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Catholic Intimacies: Negotiating Contraception in Late Communist Poland

The majority of people in Poland self-identified as Catholic throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Despite the Polish Episcopate's unanimous rejection of contraception as immoral and sinful, a considerable proportion of Polish Catholics utilized family planning techniques and technologies explicitly banned by their institutional Church. This article uses personal narratives to show how Polish Catholics negotiated their use of Church-authorized and Church-banned family planning methods with their lived experiences of faith in a communist state where both abortion and contraception were legal. We explore the strategies of interpretation, relativisation, and (selective) rejection through which Catholics who self-identified as "practising" approached birth control as a social issue and an individual practice and show how communist secular approaches to birth control contributed to extending the scope of Catholics' agency in the realm of reproductive decision making.

Introduction

During most of the second half of the twentieth century, Poland was simultaneously a Catholic and communist country.¹ While the government's

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1. We have made the terminological choice of "communism" following Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Małgorzata Fidelis, and Barbara Klich-Kluczewska, as well as earlier reflections by Andrew Roberts as cited by these scholars, who contend that the label of "communism" exceeds that of "state-socialism" and encompasses the non-democratic character of the Polish regime. A. Roberts, "The State of Socialism: A Note on Terminology," *Slavic Review* 63, no. 2 (2004): 349–66; K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, P. Perkowski, M. Fidelis, and B. Klich-Kluczewska, *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989: Nowoczesność, Równouprawienie, Komunizm* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2020), 11.

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reproductive policies shifted during this period, abortion remained legal and widely accessible between the late 1950s and early 1990s, and health authorities promoted contraceptive technologies such as female barrier methods and spermicides (1950s–1960s), and the IUD (intrauterine device) (1970s–1980s).² The authorities and a dedicated state-sponsored family planning association promoted these technologies as beneficial for women, especially those struggling economically or subjected to sexual violence from alcoholic husbands. Contraception was framed as a tool that could prevent abortion, which, while legal, was systematically stigmatized in public discourse.³ Despite this stigmatization, as well as the Polish Catholic hierarchy's persistent anti-contraception and anti-abortion stance, abortion remained a frequently used birth control resource in a country where the majority of the population were baptized Catholic and a considerable proportion regularly attended Sunday Mass.⁴

The aim of this paper is to begin exploring this paradox by examining the impact of Catholic religious doctrine on the intimate practices of Polish Catholics and problematize the predominant narrative of a homogeneously Catholic Poland. We address this issue by analysing personal narratives by Polish Catholics, particularly women, living their reproductive lives under communism, and examine on their reproductive decisions and the ways in which these were affected by their faith. In this article, we focus specifically on contraceptive methods explicitly prohibited by the Church rather than abortion, which the Polish Catholic hierarchy systematically condemned as a sin and a crime against the “person” and the nation, and which we discuss elsewhere.

A crucial prerequisite for this analysis is to shed light on how Polish Catholics understood and implemented Church doctrine on birth control and sexuality. Historians and historical demographers have shown that doctrine in these areas has been particularly subject to counter-readings and divergent interpretations by theologians, the clergy, and the laity.⁵ Catholic negotiations

2. A. Ignaciuk, “Innovation and maladjustment. Contraceptive technologies in state-socialist Poland, 1950s–1970s,” *Technology and Culture* 63, no. 1 (2022): 182–208.

3. A. Ignaciuk, “No Man’s Land? Gendering Contraception in Family Planning Advice Literature in State-Socialist Poland (1950s–1980s),” *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 4 (2020): 1327–1349; A. Ignaciuk, “Ten Szkodliwy Zabieg: Dyskursy na Temat Aborcji w Publikacjach Towarzystwa Świadomego Macierzyństwa/Towarzystwa Planowania Rodziny,” *Zeszyty Etnologii Wrocławskiej* 2, no. 20 (2014): 75–97.

4. L. Adameczuk and W. A. Zdaniewicz, *Kościół Katolicki w Polsce, 1918–1990: Rocznik Statystyczny* (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1991).

5. G. Dalla-Zuanna, “Tacit Consent: The Church and Birth Control in Northern Italy,” *Population and Development Review* 37, no. 2 (2011): 361–374; R. N. López, “Priests and Pills: Catholic Family Planning in Peru, 1967–1976,” *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008): 34; D. Gervais and D. Gauvreau, “Women, Priests, and Physicians: Family Limitation in Quebec, 1940–1970,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): 293–314; W. Dupont, “In Good Faith: Belgian Catholics’ Attempts to Overturn the Ban on Contraception,” in *La Sainte Famille: Sexualité, Filiation Et Parentalité Dans L’église Catholique*, eds. C. Vanderpelen-Diagre and C. Sägeser (Brussels: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2017), 67–76; L. W. Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); A-S. Crosetti, “The ‘Converted Unbelievers’: Catholics in Family Planning in French-Speaking Belgium (1947–73),” *Medical History* 64, no. 2 (2020): 267–286.

with sexual and contraceptive ideals were particularly intense during the 1960s, the period between the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the late 1950s and publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, through which the Vatican pronounced itself resolutely against the new contraceptive technology and reiterated its rejection of any “artificial” contraception.⁶ Before, and despite this pronouncement, after, the contraceptive pill was deemed a suitable method for the exercise of *responsible parenthood* by many theologians and lay Catholics. This term, as outlined by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), referred to conscientious reproductive decision making: having all and only the children that spouses felt capable of raising in an adequate manner. In 1963, Pope John XXIII convened the Pontifical Commission on Population, Family and Birth Control to discuss the place that various contraceptive methods occupied in the exercise of responsible parenthood. Eventually encompassing over 70 participants, including members of the hierarchy, theologians, physicians, social scientists, and married laity, the Commission concluded that the use of the contraceptive pill was an expansion of the rhythm method, previously sanctioned by Pope Pius XII. However, a dissenting minority of Commission members produced their own report, in which they called on the Church not to abandon its long-held beliefs that every marital sex act should potentially lead to conception, and that artificial birth control methods were immoral. Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, published in 1968, emulated the minority report.⁷ Intense debates about the encyclical received extensive media coverage across Europe, producing an unexpected opening of debate on sexuality.⁸ Responses to the papal document from the public and national hierarchies varied significantly: while the Catholic hierarchies in Germany and Belgium were critical of the encyclical, the Polish Episcopate welcomed it as an incarnation of their own unyielding position. Nevertheless, in regard to responsible parenthood, some Polish Catholic intellectuals continued to write books and articles positioning themselves with the Second Vatican Council rather than the *Humana Vitae*.⁹

