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EVALUATION

“Humanist Marriage Ceremonies as Social Performances.
The Reconstruction of Meanings”

by

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Mgr. Agata Rejowska has produced an excellent doctoral dissertation on humanist wedding ceremonies in contemporary Poland. The author provides ample information on the Polish context of those ceremonies, on Polish Catholicism and recent secularization trends, as well as on the emerging wedding industry in Poland. The author manages to provide just the right amount of ethnographic explanations for a non-Polish /non-Polish expert to follow the analysis, and should be of interest for sociologists of religion and sociologists of the family unfamiliar with the Polish case. I can state without any hesitation that it meets the criteria required for a doctoral degree. In what follows, I discuss the dissertation and make suggestions for the book manuscript that should follow from this excellent piece of scholarship.

The core of Mgr. Rejowska’s research is based on the observation of 9 humanist wedding ceremonies, open-ended interviews with the 18 couples and with 12 celebrants/managers. The data is complemented by documentary evidence—scripts form marriage ceremonies, photographs that serve as reminders for elements of the ceremonies, as well as promotional documentations from websites, magazines, and

YouTube. The author sheds light on the different “actors” involved in the production and performance of humanist wedding ceremonies, bringing their voice into the text with exceptional quality. She pays close attention to gender dynamics and couple-family relations, and provides enlightening discussions of class and class habitus, as well as the gender-based dynamics of exogamy. We learn about what couples expect and desire from their weddings, and why and how celebrants guide them in the process of putting together the ceremony. The author makes sharp observations on mixed-couples and the different types of ceremonies they imagine together, navigating important cultural differences and family expectations, for example.

The empirical analysis is Mgr Rejowska’s most significant contribution—it is rich and nuanced, and clearly articulated. It does have some blind spots, however. While there is a chapter devoted to the audience of humanist wedding ceremonies, those “characters” only appear through what couples report about the planning of the ceremony. As a result, we do not know whether the ritual “worked” for the audience; if, for example, it managed to confirm or transform the relationship (as it does for couples). It would be interesting and important, in the future, to observe witnesses and family members during ceremonies and interview them afterwards in order to hear their reactions to the ritual as it was performed (instead of hearing about their opinions before the ritual, as reported by the couple to the author). This is more significant than it might at first appear; as the author points out, many of the couples already considered themselves “coupled” (some even considered themselves “married”), and the ritual was important to them as a social, communal event marking recognition of their relationship. Analyzing how the social group present at the ritual understands and evaluates the ritual; how it expresses emotions (or lack thereof), and whether it “recognizes” the new state of the relationship is therefore crucial from a sociology of ritual perspective. To take the analogy of theater or performance: whether spectators clap, boo or remain silent; show up or leave during the spectacle is certainly relevant.

It might also be productive for the author to think comparatively: The author mentions funerals (rare), but are there other humanist rites of passages? What about “baptisms”/naming ceremonies? If they do exist, are they less or more popular than weddings? Why? Could the existence of wedding planners and a wedding market play a role in promoting humanist weddings, as competing forms of union celebration to religious and civil ceremonies? How popular are they in non-Catholic communities in Poland? I’m asking those questions not because I think the dissertation should have studied other rites of passages per se, but to show that considering them could have led the author to specify key features of humanist weddings, and assess to what extent they may be a form of resistance to Catholic hegemony or a fashionable trend observable throughout the western world.

In terms of theory, it is clear that Mgr. Rejowska is well-versed in multiple literature (as can be appreciated in her 33 pages-long bibliography), which she cites extensively in the text and in footnotes. She shows impressive command of the literature and is fluent in the finer points of the various sub-fields she engages with: theories of ritual and performance, the sociology of religion and secularism, the history of Polish Catholicism and social change in Poland. As is common, the first part of the dissertation suffers from being a bit too “scholastic,” and ends up being overly exhaustive rather than synthetic. Mgr. Rejowska articulates her research questions and outlines her methods and data only after 100 pages of discussion of other scholars’ work. Such an extensive discussion is not necessary to establish her credentials or to define her research object. A genuine synthesis of the main theoretical issues would have been more intellectually productive. I would therefore urge the author, in her future book manuscript, to radically trim the first three chapters and push her to articulate her *own* conceptual framework on the basis of what is most relevant: What are the main problems with existing theoretical frameworks? How can she move the field of ritual studies forward? How can the empirical case open new theoretical avenues? These reflections, which are missing from

the front-end of the dissertation, will better justify the empirical study and keep the reader intellectually engaged. The dissertation's conclusion also remains focused on the case instead of critically reassessing the theoretical framework she adopted. Does the empirical research provide new methodological or conceptual advancements to Alexander's theory of performance? What are the greater implications of the empirical case on the nature of ritual and institutionalized forms of religion? On processes of secularization in religiously homogeneous societies? While the conclusion is currently sufficient for a doctoral dissertation, the author should articulate contributions of the case to the sub-fields it engages with in the book version.

At the risk of being repetitive: None of the critiques or suggestions outlined above diminish my evaluation of the work and should not be read as requests for corrections, but as suggestions for the book that I hope will follow. **In my opinion, Agata Rejowska's dissertation "Humanist Marriage Ceremonies as Social Performances: The Reconstruction of Meanings" meets the criteria required for a doctoral degree. I therefore recommend it be accepted for public defense** at a date to be determined by the authorities of Jagiellonian University.

Thank you for inviting me to serve as external reader to this excellent work. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,



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