on the problem of religious reference. In official teaching, certain moves encourage believers to separate the material form from symbolic content and consider this transcendent content somewhat more appropriate than the immanent form. Describing this phenomenon in the social contexts, Hervieu-Léger (2000) writes about intellectualization and spiritualization of faith, which are revealed in the efforts of Church authorities to develop a new intellectual framework for the ritual and reinterpretation of the meaning of religious practices. One example of such a reinterpretation indicated by Hervieu-Léger is the metaphorization of the ritual – treating the gestures, images, objects, and activities involved in the ritual as a metaphor or symbol. From the semiotic perspective, the mechanism of these processes in Christian thought was analyzed by Yelle (2013), who focused on the relation between protestant literalism and iconoclasm. I propose to look at them in light of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory. The process of metaphorization and intellectualization boils down to separating the form of the ritual from the content it refers to and then diminishing the importance of form and transferring its relationship with content from the level of material reality to the level of symbolic reality. Describing this process using Peirce's theory of semiosis:

1. the importance of the representamen (the physical form of the sign) is diminished,
2. its connection with the object becomes more arbitrary. Representamen loses its indexical and iconic connections,

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<sup>10</sup> Tokarska-Bakir used here the term introduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer. In her analysis, indistinguishability in the religious experience allows believers to perceive the unity of the signifier and the signified.

3. instead, the interpretant (a sequence of other signs, which in Peirce's theory mediate between the representamen and the object) is expanded: whole theological treatises claim to be interpreters of single signs.

The depreciation of the material form of the sign (representamen) and the expansion of the interpretant disturbs the process of semiosis. In ritual communication, indices, which are the basis of self-referential messages and refer to the condition, presence, and status of participants, still do not lie: after all, they do not refer to external objects but point to themselves. However, in this case, the mediation between the representamen and the object (at the level of interpretant) changes significantly. The most radical effect of the new mediation is the removal of representamen (as an unnecessary form). According to the conviction that an internal intention of the ritual participant is essential, it is considered the most important part of communication, and if so, it doesn't necessarily need any external proof. The complete abandonment of such external proofs is the end of the process of semiosis in a specific communication situation.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes such an ending is the beginning of a new sign process and sometimes it is not. When it is not, it is a pure example of secularization seen from the perspective of semiosis.

Interpretive depreciation of indexical references to prestige results in the withdrawal of their vehicles from the space of religious ritual. In ritual, however, the same vehicles function as representamens for two different types of objects: objects of self-referential messages and canonical ones. By removing indicators of prestige, wealth, or commitment, representamens referring to the objects sacralized in the ritual are also removed. The anti-religious potential of the annihilation of the representamen was very clearly expressed by Massimo Leone while commenting on the antifundamentalist stance that undermines the idea of the church:

According to this stance, the representamen is not necessary. It is arbitrary to the point of disposability. What matters is the direct relation of the faithful to transcendence, whereas any material mediation of it is considered as fetish. But as the fundamentalist church kills the human instinct for transcendental imagination by fetishizing representamina, so the anti-fundamentalist church which is not a church any longer, indeed kills the same instinct by fetishizing the object of religious semiosis, that is, transcendence. The problem is that, as semioticians know, there is no object without representamina. (Leone 2014: 52)

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<sup>11</sup> Although Peirce's intuition regarding the finalization or conclusion of individual semiosis processes is not connected with the disruption between the elements of the sign, but rather with an effective habit change – identified as the ultimate logical interpretant, which is no longer a sign itself (CP 5.476) – confronting this idea with empirical data presents many challenges. From a sociological perspective, pre-reflective habitual actions are social practices and, as such, remain significant.

In his text, Leone focuses mainly on the canonical reference, as he discusses the conceptualizations of the reference of relics by examining the interrelations between immanence and transcendence. In this text, I was trying to present the context in which such a conceptualization can appear in the lived experience of lay believers.