Many secular Catholics across the globe continued to use the pill and other forms of “artificial” contraception either as a conscious choice; an interpretation of doctrine; or, as media coverage faded, through ignorance of the encyclical. In fact, as Leslie Woodcock Tentler has argued in regard to American Catholicism, after the intense debates about sex and contraception in the 1960s, the 1970s ushered in a bilateral silence. Priests preferred to avoid contraceptive controversy by skipping discussions about sexuality

6. A. Harris, ed. *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

7. A. Harris, “Introduction: The Summer of '68 — Beyond the Secularization Thesis,” in Harris, *The Schism of '68*, 5–6.

8. Harris, *The Schism of '68*.

9. A. Kościańska, “*Humanae Vitae*, Birth Control and the Forgotten History of the Catholic Church in Poland,” in Harris, *The Schism of '68*, 187–208; S. Kuźma-Markowska and A. Ignaciuk, “Family Planning Advice in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s–1980s: Local and Transnational Exchanges,” *Medical History* 64, no. 2 (2020): 240–266.

entirely, creating a “teaching vacuum.” In exchange, the laity was increasingly skipping confession, especially in regard to birth control, and negotiating the surrounding “sexual wilderness” on their own.¹⁰ Tentler’s seminal work on North American Catholics and contraception laid a foundation for the recent, expansive body of historical scholarship on lay Catholic attitudes to sexuality and birth control from the 1960s onwards.¹¹ Alana Harris has analysed correspondence from the laity to the English primate Cardinal Heenan during the second half of the 1960s, and emphasized that lay Catholic authority and autonomy, as well as class, were the central axes around which lay believers articulated and justified their dissent toward the papal decision in *Humanae Vitae*. Laura Kelly’s analysis of women’s attitudes to the pill in Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s, a period when contraception remained illegal and oral contraceptives circulated as therapeutic drugs, brought to the fore the fact that pill users believed they were acting “in good conscience” and justified their birth control practices with economic reasoning.¹² Caroline Rusterholz’s study of reproductive behaviour among Catholics in Switzerland during the 1950s and 1960s also sheds light on the concrete strategies with which married couples negotiated the ban on “artificial” contraception. These included ignoring or failing to acknowledge the existence of the strong condemnation of contraception by the Church; explicitly refusing to accept the Church’s ruling on birth control matters, deeming this area to belong in the private domain; and justifying the use of contraception through personal and economic situations.¹³ Use of the highly subjective economic well-being criterion as justification for a family planned with the aid of “artificial” methods appears as a common thread in the narratives of European Catholics from the 1960s onwards.

Over the past decade, there has been increasing academic interest in the history of sexuality and reproductive politics in East Central Europe.¹⁴ With regards to Poland specifically, historians have focused on the establishment of state-sponsored and Church-driven family planning services, the development of sexual and contraceptive expertise and way this expertise was gen-

10. L. W. Tentler, “How Exceptional? US Catholics since 1945,” in *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World*, eds. D. Hempton and H. McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 272–287, on pp. 280 and 282.

11. A. Harris, “A Galileo-Crisis not a Luther Crisis? English Catholics’ Attitudes to Contraception,” in Harris, *The Schism of ‘68*, 73–96; L. Kelly, “The Contraceptive Pill in Ireland C. 1964–79: Activism, Women and Patient–Doctor Relationships,” *Medical History* 64, no. 2 (2020): 195–218; C. Rusterholz, “Reproductive Behaviour and Contraceptive Practices in Comparative Perspective, Switzerland (1955–1970),” *The History of the Family* 20, no. 1 (2015): 41–68.

12. Kelly.

13. Rusterholz.

14. For recent reviews of this literature see K. Lišková, “History of Medicine in Eastern Europe: Sexual Medicine and Women’s Reproductive Health in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary,” *European Journal for the History of Medicine and Health* (30 Jun. 2021): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1163/26667711-78010029>; E. Varsa and D. Szikra, “New Eugenics, Gender and Sexuality: A Global Perspective on Reproductive Politics and Sex Education in Cold War Europe,” *The History of the Family* 25, no. 4 (2020): 527–49.

dered, and social and medical debates around legal abortion.¹⁵ However, the theme of reproductive decision making in Poland is still embryonic in scholarly research. A forthcoming study by the historians Natalia Jarska and Agata Ignaciuk examines personal narratives about fertility management by two generations of Poles: those coming to age after World War II, and in the late 1960s and 1970s. While not focusing explicitly on Catholicism, they conclude that practising Catholics tended to abandon the two-child family model, widespread in Poland from the 1960s onwards, especially in urban areas. By consciously choosing to have more children, Catholics faced the stigmatization attached to large families and were often viewed as unmodern and unorganized.¹⁶ Anthropologist Joanna Mishtal has explored confession relating to contraception and reproductive decision-making in contemporary Poland in terms of Foucauldian governmentality, interpreting the need to confess to the use of a banned contraceptive methods, and the cessation of such use after receiving a reprimand as a self-disciplinary and self-censorship practice.¹⁷

The scholarship on Catholic family-planning decision making suggests that intimate negotiations occurred on at least two levels: the (perceived) doctrine and one's own subjectivity, or, in religious terms, conscience and, explicitly or tacitly, within the couple.¹⁸ The results of these negotiations were by no means definitive: both (perceived) doctrine and personal circumstances could alter previous agreements and arrangements. In exploring the intimate negotiations in narratives by Polish Catholics who lived their reproductive lives under communism, we focus on two research issues. Firstly, we examine ways in which "practising" Catholics — those deeply engaged with their faith, who attended Sunday mass and received the sacraments — made decisions about their reproductive lives in communist Poland. Secondly, we address the extent to which their decisions were influenced by Church doctrine. We show that practising Catholics in communist Poland employed a variety of family planning strategies that transgressed the Church's ruling,

15. Kuźma-Markowska and Ignaciuk, Family Planning Advice, and N. Jarska, "Modern Marriage and the Culture of Sexuality: Experts between the State and the Church in Poland, 1956–1970," *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2019): 467–490; A. Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland* trans. M. Rozmysłowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021); B. Klich-Kluczewska, *Family, Taboo and Communism in Poland, 1956–1989*. (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021); A. Krajewska, "Rupture and Continuity: Abortion, the Medical Profession, and the Transitional State — a Polish Case Study," *Feminist Legal Studies* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-021-09465-3>; A. Ignaciuk, "In Sickness and in Health. Expert Discussions on Abortion Indications, Risks and Patient-doctor Relationships in Post-War Poland," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 95, no. 1 (2021): 83–112.

16. N. Jarska and A. Ignaciuk, "Marriage, Gender and Demographic Change: Managing Fertility in State-Socialist Poland," *Slavic Review*, forthcoming 2022.

17. J. Mishtal, *The Politics of Morality: The Church, the State and Reproductive Rights in Post-socialist Poland* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015).

18. On negotiations of family planning strategies within the couple in the twentieth century, the work of Kate Fisher has been seminal (eg. K. Fisher, "Uncertain Aims and Tacit Negotiation: Birth Control Practices in Britain, 1925–50," *Population and Development Review* 26, no. 2 (2000): 295–317). A more recent contribution in this vein is V. Hionidou, *Abortion and Contraception in Modern Greece, 1830–1967: Medicine, Sexuality and Popular Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

either ignoring doctrine, interpreting it in a way that suited their lives and needs, or negotiating between their beliefs and a state framework that offered contraception and legal abortion. Therefore, we highlight communist reproductive policies as a significant element in these negotiations and in Catholic agency within the realm of reproductive decision making.

On a theoretical level, our discussion is a voice in the ongoing debate on human, and particularly women's agency. Agency is one of the major analytic tools used in feminist scholarship to understand women's oppression and empowerment. Although the term is rooted in the theories of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, who focused on the complex relationship between the individual and structure, it is often used as a synonym for unlimited possibilities and placed in the context of capabilities provided by liberal secular democratic societies.¹⁹ The relationship between women's agency and religion remains highly problematic for many feminist scholars and activists, despite a series of theoretical and empirical interventions arguing for a more nuanced approach. Feminist scholars of religion have demonstrated that pious women have been able to use religion to expand their space of capabilities, their authority within communities, and their ability to interpret doctrine. In this context, religion is seen as a space for negotiation of women's agency and women's social position rather than an immutable tool of gendered oppression.²⁰ In the Catholic context, within which all major decisions, both practical and doctrinal, are traditionally made by the (male) clergy, these considerations could apply not only to women but to the laity in general.²¹

As stated, agency is often associated with liberal democracy. It is an ongoing common misconception to perceive the "Eastern Bloc," comprising the USSR and its satellite states, communist Poland included, through the unnuanced lens of totalitarianism within which there is no space for individ-

19. A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). For an overview, see C. B. Brettell, "The Individual/Agent and Culture/Structure in the History of the Social Science," *Social Science History* 26, no. 3 (2002): 429–445.

20. T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); P. E. Klassen, "Sacred Maternities and Postbiomedical Bodies: Religion and Nature in Contemporary Home Birth," *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, no. 3 (2001): 775–809; A. Kościńska, "The 'Power of Silence: Spirituality and Women's Agency Beyond the Catholic Church in Poland,'" *Focaal — European Journal of Anthropology* 53 (2009): 56–71; P. Mack, "Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency. Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism," *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 1 (2003): 149–177; S. Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–236. For an overview, see K. Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches," *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 122–133; K. Leszczyńska and K. Zielińska, "Gender in Religion? Religion in Gender? Commentary on Theory and Research on Gender and Religion," *Studia Humanistyczne AGH* 15, no. 3 (2016): 7–17.

21. E. Peperkamp, "The Fertile Body and Cross-Fertilization of Disciplinary Regimes. Technologies of Self in a Polish Catholic Youth Movement," in *Exploring Regimes of Discipline. The Dynamics of Restraint*, ed. N. Dyck (Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 113–134.

ual or group agency.²² In case of women in East Central Europe, feminist scholars have long contested the idea that they lacked agency.²³ A new body of research contributing to this debate has revealed how women have benefited from the capabilities offered by emancipatory policies in Poland and other “Eastern Bloc” countries, such as legal abortion, access to contraception, the inclusion of women in the labour force, and the potential for pro-women political activism, and have been active agents in relation to their families, the state, and national experts such as birth control specialists.²⁴

Based on these theoretical interventions, we examine how pious women, and to some extent men, exercised agency in the context of both Catholicism and communism. Birth control in communist Poland is a particularly interesting case for exploration of these issues. Although the state did not perceive access to birth control in the context of women’s rights, its accessibility, combined with the officially limited influence of the Church, provided Catholic women with more space for agency and negotiation in reproductive decision making.²⁵ Therefore, postwar Poland differs from many Catholic Western European countries in which the state and Church officially collaborated to restrict access to birth control.²⁶ In this framework, on a theoretical level, this article contributes to understanding gendered agency in the context of a specific struggle between state and Church over women’s reproductive decision making, as will be discussed in detail in the next section.²⁷ Studying women who tended to conform to religious precepts in communist Poland will contribute to our understanding of agency on two levels: it speaks to our understanding of the religious context of agency and deepens our insight into gender equality under communist rule.

This article is based on ethnographic and oral history interviews created between 2017 and 2020 within two research projects focusing on the

22. N. Funk, “A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women’s Organizations, Women’s Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 21, no. 4 (2014): 344–360.

23. K. Ghodsee and K. Lišková, “Bumbling Idiots or Evil Masterminds? Challenging Cold War Stereotypes About Women, Sexuality and State Socialism,” *Filozofija i Društvo* 27, no. 3 (2016): 489–503.

24. Kościńska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*; K. Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women’s Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); K. Stańczak-Wiślicz et al., *Kobiety w Polsce*; M. Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); F. De Haan, K. Ghodsee, K. Daskalova, M. Grabowska, J. Lukić, Ch. Bonfiglioli, R. M. Popa, and A. Ghit, “Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited,” *Aspasia* 10, no. 1 (2016): 102–68; M. Grabowska, “From Revolutionary Agents to Reactive Actors: The Transformation of Socialist Women’s Organizing in Poland from the 1940s through the 1980s,” *Aspasia* 10, no. 1 (2016): 126–135.

25. Fidelis.

26. D. Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); A. Ignaciuk, “Paradox of the Pill: Oral Contraceptives in Spain and Poland (1960s–1970s),” in *Children by Choice? Changing Values, Reproduction, and Family Planning in the 20th Century*, ed. A.-K. Gembrics, T. Theuke, and I. Heinemann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 95–111.