## 11 Conclusions

Using the conceptual apparatus developed by Charles Sanders Peirce in research on changes in religiosity allows us to shed new light on already recognized phenomena that still require in-depth study in the sociology and anthropology of religion. As I tried to show, the basic concepts proposed by Peirce still serve as useful analytical tools and can create a paradigm in which changes in religiosity and religion can be better understood.

An important feature of Peirce's perspective, although sometimes considered non-intuitive and incompatible with classical logic, is its congruence with the emic perspective. His classification of modes of meaning corresponds to the emic conceptualizations of religious and ritual reference reconstructed during my research. My respondents understood the relationship between the ritual and its transcendent object in the ways distinguished by Peirce, although they did not use the terms *icon* and *index* (*symbols*, on the other hand, appeared very often in the interviews). Most of them were also fully aware of alternative conceptualizations of ritual reference functioning in their religious culture. Taking a diachronic perspective in comparing the three distinguished generations, Grandparents, Parents, and Children, we can see that in the emic interpretations of the ritual, there is a shift from the conceptualizations of reference as based on icons and indices to those based on symbols. It happened that research participants depreciated the conceptualization shared by others. The conceptualizations that pointed out an indexical relationship between the ritual (representamen) and the transcendent (object) were sometimes called (especially by Children) magical or naive thinking. On the other hand, older participants accused those who saw only a symbolic reference to the transcendent of a *shallow* approach to the ritual.

From the etic perspective, the observed phenomena can be analyzed as changes in the relationship between the components of semiosis. The departure from the indexical conceptualization of ritual reference translates into the devaluation of any material form (representamen) as an element that is exchangeable and, therefore, sometimes even unnecessary. The object of religious reference, once oscillating

between the immanent presence in the ritual and the transcendence, is now elevated completely to transcendence. The distance created as a result of the loosening of the bond between the representamen and the object requires greater interpretative effort. Hence mediation at the level of the interpretant grows to the extent that it significantly exceeds the capabilities of a single user of the sign.

The purpose of semiosis in Peirce's theory is to produce and refer to other signs. Thus, the idea that the expansion of the interpretant threatens the process of semiosis is counter-intuitive. However, the analysis of emic interpretations constituting the semiotic ideology and a thorough study of the relationship between the components of the signs reveals the logic of this process. Peirce assigns ordinal numbers to the components of the sign. The first in the triad is representamen. Every process of semiosis begins from it. Its deletion is, therefore, the end of a single process of semiosis. The clue of the problem reflected here is that the very idea of the devaluation of a representamen stems from the new mediation between it and the sign's object within the interpretant. Furthermore, this new mediation seems to be strongly legitimized within the semiotic ideology of Christian theological reflection (Yelle 2013) and creates the semiotic ideology of modernity (Keane 2007).

There is likely no simple explanation for the devaluation of religious representamen. Tambiah (1985: 166) presents two possible paths of disrupting the semiotic construction of ritual: by the loss of the semantic component (Rappaport's canonical message) in favor of the "pragmatic interest of authority, privilege, and sheer conservatism," and by believers' attempts to purify the ritual from all "unnecessary" references (Rappaport's autoreferential messages). Although my study of Podhale religious culture followed the second path, it is worth noting that my research participants have already functioned in semiotic ideology shaped by the history of European Christianity and Polish Catholicism. In this paper, I presented arguments in favor of the thesis that the devaluation of the representamen and the devaluation of the conceptualization of ritual canonical references as an indexical relation may be coupled with changes in the attitude of ritual participants to non-canonical ritual references like self-referential messages regarding participants prestige. The evidence for the thesis that this is a phenomenon of significant importance in the context of religious representamens' devaluation seems to be provided not only by the materials collected during my field research in Podhale, but also by the well-described history of the Reformation. At the root of the first reform movements were very similar moral dilemmas and conflicts: the scandalous trade in indulgences was not only a trade of salvation but also a trade of prestige.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank Dominika Motak, Volkhard Krech, and Jens Schlamelcher for reading the first draft of this paper and providing insightful comments.

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