27. Jarska; A. Kościńska, “The Handbook of Masturbation and Defloration: Tracing Sources of Recent Neo-Conservatism in Poland,” in *Gender, Reproduction, Regulation: Gender, Intimacy and Mobility in the Era of Hardening Borders*, eds. F. Pine and H. Haukanes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 218–234.

reproductive practices of Polish men and women from the 1950s onwards, one of which is ongoing.²⁸ The in-progress corpus of interviews with Polish men and women currently contains 105 interviews focusing on reproductive practices and perceptions of Polish people born between 1930 and 2000; our analysis here is based specifically on 31 interviews with Polish people who identified, at least at some point in their lives, as “practising believers” engaged in heterosexual activity and who contemplated reproductive issues during the last three decades of state socialism in Poland. While most of the interviews were carried out with individuals, two interviews featured couples. Respondents originated from across Poland: sixteen participants resided in big cities; thirteen in small towns; and four in rural areas, namely a village and small town in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodship of North-East Poland. Eighteen participants had higher education; eleven had secondary education or vocational training; and four had primary education. The selected quotes and biographies respond to broader trends that we identified across the narratives of Polish “practising” Catholics created during our research. In order to explore the tensions and contradictions between the birth control practices provided by the state and religious pressures, we selected and analysed interviews that featured participants’ reflections on the family planning methods they used, their understanding of the Church’s stance on these particular methods, and their strategies for coping with any discrepancy. We are not claiming that the presented selection of narratives is comprehensive or that our interpretations of these narratives are representative of the behaviour of all Polish Catholics under communism. However, this selection of narratives does begin to illuminate individual mechanisms, motivations, and emotional and intellectual elaborations relating to the use of birth control methods condemned by the Catholic Church, and personal strategies of negotiation between faith and reproductive needs.

Our work is rooted in recent interdisciplinary developments in the study of gender, reproduction, and communism situated on the border of cultural anthropology and social history.²⁹ It combines classical anthropological interest in the individual and the unofficial,³⁰ with broader historical inquiries into the processes that shape people’s gendered and reproductive lives in a given political system, in our case Catholic and communist Poland.³¹ It has also been greatly inspired by scholars who have argued for a more nuanced

28. *Birth Control Cultures in Poland, 1945–1989*, co-funded by the National Science Centre (Poland) and the European Union Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska Curie grant agreement no. 665778 (Polonez grant ref. 2016/21/P/HS3/04080, 2017–2019, principal investigator Agata Ignaciuk) and *Catholicising Reproduction, Reproducing Catholicism: Activist Practices and Intimate Negotiations in Poland, 1930 — Present*, funded by the National Science Center, Poland (Opus grant ref. 2019/33/B/HS3/01068, 2020–2023, principal investigator Agnieszka Kościńska).

29. Mishtal; Kościńska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*.

30. For example, L. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments. Honour and Poetry in Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986); J. Okely, “Defiant Moments: Gender, Resistance and Individuals,” *Man* 26, no. 1 (1991): 3–22.

31. Jarska; Fidelis.

approach toward Polish Catholicism.³² This approach enables us to identify the individual strategies that actors/subjects use to negotiate between religion and the state in their reproductive lives.

In what follows, we first provide a brief background on the communist state, Catholicism, and birth control in Poland during the second half of the twentieth century to highlight the specificity of this context. We then untangle individual motivations behind acceptance or rejection of premarital sexuality and contraceptive strategies banned by the Church and position these alongside subjective interpretations of “deep” religious practice. Such positioning offers new and valuable insights on the history of Catholicism and women’s agency in communist Poland.

Catholicism and Birth Control in Poland during Communism

Public healthcare, actively secularized in communist Poland, was the key site for implementation of family planning policies, which shifted during the second half of the twentieth century.³³ State support for birth control, strongest during the late 1950s and 1960s, began to fade through the 1970s and 1980s. However, abortion, legalized in 1956 and made available practically on demand in 1959, was legal throughout the communist period. While the actual methods health authorities recommended also changed over time, contraception was the preferred family planning tool. Both abortion and contraception were available through the public healthcare system: the former free of charge, the latter at low cost when prescribed by a doctor.³⁴

In parallel to the legalization of abortion in 1956, the Party-state supported a public health campaign promoting contraception that continued to the mid-1960s. This campaign included the commercialization of new contraceptive products and devices (female barrier methods and spermicides), creation of a network of family planning clinics, and the dissemination of birth control information through popular medical literature and the press.³⁵ The Polish Catholic hierarchy fiercely rejected the legalization of abortion and viewed the state-sponsored family planning association, the Society for Conscious Motherhood, as “anti-Church.” In the 1970s, the Party-state’s population policy shifted to embrace moderate pronatalism and promote a 2 + 3 family model. As a consequence, state support for family planning activities diminished. The new policy direction was welcomed by the Catholic hierarchy, which, following publication of *Humanae Vitae*, intensified and activated networks for the dissemination of its anti-contraception vision of family

32. B. Porter-Szucs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); P. Kosicki, “The Catholic 1968: Poland, Social Justice, and the Global Cold War,” *Slavic Review*, 77 no. 3 (2018): 638–60; M. Osa, “Resistance, Persistence, and Change. The Transformation of the Catholic Church in Poland,” *East European Politics and Societies* 3, no. 2 (1989): 268–99.

33. J. T. Persa and A. Krawczyk, “Kościół, Władza, Lekarze w PRL w Latach 1956–1969,” in *Zawód Lekarza na Ziemiach Polskich w XIX i XX Wieku*, ed. B. Urbanek (Warszawa: Śląski Uniwersytet Medyczny Instytut Historii Nauki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2009), 421–49.

34. A. Ignaciuk, “In Sickness and in Health.”

35. A. Ignaciuk, “Innovation and Maladjustment.”

planning and the connection between sexuality, reproduction, and marriage.³⁶ This rigid anti-contraception and anti-premarital sexuality stance exhibited in the encyclical was popularized through a range of channels in Poland. These included instruction in childbirth preparation, especially in the childbirth schools modelled after those opened by the Catholic gynaecologist Włodzimierz Fijałkowski in Lodz during the late 1950s.³⁷

In the mid-1970s, over 90 per cent of the Polish population had been baptized Catholic, and over 80 per cent of all wedded couples had undergone a Catholic rite of marriage.³⁸ An average of three-quarters of Poles identified as “believers” (*wierzący*) between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s. The proportion of those who considered their engagement with religion as particularly intense ranged between one in ten and one in three, with those declaring the deepest engagement most often belonging to rural parishes. During the final years of state socialism in the 1980s, the percentage of Catholics claiming to practice rose regularly, exceeding 50 per cent in the youngest population, symptomatic of the multiple social and political roles played by the Catholic Church in Poland during the political crisis and dawn of democracy in Poland.³⁹ At the same time, although the Catholic Church remained influential during almost the entire communist period, its power was not granted by the state as in many other national contexts but rather established on its opposition to the state and closeness to the Catholic population, resulting in more “democratic” and negotiation-based relations between the clergy and faithful. This process is in many ways specific to Poland and had already begun in the nineteenth century during the partition of Poland.⁴⁰ In 1989, the Church started to gain and sustain political power and influence with state support.⁴¹

Those who contracted a Catholic marriage and attended premarital courses, offered to most betrothed couples from the 1970s onward, were exposed to specific norms of expected reproductive behaviour: use of the rhythm method and rejection of abortion, contraception, and traditional birth control practices such as withdrawal. Many course instructors used the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* as a key ideological reference.⁴² However, official abortion figures and demographic surveys on contraceptive usage reflect the significant discrepancy between religious mandates and people’s practices. Between the early 1960s and mid-1980s, official abortion levels remained stable at around 140,000 a year. The Family Surveys — large demographic studies of Polish women’s reproductive practices conducted in 1972 and

36. A. Ignaciuk, “Marital Intercourse is Togetherness and Parenthood: The Biopolitics of Catholic Marriage Preparation in Poland During the 1970s,” forthcoming 2023.

37. A. Ignaciuk and A. Kościńska, “Re-gendering Childbirth. Catholicism and Medical Activism around Preparation for Birth in Communist and Early Democratic Poland (1950s–1990s),” forthcoming 2023.

38. Adamczuk and Zdaniewicz, 19, 171.

39. Adamczuk and Zdaniewicz, 165–166.

40. Osa.

41. Mishtal.

42. Ignaciuk, “Marital Intercourse,” Kuźma-Markowska and Ignaciuk.

1977 and associated with the United Nations' World Fertility Survey project — revealed that one-third of married Polish women who wished to avoid pregnancy used the rhythm method. However, at least as many relied on withdrawal; and over 20 per cent relied on condoms, the pill, or other products and devices.⁴³

Two sociological studies on sexuality published in the 1970s shed some light on the discrepancies between widely declared Catholicism and widespread transgression of Catholic sexual ethics. Hanna Malewska's study on the cultural, psychological, and social determinants of Polish women's sex lives, conducted in the late 1950s and early 1960s and based on over 800 questionnaires with gynaecological patients, over 80 per cent self-identifying as Catholic, found that at least 65 per cent of women engaged in sex before marriage. Among women who considered themselves deeply religious, 44.7 per cent condemned sexual relations before marriage but 36.7 per cent did not, and as many as 13.5 per cent viewed the practice positively. Malewska also found that deeply religious women were less satisfied with their sex lives than those who practised less intensely, which the sociologist attributed to the motivational conflict likely to be experienced by pious Catholics.⁴⁴ Maria Trawińska's survey on the sexual practices of urban and rural youth in Poland, based on over 400 surveys and conducted and published in 1971, revealed that while almost 56 per cent of participants said they were regular churchgoers, 59 per cent claimed they were not indifferent to "Catholic sexual ideology." Implementing religious norms in one's sexual life was viewed negatively by 40 per cent, and over a quarter of the respondents believed the demands that Catholicism imposed on sexuality were too difficult to fulfil.⁴⁵

Catholics Negotiating Contraception during Communism

The studies by Malewska and Trawińska anticipate some of the tensions and contradictions at the intersection of Catholic and state-driven directives for managing sexuality and reproduction in Poland that we address through our own material. Two major strategies or forms of negotiating agency emerge at this intersection. The first is purely religious: we focus on how our interview partners negotiate with and challenge Catholic teachings on birth control and look at the scope of their agency in this respect. The second is secular: despite declaring themselves to be pious Catholics, some of our interview partners do not view religion as a relevant framework for birth control and make use of the family planning resources available. Therefore, we explore how communism, usually perceived as limiting individual agency due to its

43. Z. Smoliński, ed. *Dzielnosc Kobiet w Polsce* (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1980), 160–177.

44. H. Malewska, *Kulturowe i Psychospoleczne Determinanty Życia Seksualnego* (Warszawa: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1972), 61–62.

45. M. Trawińska, *Obyczajowosc Młodzieży Robotniczej i Chłopskiej: Raport z Badań* (Warszawa: Zarząd Główny Towarzystwa Planowania Rodziny, 1971).

non-democratic character, actually contributed to extending agency and reproductive decision making among Polish Catholics.

Absolved by a “Wise Priest”: The Confession as a Site of Negotiation

In the course of our interviews, participants often addressed birth control-related conflicts by discussing the practice of confession, such as if they confessed to using condoms or the pill and were granted or refused absolution. Confession is a way of maintaining a dialogue with the institutional Church for many of our participants and therefore emerges as an important site of negotiation.

One outcome of such dialogue could be the believer’s re-affirmation in their officially banned practice through the obtaining of absolution. Monika’s narrative exemplifies such an outcome. A Catholic school teacher from Warsaw born in 1959, she had used contraceptive pills as birth control before she discovered she suffered from fertility problems. Monika described herself as “religious but not a bigot” and joked she could always find an understanding with God but not always with “ground control,” meaning the institutional Church. She described her faith as a crucial part of her life, claiming it “saved her from depression.” Asked how she reconciled using oral contraceptives with Church doctrine, Monika said she raised the subject during confession and was “always lucky to meet wise priests” who would grant her absolution. Although she did not agree with the Church’s stance on contraception, she described being “freed from this dilemma” on finding out she could no longer take contraceptive pills for health reasons.

However, absolution did not always relieve moral discomfort. Kasia, a mother of four born in 1963 and living in a suburban house outside Warsaw, identified as a “strong believer” and was moved to tears when the interviewer asked her to describe the role of faith in her life. She and her husband had used various methods to achieve the desired number of children and spacing between, with varying success, before her husband’s serious illness rendered him infertile. Kasia admitted they had used condoms and the rhythm method. Interestingly, her husband, also an interview partner, mentioned contraceptive pills, a method Kasia did not discuss. When we talked to Kasia about reconciling her strong faith with using condoms, she said she had confessed: “It was always a problem for me ... because when someone confesses, we assume they have a strong resolution not to repeat the sin, right?” Despite acknowledging the contradiction of confessing a sin she was intending to repeat, Kasia found consolation in the concept of a “common sin” and the fact that she was always granted absolution: “I was never told that I would be eternally condemned if I did it again.”

Nevertheless, absolution was by no means taken for granted in several of the narratives but rather represented as a stroke of luck, the result of an encounter with a “wise priest” (as in Monika’s narrative). Kasia’s narrative further exemplifies this perception of absolution. When discussing her contraception use and its religious implications, Kasia extended the topic of

contrition by relating an anecdote about a woman who had also confessed to using contraception:

She had an IUD. She wanted to take part in communion because her son's first communion was coming up.⁴⁶ But you cannot [take the sacrament while having an IUD]. She told the priest and he granted her absolution! So it's hard for me to tell [what the doctrine is]. Because one priest would say "no, absolutely not, you will not get absolution." And another ... (...) So it's hard to tell with the Church's approach.

In Kasia's interpretation, this woman did not fulfil the condition of promising not to sin again because her IUD was in place during and after confession. The anecdote shows that Kasia's repeated use of confession to dispense with the sin of using condoms was not unheard of; in fact, the will to continue sinning by using banned contraceptive methods could be even more evident in other believers and still secure absolution. Therefore, the chances of women receiving absolution depended on the attitudes of individual priests, and Church doctrine appears to have been unevenly and unclearly implemented.

Other narratives that do not directly mention confession but focus on other close interactions with priests in teaching contexts give a glimpse into the sought-after qualities of individual priests. Medical technician Dorota, born in 1961 in Lodz, recalled the priest who led the marriage preparation course she and her future husband attended in the early 1980s as "a normal person, with whom you could talk about anything." Lucyna, a retired administrative worker with an engineering degree born in 1952 in Lodz, who was an active Catholic during her young adulthood, provided further insights on the figure of a "wise priest":

I learnt quite a lot on the calendar method, you know, natural family planning, during religion lessons. I attended them for quite a long time, until I was 18–19 years old. We had such a wise priest. He was not a religious fanatic, but rather an ethicist, who discussed these topics with us and transmitted a lot. We were not separated, but girls and boys together, and he explained many things, in a natural and accessible way. Priest, yeah, a priest. He told us about natural family planning, but also about condoms. Not about abortion: this was not a topic at all. But he did tell us about preventing pregnancy [laughs]. He was an exceptional priest, that's why we kept attending religion classes until so late. He did not mention abortion, but yes, he spoke of natural methods.

As exemplified in Lucyna's narrative, flexibility, openness, and a willingness to transgress the strict doctrine of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* could be sought-after qualities in priests when young people and married couples "shopped around" for spiritual leaders.

However, confession could also become a space of more than passive reception of absolution from a "wise priest," especially if the priest was not "wise." Barbara, a German language teacher born in 1958 in Tychy,

46. In Poland it is traditional for a child's closest family members to confess before their first communion so they can receive communion as well.

Southern Poland, narrated an experience of confession in the late 1980s, when she was mother to two small children born in 1985 and 1986. After the birth of her second child, she was determined not to become pregnant again: she and her husband used coitus interruptus combined with condoms and, for a short time, the contraceptive pill. When she confessed to having used these banned methods and techniques, an elderly priest told her to meet him in the sacristy and handed her a book about total abstinence. “He wasn’t pressing too much, only said that perhaps this would suit me. Perhaps he had orders from the Vatican or the bishop to distribute these books,” she recalled, laughing. Barbara did not mention absolution and the interviewer did not ask for details, but the omission of any comment leads us to believe she was granted forgiveness.

While Barbara’s reaction suggests she disregarded the advice provided, Gienia’s narrative exemplifies the active claiming of absolution from using contraception in dramatic personal circumstances. Gienia, a farmer with elementary education born in 1944, lived in a collective farming community in the north of the country. Her husband, who had drunk heavily and abused her, had died at the age of 39. Gienia had been pregnant five times but had suffered one miscarriage and a premature birth by emergency C-section that the baby had not survived. Before anaesthesia was administered for the C-section, a female doctor had asked if she wanted to have her tubes tied, and Gienia had said yes. She signed the necessary forms after the procedure and was advised not to tell anyone, especially her husband.⁴⁷ Although grateful to the doctor and not wanting to cause her any trouble, Gienia had confessed to being sterilized

Gienia: Only I had a problem with a priest, right? That was a problem

Interviewer: What kind of problem?

Gienia: Because I confessed [having undergone sterilization]

Interviewer: Oh ...

Gienia: “How can you ... [do something like this] — asked the priest]. So I told him: (*raised voice, arguing*) so what am I supposed to do, miscarry, have an abortion, or what? Isn’t that worse [than having a sterilization]? (...

Interviewer: And what did the priest say?

Gienia: Weeeeell, he murmured, murmured, but he gave me the absolution. So it could not be such a bad thing, could it? So there.

Gienia believed she made the right decision for herself and her family. Her husband raped her and did not use contraception. Due to the strength of her faith, absolution was important, and she was not afraid to argue with the priest to secure it. In this instance, the fact that the priest was merely human, an individual she could argue with, worked to her advantage: she knew how to advocate for herself in order to be granted absolution and, on an individual level, a representative of the Church conceded. On the other hand, despite

47. Sterilization was, and in fact still is, punishable under the Polish Penal Code, the legal doctrine allows for sterilizations performed for health reasons. E. Zielińska, “Warunki Dopuszczalności Zabiegów Sterylizacji,” *Państwo i Prawo* 9 (1985): 66–76.

being sure she had made the right decision, Genia still felt the need to confess and her ability to receive the sacrament was dependent on the priest's individual decision. This rationalization of the legitimacy of contraception, in this case irreversible, intersects with the economic factors prominent in secular Catholic responses to anti-contraception doctrine across contemporary Europe.⁴⁸

This section has explored how confession emerged in some of the narratives as a valuable way of addressing the discrepancy between family planning practices and Catholic doctrine. Those who had the positive experience of securing absolution could have acquired a sense that these methods were, in practice, permissible. For some of our research partners, the possibility of receiving absolution meant doctrine was unclear or erratically implemented. All in all, securing absolution was an uncertain endeavour, dependant on individual priests and a negotiation between the penitent and confessor. These narratives demonstrate that some priests did not adhere to Catholic doctrine in this respect and prioritized resolving their penitents' dilemmas.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, as part of the framework of Catholic religion, the sacrament of confession retained its importance, and those believers who confessed to denounced family planning practices therefore used the confessional to address the contradictions within their choices.

These preliminary conclusions from our narratives contrast with those of the women interviewed by the anthropologist Joanna Mishtal about confession in post-communist Poland. In this new political context, in which the Church and state worked together closely to limit women's access to birth control, confession served as a tool of moral governance. Pious women who used contraception and confessed to the fact were not offered absolution.⁵⁰ Avoiding the subject was also difficult because priests were trained to ask about contraception. In 1997, under Pope John Paul II, the Pontifical Council for the Family published *Vademecum for Confessors Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life*, intended to "overcome possible discrepancies and uncertainties in the practice of confessors."⁵¹ Therefore, juxtaposing Mishtal's findings with the themes emerging in our research illustrates the political changes in Poland that endowed the Church with greater political power. Combined with the more formalized Catholic approach to birth control under John Paul II, this significantly limited the agency of pious Catholic women. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that the 1997 *Vademecum* builds on earlier writings by John Paul II on family planning that are strongly rooted in Polish communist context.⁵²

48. Rusterholz; Harris, "A Galileo-Crisis Not a Luther Crisis?"; Kelly; Y. Hilevych and C. Rusterholz, "Two Children to Make Ends Meet: The Ideal Family Size, Parental Responsibilities and Costs of Children on Two Sides of the Iron Curtain During the Post-War Fertility Decline," *The History of the Family* 23, no. 3 (2018): 408–425.

49. A similar dynamic has been discussed by Dorota Hall in her work on Catholic homosexuals in Poland, see D. Hall, "Individual Choices Revisited: Non-Heterosexual Christians in Poland," *Social Compass* 62, no. 2 (2015): 212–224.

50. Mishtal, 120–125.

51. Mishtal, 119.

Beyond Confession: Individual Reaffirmation of Contraceptive Use

Other interview partners who used family planning methods condemned by the Church did not feel the need for confession to address the discrepancies between their religious and reproductive lives. Some questioned if contraception and sterilization were morally wrong, a strategy also revealed in Caroline Rusterholz's study of Catholic reproductive practices in Switzerland during the 1950s and 1960s.⁵³ Like their Swiss counterparts, some Polish Catholics presented their own interpretations of the doctrine or disregarded it altogether: they did not rely heavily on "wise" priests to extend the scope of their agency in reproductive decision making.

An example of such agency can be found in the narrative of the aforementioned mother of four, Kasia, who proffered the following approach: she admitted condoms were condemned by the Church but argued that, beyond the technical fix provided by contraception, she and her husband lived in accordance with the Church's views on family.

[I know it's wrong], because in our Catholic faith a marriage is supposed to open itself to new life... I think we did our part in this regard. (*laughs*)

By jokingly suggesting she and her husband had fulfilled the Church's vision by having four children, Kasia appears to be illustrating how her marriage follows the *spirit* of doctrine, if not the *letter*. She agrees with the Catholic *vision* of family, while disagreeing on the acceptable *methods* used for fulfilling this vision (means vs. ends), and believes it is acceptable for *her* family to apply other methods. In this way, while not explicitly identifying her behaviour as such, she may be adhering to the Second Vatican Council's suggestions that Catholic spouses could decide about family planning in their own consciences.

While the previous narrative provides a rather veiled critique, others openly questioned Catholic doctrine by drawing attention to debate within the Church. Wioletta, a childless teacher from Warsaw born in 1954 who read the Bible and Catholic magazines, offered her view on contraception:

If someone is an ardent believer, they could have a problem with contraception. Because this is in opposition [to the Catholic doctrine], but I think that if someone reads the enlightened Catholic thinkers, they know that there is no unequivocal stance (...) on contraception. Especially if a family has five or four children already, then the well-being of these children who are already born demands ... (...) I think then contraception is a must.

Wioletta subscribes to *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a magazine for the liberal Catholic Intelligentsia. Since the 1960s, a number of *Tygodnik* writers have stated that contraception is permissible for Catholics and does not need to be viewed as evil.⁵⁴ This internal debate in the Church, led by Catholic intellectuals, helps Wioletta form her own opinion on contraception and dissolve the idea that there is only one acceptable Catholic view.

53. Rusterholz; Hilevych and Rusterholz.

54. Kościańska, "Humanae Vitae."

This section has shown that pious Catholics living under communism were able to extend their scope of agency in reproductive decision making by drawing on internal debates within the Catholic Church, as well as the widespread flexibility of the Church enforced by its non-dominant status in Poland before 1989.⁵⁵ The combination of these factors enabled our interview partners to make use of the contraceptive methods on offer and resolve the surrounding moral dilemmas.

Removing Contraception from the Religious Realm

Some of our interview partners achieved the same end through essentially different conceptualizations. Wujek, a farming specialist with higher education born in 1961 and living in Warsaw, provides an example of this intellectual approach to matters of religion and family planning. Wujek was heavily influenced by the knowledge-based approach of his parents and grandmother, all medical doctors. Loving nature and animals, he viewed humans as a part of nature and therefore equipped with a strong “instinct.” For Wujek, nature would always prevail. Despite identifying as a believer, he had a strong sense of separation between religion and sexuality:

Back then [in communist times] religion was separate, and sexuality was separate. ... I separated knowledge from faith.

Wujek recalled that, despite regularly participating in Holy Mass and other Catholic activities, he had never witnessed any religion-inspired discussion about birth control under communism. He considered abortion and contraception to be medical issues. It was only in the mid-1980s that he first heard a priest discussing abortion and describing it as a sin.

Wujek’s wife had tried using the contraceptive pill, but she experienced too many side effects. Following the birth of their third child, they strictly followed the rhythm method to avoid a fourth pregnancy. The family of Wujek’s wife had “blamed” him for the third pregnancy, and it was his task to keep track of the marital “calendar” (of fertile and infertile days), a way of sharing responsibility recommended in Catholic family-planning advice books during the 1970s. He and his wife had led a rather “spontaneous” sex life before the third pregnancy and not adhered to the “calendar.” The couple’s choice of rhythm method was dictated by medical and “social” reasons rather than any religious dilemma because he maintained biology and religion were two completely different domains. Wujek’s critique of the Church and its doctrine on contraception was rooted in intellectualism: he complained that the Polish Church was “provincial,” stressed he could not listen to sermons in the countryside because he was interested in “theology, not politics,” and lamented the “lack of intellectual debate” within the Church.

However, a critique of Church involvement in family planning matters does not necessarily require an intellectualized point of view. Inka, who was

55. Osa.

born in 1946, lives in a small village in the Warmain-Mazurian Voivodship in North-East Poland and underwent vocational education, offered a very direct and principled critique. She had two children and used contraceptive pills to prevent a third pregnancy. Her aunt had offered help obtaining prescriptions for oral contraceptives from a doctor friend. Asked if she cared about the Church's position on contraception, Inka simply answered "no":

Interviewer: Did it matter to you what the Church said about contraception, about pills?

Inka: No, not at all. Not at all. I think the Church should not interfere like this into no pills, no contraception, no nothing. They have their lives, we have ours.

Interviewer: (...) And if you had to explain to someone why it's not their business?

Inka: [*raises voice*] Because it's not! I think it's not! (...) It's everyone's personal matter what they do. No one is supposed to judge anyone else. Priests are not saints themselves. I'm not saying all of them, but crystal clear they are not. And I do not know who I'm going to get in the confessional, what kind of a past he has.

Interviewer: You never know.

Inka: And how could he help me?

Interviewer: So you just did not confess? This was separate, and the church was separate?

Inka: No one talked about this. I did not know or hear about this, and I sure did not tell them if I was taking contraceptive pills. I thought it was my business. (...) What am I supposed to tell a priest: that I took contraceptives? [*irate*] (...) This should not concern him at all. The priest has his own, the government has its own and we have our own [domain]. [*knocks on the table for emphasis*] And let us all be honest and stick to our own [domains], and everything is going to be all right. And stop doing one thing and saying another. For example, priests say that a divorcee cannot receive communion. But [Jacek] Kurski, the [then] chief of public television [who is divorced: authors], receives communion. So one man can do it and another cannot? (...) I saw a video of him receiving communion. (...) What kind of justice is this?

Inka's objection to Church involvement in birth control matters was clear and passionate. She was indignant at the idea of confessing about using contraceptives, highlighted that individual differences between priests were an unwanted risk, and questioned their morals. Inka presents a clear vision of separation between Church, state, and the people: each has their separate, specific domains that they should "stick to" to uphold a certain social contract. She openly criticized the clergy for their immorality ("they are not saints") and hypocrisy (absolving a high government official of the sin of divorcing his first wife, when a common man is told it is unforgivable). She expresses the view that the general public and the clergy have "separate lives" and, because priests do not have families, believes they cannot fully understand and should not interfere in such matters. We interpret her

question “And how could he [the priest] help me?” as a reminder that she was the only person who could take responsibility for, and bear the consequences of, her own reproductive choices.

The narratives of Wujek and Inka and many of our other interview partners whose reproductive decision making took place during communism illustrate the specificity of the Polish situation. The perspectives we found have a variety of genealogies. While Wujek’s are based on intellectual considerations, Inka’s are rooted in her personal experiences. Despite being Catholics, they both rejected Catholic teachings on birth control and separated birth control from religion. Viewing such teachings through a secular worldview, they deemed them irrelevant and made use of the possibilities afforded by a communist that extended their scope of agency. In this context, the secular politics of state communism contributed to expanding citizens’ possibilities in the sphere of reproduction by reducing the influence of the Church. Thus, communism cannot be viewed exclusively as a non-democratic regime with a limited space for agency.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The secular framework of the communist state in postwar Poland provided free abortion services and supported contraception for family planning purposes. Although a large proportion of the population identified as practicing Catholics, many did not adhere to the Church’s moral teachings on sexuality and reproduction: abortion was a popular means of birth control; premarital sex was tolerated; and various contraceptive methods were used, even by people identifying as “believers.” Practising Catholics who used birth control methods condemned by the Church negotiated this use through a spectrum of explanations that illuminate the relationship between faith and family planning practices in a state-secularized context. A dialogue with religion could be successfully personified in confession. The narratives analysed here showcase a variety of meanings that could be attached to confession of contraceptive practices. Nevertheless, the fact that absolution for such practices was viewed as a lucky exception testifies to a diversity in interpretations of official doctrine not only by believers but also by priests. The labelling of those confessors who validated an individual’s choices as “wise” potentially equates with identifying those who did not as the opposite, with “unwise” possibly meaning “unmodern,” “stiffly doctrinal,” or “fanatical.” Although not explicitly mentioned in the narratives presented here, we can speculate that interested Polish Catholics actively “shopped around” for such “wise-confessors” and avoided the “unwise ones.”

A dialogue with religion could also take place on the level of the conscience because individuals and couples believed that if they fulfilled the broader mandates of family life, the use of prohibited contraceptive methods was irrelevant, rendering confession unnecessary. Therefore, this dialogue

56. Funk.

occurred without the need for validation from the clergy. A rationalization that separated sexuality and religious life represented another form of dialogue for Catholics living with the inherently secular reproductive policies of the communist state. An additional preliminary conclusion that could be drawn from our research is the limited presence of doctrinal milestones as references for guiding the contraceptive practices of practising Polish Catholics because explicit references to the Second Vatican Council and the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* are absent from the narratives we have analysed.

Finally, our research also contributes to the ongoing discussion on agency in relation to both religion and communism. We argue there is space for human agency in both these seemingly restricting contexts. We particularly shed light on the combination of the two factors in the Polish context and show that the communist legal and discursive framing of birth control afforded Polish Catholics the tools to “negotiate” contraceptive practices between Church and state, minimizing the influence of the Church on believers’ reproductive choices and extending their scope of agency. Therefore, we show that negotiations and possibilities in the realm of reproduction are an important space for individual agency in Poland, where limitations on reproductive rights and agency in the form of the anti-abortion law were introduced within democracy under the influence of the Catholic Church.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.